

Day 1 – Introduction to the Text

Isaiah 1:1-20

We know very little about the prophet Isaiah himself. Isaiah 1:1 says that he was the son of Amoz (not to be confused with the prophet Amos) and there is virtually nothing known about him. From the book of Isaiah we do know that he was married and had some children (7:3; 8:3), but that is all that we know about his personal life. Isaiah was not concerned with letting us know about himself. Instead, he was intent on proclaiming and recording what God was communicating to His people.

From the very beginning of the book, Isaiah makes it clear that “the LORD speaks” (1:2) and the people need to “Hear the word of the LORD” (1:10) because “Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (1:20). And just as Moses called on the heavens and earth as witnesses of the people’s wickedness and covenant unfaithfulness (Deut 32:1), so Isaiah does the same (1:2).

Many scholars believe that Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the entire book. If that is the case, then Isaiah is writing this chapter late in his life, perhaps even during the time of co-regency between king Hezekiah and his son, Manasseh. This would explain why Manasseh is not mentioned in the list of kings in verse 1. It would also explain why Isaiah begins the book with such a bleak picture of the kingdom and the people’s despicable spiritual condition. Essentially, Isaiah is warning the people not to abandon the godly ways established by Hezekiah in favor of the idolatrous worship promoted by Manasseh.

If Isaiah wrote Chapter 1 toward the end of his prophetic career “he is able to reflect back on what God told him to say to the people of Jerusalem over the last years, and now he knows how they responded to God’s words. At this point he can properly prepare his future readers to understand some of the key theological themes of the book and explain more about God’s plan for the nation. This introduction is also a motivational attempt to convince his readers to acknowledge what God says and repent so that their sins can be forgiven (1:18–20)” (Smith, 93).

As we open this study of the first twelve chapters in Isaiah, think about the promises God gave to his covenant people and their response. Reflect on what God has promised us through His son, Jesus Christ, and how we need to respond.

Scripture Memory: Isaiah 1:18-20

Day 2 – Observe the Text

Read Isaiah 1:1-20

1. Who received the vision? Who does the vision pertain to? When was the vision received? (v1)
2. Who does the LORD call as a witness? Who does He have a complaint against? What is His complaint? (vv2-3)
3. How are the “People” described? What have they done? (v4)
4. What does Isaiah compare the nation of Israel to? How deep does their rebellion go? (vv5-6)
5. How does Isaiah describe the condition of Jerusalem? (vv7-9)
6. What was Yahweh’s attitude toward the people’s worship of Him? (vv10-15)
7. What does Yahweh command the people to do? (vv16-17)
8. What two choices does Yahweh present to the people? (vv18-20)

Day 3 – Interpret the Text

Read Isaiah 1:1-20 again

Verse 1: *The vision of Isaiah...* “Isaiah’s name means ‘Yahweh is salvation’... ‘Vision’ (cf. Ob 1; Na 1:1) suggests to the reader a mode of revelation, but it could be a technical term for an oracle of God, however received” (Grogan, 474).

During the reigns of... “During these years, Judah was prosperous and powerful in the time of Uzziah (2 Kgs 15:1–7; 2 Chr 26:1–23), weak and under Assyrian control for much of the reign of Ahaz (2 Kgs 16; 2 Chr 28), and then free again in the days of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18–19; 2 Chr 29–32). This period covers the time from about 746 to 686 BC. Since Manasseh, Hezekiah’s evil son, was co-regent with him for the last few years of his life, some of Isaiah’s writings may reflect the beginning of Manasseh’s reign (2 Kgs 21; 2 Chr 33)” (Smith, 99-100).

Verses 2-3: *Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth...* “The parallel with Deuteronomy 32:1–43 (cf. Mic 6:1–2; Ps 50:4) suggests that the hearers may well have been reminded of the Sinaitic covenant by the form of the prophet’s address” (Grogan, 474).

An ox...and a donkey... “Although these animals were sometimes unwilling to submit to authority (just like Israel), they maintained their relationship with their owner. In contrast, the dumber Israelites who were ‘my people’ (‘ammî) did not seem to ‘know’ (yāda’) that they needed to maintain their covenant relationship with God” (Smith, 102).

Verse 4: *Offspring of evildoers, Sons who act corruptly!* “The prophet’s language suggests that guilt is an awful burden; that if paternity is truly revealed in character, something has gone sadly wrong (cf. Dt 32:5) (Grogan, 475).

the Holy One of Israel... “Isaiah’s distinctive title for God is ‘the Holy One of Israel,’ used twenty-five times in all and felt to be characteristic of his message, even by those who rejected it (30:11) (Grogan, 448).

Verses 5-6: “The implication is, if you will address the root cause of your problems, the terrible consequences you are suffering will end. Judah is pictured as a person who was brutally beaten over her whole body (1:6). She is covered from head to toe with open bleeding wounds and ugly bruises that have not had any medical treatment” (Smith, 104).

Verses 7-9: “Once before southern Canaan had witnessed a scene of utter desolation (Ge 19:24–29), at that time even more thorough. It was the restraining hand of ‘the LORD Almighty’ (NASB, ‘LORD of hosts,’ suggestive of comprehensive authority and fullness of resources) that alone saved Jerusalem from sharing the fate of its environs, and the prophet stressed this by placing the names of the two destroyed cities in a position of emphasis (v. 9)” (Grogan, 475).

Verses 10-15: “Sodom and Gomorrah—shocking and deeply insulting names to Isaiah’s hearers—suggest not only devastation through fire by the hand of God (cf. v. 7; Ge 19:24–25) but also Gentile sin at its worst; yet the words ‘LORD’ and ‘our God’ have overtones of a covenantal relationship unknown to the cities of the plain (v. 10)... Verse 11 implies an abundance of sacrifices well beyond the divine requirements (cf. Mic 6:6–8)... The temple courts (v. 12) felt the heavy tread of the worshipping throng, probably swollen at such times of national crisis, but ‘trampling’ also suggests desecration... The people have been shown as burdened with guilt (v. 4); but here God in his turn has become (for he had not always been) burdened with their sacrifices” (Grogan, 475-476).

Verses 16-17: “In 52 out of 73 cases, ‘wash’ (raḥṣû) refers to cultic cleansing and the hithpa‘el reflexive ‘make yourself clean’ (hizzakkû) usually refers to what people do as part of their cultic responsibility, not to what God does (a passive verb would be required). Therefore, God is encouraging an internal change of the heart that is revealed in the symbolic outward action of washing. Contextually, to ‘take your evil deeds from my sight’ instructs the people to remove the pagan detestable worship from before God’s presence in the temple” (Smith, 108-109).

Verses 18-20: “The famous call of v. 18 has been taken in more than one way by scholars. Many see the words as an offer of total forgiveness, for which vv. 19–20 supply the divine conditions. Others understand the language to be ironic and render the second part of the verse as ‘If your sins are as scarlet, shall they be white as snow? If they are red like crimson, shall they be as wool?’... In fact, the language permits either possibility, though most scholars are inclined to the former... Verses 19–20 summarize the Deuteronomic theology of divine blessing—found in passages such as Deuteronomy 28, which underlies much prophetic teaching. They contain a striking play on words. In effect God was saying, ‘Eat ... or be eaten!’” (Grogan, 476-477).

Day 4 – Apply the Text

Read Isaiah 1:1-20 one more time.

1. In what way have we all acted like the rebellious people Isaiah is talking about in verses 2-4?

2. How does verses 9 and 18 help us to understand God’s mercy and grace?

3. What does verses 10-15 teach us about how we are to approach God in worship?

4. The choice between the two alternatives offered by God in verses 19 and 20 seems simple. If so, why do people still choose to “refuse and rebel”?

Day 5 – Implement the Text

Review and reflect on your study of the passage

1. Is there an area of your life where you are currently in “rebellion” against God?
2. What things can you do to ensure that you know God better?
3. What changes do you need to make in your life to ensure that your worship of God is authentic and genuine?

Bibliography

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update.

Grogan, Geoffrey W. "Isaiah." In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs–Isaiah (Revised Edition)*, edited by Tremper Longman III, Garland David E., Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.

Smith, Gary V. *Isaiah 1–39*. Edited by E. Ray Clendenen. *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007.

Sermon Notes