

Living Word
BIBLE
STUDIES

ISAIAH

The Lord Saves

KATHLEEN BUSWELL NIELSON



ISAIAH

Living Word BIBLE STUDIES

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P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Lay-flat edition released 2018

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-62995-589-6

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FOREWORD

Books that share the name of a prophet are generally overlooked today by Bible readers. We have convinced ourselves that the vast difference in time and custom between their world and our own presents a chasm too great for us to cross. In addition, their literary dependence on formal discourse is at odds with our preferred style of casual conversation. Further, knowing how these ancient works should be applied to contemporary readers appears to require an art form beyond our own set of skills. And if these reasons are not enough, the sheer length of a book like Isaiah can often deter us. Yes, truth be told, we often pass over the prophetic books, especially one like Isaiah, in favor of others we consider to be more accessible, easy to finish, and ready to apply.

Yet we should know that our persistent neglect of Isaiah can't be a good thing. After all, this prophetic book had an enormous role in establishing God's "good news" in the world. Isaiah is quoted in the New Testament more than any other book in the Old Testament. Mark chose to open and explain his gospel with it. The whole of Paul's literary corpus made extensive use of it. Philip was able to lead a man to Christ by it. And Jesus went so far as to ground his entire ministry in it (Luke 4:16–21).

Given Isaiah's place of prominence in the gospel, perhaps it is time for us to commit to the work of reading and understanding

it well. After all, according to the apostolic gospel, a careful reading of Isaiah refreshes the one who truly desires a heart that is warm toward God. For here, we see the heart of God expressed in the fullness of his just judgments and mercy. Isaiah lived during the days of Judah's lesser savior-kings—and he served God by proclaiming to them (and to us) that God's greater One was yet to come. Through Isaiah's prophecy, God's people were given a just sentence for their failings, comfort for their sins, and a reason for their hope. In short, Isaiah presents us with a God who keeps all his promises—including the good news of rebuilding a people for relationship with him by sending us his promised Son. Who can read this work and not sit in rapt attention to the songs that only God's Suffering Servant could rightly sing? But who can read this book and not end up singing a new song of praise to God for the salvation he brings through the coming of his King?

In preparing these studies on the prophet Isaiah, Kathleen Nielson has done all of us a huge favor. By that I mean she has already done much of the heavy lifting. In doing so, she has cleared the way for us to come to a better understanding of this part of God's Word. Her commentary guides us across terrain we first thought impassible. Her writing style both piques and retains our interest along the way. And her routine attention to questions of application will bring the message of the book home to our hearts on a regular basis. If you are someone who has not yet read and studied Isaiah over a definite period of time, I can only say that at some level I envy you—for there is nothing quite like coming across treasures of this magnitude for the first time!

David R. Helm

A PERSONAL WORD FROM KATHLEEN

I began to write these Bible studies for the women in my own church group at College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. Under the leadership of Kent and Barbara Hughes, the church and that Bible study aimed to proclaim without fail the good news of the Word of God. What a joy, in that study and in many since, to see lives changed by the work of the Word, by the Spirit, for the glory of Christ.

In our Bible study group, we were looking for curriculum that would lead us into the meat of the Word and teach us how to take it in, whole Bible books at a time—the way they are given to us in Scripture. Finally, one of our leaders said, “Kathleen—how about if you just write it!” And so began one of the most joyful projects of my life: the writing of studies intended to help unleash the Word of God in people’s lives. The writing began during a busy stage of my life—with three lively young boys and always a couple of college English courses to teach—but through that stage and every busy one since, a serious attention to studying the Bible has helped keep me focused, growing, and alive in the deepest ways. The Word of God will do that. If there’s life and power in these studies, it is simply the life and power of the Scriptures to which they point. It is ultimately the life and

power of the Savior who shines through all the Scriptures from beginning to end. How we need this life, in the midst of every busy and non-busy stage of our lives!

I don't think it is just the English teacher in me that leads me to this conclusion about our basic problem in Bible study these days: we've forgotten how to *read*! We're so used to fast food that we think we should be able to drive by the Scriptures periodically and pick up some easily digestible truths that someone else has wrapped up neatly for us. We've disowned that process of careful reading, observing the words, seeing the shape of a book and a passage, asking questions that take us into the text rather than away from it, and digging into the Word and letting it speak! Through such a process, guided by the Spirit, the Word of God truly feeds our souls. Here's my prayer: that, by means of these studies, people would be further enabled to read the Scriptures profitably and thereby find life and nourishment in them, as we are each meant to do.

In all the busy stages of life and writing, I have been continually surrounded by pastors, teachers, and family who encourage and help me in this work, and for that I am grateful. The most wonderful guidance and encouragement come from my husband, Niel, whom I thank and for whom I thank God daily.

May God use these studies to lift up Christ and his Word, for his glory!

INTRODUCTION

What a treasure we have in the book of Isaiah: God's inspired word through his prophet; some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible; a theological masterpiece (sometimes called the "Romans of the Old Testament"); a glimpse into God's perspective on human history; a magnificent presentation of his redemptive plan. Isaiah is a large book, not just in number of words and chapters. The prophet's "vision" (Isa. 1:1) given to him as the very word of the Lord (Isa. 1:2) involves insight into truths that stretch from creation to the final day, from Mount Zion in Jerusalem to the Zion that will someday encompass the whole re-created earth. Isaiah was enabled by God to see and to communicate what the course of history looks like to the one who ordains all of it. It is a dizzying prospect.

The goal in writing this study has not been to simplify this complex book, but to encourage and enable people to read it with growing understanding and joy. Often we hear the better-known passages from Isaiah (especially at Christmas and Easter), and we sense that they form part of a great, huge work, but we lack a grasp of the whole book and just how these wonderful passages fit in. That grasp is truly accessible with some hard work and steady, prayerful reading—and with the aid of the Holy Spirit who promises to help us understand. We will not end by having mastered all the deep intricacies and treasures of Isaiah; the goal here is to end by having understood the shape and themes of the book, by having read it through and examined it with loving care, and by having prepared ourselves for further, lifelong study and delight in this book. In order

to create just 24 lessons, it has been necessary to bite off some large chunks—all of which would bear more detailed study. However, the benefit of pushing through the whole book is that we indeed gain a sense of the whole and of how beautifully the parts hold together. Even as we push through, though, there cannot help but be many moments of pausing to marvel over individual verses and passages. Isaiah will stop us often, taking our breath away with the beauty of his vision and the personal voice of God speaking to us, his people.

Reading this book with understanding and joy will necessarily involve connecting with it personally. However, this will not always mean that we will go away from a lesson with a list of things we can do to apply the text. Sometimes this may mean we are changed by understanding more about God's marvelous plan of redemption of which we are a part. The most fundamental revelation of Isaiah is a revelation of God and how he works his redemptive plan through all of history: that is why Day Five of each lesson asks first a question focusing on what we have seen about God in the text. Of course, then, our role is to take this revelation into our hearts, apply it in our prayers—and, yes, live according to it. That was the problem with God's people in Isaiah's time: they did not believe and so *live* according to the truth they had been given about God in his Law and through his prophets.

To apply this book, we should first apply it to ourselves as the people of God. The line of connection from the Jews of Jerusalem does not move to America or any other nation; it does not move first even to individual believers; it moves first to the church, the body of Christ. As the apostle Paul puts it, "It is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed'" (Gal. 3:7–8). Isaiah preaches this very message, pointing repeatedly to a faithful remnant of the Jews who will someday grow into God's gathered people from all the nations. Being Jewish didn't do it: Israel and even Judah, as we shall see, get piled right in there with all the

other nations judged for their sin. But trust in the Lord for salvation and resulting heartfelt obedience to his law *did* do it—for the believing remnant and for all those of faith who would come after, including us. Isaiah lets us see ourselves as part of a called-out people of faith from all the nations of the world. It also spurs us on to spread that faith to all the nations, until the day when Jesus comes again.

The seed of Abraham points not only to the body of believers God will gather in; the seed points most fundamentally to the promised one who came from Abraham's seed to accomplish this salvation for God's people, who clearly cannot do it for themselves. Abraham's seed grew into a great nation that eventually established itself as a kingdom in the land God promised. God's promises unfolded to reveal a coming king from that seed and specifically from the tribe of Judah and the line of David—a king who would reign forever. As the Jewish kings came and went, and as the kingdom split into two parts which both declined and eventually were conquered, God's faithful people held on to his promise. Isaiah showed them how to do that by revealing the Promised One as a divine *king*, as a *servant*, and then as a *conqueror* who would finally come and rule over all the world. In pointing to Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah in the line of David, Isaiah gives hope to God's people in a time of darkness and collapse.

By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Isaiah was enabled to point to the Messiah. With the help of the Holy Spirit may we see Jesus our Savior in this book, either more clearly or perhaps for the first time. Not only in the New Testament but also in the Old, and particularly in Isaiah, Jesus Christ shines out as the one in whom God provides forgiveness of sins and saving hope. Salvation means being delivered not only *into* fellowship with God and God's people but also *from* his judgment. God's title repeated throughout Isaiah is "the Holy One of Israel." A holy and just God must judge sin, and Isaiah makes God's judgment vivid, both throughout history and on that last day to which Isaiah often refers—a day not only of final salvation but also of final judgment. In this context of God's holy wrath,

we see redemption shining out all the more brilliantly in Isaiah. Isaiah's name in the Hebrew means "The LORD saves"; that is what this book is all about. That is what the Bible is all about. With good reason, Isaiah is quoted in the New Testament more than all the other prophets combined. We shall see examples and learn from the way the New Testament interprets the Old—always pointing to Jesus.

Lesson One will provide more specific introduction to the book. One comment about the much-debated issue of authorship: the first lesson treats this issue and exposes the controversies, but it does so from the perspective of one committed to the prophet Isaiah as single author of a unified book. Further discussion can be found in the works listed in the Notes—especially in Alec Motyer's *Isaiah*, which has been a hugely helpful background source for the writing of the study. Motyer's discussion of Isaiah's authorship is extremely clear and well presented, in both his introduction and his appendix.¹ All the listed bibliographical sources can be helpful, but I encourage first and foremost a careful reading of the text of Isaiah itself. Included in the course of the lessons are many notes (more than in my other studies) concerning background and context, which should provide enough information to read the text with basic understanding—and that is the goal.

Do spend your study time focusing on the Word, passage by passage, as this study leads you to do. Some of the questions may seem easier or harder; they reflect the complexity of this beautiful, many layered book. That said, I encourage you to use the questions flexibly. If one seems difficult, don't let it halt you; keep moving! There may be some questions, or parts of some, that you might want to wait on or come back to. The point is to spend the great majority of time taking in and musing on the Scripture itself. The Bible's living and active words are the words that change our hearts and lives, by the power of the Spirit.

May God, through his Spirit, open our ears and our eyes to the Word of the Lord through his prophet Isaiah.

1. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 27–35, 297–301.

Lesson 1

THE LORD HAS SPOKEN

What a huge and happy prospect: to read this monumental book from beginning to end. This introductory lesson will help prepare us to read Isaiah with its contexts clear: the prophetic context, the historical context, and the literary context.

DAY ONE—THE PROPHETIC CONTEXT

1. The opening verse might serve as a heading for the whole book, as the prophet introduces this “vision”—a word that denotes a special revelation from God. First, read Isaiah 1:1–2b (i.e., through the second line of v. 2), and write down several specific observations about how the prophet Isaiah presents his book. (See also Isa. 2:1, introducing an initial section of the book.)

b. 1 Samuel 3:19–21

c. 1 Kings 21:17–19

4. Moving through the Old Testament in English, we find the *writing prophets* beginning with Isaiah and ending with Malachi. These prophets are classified as “major” and “minor” simply depending on the length of their writings. (Isaiah is major!) They spoke into a dark part of the story. God had promised to bless the descendants of Abraham and all the nations of the earth through them. Yet, after God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, gave them the law to show them how to live, and settled them in the land he had promised them—even after all that, they turned away from God. As they became great, they disobeyed God and suffered disastrous consequences. The prophetic books generally address at least four central themes: the people’s *disobedience*, the *resulting punishment* and exile from their land, a *call to heed*

LESSON 1

God's Word, and God's gracious *promises to restore them*. Look briefly through Isaiah 1:18–26. What phrases evidence these four themes?

5. The writing prophets pointed not only to the relatively near future of exile and restoration but also to the distant future: to the heavenly prophet who would come and perfectly fulfill all God's promises to his people. Comment briefly, as you read the following verses, on how the New Testament brings the climax toward which all the Old Testament prophets were pointing?
 - a. Mark 1:1–9

600s–500s B.C.). What do you notice? What strikes you, in relation to the world today?

Although his message applied to all God’s people (and all nations of the world), Isaiah spoke mainly to Judah, the southern kingdom composed of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, with Jerusalem as the capital city. Early in the growth of God’s people under kings in this promised land, the northern ten tribes separated themselves and made Samaria their capital. (The northern kingdom was called Israel, although “Israel” could still refer to all God’s people.) The southern kingdom of Judah, which stayed faithful to the kingly line of David, in general disobeyed God less thoroughly and consistently. Judah’s captivity and exile at the hands of the Babylonians (which Isaiah foresaw) came much later than Israel’s captivity and exile at the hands of the Assyrians. It was the exiles from Judah who were allowed finally to return to their land after the exile—as Isaiah also foresaw.

3. In Isaiah 1:1, find the four kings of Judah under whose reigns Isaiah lived. As you look through the following background chapters from the historical books,

what general observations would you make about each king?

a. Uzziah (2 Chron. 26)

b. Jotham (2 Chron. 27)

c. Ahaz (2 Chron. 28)

d. Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29)

DAY THREE—LITERARY CONTEXT, PART I:
THE BOOK'S SHAPE AND THEME

1. It is crucial at the start to grasp the shape of the entire book, so that each section will find its place within the whole. Read Isaiah 1:21–23, and then 66:10–14. What transformation do you see in this book, which has sometimes been called a “tale of two cities”?

Judah's center was Jerusalem, and the center of Jerusalem was the temple on Mount Zion. This was the place where God showed his presence with his people and where they came to worship and offer sacrifices. Isaiah uses Jerusalem, as we shall see, to mean not only the physical city but also the spiritual reality to which that city points: the New Jerusalem, the people of God gathered in his presence forever. The overarching shape of Isaiah's prophecy might be expressed as the *transformation of Jerusalem from disobedience and destruction to eternal life and communion with God.*

2. But there's more. This transformation will be accomplished through a particular figure, one who in Isaiah's

Babylonians. These chapters also foresee the suffering of the Servant who will come to redeem this suffering people. Read and comment briefly on Isaiah 42:1–4.

4. Finally, in chapters 56–66, which foresee the return from exile (and a restoration that stretches far into the future), Isaiah envisions a *conqueror* who will restore God's people. Read and comment briefly on Isaiah 61:1–7.

Many modern commentators have noted these sections and claimed the existence of two or three different writers of this book. After all, how could one man living when Isaiah lived foresee all the events prophesied in these chapters? The key word is “prophesied,” which implies a message given by God, who knows all of history before it happens. The words God gave Isaiah form a unified book, one that

reveals a God who not only knows but indeed sovereignly determines all of human history—for his glorious saving purposes in the one who is the King, the Servant of the Lord, and the eternal Conqueror. *Through this one the Lord will save his people forever in that New Jerusalem.* This is the overarching and consistent theme of Isaiah's prophecy.

For a summary review of Isaiah's shape, please consult the outline on pages 355–56.

DAY FOUR—LITERARY CONTEXT, PART II: THE BOOK'S STYLE

Isaiah is celebrated as a literary masterpiece not only because of its beautifully unified shape but also because of its masterful use of language. Critics have discerned a difference in style between the first section (chapters 1–39) and the others: the first section communicates in more of a preaching style, with perhaps less-exalted poetry than the rest of the book. It does not necessarily follow, however, that different writers were at work. Isaiah, at different times in his life, had varying and probably increasing amounts of time, experience, and understanding from which to draw in his inspired writing. His growing poetic depth only enhances the book's consistent thematic focus.

1. Isaiah combines varying writing styles throughout. What differences do you note in style and subject between chapters 35 and 36?

do these different pictures make you see, and what do they communicate?

4. The poem in Isaiah 5:1–7 develops one central image. What is that image, and what does it make you see and understand?

5. Why do you think God gave us so much of his Word in poetic form?

DAY FIVE—JUMPING IN

1. This lesson has aimed to provide context for the book of Isaiah. The book's preface in chapters 1–5 provides its own introductory context, setting the tone and themes for all that follows. On this final day, simply read through this preface, not stopping to figure everything out as you go. We will study it more in depth. But in this read-through, be on the lookout for themes that emerge repeatedly—themes this lesson has introduced and themes that will shape the entire book. Look for the initial unfolding of the main theme: that *God will save his people forever in the New Jerusalem, through his promised King/Servant/Conqueror*. Be praying, as you read, for eyes to see the Lord God who reveals himself through the words of this book.
2. In light of what we have seen so far, what would you pray as you begin to study this book? Write a prayer, asking God for his own guidance as you study, and thanking him for the gift of his revelation to us in Isaiah.

Notes for Lesson 1