

ISAIAH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

1. Introduction

Who Needs Isaiah?

Isaiah contains several challenges for conventional church Bible classes. First of all, in length this is a sprawling text, one that is not necessarily chronological in its composition. It covers a wide range of themes and subjects, although some certainly rise to the top as recurring elements. The text presupposes familiarity with the historical contexts in which it was composed, and it's a world situation that is unfamiliar with most western readers, unless they have a strong background in the history of the ancient near east.

Nonetheless, the text has much that commends it for study and meditation. It speaks straight from the heart of God with some of the most passionate poetry to be found in the Bible, and speaks candidly about how God feels towards and reacts to his people. The person who knows the heart of Isaiah is not far from knowing the heart of God. Isaiah can be sobering and inspiring, eloquently teaching us about the consequences of being unfaithful to God and the hope that we may have based on God's pursuit of a faithful people. As a way of introducing Isaiah, any number of approaches are possible based on what themes the teacher intends to emphasize. One way of starting would be to begin by asking, "Who needs Isaiah?"

Who Needs Repentance?

Isaiah's God pursues the repentance of his people. They have turned away from him, placing their trust in their allies, their worship, their own strength, their history...basically all kinds of things except their God. Much of Isaiah tells the story of what happens when God's people choose to trust and follow other things besides God. It shows how God feels about it, how it brings disastrous consequences as God works to discipline his people and bring them back to faithfulness.

So, this book has a great deal to say to the individual, family, or community that has failed to maintain faithfulness in their hearts towards God and begun to place their trust in anything else. Truly listening to Isaiah allows them to hear the danger of

unfaithfulness, the significant way that God responds and works to discipline his people, bringing them back to faithfulness and punishing the unrepentant.

Who Needs Hope?

Isaiah's God also provides abundant hope. Should we not be amazed that a message of hope from this prophet survived innumerable disasters, that the message of hope within Isaiah was strong enough to endure the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, the Maccabean wars and innumerable difficulties, and was still an immediate source of dependable hope during the time of Jesus? It was a message of hope that endured and retained power in the community of faith for over seven hundred years! It was still powerful enough in the first century that when the disciples reflected back on what they had experienced in Jesus, they could not help but think about him in terms of Isaiah's words! That is a remarkable testimony to the power of the words within this sacred book. **When the first disciples thought about Jesus, they thought about him in terms of Isaiah.** Wow! That says so much about how powerful and important they thought the message of this book was.

This book has much to say to anyone who looks around herself, or within his own heart, and wonders if there is anything worth hoping in anymore. It has much to say against the despair we see around us or feel ourselves. It's testimony is one that has the potential, already proven by many generations, to offer hope against even the darkest of times. Who couldn't use a shot of good, honest, reliable, hope?

Who Needs a Vision for the Future?

I started to label this "Who needs eschatology?", but I realize that sometimes our theological, high-brow words scare people away from concepts that are really essential to everyday life. Eschatology is what we call our understanding of the future. Isaiah is a thoroughly eschatological text, describing what God is going to do, creatively and judgmentally, in the future. It is critical that we understand that Isaiah was speaking to his present generation, helping them to understand the consequences of **both** their present actions and God's eternal character on **both** the immediate future and on the future of generations to come. Looking back at the text some 2700 years later, it means that some of that vision has already reached fulfillment, and other elements help inform our own understanding of God's plans for the ultimate future of humanity and the world.

This is one of the parts of Isaiah that seems to cry out for our attention. Isaiah sees to be screaming at us, "Don't you understand where everything is headed?" How we

envision the future has an incredible impact on even the smallest things we do in life. Isaiah presents the opportunity to listen to what God's plans for the world are, the vision that he has for how all this will ultimately end up. Can't we benefit from that?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

The goal of any introduction is probably to whet the appetite, to set the table for the feast to come. It's all about ringing the dinner bell and getting some salivation going! With that in mind, what is true for any teaching moment is particularly important for this first lesson:

The level of enthusiasm you communicate is infinitely more important than any profound discussion question you will find here.

Therefore, the first questions are not for the class, but for you the teacher:

**What do you need to do to get excited, genuinely excited, about teaching Isaiah?
How will you communicate that enthusiasm?**

From there, here are some questions, branching from the areas above, that may help you provoke your class to anticipate the study of Isaiah. They may be interjected within a presentation of the above themes (repentance, hope, and a vision for the future), or you may choose to present the above material and have the discussion at the end in one lengthy segment.

Isaiah

In the most unflattering terms, Isaiah can be perceived as a book full of prophecies that are enigmatic at best and probably already fulfilled. Its therefore useless in determining what I'm going to do when I wake up tomorrow. (It's kind of like listening to a recording of a really complicated commentary on who's going to win a football game, after you've already watched the game.) It's perceived as long, complicated, irrelevant...a dusty old book that probably had it's day but doesn't have much to do with us. Let's be honest, how many of us kind of start out with that idea? What kind of a barrier does that present, both to this study in particular and our ability to listen to and be shaped by scripture in general? What would our approach be to this book if we really considered it the active, living word of God that is able to shape and challenge our lives? What would that look like? What will it take for us to get to that place? Do we need to first get a taste of how this can challenge us?

Repentance

What is it about our own lives that begs repentance? That might be a stunning, overwhelming, conversation stopping sort of question, but it is one Isaiah is going to help us with. So the more introductory discussion may need to be, “Why is that such a stunning, overwhelming, conversation stopping sort of question?” How aware are we to our need for repentance? How do we react when we’re challenged to repent? What are the thoughts, feelings, and actions of repentance? Given our reluctance to talk about our own sins, how can we develop the capacity for repentance, both as individuals and as a community? What is the relationship between receiving the word, and repentance? How do we cultivate that relationship?

Hope

Where do we receive hope? What does it come from? Do we gain and develop hope from promises people make to us, our own experiences, the confidences of people around us? Isaiah has a whole lot to say about false hopes. Where do those come from? How do we challenge those in our community and in our own hearts? Additionally, we can notice that hope does something to us, it affects how we act, how we feel, what we’re thinking on an everyday level. How important is hope? How does it affect us?

Vision for the Future

What kinds of long-term and short-term visions do we have for our lives? For our church? How can we be careful to match up our vision of the future with God’s? What do we do when we begin to see differences in God’s vision for us and our own? What has to happen for us to change our vision of the future?

What do we think God’s vision for the world in the future is? What role do we play in that? Is it up to us at all, or do we totally leave it up to God to accomplish?

The Challenge to Listen

Given all these things, the challenge I would pursue with a class on this material is to really become listeners. Can we commit to becoming people who listen careful, eagerly to God’s word, anticipating that it has something extremely important to say to us, perhaps that we have never heard before? This study in Isaiah gives us the opportunity to practice such a commitment. May we eagerly anticipate it.

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2. Encountering God (Isaiah 6)

Interpreting the Passage

The account of Isaiah's prophetic call in chapter 6 richly develops not only the narrative of the prophet himself, but important motifs as well. It is a theophany story, or a story where God becomes visibly manifest to humanity. The narrative carries a message about who God is and what it means to respond to God's person. This should not be read in isolation, but is important for the rest of Isaiah's content. The other oracles reflect the themes and motifs of this story, building on what is said about God here. The Israel that God is chasing in the oracles fails to understand God's holiness, the need and possibility for grace, or their place in God's mission. These themes are so important that you can feel the immediacy and desperation in God's voice as he speaks through Isaiah. These themes create the passion of the oracles. All of that passion originates in this story of the call, where Isaiah experiences these realities first-hand. The opening questions are, "What does it mean to encounter God? Who is this God that is encountered?"

Holiness

The narrative of chapter six opens with a time marker, placing the following story in a historical context. The God Isaiah encounters is interacting in the course of history. (The date is around 740 BC.) The Lord is revealed as enthroned, and so great that the train of his robe fills the entire temple. The message is clear: God is vast, boundless. The temple, which is a symbol of his presence, could not even contain the train of his robe in reality. His glory fills the entire earth! God is above all and majestic.

The seraphs that surround the Lord serve to announce his holiness. Their cry of "holy, holy holy, is the Lord Almighty" means that the Lord is different, beyond the ordinary, outside of our normal understandings. "God is different, different, different." "God is beyond, beyond, beyond." "Other Other, Other, is the Lord Almighty." God cannot be limited, cannot be fathomed. There is not very much specific information about what God physically looks like here, any such description be inadequate and detract from the point:

Any estimation of God is an underestimation!

This experience of God's holiness has immediate personal consequences for Isaiah, as we see in the next section.

Grace

Isaiah's reaction upon seeing God manifest is immediate and desperate. By becoming God-aware, Isaiah's own self-awareness takes a dramatic shift.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined, for I am man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." -Isaiah 6:5, NIV

Isaiah realizes that before a Holy God, his own unrighteousness endangers him. We don't get specifics here, Isaiah only characterizes himself (and Israel) as a people of unclean lips. That might simply describe general unrighteousness, point towards earlier praise that now appears blasphemously weak, or acknowledge that for many reasons Isaiah's life makes him a liar. He fails to keep the covenant his mouth proclaims, fails to live faithfully by his words. This mismatch between what we say about God and our relationship to him and what we do is a theme for Isaiah. Ultimately though, the point isn't the specific "unclean lips" as much as Isaiah's unrighteousness revealed in God's presence.

Before God, the best of us might as well be the worst. Any holiness for ourselves that we imagine to have gained by our own efforts and discipline becomes clearly unclean when matched against God. importantly, this holiness theme is matched by God's power and sovereignty. It would be one thing if God were more holy than we were, but less powerful. Isaiah would have no need to fear in that case. But, the one who is holy is also "the King". He is "the Lord Almighty." Isaiah has no chance to defend his unholiness. All of the things that God is revealed to be in this theophany carry consequences for Isaiah. God is holy, Isaiah is not. God is mighty, Isaiah is powerless. God is an enthroned king and Isaiah is under his domain.

What is astonishing though, is God's response to Isaiah's cry. God does not bring destruction, death, or punishment. Instead, one of God's servants carries a holy coal to Isaiah and touches Isaiah's unclean lips. This is a passage that carries intense drama, particularly if we can manage to read it "live", as if we were hearing it for the first time. In that context, it is easy to imagine that the approaching seraph is coming to bring Isaiah's ruin. What happens next is astonishing!

The seraph touches the coal to Isaiah's lips, and proclaim that Isaiah's guilt has been taken away, his sin atoned for. There is no explanation of how this works, or why God acts this way. This is a free act of God's sovereign grace. God chooses to use his power not for Isaiah's destruction, but for his salvation and sanctification. God makes Isaiah holy.

Mission

This moment of sanctification is clearly an act of grace towards Isaiah, but it is also important to note that Isaiah is not being made holy for his own sake. This happens as a way of preparing him for the service to which he is called. Isaiah is made holy for the sake of God's mission.

After Isaiah's experience of God, he is not a reluctant servant, but enthusiastically jumps at the first chance to take part on God's mission. After all, Interestingly, God is pictured as someone seeking a servant. God solicits help, and Isaiah, newly sanctified, steps up immediately. Isaiah has experienced God's holiness, his own need for forgiveness and God's willingness to grant it. These realizations about his own position before God were not limited to him, though. He also realizes his people's position before God (6:5)!

The call is not what he expects, though. God tells him that the people will fail to respond, that the message will only serve to make them stubborn and hard-hearted. They will leave the offer of grace on the table. Isaiah is to be a prophet ignored. He cries out in response, "O Lord, how long?" Here Isaiah learns that the message will be ignored fully, until the land is ruined and the people are carried away. Then though, at the very end of this gloomy prophecy, god reveals that even in that destruction there will be a holy seed left behind, a promise of restoration. Isaiah's mission is part of God's long plan, one that Isaiah will not see the fruits of. The holy God who reveals his boundless holiness to Isaiah draws him into a plan that is much bigger than himself.

Teaching the Lesson

From a teaching perspective, the primary objective with this text might be to communicate the real nature of our position before God. This must begin with humility as a teacher, because anything we say about the holiness of God still pales before the reality. Israel had an elegant temple built to demonstrate God's holiness and presence, and yet it couldn't contain God's holiness at all. How much less so might our words! One of the prime things we can communicate about this text is a sense of the humility that must come from it.

Strategically, it might be helpful to begin this class with a discussion of the ways that people visualize God. What do people see or hear when they imagine God? Perhaps this text or others have already played a part in developing that conceptualization. What are some places that people have gotten their conceptualizations of God?

Another way this text might provoke us is by meditating on the things in our own lives that would cause us to cry out in God's presence "Woe is me! I am ruined, for I _____!" While that may be sensitive to discuss, it may be worthwhile to let the question hang in the air. How can you create a moment in your class that allows the members to consider their standing before God in this way? Then we may be ready to discuss how they identify with Isaiah's feelings in that moment.

If that can be achieved, then it may be a good next step think about what it would mean to fully experience grace as Isaiah does. What would our reaction be (or has it been) to hearing, "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for"? How can we capture that joyful reality in our lives?

Finally, what moments in our lives have we found ourselves willing to respond with Isaiah, "Here am I, send me." Are there times when we resist mission? How can experiencing God's holiness and grace lead to more faithful responses to God's call to mission?

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3. Sin Confronted (Isaiah 1)

Interpreting the Passage

Isaiah opens with a blazing call to repentance. Although the material in chapter 6 would make a more conventional opening, Isaiah's text starts with a brief historical note for context, then runs urgently out of the gate. There is no time to be wasted. The call must go out! Repent! The book's opening salvo points out the problems, promises judgment, offers grace, and demonstrates the passion of the heart of God. Not bad for an opening chapter! None of this is by accident, of course. These themes set the tone for the whole book. What follows from here is all a result of the realities of sin, judgment, and grace that are apparent in this first chapter.

“Something is rotten in the state of Judah.”

Just as in Hamlet's Denmark, something is terribly rotten in the Judah of Isaiah's time, and it starts at the very top. Judah's leadership has become corrupt, and the entire nation is characterized negatively in this first chapter. Isaiah offers a laundry list of sinful postures. God's people are rebellious, in spite of the care he has given them. They deal and judge corruptly, they trust in their worship but fail to honor God in their practices. They oppress the poor and neglect widows and orphans among them. Their hands are full of blood.

Although in worship Judah is aligned with the Lord, their ethical practices are totally different. They have failed to align their lives with the things that are truly of God's heart, namely justice and righteousness. The mistake is insidious; they retain the appearance of holiness, perhaps believe in their own righteousness, but have no holy heart. The section beginning in verse 10 is strong and punchy. Before speaking about their worship practices, for which they might expect commendation, God greets them with a serious slap in the face. “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give

ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” You can feel the tension here as well as almost anywhere in the prophets. You can imagine Isaiah’s hearers turning red. Sodom? Gomorrah? We’re the people of God! Don’t you see the temple of the Lord? Don’t you see the smoke of the sacrifices?

The Lord presses on, “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me.” (1:10-13, ESV)

Ouch, right? All the things you thought you were doing right, out the window. It gets worse. “New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations--I cannot bear iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.” (1:13-15, ESV)

It’s a chilling image, one that is helpful to have burned in our minds. A man comes to worship, lifts his hands in prayer to God, only to reveal that his outstretched hands are bloody from murder. (Lightning flashes.) The villain is revealed. It’s me. All of the guilt, the oppression, the rebellion, the neglect, the injustice, it’s all on my hands, and I didn’t even know it. That’s the feeling we’ve got to be open to when we read this text. We have to give that feeling a chance if we’re going to really listen to this text.

The Outstretched Hand of Grace

Immediately after this chilling image of the bloody outstretched hand, the Lord extends his own hand, offering grace and forgiveness. If the people repent, as spelled out in 1:16-17, the Lord will take away their sin, and purifying them and giving them the good of the land. Their blood red sins can become white as snow. **The Lord has the power to change their reality.** The offer is radical, incredible. Although the offense is great and the guilt profound, God offers forgiveness, grace.

The offer isn’t going to stay on the table forever, though. God invites their repentance, but the hand that stretches out in grace can also be turned against them in discipline. Verse 21 and following offers a dire picture of how the Lord will purify the people if they do not repent on their own, a process like smelting away the dross from silver, refining it. God will have a pure people. He offers a chance to be a part of that. Make no mistake about it, though, those who refused would be burned away. God will not allow his people to remain impure forever. While the dominance of injustice and sin among the people must be dealt with, the Lord still desires his people. He still remains

engaged with them, working until Jerusalem can again be called, a “city of righteousness”.

Teaching the Lesson

This text is something of a microcosm of the book, showing notes of confrontation, warning, judgment, discipline, and hope. Each of these will get its turn in the study, but for this lesson, the focus of the following questions will be on the confrontation of Judah’s sin.

Worship: Isolated or Integrated?

This text provokes us to examine our worship, not in and of itself, but its connection to the rest of our lives. Worship is dangerous. It can pacify us, lead us to be satisfied with an appearance of holiness. Disconnected from the rest of our lives, our worship can deceive us, creating the belief that we are more righteous than we really are. In this text, God takes Judah to task for failing to live by justice, for neglecting the powerless in their midst. The lesson here is not only a statement of what is most important to God, but a demonstration of how Judah was fooled. They had been lulled into moral complacency by their worship and sacrifices. Instead of aligning their hearts closer to God and his righteousness, their worship had become irrelevant except as a smoke screen. What about our own worship? How would we evaluate it, not based on the quality of the “program”, but based on our own connection between our hearts in worship and our hearts during the rest of the week? Do we risk believing ourselves to be more righteous than we are because we show up at weekly worship, and a Bible class for bonus? Do we see these things as a means for becoming more mature, or as evidence of our maturity?

Is our worship integrated into our lives, or an isolated event during the week? Do we use worship to reflect meaningfully on our everyday lives? Do we reflect during the week on the God who is the subject of our worship? What are some examples of how this integration has been present or absent in our lives? This is a place for a very important discussion.

Ready to Repent?

Isaiah sets out two paths for Judah: a path of destruction and a path of redemption. The path they end up on is going to be dependent on one factor, their willingness to repent. This factor is so critical, it really dominates much of Isaiah (and the rest of the Bible!). Isaiah’s story really is one where God is working to bring his people to a place where they are willing to repent. He will not force it, but uses the voices of the prophets and the swords of the pagans to create a readiness to repent.

Repentance is difficult. We become so invested in the state of our lives, in the control we wish to exercise over them, that correcting course based on an outside will is difficult at best. When confronted by God's will, we desperately want it to match up with what we're already doing. We want God to approve of and bless us, as we are. Why must he desire to change us?

On the other hand, what if we could discipline our hearts so that repentance before God became natural to us? What if it became our habit to correct our lives by God's will? What if we could become super-responsive to his direction? What would it look like to be such a community? What would be different? What would we have to do to become such a community? When we look at the cost of their unwillingness to repent, what can we learn from Judah? Can we take an easier path?

Challenge

Being confronted by our sin is a painful, hurtful experience. Within the hurt, though, is a profound gift. As Jonah knew, God's act of confronting sin is itself an act of grace, because it paves the way for repentance. The confrontation brings the opportunity for repentance. It is the first step in God making things right.

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4. God of the Nations (Isaiah 9-23)

Interpreting the Passage

Beginning with Chapter 9 through at least chapter 23 runs a significant section of texts that would have offended not only the theological sensibilities of the Ancient Near East in which Isaiah lived, but the diplomatic sensibilities of both his time and perhaps any other, including ours. Isaiah's God asserts the authority to judge not only the nation with which God lives in a covenant relationship, but her neighbors as well. **Isaiah's God claims the authority to judge all the peoples of the world.** This radical, offensive claim is asserted so thoroughly it cannot be avoided, and it carries important implications for all of us (and all who are not us.)

One of the bedrock beliefs of the Ancient Near East (ANE) was the localization of deities. There were many gods, and each god ruled over a land or nation. These gods might be in competition with each other for dominance, so that Assyria's god, for example, leads them in conquest to enforce his dominance over other gods. In conquering, Assyria demonstrates the superiority of their god but not the absence of other gods. This explains several things we're already aware of, such as why the Canaanite gods like the Baals were so tempting (they had been supposedly ruling that particular land for a long time!) or why the exile caused such a crisis of faith for Israel.

Isaiah upends this whole system of polytheism by asserting that there is in fact one God who reigns over the entire world. The Lord, the God of Israel, is the only true and living God. By the Lord's will and power do all the nations rise and fall, serving sometimes unknowingly as God's instruments. This provides alternative explanations for phenomenon like Assyrian victory over Israel (The Lord was using Assyria to punish Israel) which could have been interpreted as demonstrating the superior power of the Assyrian god.

Isaiah's God simply refuses to allow any role for any other god. Jerusalem, Samaria, and Israel answer to the Lord alone, and this is expected. But, Isaiah proclaims, so do

Assyria, the Philistines, Moab, Damascus, Cush, Egypt, Babylon, Edom, Arabia, and Tyre. Everyone answers to one God, the Lord.

The Offensive Implications for Israel's Neighbors

By claiming the right to judge the nations, God violates all of their notions of sovereignty and independence. People who assumed that they were under the rule of gods who cared little for their ethical values (or who valued power supremely) find themselves brought under the umbrella of a king who demands justice and righteousness for all. Even their victories are not their own, as Israel claims that the Lord will use them for divine purposes and then turn around and punish them as well. There is no room for arrogance regarding one's victories, and might certainly does not make right. Those nations who assumed that having the power to oppress their neighbors gave them the right to do so come under the judgement of a God who fights for the oppressed and does not vindicate those who are powerful in their own eyes.

This teaching also offends the theological sensibilities of Israel's neighbors. How dare Israel claim that the gods of their neighbors are worthless? Do they not have respect and tolerance for the religious views of others? What gives Isaiah the right to stick his nose in the religious beliefs of Egypt? Why does he feel like it's okay to critique the moral code of Tyre or Damascus? Why not leave well-enough alone? Why stir the pot by issuing accusations and critiquing the beliefs of all of your neighbors?

The implications of these passages carries severe offense for Israel's neighbors.

You claim your God will judge us?

What gives Isaiah the right? He is simply telling the truth.

The Offensive Implications for Israel

We must realize though that there is another set of implications in these passages that is just as offensive for the isaiah's own people. These passages imply that the God who they lived in covenant with as not only their God, but a God who ruled over the Nations. It is this theology that leads to a situation like that in Jonah, where God issues a prophecy against Nineveh, but is also willing to extend forgiveness and grace to that city, Israel's enemy. By declaring that One God will judge the nations, Isaiah is setting up the theology that one God cares for all the nations. This argument is born out by later sections of Isaiah, where it becomes clear that God's plan for the redemption of Israel is not only for Israel's sake, but also for the sake of all the nations.

The offense for Israel then is the realization that while Israel lives in a special relationship with God, **God possesses the earth. Israel does not possess God.** This claim strikes against the temptation to exclusivity that Israel faced, and demands that they move beyond a preoccupation with themselves.

Teaching the Lesson

Teaching these challenging texts and their implications should begin with an understanding of why these texts would have been so striking to the original readers. Then we can move from their shock and the disorientation that these texts would bring them to how they might challenge our own assumptions and patterns of thought and behavior. I would begin with a few verses from different places in this block of text where Isaiah speaks to specific nations by name. That way the class can begin to get a picture of the scope of the claims being made here.

Regarding the first implication, it naturally flows into a discussion of whether or not we believe and act on the reality that God is going to bring judgment on the world. God will judge the entire world, every last human. His dominion includes every person we encounter. In what ways can that reality affect our thinking and behavior? How does it affect our:

Evangelistic attitude?

Giving behavior?

Moral Lives?

If we can affirm that there are implications for these areas, then what has prevented us from reacting in these ways in the past? While this may have been groundbreaking material for Isaiah's time, these are concepts that we are generally aware of. What barriers exist to acting on the implications?

Regarding the second idea, do you ever get the sense that the church forgets that its mission is not for itself, but for the sake of God's work in the world? As a people, how can we become more focused on how we affect the community around us? How can we affect our world?

Finally, there is one last angle for discussion with this theme, and that is the reality that for most of us, we would have been the outsiders in Isaiah. We non-Jews would have necessarily been the outsiders. How does that change the way we read these texts?

Let's celebrate that in Christ Jesus, God has brought those who were once outsiders into the community of his people!

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5. Who do I Trust? (Isaiah 31, 36-37)

Interpreting the Passage

One of the themes that pops up repeatedly in Isaiah is the fundamental concept of trusting God above all else. That question often comes from the political situation in which Israel and Judah lived. Geographically, Israel and Judah lived between two dominant nations, each wrestling for more power and control over the region. Egypt, to the southwest, and Assyria, to the northeast, were both rising powers, each keeping a close eye on the other, each threatening to expand at any time they sensed an opportunity. They both valued control over the routes that control of Israel/Judah would yield. The result was that Israel often found herself in the middle of a tug-of-war. She felt like she had to be shrewd to stay alive.

Often, in the middle of the conflict of these expanding (but very different) empires, the kings of Judah and Israel looked to form alliances with these or other powers, for the sake of gaining protection. It was a dangerous game, because befriending one nation meant alienating another, or sometimes several others.

God reacts in various ways to the situation, and in a couple of places in Isaiah God criticizes the people for placing their trust in places besides him. For instance, in chapter 31, God criticizes those who would rely on Egypt to defend them against the Assyrians. The Lord says frankly that the deliverance Judah is seeking will not come from Egypt, or any other physical power, but directly from the Lord himself. It is summed up in 31:3, "The Egyptians are men and not God. Their horses are flesh and not spirit."

In Isaiah 36-37 an extremely colorful narrative fleshes the implications of this out. The story form is unusual; it pops up out of nowhere in the middle of a book dominated by prophetic poetry. The story is the key to interpreting texts like chapters 20 and 31, though, and sheds light on much of the rest of the prophetic texts. An Assyrian king, Sennacherib, threatens Jerusalem and in chapter 36 his commander taunts and mocks

them (partly for relying on Egypt!) Poignantly, we find God's warnings, which have been ignored up to this point, on the very lips of the Assyrian, when he asks, "On what are you basing this confidence of yours? You say you have strategy and military strength, but you speak only empty words. **On whom are you depending**, that you rebel against me?" (36:4-5) This last phrase is particularly haunting, and could very well have come from the Lord in the earlier warnings. The rest of the message makes it clear that the commander is not viewing himself as an enemy of the Lord. Judah is not relying on the Lord! In fact, he claims that it was the Lord that sent him! This is all consistent with the rest of Isaiah. (He unfortunately goes too far in his taunt to the people in 36:18-20, and seals his own fate.)

As the story develops, Hezekiah the king seriously repents. He realizes his fault in relying on Egypt and has come to the place where he realizes that he simply has no hope except for the Lord. To the casual observer, this seems WAY too late to repent. Astonishingly, God responds to Hezekiah's repentance with a promise of salvation, which he soon delivers on. The account of the "battle" is remarkably concise. "Then the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning-- there were all the dead bodies!" How is this victory possible? Perhaps the best way to think about it is a reversal of what was said about Egypt in chapter 31. "The Lord is God, not man. His forces are spirit, and not flesh." When Judah turns to rely on God rather than the flesh, even the most improbable victories are at hand.

Teaching the Lesson

Introduction

This lesson will stretch the demands of an hour-long class, because the most important thing to be done is the telling of the story that is found in chapters 36-37. If you wish to have discussion after the story, then it is imperative that your introduction be efficient. However, the material about Israel's desire to depend on Egypt and the Lord's warnings against doing that are critical to grasping the force of the narrative, so your introduction must be balanced. Communicate the information necessary to feel the story, but remember that the story itself is where you want to live this week.

Story

In telling the story, think carefully about which parts of the text you wish to quote directly, and which you wish to summarize. How will you communicate the drama of the story? How will your narrative faithfully reflect that of the one in the text, and yet move beyond

a simple “reading” of the text. How can you read the text without sounding like a bore reading a text? This is worth practicing! The material for this week’s lesson is straightforward, but with a lesson like this your skills as a story-teller will be a critical factor in the success or failure of the lesson. A teacher who is skilled and practice in the art of good story-telling has added a powerful weapon to the arsenal. Don’t ignore this in your preparation! What will the story look like to your class after you present it? What moments of the story will you emphasize? When you read and meditate on the story, which parts come alive for you? How do you visualize them?

If all of this seem overwhelming, are there people in your class who are excellent story-tellers? Can you enlist their help to communicate the force of this narrative? Would it be to much for your class to have people play parts for the story? Someone to take on the role of the Assyrian commander, Eliakim and the gang, or some common people hanging out at the wall? Hezekiah and Isaiah? One way to open up a story is to think through what each person is thinking and feeling at different stages of the narrative.

Discussion

In discussing the story, there are several clear angles to open up.

First, what are the things that we feel pressure under, so that we can’t stand up under them on our own? What threatens us, physically, or at the level of our hearts?

Secondly, what things do we typically rely on to get us through those threats? What would it mean to radically trust the Lord in those moments?

Thirdly, does it resonate with anybody else that Hezekiah waits until the last possible moment to rely on God? What are the consequences of taking that approach?

Finally, what experiences does the class have or know from others that reflect the victory Hezekiah is given here? What stories from our own lives can we share to encourage the church to learn to rely on God and no other? What about the other side, stories where our reliance on other things endangered us.

Ultimately, this lesson is about faith. It is easy to criticize Hezekiah’s desire to have a back-up plan, but can we imagine allowing the Assyrian’s to come against us without at least talking to Egypt? What faith God demands!

ISAIAH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

6. In That Day: Destruction (Isaiah 24)

Interpreting the Passage

Isaiah is a prophet who interprets the present in terms of the future. He speaks God's word about his present in terms of what will happen when the Lord takes action, and Isaiah's present was very, very bad. Israel and Judah were on the brink of calamity.

It is not the most feel-good element of the book of Isaiah, but we cannot ignore the promise of destruction that Isaiah issues for God's enemies or God's unfaithful people. The issue of the unity of the book of Isaiah is a complicated issue, but for now, suffice it to say that destruction is a major theme of the first 39 chapters of the book, at which point the themes turn to proclamations of hope. The judgment and destruction theme that we are concerned with in this lesson are simply all over the first half of the book. (See 1:2-31, 2:6-4:1, 5:1-30, 7:16-25, 9:8-10:16, 22:1-25, and pretty much everything from 26:20 through chapter 34.)

The Coming Calamity

For Israel (often referred to as Ephraim), complete destruction and disaster loomed on the horizon during the time of Isaiah. The prophets denounced the northern kingdom's injustice, rebellion and idolatry. The kings of Israel, ruling from the capital Samaria, and their allies in Damascus made themselves a political target by forming an alliance against Assyria, and the Assyrians saw to their destruction and exile. This was a crushing, painful defeat that the northern kingdom would never really recover from as an independent entity.

Isaiah's concern, however, is primarily Judah. Judah survives the Assyrian onslaught, but it is significant to understand that the Southern kingdom certainly suffers through the period. The Assyrian forces ravage the fortified cities and country towns of

Judah, and are only halted at the end of a long siege of Jerusalem itself. The Assyrian forces are like a flood that rises until Judah is neck-deep! (8:6-8) The threat is substantial, so that it appears all hope is lost. Make no mistake about it, even though Judah survives the Assyrian period, they suffer terribly. In Isaiah, there is no mistaking the cause for the suffering. God spells out exactly why this is all taking place ahead of time, and even the Assyrian commanders voice that they are working on God's behalf! (Isaiah 36:4-10) Much of Isaiah speaks to this specific day of destruction for Judah, in grim tones.

Beyond that initial period of destruction for Judah, Isaiah also speaks of a future and final day of destruction. Isaiah 24 is a good place to check into that theme, as it speaks of a universal day of wrath, destruction, and judgment. The judgment that is to come brings not only destruction on Judah, but on the whole world. Everyone is accountable, every nation faces God's wrath. There is certainly a coming day of calamity for Judah, but beyond that, there is a day where all nations are going to be taken to task.

Isaiah and Eschatology

Isaiah is a great book for helping us understand the concept of eschatology, one of the most important elements of any full theology. Don't be scared off by the fancy word. Eschatology basically refers to the way we envision the future. It's our understanding of how things are going to change. Properly done, it's the part of our theology that addresses, challenges, and shapes our fears and hopes. Often Christian eschatology has become limited to the expectation of heaven and hell, but the full canon reveals an understanding of eschatology that is much richer. Isaiah has much to contribute to such an understanding.

Study of the prophets, especially those elements where the prophets speak of then-future events, can easily become too focused on specific prophecy-fulfillment instances or too generalized, speaking only of very large strokes. To study the book effectively, it is best to get a grasp of the general tones of the eschatology being laid out, and then to evaluate specifics in terms of those generalities. One of the general tones that Isaiah strikes is that the final actions of the Lord will include a day of destruction.

There are two immediate purposes for that day of destruction. The first is that the where the evil of the world is finally and decisively undone. One is that the Lord is the rightful judge whose punishments are the just deserts of the evil in the world. God's righteous character cannot tolerate the evil present in the world, and that evil cannot go unpunished forever. In the day of destruction, "*The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.*" (Isaiah 24:5-6, ESV) The final destruction marks the wasting of everything in

conflict with the righteousness and justice of God. With it destroyed, it is even more apparent that he reigns. God's judgment and destruction is both a function of God's character and a demonstration of his authority.

Destruction is not the final word though, and this ultimate day of destruction also serves to pave the way for the salvation of the righteous that God intends. While we will spend more time later envisioning this final salvation, it is important to note that destruction and judgment serve to remove evil from the scene so that God can restore the world and humanity to their intended state. God removes and purges evil so that what remains will be pure. That theme resounds throughout Isaiah, both in terms of Judah specifically and the world in general. Evil has no place in God's vision of the ultimate future. It's removal and destruction is a step towards the realization of that future.

Teaching the Lesson

Introduction

When is a total disaster a positive? How does every good home renovation project start? With demolition! Sometimes the process of making something new and wonderful begins by tearing up and breaking down what is old and corrupted. As a class, what are some instances in your life where something old had to be torn down or apart in order to make way for something new?

Developing a Vision for the Future

As we begin to see Isaiah's vision for the Future, his eschatology, it becomes apparent that he envisioned much of the world around him as destined for destruction. If we begin to imagine how much of the world around us is destined to destruction, it can be a painful vision! How can such a vision change the way we view the people with whom we live and work? How does it change the way we go about our everyday lives? How does it change our priorities? What things are easiest for us to see as headed to destruction? What are some things for which such a fate is difficult for us to swallow?

Knowing that much of the world was on a collision course with God forces us to compare what we know of God's values with what we see around us, and within ourselves. While it is tempting for this discussion to degenerate into discussion of how evil the world is, perhaps it is wiser for us to consider our own condition. What is it within ourselves that is at odds with God's values? How do we expect such conflict to end up? How aware are we of places of conflict between ourselves and God?

Knowing that God is ultimately a judge, how does that change the relationship between ourselves and God? How does it alter the way we feel about God? How much does it affect the way we think and feel about the salvation we claim in Jesus?

Preparing for the Future

Ultimately, all of our reflection must become action if it is to be of any good. What kinds of actions would demonstrate that our vision of such a future are in line with God's? How would it alter our ethical decisions? How does it change our evangelistic mentality? What things does it lead us to be less attached to?

ISAIAH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

7. In That Day: Salvation! (Isaiah 12)

Interpreting the Passage

Hope of Salvation

Salvation as a dimension of Isaiah's vision of the future (eschatology) shows up often and in a number of shades and forms throughout Isaiah. Some of the passages give subtle hints or outright details of what kind of salvation that entails. Some of the particularities of that vision of salvation (A Son of David, A Whole Land, Peace) will be covered in greater detail in later lessons in this series, but for now, let's focus on how a firm hope of salvation can affect the community of faith in the present. Chapter 12 is a great resource for such reflection, and gives us a picture of how a hope of salvation can affect us now. Isaiah communicates the promise of future salvation for the sake of present.

Looking Forward to Looking Back

Chapter 12 is a psalm of thanksgiving, given as a summary of the promises of salvation Isaiah is offering, as a way of concluding the first section (chapters 1-12) before moving into the oracles of the nations in chapters 13-23. It is a prophetic psalm, one that the people of Isaiah's time are not yet ready to sing, but will once the vision he is revealing comes to fruition. This is demonstrated by the first verse, "In that day, you will sing:" We can think of it is a sort of eschatological psalm, one expressing hope for God's community in the future. It is about the things that Judah will look back on in the future. By shaping the psalm this way, Isaiah is able to communicate what it means to be a part of the community that has such a salvation to look forward to.

God Relents

The first verse speaks of how Judah will give thanks for God turning away his anger from his people. Although there was punishment and discipline in their near future,

Isaiah is communicating that for those who repent, the anger that was targeted at them from God would not last. Isaiah's God is one who is willing to turn away from anger and comfort his wounded people, even though they had brought the trouble on themselves. This has the possibility of changing the attitude of the people in the middle of the struggle, of calling for their repentance! Isaiah says, "In the future, you're going to look back and thank God for his forgiveness." What kind of effect does that have on the community in the present? They may know both God's readiness to respond to their forgiveness, and that God does not intend their final destruction. *The community who knows that their future involves forgiveness can begin to live in the attitude of repentance and thanksgiving in the present.*

Trusting Courage

Isaiah's salvation psalm turns next to the assurance that the worshipper can have (12:2). With the power of God backing their salvation, the faithful have no need of fear. Because of their experiences, God's people will live free of anxiety and fear in the face of whatever challenges await them in the future. This is a bold message for Isaiah to proclaim, since Judah would face annihilation and extreme hardship in the future. He proclaims still that they will come out on the other side of it able to look to God for salvation no matter what the circumstance. This promise isn't speculation about the future though, it is a message waiting to be claimed in the here and now. *The community who knows that their future involves deliverance can begin to live in the attitudes of trust and courage in the present.*

Salvation for the Nations

Just as Isaiah's long-term vision of the world included a time of worldwide judgment and the destruction of evil things, the future of Isaiah also includes a remarkable vision of salvation. In places like chapters 2 and 56, the God of Isaiah describes his vision of an eventual future where salvation is both definitive for the faithful of Israel and also an open reality for the other nations of the world. The radical claim of salvation for all people involves an extreme commitment to hope and faith in the God who can accomplish the improbable and impossible. In the passage at hand, the worshipper in the psalm encourages the community to make the Lord's saving actions known "among the peoples", and in "all the earth" (Isa 12:4-5). Isaiah's community of faith is not just to enjoy their salvation among themselves, but to speak freely of their experience of salvation to world around them. *The community who knows that the future involves the possibility of good news for everyone can begin to speak testimony of the good news in the present.*

Praise for the Holy One!

The final verses in this chapter which are broken up into a second psalm. It is one of praise, as God's character has been demonstrated. The Lord's actions spark off celebration and joy. Isaiah describes the future as a place of praise, where the community has realized God's actions, seen God's glory demonstrated in them, and spontaneously sing his praises. This note of hope is meant as an enduring summons to praise for the community until that salvation is realized. By the certainty of God's promises, God's people can understand the struggles of the present as passing away, and anticipate the praises of the future. *The community who knows that their future involves deliverance can begin to sing God's praises in the present.*

Teaching the Lesson

Introduction

Much like the community to whom Isaiah ministered, the church exists in two realities, one in which we look forward to the full benefit and realization of our salvation, and the reality that we already experience the power and benefit from Jesus' saving acts in the present. This is our primary struggle, to live in the present as though the things that we believe about the future are true. Maybe the best way to start this week is to begin with a playful conversation of different ways that having a vision for the future can affect the decisions made in as varied contexts as parenting, marriage, sports, business, fitness, or whatever. Simple conversation of what we believe about the future, particularly in terms of our final salvation by God. Then we may ask what that future means for our present, and turn to the text as a way of listening to some ways that developing a vision for God's future can affect our present.

Letting the Future affect the Present

In the interpretation outlined above, the passage can be seen to offer insight into how God's vision of the future can shape us into people of repentance, gratitude, trust, and courage. It can motivate us for evangelism and praise. You might choose to discuss each of those individually, but once we see the entire sketch, it's worth asking whether or not we see ourselves as possessing these traits. If not, is it because we fail to grasp the reality of what we hope in, or is it because we fail to live out the implications of that hope? whichever is decided there, what kinds of solutions can we think of to pull us back into alignment? How can we learn to rely more on our hope? How can we become more in touch with our salvation, so that it guides our actions? What are moments in our lives when we were successful in living out these things, and why?

Who are other people we know that have demonstrated what it means to live out these characteristics?

Also, once all the elements above are outlined, we might well ask which are more difficult for us, and why. Why do we struggle with some of them, but others come more easily to us. Which are most dependent on our faith?

Another exercise that might be good for this lesson is to rewrite the psalm. Start of with the words, "In that day, we will say:", and see how your class might express the general thought of Isaiah here. What is it that we need to be reminded of?

ISAIAH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

8. Remnant Theology

(Isaiah 10)

Interpreting the Passage

The Remnant: God's Enduring Promise

Isaiah's prophecies are incredible in their own right as oracles of judgment and salvation filled with advocacy for justice and faithful leadership. They depict and elicit hope in the face of crisis, and challenge our assumptions about the way power is gained and used. Importantly though, all these oracles find their context not just within the particular historical situations that produced them, but both within those contexts and the larger context of God's ongoing relationship with his covenant people Israel. Isaiah refuses to relinquish the promises of God's covenant with Israel in the face of their unfaithfulness, judgment and impending destruction. Instead, Isaiah shows how God creatively and providentially secures the future and fulfillment of his promises while dealing with the unfaithfulness of his people.

Isaiah stands at a point in history when it seems as though the covenant between God and his people is going to be irreversibly shattered. While there is plenty of guilt to go around, Isaiah's prophecies readily recognize that a portion of the people have remained faithful, or are at least responding to God's discipline with repentance. This core of people importantly allows for the continuation of God's covenant relationship with his people, even as he judges and punishes them as a whole. The faithful core becomes for Isaiah a "remnant" of God's covenant people. They are leftovers, who preserve the potential and possibility of renewal in the future. God uses them to preserve his promises for Israel's blessing, as well as the blessing that would come to the world through Israel.

The basic remnant motif has a simple plot:

- Judah and Israel must suffer God's judgment and discipline for their unfaithfulness.
- However, God still remains committed to the covenant and its purposes.
- The tension is resolved by God's plan to separate a part of the people as a remnant who will survive the crisis of exile.
- The remnant will remerge to receive God's blessing and become a conduit of blessing for the nations.

The theme shows up often in Isaiah, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes in subtle ways. Numerous passages use the remnant term (Isa. 11:11, 28:5, 37:4, 37:31, 46:3, and the passages immediately surrounding each of these). Sometimes the term seems negative, as in "woe to Israel, only a remnant will remain!" Other texts seem to stress the positive aspect, "Have hope, a remnant will return with God's blessing!" Isaiah even gives his son a name meaning "A remnant will return", highlighting the importance of the motif. One of the clearest, most beautiful remnant passages is found in Isaiah 10, which we will look at more closely below.

Isaiah 10:20-23.

To put this passage in context, it comes as a counterpoint to a judgment theme that opens the chapter. In the first stage, God will serve justice to those who have abandoned just dealings themselves. He will avenge the oppressed among his people by bringing judgment to Israel/Judah through the Assyrians. After that though, the Assyrians themselves will be destroyed, because of the arrogance that makes them think that their power over God's people comes from themselves and not God. The words in this chapter that depict that arrogant blasphemy are mirrored in the narrative of chapter 36, there spoken by the Assyrian Rabshekah, a military general, during Assyria's siege of Jerusalem.

There is an artful word play at the end of the section regarding God's judgment of Assyria, in 10:18-19, where Isaiah writes metaphorically of the Assyrian forces that they will be so decimated that a child could take a count of the ones left over. His description of them as a "remnant" in the negative sense sets the stage for verse 20, where Isaiah turns to the idea of the remnant of Israel, the "survivors of the house of Jacob", in a positive sense. The remnant of Israel experiences two things that allow work of God in Israel to be ongoing and fruitful in the future.

Survival

The remnant's identity is defined by their status as survivors. In the face of crisis and confusion, some of God's covenant people are going to refuse to give up and will survive the tragedy of those around them. In Isaiah's circumstance, their survival may

seem a passive phenomenon. In other words, the remnant isn't determined by the will of the survivors as much as providence or the accident of the realities of the Assyrian invasion and the subsequent Babylonian exile. In such circumstances, we might be tempted to believe that there are victims and there are survivors, and the individual only has a limited amount of say in the matter. There may be some truth to that, but there is still something to be said for the individual or community who makes a decision that no matter what happens, they simply will not give up. In fact, if we look at Isaiah's whole text, we can't help but perceive that a major purpose behind the entire work is to persuade its readers to firmly decide that they will not give up. When the obstacle to survival is sin, Isaiah says "repent". When there are internal forces oppressing the righteous in Israel, Isaiah says, "God will deal with them." When the Assyrian threat seems too incredible to survive, Isaiah says, "This too will pass." When the people have experienced exile at the hands of Babylon, Isaiah says, "Be faithful, God is still with you," even though all the visible evidence points to the contrary. Isaiah answers and counters every reason the faithful might think of to give up. Isaiah stubbornly makes the case through poetry, narrative, visions of the future, and echos of the past that the community can and must remain faithful. They must refuse to give up if they are to lay hold of a real and incredible destiny as God's people. To give up is to miss out on the destiny of God's faithful people.

Survivors and victims share the experience of pain and loss. Victims are defined by the loss, but survivors are defined by the victory of overcoming the loss. Their emergence defines them as something different. Isaiah's prophecy here foretold that while many would suffer, there would be a part of the community of faith that would emerge as survivors, as improbable as it seemed.

Repentance

The remnant's survival is dependent on their will to survive, but it was also dependent on God's deliverance, which in this case was conditional upon their repentance. The way this is described in Isaiah 10 is striking in a couple of ways. The remnant would be made up of those who "return to God". What's more, they "will no more lean on him who struck them, but lean on the Lord." That is an extremely rich and very teachable concept. It refers to the episodes recorded in places like Isaiah 7, where in the face of a conflict between Judah (southern kingdom) and the alliance of Israel (northern kingdom) and Syria, Judah's leadership chose to depend on Assyria for help rather than trusting in the Lord alone to deliver them. Eventually it would be this very Assyria who would come to wreak havoc in Judah after destroying Israel. In other words, Judah was nearly brought to ruin by the very force they had turned to for help. They very much brought the suffering down on themselves. Isaiah is saying in chapter 10 that the remnant would be those who repented, and leaned on the Lord alone. Their trust wouldn't be given to other powers, but only to God.

Teaching the Lesson

The two sub-points of the lesson are very teachable, and offer a range of contact and application for modern readers of Isaiah. Begin by describing the remnant motif, providing as much background detail as you feel is necessary, before moving into reading and interpreting this particular passage in chapter 10. After you have done the basic interpretive work, Here are some ideas for different directions that the class discussion could move towards in terms of how this text/motif offers us a different perspective on our lives as a community seeking to be faithful to God.

How differently do you respond to the terms “survivor” and “victim”? Why does one sound more preferable than the other? In broad strokes, without being too negatively personal, can you think of people who you imagine as examples of either category?

What kind of mentality does it take to become a “survivor” when faced by a challenge? What are things that help you develop and maintain that kind of a mentality? How can the community around you help you become a survivor instead of a victim?

What are circumstances that tempt us to give up? What obstacles are we facing right now that we need to survive, or that threaten to make victims of us? Financial stress, relationship issues, Work or social stresses? Emotional issues or spiritual conflicts? What I the closest you’ve ever been to giving up?

What are stories of survival in our community? What have we seen or experienced first hand that demonstrates what it means to survive a crisis in order to experience a new life, to come back and thrive?

On the other side, what are some things that we turn to in order to get by, in order to cope with momentary troubles, only to later realize that they end up hurting us?

Has anybody ever had to go through some bad times before they were willing to give up something that was hurting their relationship with God? Why do we resist repentance? What does it take for us to move towards repentance? How can we cultivate the repentant hearts, who are ready to respond and repent whenever we find ourselves in need?

ISAIAH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

9. A Son of David (Isaiah 9)

Interpreting the Passage

The Good Old Days

David's grip on Israel's imagination only grew in the years after his death. He was the prototypical warrior-poet. He was humble, but a totalitarian king. He was the Lord's anointed, yet deeply flawed and honest about it. He was the kind of leader that stamped such a deep impression on his people that generations afterwards looked back with envious nostalgia, wishing their land was again ruled by such a man. All the subsequent kings were measured against David. The rule of David stood as the definitive version of "The Good Old Days" for Israel. Additionally, God had clearly made a promise to David, that his house would be established on the throne forever, so the expectation for a Davidic descendant to lead Israel out of crisis was real and ongoing. (2 Sam 7)

We shouldn't be surprised to find that when Isaiah communicates a new vision of what it means to be God's people, he speaks of it in terms of a leader who will sit on the throne of David. The eschatological reality Isaiah proclaims, and on which his contemporaries can count and place their hope, occurs under the leadership of David's heir. This is a rich image, used to change the immediate reality of hope within his community, and which also provides a resource for the disciples of Jesus to understand his ministry some seven hundred years later.

Isaiah 9:1-7

This passage is one of Isaiah's most well known messianic passages.

Like many of Isaiah's prophecies, this passage may be multivalent, allowing it to describe things taking place in Isaiah's period, but finding fuller fulfillment only in the life of Jesus. Isaiah tends to look favorably on the person of Hezekiah, and some scholars

would interpret this passage as only referring to him (or another king such as Josiah) in a hyperbolic sense. However, the passage can also be taken as a radical eschatological statement, a declaration that God is planning a future that includes a ruler not only like David, but surpassing him.

In beautiful hopeful poetry it speaks of a child who is born into a God-given purpose, the reestablishment of a righteous kingdom. The child will ascend to the throne of his ancestor David, and demonstrates remarkable qualities. The title Isaiah uses indicate a king infused with divine power, and although this wasn't an unusual understanding in the ancient world or even Israel, the language here is employed in an eschatological way, indicating how God intends to act in the person of this Davidic king. In other words, Isaiah understands that the coming king will possess superhuman qualities. Isaiah says the king will be called a "wonderful counselor", indicating he will demonstrate wisdom in his plans and judgments. He is called "mighty God", demonstrating unmatched strength and power. "Everlasting Father" calls to mind his ability to give and sustain life, and his enduring staying power. Finally, he is the "prince of peace", ending the conflicts that plague God's people. These four word pairs describe a king whose rule easily surpasses the qualities of human leaders.

The text goes on in verse 7 to describe several effects of the king's rule. Under the new king and his expanding power, the people will enjoy peace and stability. They won't be vulnerable to the transitions and cycles of new and ungodly rulers, but will live continually at peace under a king whose throne is firmly established and enduring. He rules with justice, creating a climate of fairness and equality that isn't threatened by oppression. The last part of this verse declares that this won't be an accidental occurrence, but that this ruler's emergence will be a result of divine action.

Teaching the Passage

What we Know and What we Need

Isaiah 9 is a passage of reversal. Isaiah is writing to tell people who live in darkness, about a powerful coming light. The news he brings is intended to bring hope to their despair, giving them a glimpse of something they've never really experienced. While that is acutely true for the people of Isaiah's time, who lived during a period of intense conflict and threat, Most of us are aware that the world as it is is not the world we really want to experience. What we know is vastly different from what we need.

Still, we have lingering memories of when things were better. Isaiah employs that memory and then makes a promise of a future of a time to come that will surpass it. To him, the present is not as good as the past, but even the past can't compare with what

is coming in the future. To start out, it might be a useful exercise to let the class get nostalgic. What do they remember fondly about “the way things used to be”? What do they miss about “the good old days”?

After that plays on for a little while, ask if it was all good. What were some of the things that have changed since then in a good way? What were some ways things weren’t so good, back in the “good old days”?

Can you imagine a future that’s not only better than the present, but better than the best of the past as well?

Depending on your class’s level of bible knowledge, you might be able to have a similar discussion about the things that were right about Israel during the time of David, and the things that weren’t so right. How might Israel in later generations think of David’s time as the “good old days”? What were some things they might have thought of that weren’t so good about those “good old days”? The text can be then prefaced as a prophecy of coming days that will be a whole lot better than even the remembered “good old days”.

After that, work through the text, taking the time to get the sense of drama from the first few verses. How does Isaiah build to the announcement of God’s action? (You might also consider letting 8:11-22 be read as a prologue, since it builds the sense of doom and dread that Isaiah works to dispel in chapter 9.)

As your reading turns to the announcement in 9:6-7, you may get into a discussion of the text here by way of a “gospel” discussion. What kind of good news is Isaiah proclaiming? Why is each element of his announcement good news? What is good news about the promise of a king possessing these traits, with these results? How was that good news to the people of Judah to whom Isaiah issued this prophecy, and how is it good news to people today?

ISAIAH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

10. A Whole Land

Catching the Motif

This lesson doesn't revolve around a single text, but around a motif that runs throughout many texts within Isaiah. It's subtle enough that it might avoid our attention if we confine our study of Isaiah to individual passages, but when the book is read as a whole, or these texts are extracted and compiled together, the presence of the "land" motif in Isaiah becomes clear. Isaiah often graces prophecies of destruction with language of the desolation of the land, and the prophecies of blessing and hope often describe the future in terms of the physical fruitfulness and abundance of the land. Read the texts below as a whole, and you can start getting a picture:

Isaiah's Texts of the Land

This list of texts omits several, particularly those that are associated with the desolation of other lands, like Babylon or Assyria, in connection with prophecies of their destruction. It focuses on texts that speak of the blessing or desolation of the lands of Judah or Israel. While the reader would benefit from examining each in its own context, they are given here without context in order to get a sense of the motif.

1:7-8

"Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land; it is desolate, as overturned by foreigners."

5:9-10

"Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses without inhabitant. For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah."

6:11-12

"Then I said, 'how long, O Lord?' And he said: 'Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.'"

7:23-25

“In that day, every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns. With bow and arrows a man will come there, for all the land will be briers and thorns. And as for the hills that used to be hoed with a hoe, you will not come there for fear of briers and thorns, but they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep tread.”

9:19

“Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts the land is scorched, and the people are like fuel for the fire, no one spares another.”

13:9

“Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation, and to destroy sinners from it.”

24:4-6

“The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.”

24:19-20

“The earth is utterly broken, the earth is split apart, the earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunken man; it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again.”

26:21

“For behold, the Lord is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain.”

30:23-26

“And he will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and bread, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. In that day your livestock will graze in large pastures, and the oxen and donkeys that work the ground will eat seasoned fodder, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. And on every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water, in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. Moreover, the light of the moon will be as the light

of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the Lord binds up the brokenness of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.”

32:10-16

“In little more than a year, you will shudder, you complacent women; for the grape harvest fails, the fruit harvest will not come. Tremble you women who are at ease, shudder, you complacent ones; strip, and make yourselves bare, and tie sackcloth around your waist. Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vine, for the soil of my people growing up in thorns and briars, yes, for all the joyous houses in the exultant city. For the palace is forsaken, the populace city deserted; the hill and the watchtower will become dens forever, a joy of wild donkeys, a pasture of flocks; until the spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.”

33:9

“The land mourns and languishes; Lebanon is confounded and withers away; Sharon is like a desert, Bashan and Carmel shake of their leaves.”

35:1

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of the Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.”

45:8

“Shower, O Heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the Lord have created it.”

51:3

“For the Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.”

What the Land Motif Offers

It’s easy to read a collection of texts like that and shrug them off as trivia. This motif offers a couple of key theological perspectives though, ways that we can understand

our lives better. First, it points towards an inherent theological connection between the actions and character of humanity and the quality of the places where we live. This perspective isn't isolated to Isaiah, but shows up elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and may have been a perspective common to other peoples of the Ancient Near Eastern. In that perspective, the land itself carries a level of ritual purity or contamination based on the righteousness or sin of its people. Note this telling (but not uncommon) text in Numbers 35:33-34, regarding the punishment of criminals: "...this will ensure that the land where you live will not be polluted, for murder pollutes the land. And no sacrifice except the execution of the murderer can purify the land from murder. You must not defile the land where you live, for I live there myself. I am the Lord, who lives among the people of Israel." Also, think of Genesis 4, where Cain is told that the ground that has swallowed up his brother's blood is crying out against him, and will not yield crops for him anymore.

Sin, particularly violence, defiles the land. It breaks a connection between humanity, placed on the earth as a steward of the land, and the land itself, which provides for the needs of humanity. Although we tend to think of our sin as something individual and personal, that notion is rejected throughout the Hebrew Bible. Israel affirms that, contrary to our own notions, our morality actually affects not only our own holiness, but the communities we live in and the very earth that we live on. Isaiah confirms this theology of connection, demonstrating that in Isaiah's time Judah's unrighteousness made the land a wasteland. Further, God's promised actions of redeeming the people in the future are also a redeeming of the land. Just as he promises to restore his people, he promises to bring the land back into abundance. The land begins to take on a role as a symbol of God's blessing. There is a relationship between God, the people and the land.

A second valuable perspective here is how the status of the land reflects the sovereignty of God, a key theme for Isaiah. God's power to bring the land back into abundance, to cleanse it from the sin that made it a wasteland, is a vivid way of speaking about his ability to bring blessing back to his people. They are part of the hope that Isaiah preaches for the coming messianic age, and **hope depends on power**. Israel's hopes for coming change and renewal are not wishes, pipe dreams. They are dependent on Israel's faith in a God who makes promises, and who has the power to keep those promises. The Lord, as sovereign king over creation, has the power to bring the land which he created back into abundance, to redeem it from the destruction and defilement caused by Israel's sin. Isaiah's images of the abundant earth are really description of what the Lord is able to do, not in a purely spiritual sense, but in concrete, physical action. If we are to follow Israel in trusting in the Lord, then we aren't walking into a religion that is only out to change our spiritual circumstances, but one which claims to trust a God who has the sovereign ability to change physical reality,

even that which came about because of our sin. God is not just concerned with our spiritual destinies, but also our physical realities.

Teaching on this Motif

In terms of introducing this lesson, it is difficult to prepare a group to hear a long selection of texts such as are included here. You may find it more helpful to pare the list down somewhat, or to read a large group of the texts while focusing on only a couple for your class discussion. I found the passages in chapter 24, 30, and 32 to be particularly poignant, and you may want to just pick a couple of those to spend some class time unpacking.

There are at least three places of worthwhile discussion on this motif.

1. How does our sin affects others besides ourselves? What is the real impact of our sin? How have we been confronted with the impact of our sin? How can an awareness of our sin's impact on others sometimes be more motivating to us than our understanding of how it affects us?

Sometimes the destruction, distrust, and brokenness we see around us is a result of sin, maybe our own. Do we ever get the sense that we live in a "polluted" land, not just in terms of physical pollution, but moral pollution? How does it impact us to live in that kind of a place?

2. How do our lives reflect a dependence on the sovereign power of God? What are ways that we continually depend on God's action? What are ways that we long for his action, but don't see it? In what ways are we hopeful that God will decisively act in the future? How are the hopes that shape our lives dependent on God?

3. For Israel, a highly agricultural society, the image of the desolate land crying out against them was a powerful way of speaking about the importance of sin. Are there other images that might be more powerful to us? What is it about our world that cries out for our attention because of how it's changed by sin?

ISAIAH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

11. A Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)

Interpreting the Passage

One of the characteristic sets of passages in Isaiah 40-55 are the so-called servant songs, poems that speak of the Lord's servant. The servant is introduced in 42:1-4, and then is described further in 49:1-6, 50:4-9. For Christian theology, though, the most significant passage has been that in, 52:13-53:12. Here the servant is described as one who suffers for the sake of the Lord's will to redeem his people. This vision of redemptive suffering that has long been associated with the passion of Jesus Christ for the sake of atonement for the world.

There is a good bit of debate over what the original passage in Isaiah meant when it was first written. Some have argued that the "servant" is a metaphor for the whole community of God's people in exile, while others have identified it with a single person, either named or more often, anonymous. Others have chosen to view the passage as referring solely to the work of Jesus, being completely predictive in nature. While that debate will be ongoing, another option has been to read the text as multivalent, referring both to circumstances contemporary with its author and also describing the work of God in Jesus. Whichever of these conclusions we reach, there are several things that must be said about this text and which are ultimately more important than identifying the particular historical intent of the author in this case.

1. The text contains a stunning vision of sacrifice. The poetic beauty of this passage may lose its grip on our imaginations because of its familiarity, but this servant song speaks vividly of one who at great personal costs intercedes for his people, even though they fail to regard him as worthy. It is a song about obedience, and glory earned through sacrifice. It is written from the perspective of someone who has benefited from the servant's actions and who insists that the community recognize what has happened. It is one of the most passionate parts of Isaiah, and shifts our perspective towards gratitude towards the sufferer.

2. The church has long understood this passage to describe the work of Jesus. The early disciples proclaimed that Jesus' passion was an act of redemptive suffering that fulfilled what is written in Isaiah. His death, interpreted as a voluntary atoning sacrifice, gave this passage an intensity of meaning, and in return the passage provided an interpretation of Jesus' death. The passion and the passage would be tied together to be mutually interpretive, each providing insight into the other.

3. One of the major ways this passage interprets the passion of Jesus is to indicate that the suffering of Jesus was a consequence of our actions. This central theme of Christian theology is inescapable and powerful when we connect Isaiah 53 with the death of Jesus. This element provokes discussion and thought, but more importantly, those thoughts and discussions have to lead us to *feel* the meaning of this text. This is a heart text more than it is a head or hands text, although there are certainly implications for the cognitive and behavioral parts of our lives as well.

4. Like much of Isaiah, this text also stresses God's sovereignty. The suffering of the servant is not an accident, but is part of God's plan to redeem his people. The servant obediently complies with God's desires, and it is the aggression of others that brings about the suffering, but all of this happens for the sake of God's will be fulfilled. This passage affirms that even when it seems unlikely, it is indeed the Lord who is in control.

Teaching the Text

Hearing the Text

With a poetic piece of scripture like this, one of the best things you can put thought into beforehand is how you can prepare the class to actually hear the text and feel its impact. Take some time to think about how you will introduce the text, and how you're going to do the reading. Are you going to have somebody else read it as a whole, are you going to break it into pieces, or perhaps you can create an environment of hyper-attention by changing the lighting in the room. Maybe you can have everyone stand, or perhaps ask them, for a change of pace, to not follow along in their Bibles, but rather intently listen to what is read. Maybe you can frame the reading with silence on either side of it, or prayer. The key though, is to think through what the moment is going to be like when the class physically meets this text, whether by hearing aloud or reading it with their own eyes. The best moment for that to happen with full impact might be at the beginning of class, or maybe not until the very end, or maybe both.

Discussion Directions

Accent the emotional content of this text by asking different class members to just react to the text, asking which parts of the poetry they find most striking. What imagery best

captures the feel of the text for them? What phrases do they hear in the text that haunt them a little bit, or give them more insight into what it meant to be Jesus?

There are several themes that appear in different parts of the text. Ask the class where in the text they see the following themes:

Physical violence and suffering

Shame

Rejection

Obedience

Glory

Purpose

What other themes jump out as you hear the text?

What is the perspective of the author (or narration) of this poetry? The passage has an interesting use of the first person (I, My, We, Our). It seems as if some of the things that the author says or claims are things we don't really want to claim (he was crushed for **our** iniquities), but the author doesn't allow that possibility. What is the hardest thing in this text to claim as something from **you**? When in your life did your own role in this story become clear to you?

How does this passage underline both the abundance of God's grace and the seriousness of our own sin? Why is it important to understand both of these?

What kind of emotional response does this passage elicit? How can that emotional response lead us to think and act differently than we normally do?

ISAIAH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

12. Isaiah's Peace (Isaiah 11, 65)

Interpreting the Passage

Shalom

Shalom, the Hebrew concept of peace, indicating not only peace in terms of international or personal conflict, but reflecting a whole vision of life. When things are in a state of shalom, EVERYTHING is in a state of shalom. Everything fits together, the relationships work like they were designed to, and things just work right. The inverse is true as well: the brokenness of the world isn't just about the human heart, but has social, international, and even ecological implications.

There are lots of passages in Isaiah that describe the shalom of Isaiah's vision of the future, but some of the most familiar language may be that which is common to chapters 11 and 65. The version in chapter 11:1-9 is a bit fuller, and perhaps the preferable option for a class. The first five verses are messianic, and we'll come back to those in a minute, but in verse 6 it turns to the shalom concept, depicted by sets of enemies living at peace with each other. Isaiah pairs a wolf with a lamb, a leopard and a goat, a calf and a lion, a cow and a bear, and a child and a viper. All of these are very visual elements, and Isaiah is using them to help us imagine a world in which even those things we consider natural enemies live at peace with each other. The variety of images conveys that Isaiah isn't just talking about a singular peace, like the cessation of violence between nations, but is an all-pervasive vision of peace that even affects the relationships between wild animals.

Israel's Experience, and Ours

The images are all the more incredulous when they are compared with the intense conflicts that Israel and Judah experienced during the time of Isaiah. The early exile at the hands of the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom, and while Judah escapes destruction, the escape is costly, and by a thread. Assyria only stops after a frightening

siege of Jerusalem, after ravaging the other cities and towns of Jerusalem. Judah lives on, but certainly suffers at the hands of the Assyrians. Isaiah also records something of the Syro-Ephraimite conflict, when Judah felt threatened by her sister nation to the north. Furthermore, Isaiah's writings indicate that there is conflict enough to go around within the borders of Judah, with power struggles and the difficulties of the lower classes being oppressed by the richer ruling classes. Take all that together, and Isaiah's listeners had enough conflict in their lives to be startled by these idyllic images of predators and prey hanging out at peace together. The images portray a world starkly in contrast to the world in which Isaiah spoke these prophecies.

It's not just Isaiah's world that is at odds with this vision, though. In our own lives, we experience on a number of levels. On the largest scale, we are aware of the international conflicts and wars that perpetually fill the world, if not our little corner of it. Regional conflicts and struggles between different groups of people are not news to us, and tension exists even in our seemingly civilized world between races, generations, and other groupings that come in conflict. Most personally, relationships between individuals fail to develop or are broken as we find reasons for conflict in ideology, values, culture, or in the preferences and personal habits of each other. Some causes for conflict are real and seemingly unavoidable, some begin with perceptions that quickly become real enough to do significant damage. It doesn't even really stop with conflict between persons, though, as most of us experience some measure of conflict within ourselves.

All of this conflict hurts.

Some of it causes us to grow, some of it is because of evil, some of it is perhaps justified by various reasons. But all of it hurts, and we have no rest while it dominates our lives. So maybe this can be a place where we can see ourselves in the Judah of Isaiah's time. Perhaps this can be a place where we find some common ground with our ancestors in the faith. Maybe this is a place where we can listen with them to God's vision of the future, and feel with them the same hope that these images convey.

God's promise here is that there will come a time when all of that conflict ceases to exist. Even the things that we see as naturally opposed to each other will get along, and both can rest, and feel at home in each other's presence. It is a radical vision of hope.

Messianic Peace

Such a radical vision of peace cannot be attained on our own efforts, though. Isaiah 11 puts the fulfillment of this vision in the right place. Conflict doesn't go away when humans just get it right, or when we figure out on our own how to get along. Peace comes through the work of Jesse's descendant, a man through whom God's power is

distinctly at work! The Messiah establishes justice, and establishes shalom through the work of the Spirit of the Lord in him.

As disciples of Jesus, we have to think about what it means to think of our Lord as the one who establishes such peace. Disciples of such a “prince of peace” might well be challenged to live lives that mirror this call. What does it mean for us to live at peace with ourselves, our friends and families, and our neighbors here in Little Rock and around the world?

Ultimate Peace

We might well wonder why, if this passage is about the messiah, why we who live after Jesus don't experience this peace already. To be sure, that is both a personal question and a theological one. In other words, there may be personal reasons why I don't experience peace, but another set of reasons why the world as a whole hasn't achieved this vision.

It is helpful at this point to turn to Isaiah 65, where very similar language shows up. In this passage, though, it isn't placed in a necessarily messianic context, but one of ultimate divine recreation. We might well question if Isaiah intended those to be different, but from our perspective it makes sense that while a measure of peace came with the advent of Jesus the Messiah, there is a sense of ultimate and final peace yet to come. In other words, while Jesus has already created the possibility for peace, (a possibility that to some extent is already being realized in the world), that possibility awaits a time when it will become the ultimate reality of history. The world still waits to be recreated, and we wait with it. If we believe that, then the question isn't just “Why hasn't this become reality?”, but “What should we be doing until it becomes reality?”.

Teaching the Passage

Idea: normally, the discussion format works by the teacher asking questions, and the group providing their thoughts as answers. What if this lesson worked the other way, with the teacher presenting the material, and then saying, “What questions arise when we read this text?” Just a thought, try it if you wish. Below are more conventional discussion questions that may be useful in teaching these texts.

Discussion Questions

Warm-up: Name some classic enemies (Batman and Joker, etc.)

In reading Isaiah 11:1-9, which of these pairs stands out to you as being a particularly striking image? Which pair seems most unlikely?

In what areas of your life do you experience the most conflict?

Where does conflict come from? Is it all evil?

What kinds of feelings does the Isaiah passages evoke? What would it mean for you, right now, to enter into a life without conflict? What price would you pay for that?

In what way does Jesus offer us peace? In what way does his influence over the world bring more peace? Does it fail to do so?

In what ways might you, as a disciple of Jesus, understand yourself as an agent of peace? What is our responsibility to become peacemakers?

What are some misunderstandings about peace in the world?

Do you see around you a longing for peace, in the shalom sense?

How does the conflict that we see around us reflect the broken nature of the world? What is your expectation of that being redeemed, eventually?

ISAIAH

ADULT BIBLE STUDY

13. Isaiah's Legacy

Isaiah and the New Testament

A Long Reach

It really is amazing how long Isaiah's has influenced the understanding and hearts of God's people. While much of it is admittedly distant from us today, we might well be more amazed that ANY of it is relevant. And yet, much of the imagery, poetry and vision we find in Isaiah speaks profoundly to us today. There is much in this book that gives us insight into the heart and intent of God...an incredible thought to ponder in and of itself!

For the Christian church, there is no denying how important this prophet's work was in helping the early church understand and think about Jesus. In the first few centuries after Christ, the prophet's work was often referred to as the fifth gospel, and many of its recent commentators have referred to it as a book proclaiming "salvation, and nothing but salvation" (Westermann). Isaiah's legacy is that of a long promise of salvation for God's people, for the unification in peace of the peoples of the world under God's sovereignty, and of the dispelling of oppressive and unjust forces.

It is amazing how many passages in the New Testament directly quote Isaiah. The charts at the bottom of the page offer a glance at places where Isaiah shows up in the New Testament, written at least four hundred years later. Some are direct quotations, some are barer allusions, but there can be no doubt how heavy the influence of Isaiah was on the earliest communities of Christians.

As a way of wrapping up a study of Isaiah, a review of these texts could serve a class very well. Perhaps you would choose to have groups evaluate different sets of the material, or have the Isaiah passages read aloud and see how many sound familiar. Can anybody remember where these passages show up in the New Testament? As a Teacher, one of the best ways for you to prepare for these sorts of exercises would be to take the charts below, and quickly skim the passages in Isaiah. Which ones stand out to you? Which ones seem to have held the greatest influence on the earliest

Christians? Please don't take my observations below as more significant than your own observations, but here are a few of the passages I would hone in on.

Luke 4

Note the importance of Isaiah's message in the story of Luke 4:16-21. It's not just that Jesus' followers understood him in terms of Isaiah, but Jesus himself believed that his life was a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies! Isaiah is formative to Jesus' own understandings of what it meant for him to be the messiah, or at least was how Jesus chose to articulate his messiahship. This is profound! Beyond that, what might we notice about Jesus' announcement here? How do these words from Isaiah characterize Jesus? How would you summarize the gospel from this passage?

Matthew 11

Similarly, Jesus answers the messengers of John the baptist with words full of Isaiah (26:19, 29:18, 35:5-6, 61:1). Jesus' reply here gives an excellent description of how he conceived of his own ministry. How does this message compare to the ministry of the church? If Jesus was this kind of Messiah, what kind of disciples does that compel us to become?

Acts 8

Next, The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 gives a remarkable description of how the earliest Christians understood the connection between Isaiah's servant songs and Jesus death and ministry. How would this story read differently without the Isaiah text? Would it even be possible? This story is also notable because of the role the holy spirit plays in placing Philip in the perfect position to explain Jesus...not just physically, as is explicit in the story, but also with someone who, inquiring about Isaiah, was ripe for the gospel. Isaiah had prepared him to desire Jesus!

These are some of my observations, but reading through the following texts, you may have others that are more profound. This week's lesson is simply about seeing how these writings which we have been at work studying were used by the holy spirit to help form the mind and heart of the early church. Isaiah indeed has a profound legacy!

We may note one last thing though: The profoundest legacy Isaiah might have would be how it's words give us hope and provoke us to holy living! May it ever be so.

Charts adapted from John Sawyer's book
*The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of
 Christianity* (1996):

Isaiah Passage	NT Passages
1:9	Rom 9:29
6:9-10	Mt 13 Mk 4 Lk 8 Jn 12 Acts 28
9:1-2	Mt 4 Lk 1
9:7	Jn 12:34
10:22-23	Rom 9:27
11:1	Acts 13:23
11:1, 10	Rom 15
12:3, 44:3, 55:1-3	Jn 4: 10-14, 7:37-39
13:10	Mt 24 Mk 13
22:13 25:8	1 Cor 15
27:13	Mt 24
28:11-12	Mt 11 1 Cor 14
28:16	Rom 9 Rom 10
29:10	Rom 11
29:13	Mt 15 Mk 7
29:14	1 Cor 1
29:18	Mt 11
35:3	Heb 12
35:5	Mt 11 Lk 7
40:3	Mt 3, Mk 1, Lk 3, Jn 1

Isaiah Passage	NT Passages
40:4-5	Luk 3
40:8	Mk 13
40:9	Jn 12
40:13	Rom 11, 1 Cor 2
41:8-9	Lk 1
42:1-4	Mt 12
42:6	Lk 2
42:7	Mt 4
43:19	Jn 7
44:3	Jn 7
45:9	Rom 9
45:23	Rom 14, Phil 2
49:6	Acts 13
49:8	2 Cor 6
50:6	Mt 26
51:6	Mt 24
52:5	Rom 2
52:7	Rom 10
52:10	Lk 2
52:11	2 Cor 6
52:15	Rom 15
53:1	Jn 12, Rom 10
53:3	Mt 2
53:4	Mt 8

Isaiah Passage	NT Passages
53:5	Lk 24
53:7-8	Acts 8
53:12	Mk 15, Lk 22
54:1	Lk 23 Gal 4
54:13	Jn 6
55:1	Jn 7
55:3	Acts 13
56:7	Mt 21 Mk 11 Luk 19
57:15	Mt 5
58:6	Lk 4
58:11	Jn 7
59:7-8	Rom 3
59:17	Eph 6
59:19	Mt 8 Luk 13
59:20-21	Rom 11
60:6	Mt 2
61:1-2	Mt 11 Lk 4
62:11	Mt 21
64:4	1 Cor 2
65:1-2	Rom 10
66:1-2	Mt 5 Acts 7
66:24	Mk 9