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**Core Seminar**

**Old Testament**

**Class 16: Isaiah**

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Think of a couple who’s been married for years, but whose relationship is now on the brink. Things are complicated, confusing, and difficult; there’s been years of hurt, insults, and broken promises.

* What once seemed to be *the* problem turns out as just a symptom of a deeper problem.
* That deeper problem turns out to be one of many problems.
* There’s been lots of sin; lots of pride; lots of damage.
* Apologies are not believed because trust has been broken. It’s all pretty rough.

And the path forward is to look in two directions simultaneously: backwards and forwards. The couple must look back to their marriage vows, and what they originally promised to one another. And they must look forward with hope to what reconciliation might be like.

**INTRODUCING OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY**

The analogy isn’t perfect, but reading the Old Testament prophets is a bit like jumping into such a counseling scenario mid-stream.

* Like a counseling situation, there are many overlapping stories which seem to get tangled together.
* Like a counseling situation, you can jump from one situation to the next quickly, as one idea calls another idea to mind.
* Like a counseling situation, moods change quickly, from hot to cold, tenderness to scorn, and back again.

In fact, God uses this analogy of a broken marriage throughout the prophets to describe his relationship with Israel (Jer 2:32, Is 50:1)

So far in this class, we’ve studied the Pentateuch, the pre-exilic histories, and the wisdom literature. Today we enter the prophets. The prophetic books began in the middle of the eight century BC and end some 300 years later. As I mentioned earlier, the prophets begin by looking backward. They compare God’s covenant as it’s given in the Pentateuch—especially Deuteronomy—with Israel’s real history. And they say, “You’ve broken the covenant! You’ve been unfaithful—to God!”

People often think of “prophecy” as concerned with *fore*telling the future. Actually, prophesy begins with *forth*telling—being forthright about the present in light of what was promised or warned in the past.

But then the prophets do turn to *foretelling*. They look forward, and promise one of two things: salvation or judgment. Keep in mind, even the promises of judgment are implicit calls to repentance, which would in fact turn away God’s judgment.

One thing that can make them difficult to read is a complexity of time horizons. When they make predictions about the future, those predictions can have multiple fulfillments, such as Isaiah’s promise in Isaiah 7 that the virgin or unmarried woman would be with child. That seemed to have a short term fulfillment, with Isaiah’s then-virgin fiancée eventually giving birth (not as a virgin, of course) as well as a long-term fulfillment in Mary. The prophets have a telescopic view of history: everything looks like it’s up close[[1]](#footnote-1).

So let me give you a few tips for interpreting Old Testament prophecy, *in your handout*:

* + 1. Discern the immediate context – the structure and flow of the book.
		2. Discern the kind of oracle employed (judgment, salvation, or something else).
		3. Study the balance between the historical (forth-telling) and the predictive (foretelling).
		4. Determine what kind of language is being used (Poetic? Disputation? Narrative?)
		5. Place these texts in their overall place in redemptive-history. Be careful not to make wrong associations between Israel and your nation or church.
		6. Be alert for certain recurring and sweeping themes, especially those which bear on the relationships between the testaments.
		7. Consider how the New Testament authors employ your passage, or at least your book.

***[Questions]***

**INTRODUCING ISAIAH**

Let’s try a couple of these interpretative principles out as we open up the book of Isaiah.

But before we get there, I’d like to sample what you love about Isaiah. ***What are some of your favorite sections from the book?***

OK. Back to our study.

The first four verses of chapters 1 and 2 function like two different introductions to Isaiah, each representing a different side of the book. Let me read from chapter 1:

**1**The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

**2**Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
    for the Lord has spoken:
“Children have I reared and brought up,
    but they have rebelled against me.
**3**The ox knows its owner,
    and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know,
    my people do not understand.”

**4**Ah, sinful nation,
    a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers,
    children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the Lord,
    they have despised the Holy One of Israel,
    they are utterly estranged.

In verse 2, we have the beginning of an oracle for all the earth to hear.

*What’s the context?* Verse 1 sets it up as a vision of Isaiah concerning Judah (the southern kingdom) and Jerusalem (its capital city), and Isaiah’s words are datable to the reigns of these kings.

*What kind of oracle beings in verse 2*? Judgment.

*What literary form is being used*? Poetry.

*Is Isaiah looking backward or forward?* Backward. Recalling the Pentateuch, he refers to the Lord rearing Israel as children, but says they’ve forsaken him. As in marriage counseling, God’s pain is profound.

I wonder if you ever view your own rejection and rebellion against God as something that would cause God pain—that God would say of you, “He has forsaken me! She has turned her back on me.” It’s worth meditating on the profound grief your sin causes God.

Interestingly, chapter 2 feels like a different introduction:

**1**The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

**2**It shall come to pass in the latter days
    that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
    and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
**3**    and many peoples shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
    to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
    and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go the law,
    and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
**4**He shall judge between the nations,
    and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
    and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
    neither shall they learn war anymore.

And let me ask the same questions:

*What’s the context?* A vision about Judah and Jerusalem.

*What kind of oracle beings in verse 2*? Salvation and promise.

*What literary form is being used*? Poetry.

*Is Isaiah looking backward or forward?* Forward, to a time of hope. And notice the difference. The Jerusalem mentioned in chapter one felt gritty and historical. The Jerusalem mentioned here feels almost otherworldly: “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” The biblical scholar’s term for this is “eschatological.” “Pertaining to the end times:” when God brings history to a close.

We need to ask these questions when we turn to prophesy. In fact, I’m going to structure the remainder of our time around three of the interpretive principles listed above for reading prophesy.

**PRINCIPLE 1: KNOW THE STRUCTURE**

These two passages are a good springboard into the structure of Isaiah. The structure of a book is like a road map. It helps you know where you are at any time, which is especially helpful in the prophets. In a sense, these two passages represent the two halves of Isaiah. Throughout the book, and particularly prominent in chapters 1 to 39, are oracles of woe and judgment concerning the historical Jerusalem. Chapters 1 through 39 are spoken by an eighth century prophet and are directly aimed at his eighth century audience. He points to their particular sins. And he points to the immanent invasion of Assyria. Chapters 1 to 39 sound like the first verses of chapter 1.

Beginning in chapter 40 and continuing through the end of Isaiah, something changes. Isaiah doesn’t address the present, historical Jerusalem. He’s addressing some future version of it. It sounds more like the first verses of chapter 2. At face value, he’s addressing the Jerusalem which, in a century’s time, would be in exile in Babylon. But remember what we said about multiple horizons of fulfillment? Really, Isaiah seems to describe an eschatalogical Jerusalem. The language he uses in these chapters, especially in the final ten, is much too dramatic and grandiose to be referring simply to the small band of Israelites who would return from exile in the fifth and sixth century BC—swords-into-plowshares sort of language. There’s talk of God’s glory being revealed, and God creating a new heavens and earth. It envisions life on a whole different plane. This eschatalogical Jerusalem, furthermore, is comprised of a *remnant* of the original, but doesn’t appear to be tied to ethnic Jews but to everyone who is united to God. Though there are oracles of salvation in the first half of the book, they abound in the second half.

That’s the biggest division in Isaiah: the first thirty nine chapters, broadly speaking, focus on the historical Jerusalem and its failed kings, while chapters 40 to 66, broadly speaking, focus on an eschatalogical Jerusalem and another character who, at first glance, doesn’t sound like a king, but indeed is.

On the back of handout, you can see an outline of the book, which I won’t take the time to go over here.

What I will say about this, that across these 66 chapters a dramatic change happens to Jerusalem. In chapter 1, Isaiah says of Jerusalem, **“**How the faithful city has become a whore!” (1:21). By the end of the book, however, he anticipates her presentation as a “bride” in whom the Lord “will take delight” (62:4-5). She moves from harlotry to holiness, from whore to bride.

That, in a sense, is the beginning and the end of the plot, and it shows up in the structure of the whole book. I’m sorry if I spoiled the ending for you. How does this transformation happen? That brings us to a second principle for reading the book, and one where we will find plenty of challenge for ourselves…

***[Questions]***

**PRINCIPLE 2: BE ALERT FOR REOCCURING AND SWEEPING THEMES**

Reading through the prophets can be difficult, as we’ve said, because they jump around. But you’ll be amazed that, as you read over broad sections of a book like Isaiah, certain themes appear again and again. It’s worth noting them in the margins of your Bible. Jerusalem is one, as we’ve already seen. And there are several more that are prominent in Isaiah, and that help us understand how intense this marriage counseling is as we move from harlotry to holiness.

1) ***Pride***

The theme of Israel’s pride—and humanity’s pride—comes up again and again in Isaiah. The Lord continually addresses it:

* **Isaiah 2:11**  The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low
* **Isaiah 5:21**  Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight

And there are manymore. Behind the rebellion of Israel, of the nations, of all of us sitting here this morning is our pride.

The nation of Israel, in many ways, is nothing more than an example of humanity. So as we read through Isaiah, and read of their despicable pride and the injustice it yields, remember that, apart from Christ, that is us.

2) ***Trust***

Another massive theme in Isaiah is trust—especially chapters 7-39.

* In chapter 7, the northern kingdom of Israel, together with the Aram, make war on the Southern kingdom of Judah. Isaiah tells King Ahaz of Judah not to make any foreign alliances, and even promises Ahaz a sign. But Ahaz, in a show of false piety, refuses to ask for a sign (Isaiah 7:12). And he proceeds to move toward foreign alliances, which angers God.
* This theme is further developed through chapter 31:“Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord.” (v.1)
* The question of trust reaches its climax when the city of Jerusalem, under king Hezekiah, is surrounded by the armies of Assyria, and the Assyrian field commander taunts the inhabitants of Jerusalem about their trust in Hezekiah and Israel’s God. Isaiah 36:14-20: The Assyrian army commander shouts, “Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you! 15 Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the Lord when he says, 'The Lord will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.'…19 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? 20 Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand?"”

The people have a choice: trust God, or trust someone else? Gratefully, Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem in this episode, unlike Ahaz, do trust God, and God delivers them miraculously from the Assyrian army.

So read these chapters of Isaiah, and reflect on where you place your trust.

3) ***God as the Holy One***

The first two themes have centered on people. But really, the book of Isaiah is about God. First he is the Holy One. Isaiah calls God the Holy One thirty times in this book, while he’s called this only six times in the rest of the Bible. Why does Isaiah have such a strong sense of God’s holiness? Probably because of how Isaiah’s was called to be a prophet in chapter 6:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe 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!”

Holy means to be set apart—on a whole different plane. And what is the culmination of God’s holiness? Look at the second half of verse 3. It is to known and understood by everyone. “The whole earth is full of his glory.” God’s driving purpose is that his greatness might be known and enjoyed by his creatures. That’s why he does everything—even saving sinners. Chapter 48: “For my name's sake I defer my anger,

 for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you … For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.” (**v. 9, 11**).

So we learn that God is holy and therefore committed to his own glory.

4) ***God as the Sole and Incomparable Ruler of Creation and History***

We also learn that he’s the sole and incomparable ruler of creation and history. This theme becomes particularly prominent beginning in chapter 40 and is highlighted in the following eight chapters.

* **Isaiah 40:25**  To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One
* **Isaiah 45:5-6a**  I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me;
* **Isaiah 45:21b-22** Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.

5) ***God as the Sole Redeemer***

Notice in this last passage how God being the only ruler of creation means that he alone can save. That’s another prominent theme in Isaiah.

* **Isaiah 54:5**  For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.
* **Isaiah 54:8**  In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,” says the Lord, your Redeemer.

God refers to himself repeatedly as the Holy One *and* the Redeemer of his people.

6) ***The Remnant***

But who does God save? He doesn’t save everyone. Through the course of Isaiah, it becomes clear he means to save a remnant.

* **Isaiah 10:20-21**  In that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God.
* **See also Isaiah 28:5**.

What’s interesting, however, is that it becomes clear in chapters 56 to 59 that even the remnant still sin. They are not entirely holy before God. In fact, the true remnant appears to be a remnant of one:

* In Isaiah’s call, Isaiah is told that God will bring destruction until everything is laid waste, everything, that is, except a “holy seed” (6:13). Who is that holy seed? Chapter 11 has the answer.
* **Isaiah 11:1-2**  There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.

Who is it upon whom the Spirit will rest? We know from the first half of Isaiah, particularly chapters 9 and 11, that it’s a messianic and kingly figure. Then in the second half of Isaiah, we discover a little more…

7) ***The Servant***

God’s Spirit will specially rest on one who is a servant. We learn about him in four songs:

* **Song 1: Isaiah 42:1**  Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.
* **Song 2: See Isaiah 49:1-6**
* **Song 3: See Isaiah 50:4-9**
* **Song 4: See Isaiah 52:13-53:12:** Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up,
* and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—so shall he sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him….

8) ***The Conqueror***

Remarkably, a few short chapters after Isaiah 53, we learn that God’s Spirit is going to rest not just on one who is this suffering servant, but on one who is a conqueror. Could this be the same individual? There are four conqueror songs:

* First Conqueror Song: Isaiah 59:15-21: “The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice.He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak....
* Second Conqueror Song: 61:1-4. “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (v. 1).
* Third Conqueror Song: 61:10 - 62:7. The conqueror comes as a bridegroom to take his bride away, to rescue her.
* Fourth Conqueror Song: 63:1-6. There is a horrible image of judgment. When the Conqueror comes, he is coming to judge.

9) ***New Jerusalem—the Bride***

With this servant/conqueror in place, the final chapters of Isaiah focus especially on the new Jerusalem as the new bride, which is also representative of the new heavens and earth.

**Isaiah 62:3-5**  You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate…for the Lord delights in you...as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

What a glorious vision! Think back to the fact that we’re talking about the Holy One. We’re talking about the sole and incomparable ruler of creation and redemption. And it’s this one who says to his people, “I take delight in you. I rejoice over you.” Christian, he says this to you! Isaiah says that all true Christians are a crown of splendor in his hand! Is this because we of anything we’ve done? Or anything we intrinsically are—good looks, intelligence, career success, keeping our nose clean? No, you have to go back to the servant song of chapter 53 to understand how God could say these things. It’s through Jesus.

**PRINCIPLE 3: CONSIDER THE NT’S AUTHORITATIVE INTERPRETATION**

But finally, we need to read all of Isaiah in light of the New Testament. That’s the third principle for reading Isaiah. Read it all in light of the New Testament’s authoritative interpretation. I’ve mentioned the fact that Old Testament prophesy often yields several horizons of fulfillment. Sure enough, the New Testament literally reverberates with the sounds of Isaiah, and says all that its great and glorious promises are fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

1) ***Jesus is the Promised Messiah***

Looking back to the Messiah promised in Isaiah 9 and 11, Paul says, “And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.” (Rom. 15:12) and he applies this to Jesus.

2) ***Jesus is the Holy One***

Referring to chapter 6 of Isaiah, the apostle John says, “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.” Did you catch that? Who is the Holy God that Isaiah saw on a throne, high and lifted up, the train of his robe filling the temple? According to John, it was Jesus!

3) ***Jesus is the Promised Redeemer***

All four Gospels quote from the opening words of Isaiah 40 to say that Jesus is God who has come to give salvific comfort to his people. So in Luke 3, John the Baptist—who has come to prepare the people for Jesus—explains his role in the words of Isaiah. “A voice of one calling in the dessert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him…And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’”

4) ***Jesus as Suffering Servant***

The New Testament authors knew that Jesus was the suffering servant. To explain Jesus’ ministry, Matthew writes, “This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight’” (Matthew 12:17-18)[[2]](#footnote-2).

5) ***Jesus as Conqueror***

And the New Testament also shows that Jesus is the Conquerer: so in the first conquerer song, we read that this promised one will repay each “according to what they have done” (59:18). And so who is it who says in Revelation 22:12, “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done”? It’s Jesus!

And I could go on. The New Testament is full of examples showing that Isaiah is pointing to Jesus.

***[Questions]***

**CONCLUSION**

The book of Isaiah does read like the recorded transcript of the marriage counseling between an embattled couple. But here’s the thing: unlike most human marriages where there’s fault on both sides, Christ is the perfect faithful spouse, and we have been the unfaithful and hard-hearted one. You can learn this simply by reading the New Testament. But it’s as you read the book of Isaiah you come to understand these things more deeply and richly.

I’ve said that we want the New Testament’s interpretation of Isaiah. But the same thing is true in the opposite direction. To understand the New Testament, and who Jesus is, you need to read the Old Testament, and the prophecies of Isaiah in particular. What does it mean that Jesus is holy, and a redeemer, and a conqueror? What is sin? Who is God? What’s he like? Is he really in control? Isaiah gives us pre-interpretation, you might say. It gives meaning to the words used by the New Testament. Do you want to understand and know and love Jesus? Then read, study, and learn Isaiah. I hope I’ve given you a taste of that this morning.

1. Removed: The prophets use a number of literary forms to communicate their message: allegories (Isa. 5:1-7); proverbs (Ezek 18:2), lamentations (Amos 5:1-2), prayers (Hab 3), narrative (Isa. 36-39). The style of their writing was also diverse—from Jeremiah’s laments (8:18-9:1), to Ezekiel’s shocking statements (20:21-26), to Habakkuk’s questioning (1:12-17), to Amos’ sarcasm and irony (3:12). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also Acts 8:35 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)