

ISAIAH

A Study Guide for Personal or Small Group Bible Studies

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STUDY 2: PROBLEMS WITHIN

(Isaiah, Chapters 1-5)

(Note: The majority of Studies 2-9 will be commentaries on the text of **Isaiah**. The relevant passages will be indicated in square brackets [] and specific texts in round brackets (). If time does not allow for reading the full passages, students should at least read the verses in round brackets.)

Learning Outcomes:

1. *Compare modern traits with those of Judah in the time of Isaiah.*
2. *Interpret illustrations used in Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard.*
3. *Identify opportunities to produce good character and obedience.*
4. *Identify expressions implying repentance.*
5. *Recognise the effect of obedience on the fulfilment of God's promises.*
6. *Match New Testament references with prophecies of Isaiah concerning times beyond judgment on Judah.*
7. *Apply given passages of Isaiah to present day Christians.*

INTRODUCTION

Deprived of the Temple on the division of the Kingdom after the death of Solomon, the northern kingdom (Israel) set up alternative sites for worshipping the Lord. It was not long before they exchanged their devotion to the Lord for the worship of idols. When Isaiah began to prophesy in the Southern Kingdom (Judah), the days of Israel were numbered, for the Lord's hand of judgment was about to fall. The crunch for Israel came in 722 BC, about two decades into Isaiah's ministry.

Judah had the distinct advantage of being able to maintain the worship of the Lord at His Temple, located on Mount Zion in their capital city of Jerusalem. Consequently their decline into idolatry was somewhat slower. However, Isaiah could see that all was far from well in Judah. Worship was being maintained, but it was lacking in sincerity; society was prospering materially but falling short morally.

Isaiah's mandate was to call attention to the rot within the religious and social life of the nation, warning her leaders and citizens that their nation was bound towards the same fate as that of her northern neighbour.

A. THE PROBLEM OF A REBELLIOUS PEOPLE

Learning Activities:

1. Compare modern traits with those mentioned in the first five Chapters of Isaiah.
2. Interpret illustrations used in Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard.
3. Discuss what opportunities we have to produce good character and what use we are making of those opportunities.

1. Rebellious Children (*read* Isaiah 1:2-4). Like ungrateful children who fail to respond to their parents' love, many in Judah were indifferent to God's care and had turned away from Him. Their rebellion showed itself in:

- (i) Hypocrisy [1:10-15; 29:13]. People had divorced their behaviour from their religion. Outwardly they appeared to practise their faith, offering their sacrifices and celebrating the religious festivals, but they lacked true devotion and penitence. They called God "Lord" but they did not obey Him as lord of their lives. (*Read* Jesus' reference to this in Mark 7:6-7.)
- (ii) Arrogance [2:11-22] (*read* Isaiah 5:21). Rather than acknowledging their reliance on the Lord, people were putting their confidence in their own abilities and the products of their ingenuity. Three things

which gave a false sense of security are given particular mention in Chapter 2¹:

- Fortifications, for military security.
- Shipping ('*Ships of Tarshish*'), for economic security (trade).
- Idols, for spiritual security.

All of these, says the Lord, will come tumbling down and - too late - Judah will realise that true security is to be found only in the Lord.

- (iii) Provoking the Lord [5:18-19] (*read* Isaiah 5:19). Men's arrogance went to the extreme when they denied either God's ability or His willingness to act.
- (iv) Intoxicated Self-indulgence [5:11-12, 22] (*read* Isaiah 5:12). They were too preoccupied with their drunken parties to pay attention to what the Lord was doing.
- (v) Flaunting sexuality [3:16]. Women attracted attention to themselves by their haughty bearing, gait and flirtatious eyes.
- (vi) Greed [5:8]. Wealthy landowners aggressively extended their holdings to become sole occupants, with little thought for those they displaced from their properties.
- (vii) Oppression [3:14-15]. Leaders were profiting at the expense of the poor.
- (viii) Reversal of right and wrong [5:20] (*read* Isaiah 5:20). Personal desires of the sinful nature were taking precedence over the commands of God, to the extent that moral and ethical values were being reversed: "It must be good, because I enjoy it: It must be bad because I do not enjoy it."

¹ Isaiah 2:16-18.

- (ix) Bribery and corruption [1:23, 5:23, 10:1-4]. Justice was being denied because unrighteous judges were responding to bribes.
- (x) Failure to respond to discipline [1:5-9]. Judah is depicted as a person suffering with open wounds and sickness, her sufferings brought on by her relentless revolt against the Lord. Afflictions should drive the sufferer toward God, but Judah's response was to turn away from Him.

Activity 1: Which of the failings listed in Section 1 (i) to (x) above do you think are represented by the following modern traits?

- (a) Binge drinking at rowdy parties. []
- (b) Society women flirting at a cocktail party. []
- (c) Big companies ruthlessly driving out smaller traders. []
- (d) Corruption by those in public office. []
- (e) Celebrating Christmas without any thought of Christ. []
- (f) Becoming bitter towards God because of suffering. []
- (g) Boasting in mankind's achievements. []
- (h) Thinking that sexual freedom without the commitment of marriage is OK because it gives two people pleasure. []
- (i) Saying, "If God is real, why doesn't He sort out the mess in this world." []
- (j) Dishonest use of expense accounts by politicians. []

2. The Song of the Vineyard. Judah's failure to respond to the Lord's care is taken up in a song in which the nation is compared to a vineyard, planted and tended by the Lord. The Song laments that, in spite being given every opportunity, God's people had not produced the fruit of character and obedience that was expected of them.

Activity 2: Read *the Song of the Vineyard* in Isaiah 5:1-7. Which illustrations tell of? :

- (a) The opportunity to make good (v1).
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(b) Removal of hindrances to making good (v2).

(c) The best possible start (v2).

(d) Protection from evil (v2).

(e) Failure to make good (v2)

(f) Judgment in the form of destruction. (There are several illustrations in verse 5. Mention any two of them.)

(g) Judgment in the form of famine (v6).

(h) The exploited needing help (v7).

3. Poor Witness (*read* Isaiah 1:2). The early prophecies open with a call to heaven and earth to listen to what the Lord has to say about His people. Our behaviour is not a private affair, for as God's children, what we say and do can bring either glory or dishonour to our Father in heaven.

Activity 3: In discussion or meditation, consider what opportunities we as Christians have been given to produce lives full of the "fruit" of character and obedience. How well do you think we are making use of these opportunities?

B. DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM

Learning Activities

1. Discuss the relationship between God’s promises and obedience.
2. Find in a given passage five expressions that imply repentance.

1. Call to Repent. Although Isaiah does not use the word “repent”¹, he frequently calls God’s people to change their ways, telling them what they should (or should not) be doing. This way, no one could make the excuse that they did not know what they should do to obey God. Neither have we an excuse, for we have the Scriptures, the teaching of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit to tell us what God requires.

2. The need for God to take action. We often read of God’s “judgment.” The word “sentence” might give us a better understanding of what this involves. A judge considers the evidence and gives his verdict. When that verdict is “guilty,” he goes on to pronounce the sentence. The Lord judges His people and, since the verdict turns out to be “guilty,” He pronounces the sentence, in this case the corrective punishment of devastation of their land and deportation of the people by the nation’s enemies.

Notice I used the expression “*corrective* punishment.” God’s aim is not to punish in the spirit of, “It serves you right!” but to drive the wrongdoers to turn to Him in repentance. He does not want to push them away, but to forgive them and restore the relationship they have lost through sin (*read* Isaiah 1:18).

Activity 4: Read Isaiah 1:13-18 and write down four expressions telling people to change their ways (*note:* in verse 16 there are two expressions meaning the same thing, followed by two others).

Verse 13 _____

Verse 16 _____

¹ There is just one occurrence of the Hebrew word for “turn,” in Isaiah 59:20, which the NIV, alone among the major versions, translates as “repent.”

3. The Judgment to come (*read* Isaiah 3:9). “*They have brought evil upon themselves,*” the Lord declared. His methods of judgment were to allow the inevitable outcomes of the rebellious choices the people had made. God did not have to impose these measures upon them, He could simply withdraw His protection and blessing, and let evil take its course. This is brought out by the prophet Hosea, who was a contemporary of Isaiah prophesying to the Northern Kingdom, “*Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone!*”¹ meaning, “The people of Israel have turned to idolatry: leave them to suffer the consequences.”

The consequences of Judah’s disobedience were to lead to a total collapse of the nation. Already there were signs of disintegration in society (*read* Isaiah 3:4-7):

- (i) Increased social disorder [3: 5]. The strong will oppress the weak and there will be total lack of respect for parents and elders.

- (ii) Weak leadership [3:4 & 7]. No one will want to take on the responsibility of sorting out the nation’s problems, other than those who lack the maturity and wisdom to be effective leaders. All governing authorities, by whatever means they are chosen by their society, are appointed by God,² but weak leadership is a symptom of a weak society. The last one hundred years of Judah’s independence, or semi-independence, were marked by a succession of kings who were either spiritually corrupt or politically weak.

Matters were to become far worse by the intervention of other nations:

¹ Hosea 4:17.

² Rom 13:1.

- (i) Invasion (*read* Isaiah 5:26-28). We have seen how the Lord only has to withdraw His hand of protection for evil to take its course and become a tool for judgment.¹ Here, it seems, the Lord is inviting invaders to come. Perhaps there is something we can learn from this about God’s sovereignty: He does not control the actions of men, for He never takes away free will, but He might leave the way clear for someone to act in ways which fulfil His divine purposes, even though the motive for their actions might be unworthy. He called Assyria “*The rod of my anger*,” for they were to be the instrument of His judgment on Israel.² Later, the prophet Habakkuk was puzzled when the Lord told him that He was going to use the greedy and cruel aggression of Babylon as a similar instrument of judgment on Judah. The Lord assured Habakkuk that He was not overlooking Babylon’s faults. She would, in turn, receive her own judgment.³
- (ii) Severe shortages [5:10]. The land that was once *flowing with milk and honey*⁴ will produce poor harvests, so that food and drink will be in short supply. Shortages were later increased to breaking point by the ravaging of the land and the siege of Jerusalem which were to come.
- (iii) Loss of wanton luxuries [3:18-24]. The women who adorned themselves extravagantly to flaunt their sexuality will have these things stripped away. No doubt others who put a high value on worldly luxuries and trivialities would lose these too. No earthly treasures provide lasting security. Where is eternal security to be found? (*Read* Matt 6:20 if you cannot remember what Jesus taught about this):
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- (iv) Loss of men in war [3:25 - 4:1]. So many men will die that women will be pleading desperately for husbands.

¹ B.3 above.

² Isaiah 10:5.

³ Habakkuk 1:17 & 2:8.

⁴ Exodus 3:8.

(v) Deportations (*read* Isaiah 3:1-3). Isaiah will have more to say on this later, for this was to be the dreadful culmination of the judgment. Babylonian invaders took all but the poorest and weakest away from the Promised Land and resettled them in Babylon.

No wonder *woe* is pronounced repeatedly in Chapter 5. No sinners will escape the sorrows that result from his or her actions.

In contrast, the Lord will be honoured by those who witness His justice. No peoples of the world will be able to accuse Him of favouritism towards His Chosen People, for He will be seen to be acting justly (*read* Isaiah 5:16).

Activity 5: In (v) above, the expression *Promised Land* was used. Israel and Judah were living in, but would soon be taken from, the land God had promised to them. Is there any connection between God's promises and our obedience? Consider this in discussion or meditation.

C. BEYOND THE JUDGMENT

Learning Activity: Match New Testament passages to prophecies of Isaiah.

Have you found this Study depressing so far? The catalogue of failings of God's people and the unpleasant results of their behaviour do not make enjoyable reading. Let us conclude this Study with a more pleasant outlook. This indeed is in the spirit of Isaiah's prophecies, which frequently shed rays of hope and joy to lighten the dark predictions of judgment.

1. Survival (*read* Isaiah 1:9). There is a glimmer of light here. God will not wipe out the nation; He will ensure there will remain a small number with whom He can make a fresh start. It would later be revealed that this *remnant* would emerge from the exiles in Babylon and not from those remaining in the land. On an individual basis, if we find ourselves in a situation where God seems to have taken much away from us, it may be

because God can produce something better in us from the little that remains.

2. Forgiveness (Isaiah 1:18-19). Crimson is the hardest of all stains to remove from fabric, but removal of sin from the soul is harder. Only God can do it.*

3. Cleansing (read 1:25-27 & 4:3-4). The judgments are not to destroy but to purify, as dross[§] is removed from molten metal to leave pure metal. God had told His people they were to be holy.¹ This was no longer in evidence, but it would be seen again once the purging had taken place.

4. Messiah's Rule (read Isaiah 2:1-4 & 4:2, 5-6). *The Branch of the Lord*, mentioned in Isaiah 4:2, refers to the Messiah (or *Christ*²). God's long term plan is for the Messiah to rule from Jerusalem. The city will become a centre to which people will come from all over the world to seek, find and follow the Lord. His universal rule will be righteous and He will establish peace between the nations.

Isaiah will have a lot more to say about God's plans for the Messiah and His rule and we shall be looking at those in more detail in later studies. These early chapters give us just a glimpse of what is to come, but they are enough to assure us that God's intentions in judging sin are to produce holy people who will be able to participate in the glorious days of Messiah's rule.

Activity 6: Read the following passages from the New Testament and match them to the most appropriate ray or rays of hope mentioned above. Place a tick in the appropriate column or columns. (You might need to look at the passages in Isaiah again if you cannot recall their contents.)

* An alternative interpretation of this text is that the nation's sins will get worse unless they listen to reason. The expressions *scarlet* and *white as snow* were used of the worsening effect of leprosy (see Num 12:10 and 2 Kings 5:27).

¹ Lev 11:44.

² *Christ* is the New Testament term for the *Messiah* of the Old Testament.

<i>NT Passage</i>	<i>Survival</i>	<i>Forgiveness</i>	<i>Cleansing</i>	<i>Messiah's Rule</i>
Luke 22:30				
Acts 17:31				
Rom 9:29				
Rom 11:5				
Col 3:13				
Rev 7:9				
Rev 7:14				
Rev 21:27				

D. CONCLUSION

Isaiah was given a hard message to preach to Judah, exposing the sin which lay beneath an appearance of well-being and warning of God's judgment that would shatter the religious and moral complacency. However, his prophecies were tempered with revelations of God's ultimate plan - of His appointed Messiah, ruling from Jerusalem with justice and wisdom. Some see the Old Testament's portrayal of God as stern and judgmental, but Isaiah shows that the heart of God is to love and to restore His wayward people.

Activity 7: In discussion or meditation, consider how the following passages might apply to Christians today:

- (a) *"I willthoroughly purge away your dross, And take away all your alloy"* (Isaiah 1:25).
- (b) *"Come let us walk in the light of the LORD"* (Isaiah 2:5).

E. PERSONAL APPLICATION

Refer back to Activity 3 in Section A, but this time thinking about your personal opportunities and responses.

PERSONAL ASSIGNMENTS

Multiple Choice Questions

Read through these Studies again on your own, including any Bible passages you have forgotten, then answer the ten questions below. Put your answers on Answer Sheet 2. Retain your answer sheet until it is complete and then hand it to a facilitator or your tutor if you have one.

2.1-5 Blacken box A if the statement is true, or B if it is untrue:

- 2.1 Social traits of Isaiah's day can be identified in western society today.
- 2.2 God did not receive from Judah what He looked for in Isaiah's day.
- 2.3 Isaiah did not tell people to change their ways because he did not use the word *repent*.
- 2.4 God loves us and forgives our sins, so His promises are unconditional.
- 2.5 There are no prophecies of Christ in the first section of Isaiah (Chapters 1-39).

2.6-10 Blacken the box (A to D) that gives the most suitable answer:

- 2.6 Exalting mankind's achievements is best described as:
 - (a) Arrogance.
 - (b) Hypocrisy.
 - (c) Blasphemy.
 - (d) Self-indulgence.
- 2.7 In one of Isaiah's prophecies, Judah is compared to:
 - (a) A farm.
 - (b) An orchard.
 - (c) A vineyard.
 - (d) A basket of fruit.

2.8 God's provision for us to develop Christ-like characters might include:

- (a) The Scriptures.
- (b) The Church.
- (c) The Holy Spirit.
- (d) All of the above.

2.9 Isaiah spoke of judgment or events up to ...

- (a) The return from exile.
- (b) The coming of Christ.
- (c) The death of Christ.
- (d) The future rule of Christ.

2.10 "*Come let us walk in the light of the LORD*" (Isaiah 2:5) is meant for:

- (a) The people of Judah in Isaiah's day.
- (b) Christians today.
- (c) Both the people of Judah in Isaiah's day and Christians today.
- (d) Christians, but it can only apply in heaven in the light of Christ's glory.

READING AND MEDITATION

Read Isaiah 5:1-24 with the aid of a Commentary. Carefully consider if you are tempted toward any of the sins bringing "woe" ("sorrow" in the New Living Translation).
