

## PREACHING FROM ISAIAH

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Soon after His forty-day temptation in the wilderness of Judea, Jesus worshipped at the synagogue in Nazareth. During the worship service, Jesus read aloud from Isa 61:1-2 and announced, "This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:16-21). Jesus and various writers of NT books held the book of Isaiah in obvious high esteem. Quotations from Isaiah appear in all four gospels, Acts, several of Paul's letters, and 1 Peter. The NT writers as well as Jesus Himself saw Isaiah as a rich source book of prophetic utterances relating to the day of Christ.

Preaching from Isaiah is a joyful prospect, but what a daunting task! Sixty-six chapters of beautifully written, perfectly constructed, thought-provoking prophecy! In some ways the book of Isaiah is like a beautiful symphony or a breathtaking landscape--it needs to be seen and heard, not described! Yet, God has called us to proclaim His word. So surely, then, we can find some means of preaching this majestic book.

A study of the purpose of the book of Isaiah is an important first step. Such a study will determine if the book has a central theme or a specific, objective. "Theological truth always has an end in view in the lives of people."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the true aim of a biblical book is what the author (Author) desires to happen in the experience of the readers in response to its truth.<sup>2</sup>

Most commentaries on Isaiah include a study of the purpose of the book. Lange viewed the purpose as an announcement of ". . . the whole great period of salvation. . . . For although Isaiah is not silent in regard to the judgments that threaten either Israel or the heathen, still

<sup>1</sup> Brown, Clinard, Northcutt, Fasol, *Steps to the Sermon*, Revised (Nashville: Broadman, 1996) 67.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the proclamation of salvation is the proper contents of his discourses."<sup>3</sup> One of the early Westminster commentaries concluded that Isaiah ". . . was charged with the denunciation of his country's offenses. . . . He sought to revive in his countrymen reverence for, and trust in, the Lord, of Whose holiness and majesty he himself had so profound a sense. . . ." <sup>4</sup> G. Buttrick perceived that the purpose of the book of Isaiah was to indict an apostate nation: "For this was Isaiah called, that in the name and by the authority of God he might confront his people with their sin, declare the imminence of their judgment, awaken their penitence, and preach the gospel of redeeming mercy."<sup>5</sup>

Isaiah's purpose, then, was to confront Israel with their sinful plight and to proclaim God's awesome plan to save His people from their sins. This information is crucial to preparing sermons from the book of Isaiah. The texts selected for this article focus on the positive message of Isaiah. The message of judgment is not ignored, but emphasis is given to God's love and His salvation. The message of judgment should be alluded to in order for the congregation to appreciate the message of love. However, I have left it to the individual preacher as to how and how much of the message of judgment should be included in each sermon.

Book sermons are always difficult to prepare but often beneficial to the congregation. A sermon on an entire book of the Bible can do little more than highlight the contents. This is especially true for the book of Isaiah. However, a sermonic overview of a book equips the congregation to receive future sermons from that book much more effectively. A book sermon gives the congregation a sense of confidence because the book sermon gives them a "handle" on the book. A book sermon removes, to a large extent, a sense of intimidation the congregation may feel about studying a book such as Isaiah. A book sermon helps the congregation see how a series of sermons from the book relate to one another.

Here is a summary of a sermon on the book of Isaiah:

Isaiah has been described as the Paul of the Old Testament. His book has salvation by faith as a theme. His name means salvation of God. He evidently was born of a high ranking family. His ministry was to the kings, his preaching in the palaces of the Southern Kingdom in the 8th century before Christ.

<sup>3</sup> J. P. Lange, "The Prophet Isaiah," *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1878) 15.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Locke, "The book of the Propbet Isaiah," *The Westminster Commentaries* (London: Methuen & Co., 1911) XIX.

<sup>5</sup> George Buttrick, "The Book of Isaiah," *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1939) 165.

1. Prophecies concerning Judah and Jerusalem closing with a psalm and promises of restoration, 1-12. Chapter 1 is an introduction in which Isaiah mentions thoughtfulness, formalism in worship, pardon and judgment. Chapters 2-4 contain three pictures of Judah--exaltation, idolatry and eventual purification. Chapter 5 uses a beautiful analogy to confront Israel. Chapter 6 is an apologetic for the harshness of 1-5. Chapters 7-12 are warnings against political entanglement with Assyria and recommends trust in the Lord.

2. Chapters 13-23 contain oracles of judgment and salvation concerning several nations whose fortunes affect Judah. He makes it clear that it is useless for them to resist the Assyrian empire or the will of God. God used the Assyrians and later the Babylonians and Persians to bring judgment and to accomplish his will.

3. Chapters 24-27 are closely related to 13-23. It is a prediction of world judgment resulting in the redemption of Israel. These chapters teach the necessity of divine discipline and redemption that awaits the faithful. Isaiah looks forward to redemption and speaks of it in present tense.

4. Chapters 28-35 contain a cycle of prophetic warnings against alliance with Egypt closing with a prophecy against the land of Edom. The warnings are pronounced as six woes.

5. Chapters 36-39 contain history, prophecy and song intermingled. These chapters are almost identical to 2 Kgs 18:13-20:19. Isaiah prophesied that Babylon and not Assyria would be God's instrument of judgment on Judah.

6. Chapters 40-66 are prophecies of comfort, salvation, and of the future glory awaiting Israel. Chapters 40-48 announce delivery from captivity through a Persian King; chapters 49-57 describe the sufferings of the Servant; chapters 58-66 are yet to be fulfilled. They announce the eradication of all national distinctions and the future glory of the people of God.

The preacher needs to weave transition sentences between each of the divisions and subdivisions. For example: The first section ends with a recommendation to trust in the Lord. The second section, chaps. 13-23, tests this trust. In section two we see how God planned to use Gentile nations to bring judgment on Judah. In such times trust is not easy, but trust in God is always necessary.

The preacher must decide whether to make application to the congregation at the end of each section or to make application only in the conclusion. Specific application must be determined by the needs of a specific congregation.

Before looking at other specific sermon suggestions, a few words must be said about the nature of a biblical text. The custom of preaching on a particular portion of the Scripture which we call a text probably dates back to Neh 8:8: "So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, a gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (KJV). The word text is taken from a Latin word *textus* which means

*a web*. The verb form is *texere* which means to weave. The biblical text supplies the loom and the fabric from which the sermon is woven. Our working definition of a text then will be: a complete unit of biblical thought from which the sermon is developed or woven. In this article, our selection of texts for preaching from Isaiah are chosen so as to comprehensively cover the book of Isaiah without unduly repeating the recurring themes throughout the book.

### *1:1-20 Lessons for a Wayward Nation*

Isaiah 1:1-20 offers a good starting text. This passage reads like an overture of chaps. 1-39, setting the tone for the theme and variations to follow. Isaiah opens his book with God's indictment of Israel. Verses 2-4 reveal God's grief over the ungrateful and rebellious attitude of His chosen people. Verses 5-9 picture the despair that sin brings. This ingratitude and misery makes worship an empty ritual (vv 10-15). God exhorts His people to accept His salvation which is graphically described in vv 18-20.

Verse 17a, "learn to do well," provides an umbrella phrase that generally covers the preceding verses as well as the remaining verses of the text. An umbrella phrase such as this one often helps us organize our sermon. In this case God taught Israel that they had no excuse for not remembering who God is ("I have nourished and brought up children and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib; but Israel doth not know " vv 2-3). God also invited Israel to be restored spiritually and figuratively. The sermon has two divisions: God's lessons from history, and God's lessons in current events.

Thus, the text has provided the loom and the fabric for our sermon:

Text: Isa 1:1-20

(focal passage 1:17a)

Title: God's Lessons for a Wayward Nation

I. God's lessons from history (1:1-16. Focal passage vv 2-3)

Israel has no excuse for not remembering God's mighty acts that brought Israel into being. The problems besetting the nation are all related to rebellion against God.

II. God's lessons in current events (1:18-20)

God is ready to redeem Israel. All they had to do was obey God and be blessed (v 19). Israel needed to do an about face from rebellion against God to obedience to God.

### *5:1-7 Rich Soil--Bitter Harvest*

Isaiah 5:1-7 continues this review of Israel's rebellion. This passage relates Israel's rebellion in a story form that resembles both parable and allegory but is stated to be in the form of a song (v 1). "My

wellbeloved" (v 1) is God. The vineyard's identity is "the house of Israel, and the men of Judah" (v 7). In the song every care is taken to help the vineyard to produce abundant fruit. The husbandman laments that this well tended vineyard brought forth only "wild grapes" (v 2). A rhetorical question is asked, "What more could I have done?" (v 4). The implied answer is, of course, that nothing else could have been done. There is no excuse for Israel. God provided adequately in every way, yet Israel disappointed Him with "wild grapes." Instead of nourishing fruit, Israel became junk food.

Since the text is really a sermon in itself, perhaps we should seek a sermonic form that enhances the application of the text. Parallels to the vineyard song may be found in the history of our own nation.

Text: Isa 5:1-7

Title: Rich Soil--Bitter Harvest

Any farmer will tell you the better the soil and climate, the better the harvest. Agriculture has often served as a figure of speech for describing America, for example, in the hymn *America the Beautiful*. The same figures of speech can be used to describe the spiritual history of America. God made America a fertile field in which He planted the seeds of freedom to worship ("My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill"). God blessed the expansion of the colonies so that America could become a great nation ("and he fenced it"). God provided abundant natural resources so that the nation could grow ("and gathered the stones thereof and planted the choicest vine") both economically and militarily ("and built a tower in the midst of it").

Just think, if God had not blessed America, we would be beset with crime (cite recent FBI crime statistics and recent cases of nations leaders indicted for graft); we would suffer from oppression and hunger (cite recent statistics on number of people, especially children, who receive less than adequate daily dietary intake); our religious organizations would suffer from the false teaching of the few whose selfish ambitions hurt the cause of Christ; our public entertainment industries would tout adulterous, sinful ways of life while championing them as pleasant and without grief; we would have learned people telling us that if we do away with the biblical concept of guilt, we will all be happy.

You say, "But preacher, America does have all those problems." Then we had better listen to the word of God, for He looks for us to bring forth grapes. Shall we give unto Him wild grapes?

### *6:1-13 The Awesome Holiness of God*

Isaiah 1-5 establishes the sovereignty of God. Isaiah 6 establishes the holiness of God in a way that is breathtaking in its majesty! We

must be careful to treat this passage with all due reverence. We must also be careful not to trivialize this passage. Since reading Isa 6:1-13 is an awesome experience for us, think how Isaiah felt!

K. M. Yates grasped this passage with strong, clear insight:

In that brief account we see conviction, contrition, conversion, confession, cleansing, and consecration. Some preacher has called it "the 'woe' of conviction, the 'lo' of cleansing, and the 'go' of service." In it is clearly pictured the four steps in a souls experience.

1. *Revelation*--He saw God in His majesty and might.
2. *Prostration*--He saw his own unworthiness and his distance from God.
3. *Purification*--God's cleansing touch brought full purification.
4. *Consecration*--Without reservation he offered himself on God's altar for service.<sup>6</sup>

### *7:10-16 The Sign of the Savior*

The thrice holy God assures Isaiah that all of Israel's enemies will suffer burn-out. Israel will be secure if it obeys God. God offered King Ahaz an opportunity to demonstrate his faith by asking him for a sign. This sign would prove the faithfulness of God and the validity of Isaiah's prophetic message (7:10-11). The response of Ahaz reflected his lack of faith. Ahaz had more confidence in his alliance with Assyria than he did in God. This fateful decision of Ahaz compounded the history of Israel for more than a thousand years. God, however, decided to give a sign anyway, and what a sign it was! (7:14-16).

The suggested text is Isa 7:10-16, but serious consideration must be given to including Matt 1:18-23. This dual passage text lends itself easily and logically to a promise-fulfillment interpretation. The sermon from this dual passage text would emphasize first, the sign, and second, the Savior.

Text: Isa 7:10-16; Matt 1:18-23

Title: The Specific Sign of the Savior

- I. The virgin birth of Jesus is God's specific sign that He will save His people (Isa 7:10-16).

Isaiah did forth-telling and fore-telling. He did forth-telling by warning that Israel's sin would bring God's judgment, but God would provide a means of redeeming Israel. He did fore-telling by prophesying that God will provide a mighty act in the form of a virgin-born Savior.

- II. Jesus is God's specific Savior of His people (Matt 1:18-23).

God's salvation is not military, as many Jews anticipated. Nor is God's salvation political or social as many anticipate today. God's

<sup>6</sup> Kyle M. Yates, *Preaching from the Prophets* (Nashville: Broadman, 1942) 93.

salvation is spiritual. Just as Isaiah prophesied, the virgin-born Jesus is our Savior.

### *9:1-7 God With Us*

This passage is an attempt to bolster hope among God's people. When God's holy child comes, He will dispel sin and darkness (v 2). His holy light will provide great hope and therefore great joy because He will break the yoke of sin (vv 1-5). Small wonder then that this Child will be given the highest accolades our voices can utter (v 6). These accolades consist of four meaningful names: "Wonderful" signifying God's holiness; "Counsellor" signifying divine wisdom; "The mighty god" signifying His omnipotence; "The everlasting Father" signifying His deity; "The Prince of Peace" signifying exactly what it says--the coming King will provide a heaven-sent peace.

Since the Messiah came to minister to us, and since this passage voices our praises for His ministry, we may develop a sermon that speaks both of our needs and of His praises.

Text: Isa 9:1-7

Title: God With Us

- I. We were lost and in need of Someone to lead us to hope. God provided a Wonderful Counsellor.
- II. We were powerless against temptation. We turned to The mighty God.
- III. We were children in need of sustenance. He revealed Himself as the Everlasting Father.
- IV We were losing the war against sin. God provided the Prince of Peace.

### *11:1-11; 12:1-6 A Glimpse of Heaven*

The Messiah, whom we praised in chap. 9, establishes His kingdom in chaps. 11-12. Isaiah 11:1-11 is set in contrast to the closing verses of chap. 10. The fall of Assyria is compared to chopping down a cedar tree (10:24-34). The stump of the cedar slowly decays and never recovers. Israel will also suffer the judgment of God, but in strong contrast, a shoot will arise from Israel and she shall have renewal of life. Isaiah specified that this new branch would come from the lineage of Jesse, David's father (11:1). The Spirit of the Lord shall endow this particular branch (11:2). This branch is none other than God's Messiah (11:3-5). The righteous role of the Messiah will bring a complete transformation from hostility to peace. In this ideal society "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord" (11:9). The place of the Messiah's reign will "be glorious" (11:10-11).

This mighty teaching of the restoration of God's people ends with a song of Thanksgiving.

Text: Isa 11:1-11; 12:1-6

Title: A Glimpse of Heaven

- I. A glimpse of heaven is seen in the nature of the Messiah (11:1-5).  
The shoot or branch springs from old roots, just as God promised long ago.
- II. A glimpse of heaven is seen in the transformation of the world (11:6-9). The new world will be denied of danger and harm.
- III. A glimpse of heaven is seen as people gain knowledge of the Lord (11:10-11). As knowledge of God grows, people will rally to be with Him.
- IV. A glimpse of heaven is seen in the praises offered to God for His wonderful salvation (12:1-6). God's anger becomes a thing of the past and His people sing praises to Him.

*26:1-19; 35:1-10 Living in God's Perfect Will*

Following a lengthy diatribe against several nations (chaps. 13-23), Isaiah returns to the theme of God's salvation (chaps. 24-27). Another song of thanksgiving to God for the deliverance of His people is offered in 26:1-19. "That day" (26:1) refers back to 25:6-9. The righteous are invited to enter the gates of a specially fortified Jerusalem (26:2) where they will find "perfect peace" (26:3). God's enemies will be destroyed (26:5-6). The nation impatiently waited for these judgments to come, but Isaiah had no problem believing in them (26:8-10). 26:11-18 seems a little despondent, but the people needed to learn that God used suffering to teach His people to depend on Him. 26:19 changes the mood entirely. A coming resurrection is promised. Not even death can diminish our hope in God!

This theme of renewal (some say resurrection) is picked up again in chap. 35.

Chapter 35 presents two scenarios in this blessed salvation. Verses 1-6 picture the changes God makes on a place (or a people) who are desolated as a result of sin; vv 7-10 elaborate on this theme by picturing the peace of those who are restored by the Lord.

Text: Isa 26:1-19; 35:1-10 (focal passage 26:3)

Title: Living in God's Perfect Will

- I. The redeemed of God are immersed in perfect peace (26:3).  
Even when outward circumstances are a burden, God's people can know God's peace by relying on him and not on their own puny resources. The words translated "perfect peace" have the word picture of peace piled upon peace. Those who wait upon the Lord are immersed in God's peace.
- II. The redeemed of God travel in perfect safety (35:8-10).
  1. God's way is perfect, "The way of holiness."
  2. God's way is safe, "No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast."

*40:1-31 Grace that is Greater Than all our Sins*

In contrast to chap. 1, chap. 40 begins with a word of comfort for God's people who are in exile. Verses 1-5 proclaim the nearness of a new day in which Israel's punishment comes to an end. Humans may be frail (vv 6-7), but the future depends on almighty God, not humans (vv 8-17). Nothing in creation can compare to God (vv 18-20). He is the everlasting God who is never wearied by the needs of frail humans (vv 22-31).

Text: Isa 40: 1-31 (focal passage 12-31)

Title: Grace that is Greater than all Our Sins

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah emphasized the ungrateful, disobedient, rebellious attitude of God's people. God pronounced His judgment for these sins, but always included an avenue of hope for salvation. Chapters 40-66 emphasize the loving grace of God. Following their long exile from God's blessings, God assures His people that He is capable of redeeming them. Perhaps the people felt some doubt after this lengthy exile.

- I. God's greatness is seen in His power as Creator (vv 12-17).
- II. God's greatness is seen in comparison to the puny gods created by humans (vv 18-25).
- III. God's greatness is seen in the patient strength God demonstrates in casting off our sins (vv 26-28).
- IV. God's greatness is felt in the exhilaration of His salvation (vv 29-31).

*45:1-25 Trusting God When Trusting is not Easy*

God's way of doing things often bewildered the Israelites. The reference to Cyrus as "God's anointed one" (v 1) must have been one of those occasions. Cyrus was anointed to conquer those nations that stood in the way of God's purposes (vv 2-3). These purposes included the restoration of Israel (vv 4-7). Many Israelites reacted negatively to Isaiah's announcement about Cyrus. These people Isaiah condemned (vv 9-10). God raised Cyrus in accordance with His sovereign purpose (vv 11-13). Verses 14-25 describe the results of Cyrus's work.

From this chapter, we can develop a sermon dealing with the seemingly mysterious ways of God.

Text: Isa 45: 1-25 (key passage, v 22)

Title: Trusting God When Trust is not Easy

God's ways are not always easily understood. We must always remember that His wisdom is superior to ours. Anointing Cyrus confused the people of Israel. But God used Cyrus to demonstrate His deity and to call people unto Himself.

- I. Look unto God even when we cannot fully comprehend His ways (1-15); key verse is 15).

- II. Look unto God as the only true living God who saves His people (16-25; key verse is 22).

*52:13-53:12 The Homely Savior--the Beautiful Salvation*

If anointing Cyrus made little sense to the Israelites, then surely the description of the Messiah as a suffering servant (52:13-53:12) made no sense at all. Yet God knew exactly what kind of Messiah we needed. The Messiah may not look triumphant, but He will attain a high degree of success in His mission (52:13-15). People may not esteem the Messiah, but even so He takes on Himself all our iniquities (53:1-12, cf. Rom 5:8). The Messiah's mission is actually to our benefit (54:1-4).

Text: Isa 52:13-54:4

Title: The Homely Savior--the Beautiful Salvation

Isaiah takes us again to the mountaintop. Just as he did in chaps. 6, 7; and 9, Isaiah blesses us with what some have called the Mt. Everest of messianic prophecy.

- I. The Homely Messiah's destiny is to suffer humiliation (52:13-53:3).
- II. The Homely Messiah's destiny is to suffer in our place (53:4-9).
- III. The Homely Messiah's suffering brings to us a beautiful salvation (53:10-54:4).

*55:1-13 Invitation to Eternal Life*

The uniqueness of God is emphasized again in chap. 55. Actually, the opaqueness of God is mentioned in v 15, but it is His uniqueness that is emphasized. The primary ramification of this uniqueness is that all people must look to God alone for salvation (v 22). Another ramification is that God may use means to accomplish His purposes that are mysterious to us. However, just as the clay cannot question the potter, and just as a child should not castigate parents, so we cannot challenge the purposes of God (vv 9-10).

After suffering for our iniquities, the suffering servant invites us to a banquet! The table is set for those who are hungry and thirsty (vv 1-3). The one doing the inviting is God's Messiah (vv 4-5). The most appealing part of the invitation is the call to repentance (vv 5-9). This invitation is based on the word of God (vv 10-13).

Text: Isa 55:1-13 (focal passage, 6-7)

Title: Invitation to Eternal Life

God gives this invitation based on the salvation made possible by the suffering servant Isaiah expressed the invitation in physical figures of speech, but the application is as spiritual as it can be.

- I. The Lord has opened the door to heaven and invites us to come in (vv 1-6). God's invitation requires no cover charges and has no purchase price required of us.

II. The Lord has opened the door to heaven, but it is up to us to respond (vv 7-13). The Lord does the inviting, but we must do the responding.

People have sought for the meaning of life for centuries. God's word tells us that He has the answer. The gift of life is offered to us. What a tragedy it would be to reject the gift and therefore the Giver.

*61:1-7; 62:1-5; 65:17-66:2 Eternal Love*

Chapters 61-66 emphasize the glorious triumphs of the Messiah and how we may share in them. 61:1-7 summarizes the purpose and blessings of the Messiah. The Messiah brought comfort to those who mourned (61:1-3). As a result, those who mourned shall be restored (61:4-7). The Messiah's great love for us made him determined to succeed in this mission (62:1-5). Because of what the Messiah has done for us, we will live with Him forever in heaven (65:17-66:2).

These passages collectively work a magnificent conclusion to a study of the book of Isaiah. This study has selected passages that relate to salvation, forgiveness, redemption, Messiah, good news, restoration. Isa 66:1-2 serves as a perfect conclusion because it offers the assurance that God is on His throne with enough love to care for us eternally.

Text: Isa 61:1-7; 62:1-5; 65:17-66:2

Title: Eternal Love

- I. God demonstrates His eternal love in the works of the Messiah (61:1-7). The Messiah brings hope, comfort, and restoration.
- II. God demonstrates His eternal love in His perseverance for His people (62:1-5). God restores our broken lives and commits himself to us as a groom accepts his bride-in consummate love.
- III. God demonstrates His eternal love in His gracious acceptance of His people (65:17-66:2). Our sinful past will no longer be remembered.

As often as possible, rewrite the outlined sermons to a narrative style. The outlines will serve to keep the sermon locked on its text as the preacher moves to a narrative style. The narrative style will help the congregation assimilate the eternal truth of the text emotionally as well as intellectually.

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