

ISAIAH: The Salvation of the Lord

by Ray C. Stedman

Isaiah was the greatest of the prophets and a superb master of language. If you enjoy beautiful, rolling cadences and marvelous literary passages, you will enjoy this book for that reason alone.

Isaiah is the fullest revelation of Christ in the Old Testament – so much so, that it is often called the Gospel according to Isaiah. To acquaint yourself with these magnificent, prophetic passages looking forward to Christ is to experience much of the richness and depth of Scripture.

Also, the prophetic nature of the book of Isaiah is one of the great proofs that the Bible is the word of God, for Isaiah lived some 724 years before Christ. The many passages looking forward to the Messiah point so clearly to Christ and are fulfilled in him, and thereby constitute an unanswerable argument for the divine inspiration of the book.

Any time we approach a new book, we always want to look for a key. I am afraid, however, that this is sometimes a rather weak approach. Sometimes these Bible books seem like locked houses, barred and shuttered, so that you can't get anything out of them unless you find the key. And some people feel that the only duly-licensed real estate agents are the Bible teachers, who alone have the keys to the Scripture's "real estate."

But scriptural books are not like that. They are more like national parks. They are open to everyone to roam in, and are a delight to explore all by yourself. But each park has a characteristic peculiar to itself that distinguishes it from the others; and you appreciate a park better if you know what that characteristic is. I have learned to appreciate some of the distinct characteristics of the great national parks in the West. For instance,

- If you want to see nature's various moods, go to Yellowstone Park. There she pulls all the tricks out of her bag and throws everything together.
- If you want to see mountain grandeur and cool lakes, Glacier Park in Montana is the place to go.
- If you want to be awed and humbled and stirred, then go to the Grand Canyon.
- If you are looking for a quiet valley in which to rest and reflect, Yosemite fills the bill – that is, any time other than midsummer, when some twenty thousand people are in the valley with you.

Sometimes I think of these books of the Bible like this. The book of Revelation is to me very much like Yellowstone National Park. It is full of spouting geysers and all kinds of weird symbolism and a variety of formations. The Gospel of John is more like Yosemite; quiet and deep and reverent. But there is no question that the book of Isaiah is the Grand Canyon of Scripture. Geologists tell us that the Grand Canyon is a miniature history of the earth – a condensed history, a pocket volume of the past – just so, the book of Isaiah has long been recognized as a miniature Bible.

I am very inclined to think that the order in which the books of the Bible occur is divinely inspired, because of their unique arrangement. By no means are they placed in an order we would expect them to be, and I think this is highly significant. It is particularly interesting that the book of Isaiah is

exactly in the middle of the Bible. It comes right at the center and is often called a miniature Bible.

How many books does the Bible have? Sixty-six. How many chapters does Isaiah have? Sixty-six. How many books are there in the Old Testament? Thirty-nine, and therefore twenty-seven in the New Testament. And the book of Isaiah divides exactly in that way. The first half of the book comprises thirty-nine chapters. There is a distinct division at Chapter 40, so that the remaining twenty-seven chapters constitute the second half of this book.

The New Testament begins with the history of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, as he came to announce the coming of the Messiah, and it ends in the book of Revelation with the new heaven and the new earth. Chapter 40 of Isaiah, which begins the second half, contains the prophetic passage that predicts the coming of John the Baptist:

A voice cries:

**“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” {Isa 40:3 RSV}**

And this, John says, was fulfilled by himself when he came. And when you read on to the end of the book you will find that Chapter 66 speaks of the new heavens and the new earth that God is creating. So you find here in the book of Isaiah a remarkably close analogy that parallels the entire Bible.

Visitors to the Grand Canyon are always astonished by one thing when they go there. They stand at the rim and look out over the vast, jumbled, silent canyon – down to the Colorado River, which seems but a silver thread more than a mile below them – and sooner or later some tourist cries in amazement, “I don’t understand how a tiny thing like that river could have carved a canyon like this!” They are amazed by that concept.

Now if you read the book of Isaiah thoughtfully and carefully, you sense immediately the grandeur and the power of God. You hear the powerful, rolling cadences of this book’s language. You sense the insignificance of man when compared with the might and the wisdom and majesty of God. And if you ask yourself, “How could Isaiah, just a human being like myself, write a book like this?” to answer seems impossible.

We know very little about Isaiah himself. He lived during the reigns of four kings of Judah – Ussiah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. His ministry began some 740 years before Christ when the ten tribes that formed the northern kingdom of Israel were being carried away into captivity by Sennacherib, the Assyrian invader. And Judah, the southern kingdom, was plunged into idolatry toward the end of Isaiah’s ministry in 687 B.C., and was carried captive into Babylon. So the ministry of this prophet spans the time between the captivity of the northern kingdom and the captivity of the southern kingdom – about 50 years. Isaiah was a contemporary of the prophets Amos, Hosea, and Micah. And tradition tells us that Isaiah the prophet was martyred under the reign of Manasseh, one of the most wicked kings recorded by the Old Testament. The story is that he hid in a hollow tree to escape the reign of Manasseh, and the king’s soldiers, knowing he was in that tree, sawed the tree down. Thus, he was sawn in half. Some scholars feel that when the epistle to the Hebrews, in its great chapter about the heroes of faith, lists being sawn in two as one of the ways the prophets were martyred, that it refers to the prophet Isaiah (Heb 11:37).

He was the human author of this book, and it is indeed amazing to think that a man could write language as beautiful as this and reveal the tremendous things found here. But, when visitors go down the long trail to the Colorado River, they are no longer amazed that a river could carve out the great canyon, because they can actually hear the grinding rocks being swept along by the force of the current, and they can sense the powerful and invisible force of this river. The book of Isaiah is something like that. Here is a man carried along by an amazing force and speaking magnificent prophecies because of it.

In his second letter, Peter says of the Old Testament prophets,

“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because,” [he says,] “no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God,” (2 Pet 1:20-21 RSV)

and this explains how Isaiah could speak and write as he did.

Now the amazing thing is that prophets who spoke like this were very much aware that an invisible power within them was speaking through them and that what they spoke and wrote was greater than their own. They actually searched through their own writings to discover hidden truths, and in this sense they ministered to themselves. They studied their own writings. Peter says the same in his first letter:

The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when they predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. {1 Pet 1:10-12 RSV}

Now if any key is needed to this book, this is it. Isaiah was a man who was searching for something. Peter says he was searching after the salvation that was to come from God. And the interesting thing is that the name *Isaiah* means “The salvation of Jehovah.”

Now what sets this man searching? Why does he pore over his writings, puzzling over this matter? Well, when you read this book you can see his problem. Isaiah lived in a time of national stress, when man’s true nature was visible and was exposing itself for what it was just as in our day. He was terribly bothered over man’s innate rebelliousness, as he cries out in the opening chapter. The nation has deliberately forsaken the ways of God and their stupid obstinacy is simply beyond his understanding. “Why,” he says, “even the ox knows its owner, and the ass its master’s crib...” (cf, Isa 1:3). Even an animal knows where its bread is buttered, where it gets blessing and help. But he says, “Not Israel. They don’t know where to go.” They are wandering off stupidly, ignorantly, and this amazes him. He simply cannot understand their stubborn refusal to turn back – and the other nations around are just as bad.

Then God gives Isaiah a vision. He sees God in his awful purity and holiness. This amazing

revelation of God is in Chapter 6, Verses 1 through 3:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

**“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”
{Isa 6:1-3 RSV}**

Imagine this! As he is in the temple one day, he sees God. In the year King Uzziah died, when the throne was vacant, he saw the throne that was never vacant. He saw a God of wrath and power. As you read on, you see beautifully described how God has power to shake the earth to its foundations – an immense God, infinite and mighty, speaking in thunder and moving in strength. Isaiah asks, “How can such a God do anything but destroy the rebellious creatures that are men? Where is salvation for men like this?”

His problem grows worse as, in the second part of this book, he is made aware of man’s helplessness. Chapter 40 begins on that note. Here is the prophetic passage concerning John the Baptist:

A voice says, “Cry!” {Isa 40:6a RSV}

Go to this nation and cry, cry.

And I said, “What shall I cry?” {Isa 40:6b RSV}

God said, cry that,

**“All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. {Isa 40:6b RSV}
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand for ever.” {Isa 40:8 RSV}**

Man is just like the grass. He is temporary – here for only a little while. His life spans but a brief period of time and then ends. Isaiah sees in this man’s utter impotence and helplessness as he blindly stumbles on to his doom.

But then Isaiah begins to see the answer. Woven beautifully throughout this book is the ever-growing revelation of God's love, of Jehovah's salvation, found in the figure of someone who is to come – the Messiah, the servant of God. At first it is dim and shadowy, but gradually it grows brighter and still brighter until, in Chapter 53, the figure of Christ steps right off the page and fills the whole room and you realize that he is the answer.

But what Isaiah was given to show especially was that the God of transcendent glory that he saw in Chapter 6 – the God who frightened him so much that he cried out, "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;" (Isa 6:5b RSV) – is the same God who would one day be,

**despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with
grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
... {Isa 53:3a RSV}**

**But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made
us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed... {Isa
53:5 RSV}**

**He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth; {Isa 53:7a
RSV}**

And Isaiah saw how God's love would break the back of man's rebelliousness and meet his helpless need.

Then, at last, he sees beyond the darkness and gloom of the centuries yet to come, to the day when there will come a morning without clouds, the day of righteousness, when all God's glory will fill the earth. And man will make war no more, and they will beat their swords into pruning hooks and their spears into plows, and nothing shall hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain.

You can find these two themes, or characteristics of God, brought together in the book of Revelation. In the fourth chapter, John tells us of a mighty vision of God: "And lo, a throne stood in heaven..." (Rev 4:2). Then, in Revelation 5:6 he says, "And between the throne and the four living creatures ... I saw a Lamb ..." There, then, are the

two themes of Isaiah: a throne and a Lamb. In Isaiah 6:1 you see the throne: "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up..." And you find the Lamb in Chapter 53, Verse 7:

**like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is
dumb,
so he opened not his mouth. {Isa 53:7b
RSV}**

This is God's plan, you see. God doesn't choose to come with power and might and warfare to wipe men off the face of the earth – although that is the way we try to solve our problems! As God declares to Isaiah (55:8-9):

**"... my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the
Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the
earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts."
{Isa 55:8-9 RSV}**

God's method is to break through man's rebelliousness not by might, not by power – but by love, by love that suffers. And when he does, and the heart responds by opening up, then all the majesty and the power of God are poured into that life to bring to it the fulfillment that God has intended for human hearts.

It is remarkable how up-to-date this book is. The first part of the book presents the threat of the king of Assyria; the last half of the book describes the threat of the kingdom of Babylon; and the middle part of the book, Chapters 37 through 39 are the "filling" in this historical sandwich – an interlude carrying us from Assyria to Babylon. These two nations – Assyria and Babylon – are in the world today and have been since before the time of Isaiah.

The king of Assyria stands for the power and philosophy of godlessness – the idea that there is no God and that we can live as we please; that we are in a deterministic, materialistic universe that runs on in its clanking, grinding way and there is nothing we can do about it but try to enjoy ourselves and make the most of things. It is the philosophy that might makes right, and that man has no one to answer to but himself. This is the Assyrian philoso-

phy so prominent in our own day, and it is also the philosophy behind Communism.

The second force is the power of Babylon. In Scripture, Babylon is always the symbol of apostasy, of religious error and deceit. Again, this is what we experience today, on all sides. The voices from which we should be able to expect guidance – the voice of the church itself in many places – are often voices crying out against God, by preaching the things that encourage wrongdoing and destruction in human life. So we are living in the very times described in Isaiah.

The dominant characteristics of human life are basically rebellion and helplessness. Have you ever noticed how true that is? I read recently in the papers of a man who was given a speeding ticket. When the officer handed him the ticket, the man read it, handed it back to the officer, threw his car into gear, and sped off. The officer jumped into his car and they wound up in a high-speed chase in which the man finally ran his car off the road and destroyed it, killing both himself and his six-year-old daughter who was in the car with him. Now what made him do that? Wasn't it simply that same innate rebelliousness of the human heart which does not want to be confronted with authority? That is the problem with all of us, isn't it?

People often say to me in counseling: "I know what I ought to do, but I have to confess that I don't want to do it." Why not? We all have this problem don't we? Rebelliousness and helplessness. It is reflected in the growing despair and sense of futility that grip so many people today – the loneliness and apparent meaninglessness of life. And twice in this book – once in the beginning and once toward the end – you find the great words that God addresses to a world that is gripped by rebellion and helplessness. God says in Chapter 1, Verse 18:

**"Come now, let us reason together ...
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool."
{Isa 1:18 RSV}**

He offers forgiveness, pardon. Again, in Chapter 55, Verse 1:

**"Ho, every one who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price."
{Isa 55:1 RSV}**

You see, God's message to man is not condemnation. His message to man is, "Come, come; the salvation of Jehovah is available to all." And when a man accepts what Isaiah says –

**All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. {Isa 53:6 RSV}**

– he will discover the answer to his deepest need; that the rebellion can be cured and the helplessness canceled and man can become what God intended him to be.

I often think of what occurred years ago to one of England's Bible teachers. As he hurried down to catch a train after one of the services at which he had been speaking, a man ran along the platform after him and caught him just as he was about to board the train. And the man said, "Oh, sir! I was in your meeting tonight and I heard you tell about a way by which man can find peace with God. I need help. I want to find my way to God. You help me." The teacher said, "I'm sorry. I haven't time. I've got to catch this train. But I will tell you what to do. Take this Bible and go to the nearest lamppost. Turn to Isaiah 53:6. Stoop down low and go in at the first *all* and stand up straight and come out at the last *all*." Then he boarded the train and off he went. The man stood there for a minute, puzzled. He didn't know what to make of it. Then he said, "I'll do what he said." He took the Bible that the teacher had given him and went over to the nearest lamppost. "Now what was it he said?" he thought. "Oh, yes, find Isaiah 53:6." He found it. "All we like sheep have gone astray." What did he say to do now? "Stoop down low and go in at the first *all*, stand up straight and come out at the last *all*. 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.'" "Oh," he said, "I see what he meant. I'm to admit that's the case with me. Stoop down low and go in at the first *all*. Acknowledge that I've gone astray, that I've turned to my own way. Well, then what? Well, I'm to

stand up straight and come out at the last *all*. ‘But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’ He bore it.” In a moment the man saw it. The next night at the meeting he came up, handed the Bible to the teacher, and said, “Here is your Bible, and I want you to know that I stooped down and went in at the first *all*, and I stood up straight and came out at the last *all!*”

Well, that is Isaiah’s message. It is the message of the Bible – the message of the Word of God. Let’s stand up straight and come out at the last all.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for the ministry of this great prophet of old. When we think that this book was written over seven long centuries before the Lord Jesus ever appeared on earth, yet so beautifully and accurately describes every aspect of his ministry, we can see that your hand is behind it, and that you have provided for us this great deliverance from ourselves. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way. Thou hast laid on him our iniquity. He bore our transgressions. Because of this we are accepted in your sight and can discover all the wonders that you have for us. We thank you in Christ’s name. Amen.

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