

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

# **Isaiah The prophet of God**

### **Lesson 1: Isaiah – Heard God’s invitation**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 1:1-20**

God used Isaiah predominantly to speak to His people Israel.

Whilst God addressed other nations it was usually within the overall context of His plans for Israel. Some nations were used to encourage Israel to return to a life of obedience and blessing, and yet at the same time, God held them accountable for the ways they behaved towards His chosen people. The fact that God used a nation to ‘get Israel’s attention’ did not mean they were exempt from judgment.

The writings of Isaiah begin with an explanation that Isaiah served as prophet and received his visions regarding both Jerusalem and Judah, at a time of the divided kingdom, during the reigns of four of the kings of Judah – Azariah (Uzziah), Jothan, Ahaz and Hezekiah.

Isaiah appears to have had a more intimate relationship with king Hezekiah, albeit king Azariah’s life must have had a profound effect upon him.

As we read Isaiah’s words and warnings about both Jerusalem and Judah, we have to hold our hands up in honesty to say that the description of their lifestyle and treatment of God and all that is holy is very similar to our own experience.

It is therefore with great relief that we read of God’s mercy upon Israel, in that although God punishes them, He will never ultimately destroy them nor forsake them.

God is not like us. Whenever we feel abused, let down or unjustly criticised, we naturally want to take revenge (hopefully at a more intense level than what we have received, so that the ‘offender’ gets the message not to repeat the offence), or alternatively we put up immovable blockades to avoid any possibility of a similar event taking place. There is rarely any real desire for reconciliation or the restoration of any former relationship. Divorce and acrimonious separations are the norm.

Therefore, it is wonderful to read in the first chapter of Isaiah, in the midst of God’s pronouncement of judgment on Israel, three amazing and comforting statements about God. In the section where God described the desolation of Israel, Isaiah is able to prophesy – *“Unless the Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom (and Gomorrah).”* So, unlike what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, Israel would be left with a remnant of people.

Then, after more denunciations, Isaiah records for us one of the most exciting revelations about God that we find anywhere in the Bible. After saying, *“Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!”* God continued, *“Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”* Next God reveals an amazing promise, *“come now, let us reason together,”* says the Lord. *“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”*

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The question arises – How can / does that happen? The answer is, of course, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God’s ultimate, total and unique sacrifice. He took my sin to the Cross and died in my place. The scarlet, crimson blood that flowed from His body washes me totally clean so I become white as snow in the sight of a holy God.

The third glimpse of the heart of God is revealed later in the chapter, “*Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness.*” So not only is she forgiven and cleansed from sin, she is clothed with righteousness. It is the same for us. We need to be forgiven and cleansed from our sins. Jesus accomplished that for us on the Cross. However, He did more – God clothes us with Christ’s righteousness.

Please notice it is all initiated and carried out by God. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us – Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. Isn’t God good? No wonder Christians are so joyful.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Being called to be a prophet is both an enormous privilege and a daunting experience. The genuine prophet doesn’t choose the words they deliver; they just repeat what they believe they have heard directly from the Lord, whether or not it is a blessing. The comforting thing for me is that I am a prophet of Jehovah and He always deals in righteousness and mercy.

### **Prayer**

*Thank you so much, Father, for Your awesome plan of salvation. Thank You for caring enough about us even while we were still rebellious and selfish. Thank You that it is all about You and Your amazing love and grace, yet we benefit through forgiveness and righteousness. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Hebrews 12:1-13
- Ephesians 2:11-22
- Galatians 2:17-21

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think God came up with His plan of salvation?
2. What makes Israel different from all other nations?
3. What in your life do you see mirrored in the biblical account of the nation of Israel?

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### **Lesson 2: Isaiah and the mountain of the Lord**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 2:1-5**

Isaiah's vision of the last days is in stark contrast to his vision of what is called the Day of the Lord. Isaiah's description of the Day of the Lord is predictably challenging to the arrogance of humanity. God would expose the impotence of the wisdom and power of the proud and self-satisfied with the destruction of their idols. Complacency would be replaced by a period of terror and shame.

On the other hand, Isaiah's vision of the last days reveals a completely different scene. The spotlight is not on mankind but upon God. It begins with His temple and pans around to show that when God is placed in His rightful place, order is restored from chaos. The obvious inference is that in order to experience true peace God must be put back in control, in first place.

So often we treat God as little more than a genie of the lamp, or a deity formed with our own imagination, who should be totally answerable to us and thus remove us from all situations we don't like and keep us happy. Unfortunately, happiness is, of all things, very volatile and subjective, invariably determined by our emotional state at the time. If the sun shines we are happy, if it rains we are sad. Farmers, on the other hand, should be excused for wishing the opposite.

If our favourite or national team wins we are happy, if they lose we are sad. The opposition team and supporters will have opposite emotions. How could God satisfy each of our demands for happiness at the same time?

When we consider the word "*temple*" in the Bible we need to recognise that it represents the presence of God. Solomon's temple was designed to house the "*name*" of God, His representation. God does not live in man-made physical temples, He is far too big. As David said, even earth and the heavens can't contain Him. God, however, in His grace, deigned to allow His presence to be represented there. Just as He was represented by the tabernacle in the wilderness.

Solomon's temple was built on a hill, Mount Zion. However, Mt Zion was no where near as high as Mt Hermon, which was usually snow-capped. In his vision, Isaiah appeared to have seen Mt Zion being raised higher than Mt Hermon. Not because Mt Zion was more important but because God is almighty. Because the temple represented the presence of God, the mount on which it stood would become visible to all. God would be held in such high reverence that everyone would want to come into His presence. Not only the people of Israel, but all the people of the earth. Even today, pilgrims from all over the world travel to Israel and, in particular, Jerusalem. It has an innate magnetism that draws both Jews and Gentiles.

However, what Isaiah saw was even more significant than what we see today. He saw that people would flock to Jerusalem to seek the God of Jacob (Israel) for themselves and to learn His ways. They would eagerly seek God in order to follow His ways and His truth. Having found that nothing else truly satisfies, they would willingly give up everything to know God.

The wonderful thing is that when we seek God and follow His ways, not only do we experience peace with God but also reconciliation between ourselves. As we lose ourselves in God, we find true peace and fulfilment. Our previously held selfish ambitions and attitudes are replaced by a desire to seek the best in and for others. Our disputes disappear and we can live in harmony with one another.

No wonder Isaiah saw the weapons of war replaced by agricultural implements, which would increase fruitfulness and community prosperity.

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As our vision gets absorbed in the light of God, so our desires change to reflect our Heavenly Father, who is totally others-centred.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

God is a holy God and yet, at the same time, a God of mercy, grace and love, who reigns in righteousness. There is no discord in Heaven, and that is His design and plan for earth as well.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please forgive me for often just thinking of You as a judgemental, angry God who is solely determined to eliminate anyone who does wrong, forgetting that Your plan has always been for everyone to live in peace, joy and fruitfulness flowing from an intimate relationship with You. Amen*

### **Additional Readings**

- Exodus 3:4-14;
- Psalm 27:4-14;
- 2 Corinthians 5:14-21;

### **Questions**

1. What do you think Isaiah meant by the phrase, "In the last days"?
2. Can we expect to ever experience Heaven on earth?
3. How does this picture of God differ from the more conventional view of an Old Testament God of judgement and wrath? How do you explain the paradox?

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### **Lesson 3: Isaiah and the Righteous Branch**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 4:1-6**

I think Isaiah's vision of the Branch of the Lord is terrific. I get a thrill every time I contemplate it. For me, it engenders a picture of Jesus. Who could be more beautiful and glorious than Jesus? And yet, when Jesus was on earth as God incarnate, He hid His majesty.

Oh yes, Jesus performed miracles, turned water into wine, healed the sick, cast out demons, fed the five thousand, fed the four thousand, walked on water, and calmed the raging sea. However, the people still didn't recognise His majesty. They treated Him a bit like how we would treat superman. Expect him to perform tricks, get us out of difficulties, answer all our wants – yet, we would still keep him at arms length, not really knowing if we could trust him or not.

Jesus wasn't superman. He also knew how volatile we are. One moment praising outstanding performances and then criticising anything that doesn't satisfy our expectations. One moment standing in awe of unquestionable ability or courage and yet also trying to 'cut them down to our size' – adopting the tall poppy syndrome – so we feel better and less intimidated or exposed.

Yes, they crucified Jesus because He was just too good. And yet, the reality was that Jesus let them do it. He had the power and authority to completely annihilate all His enemies with a blink of His eye. Yet, He chose to place a veil over His majesty and hide His glory. Peter, James and John saw a glimpse of His majesty on the mountain of transfiguration; however, Jesus commanded them not to talk about that until He had risen from the dead.

I'm sure Mary of Magdala and Mary of Bethany, in particular, saw something of the beauty of Jesus. However, I'm also sure they couldn't understand the full nature of that beauty.

Isaiah's vision was particularly directed at the remnant, those left after the judgment of God on Israel. They would be restored and made whole, and would experience an awesome incident. God would cleanse the city by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire. Wow! What a great description of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would pass through Jerusalem and make it clean. Yes, judgment has to precede restoration. The fire of God would burn up all the chaff and rubbish, leaving everything clean and pure.

Then Isaiah received a picture of a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night, hovering over the city. Isn't that wonderful? I'm sure, like me, your mind goes back to the wilderness journey. The People of Israel were led and protected throughout their 40-year long journey, by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. What did that represent? Yes, the presence of Almighty God, Yahweh.

Here, once more, was the renewed promise of the presence of God. God's Holy Spirit. And over all the glory was to be a canopy – *a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.*

What an amazing promise! God's benign presence every moment of every day. A shelter providing refreshment, restoration and preservation. No harm could come upon them. And a refuge and a hiding place from the storms of life. Isn't that the hallmark of God? No wonder David wrote the shepherd's psalm: Psalm 23. He knew what it was to have a refuge and a hiding place when he was hounded for his life by king Saul.

And yet, Isaiah realised that the promise was for the people of Jerusalem. The God of Moses, the

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God of David was their God. The same God who faithfully led the people of Israel through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. The same God who defeated Goliath and all David's enemies, who ensured David would be king and Solomon, his heir, who would succeed David as king, was the same God who would preserve and protect the remnant of the people in Jerusalem in Isaiah's time.

The great news is that this same God is our God as well. The same promise He gave through Isaiah to the people in Jerusalem He says to you and me today. He is your shelter and He is your refuge. The same Almighty God is with you today. Be at peace and rest under the shelter of His wings. Cast all your cares on Him for He cares for you.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

The Almighty Creator God has presented Himself primarily as the God of the Jews. God is the vine; they are the branches. Whilst the Jews rejected Him time and time again, yet from among them would come their Saviour – the Righteous Branch you know as Jesus Christ, the King of the Jews. Through His death you, too, are grafted into the same vine.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You for being a God of mercy and love. Thank You for showing Your amazing grace, patience and faithfulness through the history of the Jews. Please help me remember that I am no better than the Jews and that you are equally faithful to me, even though I keep letting you down. Thank you so much. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Psalm 2
- John 15:1-17
- Romans 11:11-32

### **Questions**

1. Why is replacement theology suspect?
2. Why does God still love the Jews?
3. Why is Jesus called the Righteous Branch?



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### **Lesson 4: Isaiah's vision of God**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 6:1-13**

God gave Isaiah an amazing vision, which dramatically influenced his life from that moment on and God recorded it for posterity.

We all need to experience a glimpse of who God really is, what He is like. However, God is too vast for the human mind to fully comprehend. He therefore uses different ways to display some of His splendour in order to catch our attention and expose His presence.

God reveals Himself to us in many ways. Initially, through creation. The wonders of creation continue to amaze us. Whether we look into the sky – the heavens, examine the diversity of fauna and flora or study our human bodies under a microscope, the complexity of the design, the unity and harmony of the inter-relationships all combine to pose the question – who is their creator?

It is very difficult to see the vastness of the universe, the intricacies of individual cells and atoms and the consistent structure of each of the individual species, and feel that they all came into being by chance or unaided intention.

The psalmist and king, David, recognised this when he wrote in Psalm 19, *"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."* (Psalm 19: 1 – 4.)

Saul of Tarsus, the murderer of the first century Christians and who later became a follower of Jesus Christ, expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote to the Christians at Rome, *"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made."* (Romans 1: 20.)

I think God displays the incredible vastness and variety of creation before us so that we would look at it and exclaim, "Wow!" When we realise that we will never be able to fully understand the smallest part of it, we would feel compelled to try and discover how creation came about. It is a logical step to accept that there must have been a creator who has almighty power, not only to create it in the first place but also to sustain it, regardless of how poorly we manage and try to destroy the creation we dwell in.

God not only reveals Himself in creation, He also revealed Himself when Jesus Christ, His Incarnate Son, came to earth between approximately 6 BC and AD 27. We celebrate that revelation each Christmas. Jesus explained that those who saw Him saw God. The Gospel writers also confirmed that Jesus was more than a human being. Yes, He was human as we recognise a human, with a human body. He also had feelings, knew physical and emotional exhaustion, pain and suffering. However, He displayed something of His Divinity through the miracles. John, the writer, declared that the miracles were signs that Jesus was God.

The Bible records many occasions where people had visions of God. Often it was in order to prepare 'ordinary' people to perform extraordinary exploits.

From the Day of Pentecost onwards, it is increasingly obvious that God wants to reveal Himself to all His disciples. God longs for everyone to have a dynamic encounter with Him, through the

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experience of the filling of His Holy Spirit. The prophet Joel prophesied that, one day, everyone would experience the Holy Spirit – it began on the Day of Pentecost, and has continued until today.

However, there appears to be a common theme. The reason God gives people a dynamic experience of His Presence and power is not solely for their benefit. Rather it is for sharing with others the truth about God, and the Good News that they, too, can have a similar experience of the presence of God and enter into a living and vital relationship with God as their Heavenly Father.

God's awesome revelation to Isaiah happened at a time when he was probably feeling very low and depressed. Good king Amaziah (Uzziah) had died and Isaiah was, no doubt, in mourning. It was into that very time that God broke through and gave Isaiah his glorious vision. Isaiah received a glimpse of the regal majesty and righteous holiness of God. Holy, Holy, Holy suggests the Trinity. Yes, Isaiah saw something of the dazzling splendour of God and quite understandably realised how vile and wretched he was, in comparison.

He cried out to God in desperation. Immediately, God sent an angel to bring him salvation. There was nothing Isaiah could do; he was totally helpless. No, God did it all. Cleansed Isaiah from his sin and guilt and justified him before the Holy God. However, please note what follows. There was a cry from Heaven, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Isaiah replied immediately, "Here am I. Send me!"

When we have a true vision of God, not only do we get a glimpse of who we are and cry out for mercy, grace and salvation, but we also find there is an inherent responsibility to be totally obedient to God's will, which invariably requires us to tell others about God's message.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Everyone needs to have a personal, dynamic encounter with God. When you experience it, you will never be the same again. It moves your head knowledge about God to your heart and enables you to see life in its true perspective.

### **Prayer**

*Father, I thank You that although You are, as Isaiah reminds us – Holy, Holy, Holy – You nevertheless long for us to have an intimate friendship with You. Please touch my lips, take away my guilt and remind me again that my sin is atoned for, through the sacrificial death of Your beloved Son and my Saviour, Jesus Christ. Thank you so much. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 12:1-9
- Exodus 3:1-17
- Acts 1:1-8

### **Questions**

1. What is your concept of God?
2. Have you had a personal dynamic encounter with God?
3. What do you think God's purpose is when He gives us a revelation of who He really is?



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### **Lesson 5: Isaiah and the promise of Immanuel**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 7: 1 – 16**

God never totally gave up on the Jews. The people of Israel often rejected God, disobeyed Him, turned from Him to idols and looked for other human beings to protect them from their enemies when, in fact, God had promised to be their Protector, provided they kept trusting in Him.

God is revealed in the Old Testament as a loving Father, a faithful Protector and gracious Shepherd and yet, time after time, His specially chosen people, the people of Israel, turned their collective backs on Him.

God was constantly watching over His people and here the people of Judah were about to be attacked by the king of Israel and his mercenary cohort, the king of Aram. The Arameans had been habitual enemies of Israel for centuries, so why Pekah would join forces with them to attack Judah and Jerusalem is both very puzzling and disquieting.

Nevertheless, God noticed, and when He saw how the king and the people of Judah were trembling in fear, God sent Isaiah and his son to see Ahaz and deliver His message to them. The message was very reassuring. God revealed to the king that He knew what the two leaders were planning, however, Ahaz was not to be overwhelmed by fear because God would not only stop the invasion from taking place but also confirm that both would be dealt with by God.

God challenged Ahaz to hold firmly to his faith in God and in this message. Indeed, God warned him that if he didn't stand firm in his faith, he wouldn't stand at all. Which is a salutary challenge to us as well, today.

Later God challenged Ahaz to ask Him for a sign that would confirm God's promise. Ahaz could ask for anything, whether it was a huge miracle or small. However, Ahaz declined saying that he would not put God to the test.

God chastised the king and his people, reminding them that they had severely tried His patience. Consequently, God would give them an unsolicited sign. God's response, through Isaiah, was to give a sign that would shake the world and turn it on its head.

*"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel."*

What a sign! Yes, it would be miraculous. A virgin would conceive a child without any human insemination, artificial or otherwise. In other words, by inference, through the power of God alone. Not only would she have a child, not 'any' child, the child would be a boy, a son. God was very specific – a miracle birth of a son, who would be born through direct Divine intervention.

Then to 'cap it all off', the son would be called Immanuel. A specific woman – a virgin; a specific child, a son, a specific son, to be called Immanuel. Not Abraham, Isaac, Jacob or David. No such lowly and human names for this child, this boy, this son. His name would be Immanuel. Not a name given to any other child, because this name, "Immanuel" means "God with us"!

Yes, the child, the son would be God Himself in human form. Yes, Christmas was prophesied in this passage, centuries prior to it taking place. The plan had been drawn up; the promise made, awaiting time to reveal it in all its splendour.

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That time came and the virgin, Mary of Nazareth, became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit and had a child, a son, and the son's name was Jesus.

Why was He called Jesus? Because He would save His people from their sins. Jesus, Yeshua means, "Saviour". However, Jesus was also Immanuel, which means "God with us."

God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to save the world from selfishness and sin. It was God's plan; He promised it and He carried it out. We are saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Immanuel, the virgin's son as prophesied through Isaiah to king Ahaz. Aren't we blessed? Aren't you excited by that? You should be. What a wonderful preparation for our Christmas celebrations this year.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Don't overlook the fact that the promise of the incarnation of Jesus Christ was given to me long before it became a reality. I didn't witness it in my lifetime. However, God said it and it happened. God did eventually come to earth as a man, born of a virgin, and He was, in reality, God with us.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You for recording in the ancient Scriptures the fact that Your Son would be born of a virgin. Thank You for promising that He would be God. Thank You for Your wonderful plan of our salvation and that, from Pentecost, You can be with us forever through the indwelling of Your Holy Spirit. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 3:1-15
- John 1:1-18
- Revelation 3:19-22

### **Questions**

1. Why was it important that Jesus was born of a virgin?
2. Why did God have to come to earth in human form?
3. How is *God with us* with you today?

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### **Lesson 6: Isaiah – God’s promise of a Son**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 9:1-7**

I guess this has to be one of the most treasured Scriptures for all Christians. Whilst it is most often referred to and studied at this time of the year – Christmas time, it is, nevertheless, applicable all year round. It is one of the most profound prophecies of all. It must have been a deeply-held hope for centuries, as the People of Israel waited for their Messiah to appear.

The prophecy was given to Isaiah at a time when the people were in distress and fear. They were surrounded by enemies and must have felt God had inflicted suffering upon them. Into that mist of hopelessness, Isaiah brought a shaft of light. It was both specific and dramatic. And yet, the incredible fact was that it spoke of a time to come in the far distant future.

The people to whom it was addressed had to hold on to the vision, hold on to the hope, even though it would, for many, be an unrealised dream. No doubt many gave up on it; many became skeptical and many doubted whether it was ever given in the first place. Faith can be hard at times. I wonder how many of us would have held on to the hope for our lifetime, knowing that the prophecy had been given centuries before.

It’s a bit like us with the prophecy of the return of Christ, isn’t it? That too was given centuries ago. Do you still believe it will happen? Will it happen in your lifetime? Is it time for you to give up on the promise and move on? That does, of course, beg the question of where will you move on to? How convinced are you that Jesus Christ is coming again as He promised?

For the People of Israel the promise of a Messiah was an integral part of their culture and psyche. Indeed, for many, they are still awaiting their Messiah.

When Jesus was born many still didn’t recognise His birth as the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy. Thankfully for us, some of the eye-witnesses did. Matthew the tax collector, John the Gospel writer and Peter the disciple all eventually recognised Jesus for who He really was and wrote their testimony for us to receive and believe.

What a fantastic description of Jesus given to us by Isaiah: *For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders.* Yes, Jesus is no other than the Baby of Bethlehem whose birth we celebrate at Christmas – Jesus is the reason for the season. Although born as a baby, He is, nevertheless, the King of kings and Lord of lords. His is the final and ultimate Authority.

*He will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace.* The record of Jesus’ life concurs with this prophecy. He was the One everyone wanted to be near and seek advice from. He was the only One who performed the miracles proving He was the Mighty God. He was the One who brought peace and still gives peace today.

*Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.* Oh, how I love this promise. Please notice it is not His government or peace that has no end – that is wonderful in itself. However, it is the INCREASE that will not end. His Kingdom will continue to expand forever. What a fantastic prospect! Yes, Jesus shall reign; however, His Kingdom is an eternal Kingdom of unlimited growth and expansion.

No wonder Handel was compelled to write, *Hallelujah!*

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As you celebrate this Christmas, never forget that the Baby lying in the manger was none other than the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace and the Coming King.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

The prophecy I was given did not take place in my lifetime. However, God revealed to me that He would invade our world as a human being, God incarnate. Not as some imperial potentate who would demand utmost obedience and submission, but as a baby, totally non-threatening, and yet, with meekness and majesty. You are about to celebrate His birth, for His Name is JESUS.

### **Prayer**

*Father, how can we express our thanks and gratitude to You for sending Your Son, Jesus, into the world to be our Saviour. Thank You that He came as 'one of us' and yet demonstrated to all Your love, Your grace, forgiveness, and gave us a glimpse of Your majestic glory. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Matthew 1:18-23
- John 1:1-18
- Hebrews 1:1-9

### **Questions**

1. Why did God choose to come to earth as a baby?
2. How did Jesus reveal His true Divinity whilst on earth?
3. How is Jesus reigning over David's kingdom today?

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### **Lesson 7: Isaiah and the shoot from the stump of Jesse**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 11:1-16**

David is always acknowledged as Israel's greatest king. David was Jesse's youngest son. He was the one out in the fields when Samuel arrived to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the next king of Israel. David was the boy who slew the giant, Goliath.

David was the one who, although anointed by Samuel as the next king of Israel, nevertheless, had to run away as a fugitive from the king's court for the rest of Saul's life because Saul saw David as a threat and enemy.

David was the one who led the armies of Israel in many famous victories. David was the one who committed adultery with Bathsheba and subsequently conspired for her husband, Uriah, to be murdered.

David was the one who married many wives. He had many children who were a constant challenge to him. It was David's son, Absalom, who tried to prise the kingdom from him, whom David wept so bitterly, proving how much he loved his son.

It was David, Jesse's son, who longed to construct a temple to God and it was David whom God regarded as a man after His own heart.

The shadow of David's life and reign dominated Israel's history and still does even today. There has never been anyone who has come close to the stature and character of king David. In true deference, David's father, Jesse, is equally honoured and held in the highest respect.

Consequently, when God wanted to get the attention of the people of Israel, He used their hero, David, and his father's reputation as the draw-card. God announced that from out of the greatest kingly heritage another 'king' would come. As the English say, they would be a 'chip off the old block'. Out of the revered heritage would emerge a new king of similar character. Someone the people of Israel could trust and follow.

Furthermore, just as David had been filled with the Spirit of God, so would the new descendant. The Branch would be full of the Spirit of God and display wisdom, counsel, knowledge and power. That would naturally flow from His fear of the Lord. He would make sound judgments, rather than base His decisions on the obvious. He would be especially caring to the poor and all his rules would be righteous.

Yes, there would be a similarity to Solomon, but a greater king than Solomon and a greater king than David would come from the family line of Jesse.

Who could that person be? When would that person be revealed? Isaiah's prophecy was silent on both. However, both Matthew and Dr Luke traced Jesus' genealogy back through to king David, Jesse and beyond. Yes, Jesus was, through human descent, of Jesse's genealogical line. However, Jesus was more than a man; He was the Promised Branch. He was the righteous King, the longed-for Messiah, Redeemer of Israel.

Jesus was Israel's next and final King. He would restore truth, integrity and righteousness to the Kingdom. Yet we know that when Jesus came, He was not born in a palace. He was not revealed as the son of an Israeli king. On the contrary, he was the offspring of a humble virgin. He lived far



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from the opulence of government or the trappings of traditional religion. Yet, He was a King. Even in death the inscription written above Him was *"Jesus, the King of the Jews"*.

Yes, the Branch bore fruit, for although Jesus was never officially made or acknowledged as their King, down through the centuries, millions of people have and still recognise Jesus Christ as King of all kings and Lord of all lords. They believe that this shoot from the stump of Jesse will, one day, return and establish His eternal Kingdom on earth.

The promise has been made; we just await its fulfilment.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

David was Jesse's son and every Jew recognises David as the greatest king Israel ever had. He was a mighty warrior, a wonderful shepherd of both his father's sheep and the people of Israel, and was devoted to God. However, Jesus Christ is even greater. Although Jesus was not made a king on earth, His eternal Kingdom is so much greater than that of David's. Jesus is the ultimate King of the Universe and, from an earthly perspective, a descendant of David, and thus a shoot from the stump of Jesse.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me grasp the fact that the Baby of Bethlehem, the descendant of king David, Jesse's son, is none other than Your Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah. Jesus was not only man; He is God – Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The One before whom every knee shall bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Matthew 1:1-17
- Psalm 2
- Revelation 3:7-13

### **Questions**

1. Why did God honour Jesse?
2. In what way is Jesus a shoot from the stump of Jesse?
3. How did Jesus' life on earth fulfil the description given of the Branch in verses 2 - 5?

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### **Lesson 8: Isaiah reveals who Satan is**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 14:4-20**

It's always interesting to notice how in Scripture the revelation of Jesus is closely followed by the exposure of Satan, the antichrist.

Isaiah had just finished expressing his song of praise for the salvation from the Branch of Jesse, Jesus (Chapter 12), when he was given a prophecy against Babylon. Babylon, the enemy that would destroy Jerusalem and take the people into exile, away from the Temple, the presence of God.

Isaiah recognised that God would be compassionate and merciful towards Israel, and one day they would return to their homeland. At that time, not only would they return but they would also sense freedom. Freedom from the past and freedom from their oppressors, the enemy Babylon. Additionally, Babylon would reap the harvest due to her for all she had done to Israel.

Isaiah's prophecy seems to enter a new realm with verse 12. He exclaims that the morning star, the son of the dawn, has been thrown out of Heaven. Babylon was not in Heaven; Satan was. Satan was the morning star, he was the worship-leader and yet he was not only thrown out of Heaven but also cast down to earth with a curse on him that would not be fulfilled until he was destroyed forever.

Isaiah saw the progression. He also saw the reason. Satan may well have looked the part. He may well have had the highest honour in Heaven for any created being. However, he forgot that he had been created; he forgot that the position he had in Heaven had been graciously bestowed upon him by God. He enjoyed the privileges so much he began to think they were his, by right not grace.

Satan began to believe that everything that happened to him was because of who he was; he overlooked the Giver, God. No, Satan thought he was as good as God, if not better. Satan considered himself God's equal. Satan wanted the praise for himself and so desired to have all the praises diverted to him. He wanted his 'choir' to praise him instead of God. He wanted all the attention. He promoted himself above God.

It is a trap we can all so easily fall into. Selfishness and pride go hand in hand. If we are honest, we all suffer from self-centredness. We all suffer from selfishness and we all have to control pride or we will become a victim of it. Why else do we ask people what they do for work? Isn't it so we can put them 'in a box' that we expect to be a little smaller or lower than ours? Or we play the tall poppy syndrome and do all we can to make sure we come up looking better than they do. Its real name is pride and the results are often devastating as we undermine the prospect of an on-going relationship.

All these desires are initiated through our inherited selfish nature. We were not taught but were born with it. Yes, to a greater or lesser extent it was also modelled for us but, in the end, the choice was ours.

Ever since the Fall (Genesis 3), we have inherited our selfish nature. They come through Satan, the angel expelled from Heaven. We can only change through a change of heart – a heart transplant. When we ask Jesus Christ to forgive us for our selfishness and pride, to come into our lives by the power of His Holy Spirit, then we experience the change. The Spirit of God works with our spirit to make us new.

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The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the power to overcome our pride and selfishness so we are able to become others-centred, like God.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Beware of pride; it was the original sin. Satan had all the benefits one could ever imagine, yet he sought to be like God. He was not satisfied with who he was or the role God gave him to play. No, he coveted being God Himself. Whilst God had given him such beauty and prominence, Satan attributed it all to himself. However, there is only one Triune God and He will never give His glory to another. Satan's fate is both determined and terrifying.

### **Prayer**

*Father, I thank You for revealing in Your Word that there is a devil, an antichrist, and he is both personal and created. I am so glad he was conquered by the Cross of Christ and His resurrection. Thank you that Satan's kingdom is doomed to perpetual defeat. Please help me remember that there are more on my side than against me, and help me live in victory today. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Ezekiel 28:11-19
- Luke 4:1-14
- Revelation 20:7-10

### **Questions**

1. What are the characteristics of pride?
2. How do you deal with pride in your life?
3. How did Jesus show us how to counter pride?

## ***The Cloud of Witnesses***

### **Lesson 9: Isaiah and the joy of the redeemed**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 35:1-19**

Isaiah had a difficult message to give to the kings, rulers, priests and people of Israel. He spent much of his time trying to get everyone to return to the Lord in faith and to follow His commands for righteous living. Nevertheless, the people, from the kings and priests to the peasants and slaves, chose rather to continue to worship the Baals and foreign gods. Some would offer sacrifices to both God and the idols in an attempt to keep their options open. They hoped it would appease God, since they sacrificed to Him as well.

However, God is not mocked and told the people that He alone was to be worshipped as He alone was their shepherd, guide and protector. Despite God's constant faithfulness and compassion, the people chose to go their own way and preferred to make alliances with the surrounding nations. Isaiah prophesied the downfall of those nations and declared that although the enemy might be powerful, threatening and eventually come to attack, yet God would save them.

Isaiah was looking ahead to the redemption of Israel when he burst into spontaneous praise. First, he noticed that creation would respond to the glory of the Lord. The desert and parched land would be glad and even the wilderness would rejoice and burst into bloom. Furthermore, they would shout for joy. Can that happen? Can inanimate creation respond in such a way? Isaiah prophesied it would.

Then Isaiah sent out his message of hope. To those fearful and in despair, he encouraged them to have faith to believe that God would come with almighty power and not only deal to their enemies but also save them.

Isaiah saw miracles happening everywhere. Blind people receiving their sight, deaf people being able to hear, those who were lame leaping as a deer and those voiceless, shouting for joy.

Water would pour out all over the parched land. Where barrenness and burning sand had been, a fresh spring of cool water would appear and foliage would replace the animals of prey. There would be a new pathway. A highway of peace and holiness. This new Way would be very special, for there would be no place for enemies, the wicked or ferocious wild animals. Only the redeemed would be able to walk on that road. Those people God had specifically helped and saved. Those who had turned to Him for their salvation. Those people would return to Zion, the City of God, to the very presence of God.

Isaiah added that they would return, not in shame but rather with exuberant singing. Yes, everlasting joy would be like a crown on their heads, and they would be completely overwhelmed by gladness and joy to such an extent that they would never know or experience any more sadness or sorrow.

The sheer joy that flows from a grateful heart once released from war, fear, death, cancer, or a debilitating illness is difficult to describe. Only those who have gone through those deep valleys can understand. The deeper the valley, the greater the fear, the greater the degree of release or relief expressed in unsuppressed thanks, praise and joy. Some people are able to keep that joy with them for years.

For the Christian, the degree of our praise and thanksgiving is usually related to the depth of our gratitude to Jesus for what He has done for us. He is the One who redeemed us. We were all

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heading towards receiving the full consequences of our sin, selfishness and pride – the unquenchable wrath of God. We would have become less than dust for eternity.

Yet, because of His great love and mercy, Jesus came to earth (as a Baby, which is why we celebrate Christmas), lived a perfect life and yet was crucified as a criminal. Not for what He had done but for what I (we) had done. He paid the price to ransom us from the wrath of God. So we are set free, released to have a relationship with God, not as our Judge but as our loving Heavenly Father. Jesus, the innocent, died in place of the guilty. There was nothing I could do, however, Jesus stood in my place and bought me complete salvation. I am grateful – I feel like singing.

Yes, the ransomed of the Lord (Jesus) will return to Father. Gladness and joy will overwhelm us and sadness and sorrow will pass away. A new Heaven awaits us.

May we never lose the wonder, majesty and indescribable grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus who ransomed us and will return to take us to Heaven forever.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Never forget, everyone goes through times that are tough. The important thing is to keep your faith and your eyes fixed on Jesus. He has won the victory and, always remember, the best is yet to come. And you, yes even you, will be able to rejoice with the joy of the redeemed.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much for life. Thank You for the easy times. And thank You for the tough times since they are the ones that teach me to trust You more and cause me to overflow in thankfulness and praise when I eventually emerge on the other side. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Exodus 15:1-20
- Psalm 57
- Revelation 5:9-14

### **Questions**

1. Why do we always expect life to be easy?
2. Why do we learn greater lessons when we face tough times?
3. How can we train ourselves to celebrate and rejoice whenever we realise that we have been redeemed from God's wrath?



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### **Lesson 10: Isaiah and the mocking of Sennacherib**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 36:1-22**

It was terrifying. The Assyrians had attacked and beaten into submission all their enemies before them. They had a huge army and had surrounded Jerusalem.

Isaiah almost gives us a GPS reading, doesn't he? *"When the commander stopped at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field..."*

Just imagine being Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary or Joash the recorder. You've heard the reports that Sennacherib was on his way. The Assyrian king's armies had not been halted by any force standing in its way. All Israel's alliance partners were now defeated, deflated or helpless.

How would you feel? Your enemy, the field commander of the all-powerful and vast conquering army was standing at 'the gate'? He was there not for a discussion but for surrender. It was not surprising that the field commander was feeling very secure and proud. After all, he was at the head of the all-conquering troops and his role now was to finalise Sennacherib's victory, and enforce his control over all Israel.

The field commander began his speech with derision. First, he denounced Israel's allies, the Egyptians, pointing out how they were totally useless, indeed more a liability rather than any help. Then he turned on Hezekiah's faith in God, emphasising that looking to God for support was a bit presumptuous, seeing how Hezekiah had actually destroyed some of the altars of the Lord.

He then ridiculed Israel, taunting them that even if he gave Hezekiah 2000 horses he would not be able to find sufficient men to ride them. He also re-affirmed that waiting for Egyptian reinforcements was futile. He challenged the leaders to consider that, maybe, it had not been without their God's approval that he had so far been so successful.

Eliakim, Shebna and Joash were particularly embarrassed since the field commander spoke in Hebrew, so all the people could understand, rather than Aramaic, which only the leaders would comprehend. They, therefore, asked the field commander to switch languages but he responded spitefully that the message he brought was for all, not just their master. He then provoked them even more by shouting louder.

The field commander broke out into a three-pronged verbal attack on Hezekiah and his faith in God.

- *Do not let Hezekiah deceive you...* He can't save you and don't trust in his hope that God will deliver you out of my hands.
- *Do not listen to Hezekiah...* Instead, listen to me. Surrender to me and we will look after you. You can enjoy your possessions here and then prosper in the land I will take you to.
- *Do not let Hezekiah mislead you...* when he says the Lord will deliver us. Be sensible and realistic. Have any of the gods of the other lands we have conquered been able to withstand us? No, every other nation has fallen. So what gives you the impression, arrogance or courage to believe that the Lord can save Jerusalem?

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The people remained silent as commanded by Hezekiah and the three leaders returned in disgrace and humility to advise the king what the field commander had said.

It's worth reading the next chapter – it's also very exciting. The king immediately sent for Isaiah. Isaiah had a reply from the Lord, the Almighty God. *"Don't be afraid of this blasphemy... he will depart and be killed by the sword at home."*

Hezekiah poured out his heart in prayer and again Isaiah received a word from Jehovah – *"The Virgin Daughter of Zion despises and mocks you. The Daughter of Jerusalem tosses her head as you flee. Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted up your eyes in pride? Against the Holy One of Israel! By your messengers you have heaped insults on the Lord."*

I would love to have been there, wouldn't you? Wow, a simple message from the Lord of lords. No-one could argue with it – it promised doom and destruction for Israel's enemy. And so it was. The army withdrew and the King was murdered.

The Bible reports that, sadly, this high moment in Israel's history was short-lived and their rebellion against God was finally terminated by their exile into Babylon. God is not mocked by his enemies nor his people, without consequences befalling them. We need to constantly remember that and not presume upon the grace of God.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

I shall never forget that period in Israel's history. We were as good as dead. Then the field commander made that blasphemous speech. God heard it and met the challenge. The rest is history. Never ever doubt the awesome power of God and the fact that He has won the final victory.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much for showing us, time and time again through Scripture, that You love Israel, that they are Your special people and You will protect them from all enemies. Thank You that Yours is the Power, the Kingdom and the Glory forever and ever. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Isaiah 37: 1 – 38; Psalm 2; Acts 12: 1 – 23

### **Questions**

1. What are the big issues you are facing today?
2. How does this story affect your attitude towards your 'problems'?
3. Does God always rescue us from our struggles? Why?

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### **Lesson 11: Isaiah brings comfort to the people**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 40:1-31**

If there was ever a Scripture for Israel today it must surely be this. As we see the state of the nations that surround Israel and their combined intention to drive Israel into the sea, this passage must come as a ray of hope for Israel's future. Whilst we are saddened by the almost universal rejection of the Jews today, we need to remember that it is not anything particularly new.

Even in our contemporary lifetime, many of us would remember the war of 1973 and the Six Day War of 1967. We would also remember that the State of Israel was re-birthed as recently as 1948. Prior to that, of course, was the Holocaust during the Second World War from 1939 to 1945. History also tells us that the Jews have been hounded out of many other nations in the last two millennia.

Isaiah, of course, lived many centuries before Christ and yet he also knew, first hand, what it was like to be a Jew, hated and mistreated by their enemies. The exciting thing is that it was into that very milieu that Isaiah's prophecy was delivered.

We need to be mindful from whom the message came. It was not from Isaiah; it was from God through Isaiah. So when Isaiah cried out, "*Comfort, comfort my people*", it was not a case of Isaiah trying to be motivational or encouraging. It was far more significant and life changing. This message came from the Throne room, from God Himself. It spoke of peace, it spoke of forgiveness and it spoke of promise.

It also spoke of God, not only returning to His people and to the Holy Land, but in such a way that the entire world would know, watch and wonder. This was not something that would happen in secret. This was a sign to the world that not only was God still on the Throne in Heaven, as King of all kings and God Almighty, but also that the Jews were His special and unique people. Something we must never forget.

God reminds us, through Isaiah, that we are just like the grass, here today and gone tomorrow. We are created beings. God is awesome in splendour, omnipotent in power and the only Creator. We so often forget who God is and treat Him as if He is little more than a genie of the lamp or a religious Father Christmas. The reality is that when God speaks the earth shakes. He is answerable to no one. He is still in control of the earth and the universe.

Oh yes, we may think and act as if God is dead, impotent or blind, but He is eternal and we are mortal, and He has decreed that each one of us will one day meet our Maker, either face Him as the Righteous God of Justice or as our Heavenly Father, through faith in Jesus Christ, our only Saviour.

Time is marching inexorably towards the final Judgement Day. Yes, our lives are finite and we can expect to die after a short lifespan. However, we need to realise that the whole of creation – our world and cosmos – is also slowly reaching its climax and destination.

God has set a finite moment, when time and space as we know them, will have reached their own use-by date. That destiny was set in eternity past, and everything is designed to culminate at that moment in time.

Consequently, Isaiah's message is as relevant today as when he first gave it. We need to be "a

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*voice calling... prepare the way for the Lord*" for our generation since Jesus is coming back and we need to be ready for that momentous event. Our lives are only one very small portion of history. For all of history is His Story. He will have the final say, and His verdict will be righteous, all encompassing and eternal. *"And the glory of the Lord will be revealed."*

It's worth preparing for, whether or not we are still on earth to see it, isn't it?

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

There is no-one who can compare with our God. When He speaks we must listen. When He speaks reassurance, there is nothing in this world that can make us frightened or afraid. His Word is the rock on which we stand and face the enemy, knowing that victory is certain.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me remember that with You on my side there is nothing I need fear. Help me to realise that no matter the circumstances I face, Your plans will be fulfilled and Your promises will never fail. Thank You so much. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Psalm 23
- Proverbs 8:22-31
- Mark 1:1-8
- Romans 8:37-39

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think people linked John the Baptist with this passage?
2. How does Isaiah describe the difference between God and idols?
3. What attributes of God does Isaiah highlight in this passage?

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### **Lesson 12: Isaiah describes God's servant**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 42:1-13**

The Bible is such an exciting and amazing book! It is particularly incredible when compared to the wisdom of this world. Our worldview is so contrary to God's worldview; yet, it is so hard not to get sucked into this world's thinking mould.

Our society wants to applaud and honour those who are money makers, powerful, demanding, arrogant, proud, self-reliant, independent and forceful. God honours servants, givers, the humble and the meek. God looks for righteousness and justice, rather than popularity and acceptance by the masses.

We tend to adopt the approach that the majority must be right, that society dictates the moral code and we live for today, rather than focusing on rectitude, integrity and eternity.

God's servant is described as someone who will quietly get on with the job, rather than boast loudly about what they hope to do. They will seek to encourage the disheartened, motivate the despairing and bring hope to the faltering and hopeless.

They will know their mission and destiny, and will have the necessary passion, determination and fortitude to carry it to completion. They will recognise righteousness and justice, and strive to see these values established for the benefit of all.

Furthermore, they will enable people to see and understand God's moral code and His 'world' view. They will be so counter culture that they will draw people to them, so they, in turn, can point the people to God.

They will be able to empathise and sympathise with those who are downcast and downtrodden. They will also spend time helping others out of their depression, helplessness and fear. They will aid people out of their addictions and enable those held captive by evil to be released into the freedom they so long to enjoy.

Yes, of course, we realise that Isaiah was prophesying a Messiah. He was looking by faith, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to Jesus. No one else has been the perfect servant. No one else has performed the miracles Jesus did. No one else has lived a morally faultless life. No one else has transformed the lives, for the better, of millions of people over the centuries. No one else has stood for righteousness, justice and mercy as Jesus did.

However, the Holy Spirit that dwelt in Jesus is the same Holy Spirit who dwells in every Christian. The Holy Spirit still wants to perform the very same works that Jesus did, today. He constantly looks for Christians, those disciples of Jesus, who will be true servants of the Living God. People who are concerned about the things that God is concerned about. Those whose hearts break over the things that break God's heart. People who want to help bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth.

Yes, God, through His Holy Spirit, is still looking today for servants. Servants who resemble the one Isaiah described. People who are humble. People who are available to God and for God. People who will listen to God's heartbeat. People who will surrender their agenda to God's agenda, and people who are determined to see God's Kingdom established on earth, regardless of the cost to themselves.



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Can it be done? Too right. It just needs each of us to get serious about God and His Kingdom. To be prepared to be humble, by humbling ourselves rather than waiting for other people to make us humble.

We need to recognise what it means to be meek. No, not weak but *meek*. Meek means being like Jesus who, though He was God, didn't go around acting like a judgmental, totalitarian, and indiscriminate tyrannical despot. He knew He was someone who was under the Ultimate Authority, and He humbled Himself and became a human being. Even then He stooped lower by becoming a servant of all. That is meekness. Strength and total authority under complete control.

Jesus was not weak, even though He allowed Himself to be beaten and hung on a Cross. He did that for you and me, knowing that He would win the final battle.

Meekness enables us to carry on, knowing the battle is already won. What we need to do is be willing to be a servant and be used to help facilitate and establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Most people do not understand God's pattern of true servant-hood. Like Samuel, we look for the rich, famous, physically attractive and powerful. God looks for meekness, for those who will be obedient and advance the Kingdom of God, rather than seeking to promote themselves or their own agenda.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You for giving us the amazing model of the life and character of Your Son Jesus Christ. Please help me to become more and more like Him, for Your glory. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Philippians 2:5-11
- Hebrews 2:5-11
- Revelation 5:1-14

### **Questions**

1. How would you describe the difference between the world's picture of success and influence with that of Jesus Christ?
2. What is there in Isaiah's picture of a servant that pointed towards the life Jesus Christ lived whilst He was on earth?
3. What has God revealed to you from this passage?

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### **Lesson 13: Isaiah prophesies an unlikely Saviour for Israel**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 45:1-15**

The fact that we have this Scripture at all has got to be significant evidence that God knows the future and that Isaiah made this revelation as a direct result of prompting from the Holy Spirit.

No human could have foreseen what Isaiah prophesied, for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, not only had Cyrus not been born, he wasn't even a twinkle in his father's eye. Cyrus wasn't born until over 100 years later.

Secondly, Cyrus was specifically named. In his prophecy, Isaiah didn't give a general reference to a leader of a foreign nation; he went so far as to reveal his unique name.

Thirdly, Isaiah would have naturally looked within Israel or a friendly nation for a saviour; a saviour from within, not from without – one of Israel's enemies.

Fourthly, if Isaiah wanted to name a leader of one of Israel's current enemies, he would not have chosen Cyrus. The kingdom most likely to attack Israel at the time of Isaiah's prophecy was Assyria; Cyrus was the leader from Persia.

Fifthly, we find that Cyrus was not even a God-fearer, let alone a God-worshipper. As you can see, he was a very unlikely saviour for Israel.

Cyrus was neither a Jew nor a Hebrew. He was a powerful king with an ambition for world domination, not for the rescue or restoration of the Jewish nation. However, God chose Cyrus to carry out His plan for Israel's return from exile and the restoration, not only of the nation but of the Temple and worship of God.

No wonder Jesus said that we should pray for our enemies – because God can use them to fulfil His plans for this world.

God began the prophecy calling Cyrus, *'His anointed'*. How could that happen? How could God 'anoint' one of the enemies of His people? Did you notice that God said He would make Cyrus victorious over all his enemies, to such an extent that virtually every nation would surrender to his army and inevitably concede defeat? However, God also seemed to qualify that this power would eventually be used for blessing His people, Israel.

I love the way God repeats that Cyrus would accomplish all that He planned, even though Cyrus was not a worshipper or God-fearer. Nevertheless, God would use Cyrus so successfully that even Cyrus would have to acknowledge that it was God who gave him victory wherever he went. Not only that, but God would also make him an unstoppable conqueror for the sake of the Jews, God's special and treasured people.

Additionally, God declared how Cyrus' conquests would inexorably reveal God's ultimate power, authority and uniqueness, that He alone is the One True God of the entire world, from the rising of the sun to its setting, from east to west.

God also highlights that He is the Maker of Heaven and earth and, specifically, of humanity. We are like clay in a potter's hands. Just as the clay or the clay-pot the potter makes is incapable of

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questioning its maker, so as human beings, we have no right or authority to question God's will, plan or actions.

That is a timely message for us all, isn't it? We live in a world more focused upon so-called rights than responsibilities, and are often tempted to believe we have the right to question what God does. In fact, God has not entrusted or delegated that authority, right or privilege to us.

God is our Maker, our Creator, and the One in whose hand is our very breath of life. We are created by God to worship, follow and obey Him. Ironically, that is where true freedom, true life and blessing are found, because our Creator knows what is best for us and has our best interests at heart.

God loves His created beings. He showed it by stretching out His arms on the Cross. He died to pay the price of our rebellion and selfishness, to enable us to know what it is to have an intimate and vibrant relationship with God as our Heavenly Father.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Try not to put people in a box, nor God for that matter. If God can use a donkey to talk to Balaam, He can use any person to accomplish His plans, even people who look like our enemies. Don't concentrate on your enemies; keep your eyes focused on God.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me to remember that You are the almighty, omnipotent God. You are also a gracious and merciful God. Please help me also remember that You are merciful to all people, not just the ones that I like. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Psalm 2
- 2 Chronicles 36:15-23
- Acts 9:1-19

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think God chose Cyrus?
2. In what ways do you think Cyrus was able to exercise his freewill over what he accomplished for God, albeit he seems to have been predestined to do it?
3. How do you view people? Do you make quick character judgements? Have any of those judgements ever been wrong? How should we view people?

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### **Lesson 14: Isaiah and the promise of restoration for Israel**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 49:8-21**

Why is it that so often we undervalue the most precious things in life? We work all the hours we can to achieve status, power, control, a collection of 'toys' or a sense of satisfaction, and yet fail in our human relationships. Parents 'farm out' their children to babysitters, nannies or early childhood educators. Later, work takes priority over family time so much so that the father / son or father / daughter relationship becomes strained, mechanical, spasmodic or even non-existent. Working mothers experience similar challenges. Yet, at the end of one's life, very few people, if any, exclaim – *If only I had spent more time at work!* No! The death-bed cry is usually, *"If only I had spent more time with my spouse and my children."*

Whilst family relationships are very precious and should be prioritised, nurtured and protected, there is another relationship that is of an even higher echelon. We need to recognise and develop a relationship with our Creator. We are not created to be self-focused, and to work to provide a castle for the family and a magnificent inheritance for our children. We are created to enjoy an intimate relationship with God on earth that continues to mature in Heaven.

God is others-centred but we tend to be self-centred. The Israelites were no different. They became so self-focused they ignored God. Although they had been selected from all the peoples on earth to be God's special people, delivered from slavery in Egypt and united under one of the greatest kings of earth, King David, who was himself a God-worshipper, yet they individually and collectively turned their backs on God and went their own way.

Like Esau, they despised their birthright, turned away from God and followed the ways and idolatry of the surrounding nations. What was worse was that they thought, firstly, God wouldn't know or care and, secondly, they could compromise by sacrificing to God as well as idols, thus keeping their options open. However, God knew, cared and found the compromise abhorrent.

God departed the Temple and forced the people into exile. There was no hope and their banishment was a double tragedy. Their enemies triumphed over them, which was humiliating enough. However, the greatest heartbreak for them was that they were separated from the Temple, the presence of God – it was not only devastating, it was like being sentenced to Hell.

Out of this extreme darkness shone a shaft of light, the bright beam of hope. God promised a Saviour. Not a prophet, not a human deliverer, but a Divine Saviour. God would do it all Himself. The Heavens shouted and the earth rejoiced. The God of mercy revealed Himself once more. Yes, God is a God of righteousness and justice. However, He is also a God of love and mercy. He reminded the Israelites that just as a mother cannot forget the child she bore, neither would God forget His chosen people, even though they were disobedient and had rejected Him. Not only was His heart of love constant and unwavering towards His people but He had also engraved them on His hands as a perpetual and eternal reminder.

Yes, God would return them to their land and cause them to be so prosperous that they would need to extend out in all points of the compass. Then they would realise that God had intervened on their behalf and blessed them beyond description or understanding. Yes, all their enemies and the entire human race would acknowledge that God had done it for the sake of His great and awesome Name. He would be acknowledged as their Saviour, Redeemer and the Awesome God of Jacob.

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He is the same God today. That is why Israel remains today the centre of the globe and the centre of history-making events. The Awesome God of Jacob still reigns – never forget that.

More importantly, never forget He longs to be your God too. Indeed, He wants you to be a part of His family, adopted into the same family as Jacob, with Abraham as your earthly father. Jesus came to make that possible. He died for our self-centredness, rebellion, pride and independence. Today God is saying to you, *“Come home. I long to bless you and make you a blessing. Don’t turn away. Open your heart and receive forgiveness, healing, freedom and hope. I still love you and I will never forget you, because I created you for friendship for eternity.”*

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Praise the Lord for His amazing mercy and grace. Yes, my people rebelled against God, following the nations and worshipping their gods that are no gods at all. So God sent them into exile. However, God showed them mercy and a remnant returned, because God could not turn His back on His people forever. He will do the same for you.

### **Prayer**

*Father, let us never forget that the people of Israel are still Your people. We are no better than the Israelites; we fail you, rebel against you and are faithless. Thank you that just as You are merciful and gracious to us, You will be merciful and gracious to Your people Israel. Please bless them and draw them closer to You. For Your Name’s sake. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Psalm 126
- Jeremiah 29:4-14
- Romans 11:11-32

### **Questions**

1. Why is it so important for us that God still regards Israel as His special people?
2. What does “*God is a merciful God*” mean to you?
3. What does God’s grace look like?



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### **Lesson 15: Isaiah reveals the suffering Servant**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12**

This reading presents us with a paradox. There are two intertwined themes: one of suffering and death, the other of victory and triumph – a single death bringing release, freedom and forgiveness for many.

It is hardly surprising that Jesus' contemporaries were confused and found His life both a challenge and an enigma.

The religious leaders wanted to protect themselves from heresy, compromise and anything that challenged their traditions and heritage. They also felt they had to preserve their own status and their view of who God is. As God's earthly representatives, they considered it their role to defend their God from anything they perceived as a threat.

As part of the ruling class, they looked down on anyone who was not of the same social spectrum. They must have really struggled with Isaiah's prophecy. It had elements pointing back to the sacrifices of Leviticus. Moreover, it seemed to suggest a transfer of guilt and suffering from sheep, goat or other sacrifices to that of a human being. Not only that, it was someone called God's servant. Just as today, servants were not seen as people to emulate, honour or respect, so where could Isaiah's thoughts have come from?

David was considered the greatest king of all; the one who would redeem Israel from her enemies. Their Messiah must surely be a king, preferably from the line of Judah. Surely, someone from among the rich and famous, the aristocracy. How could the description of their Messiah equate with that of a servant?

Isaiah's description began with God's representative being *raised, lifted up and highly exalted*. That was fine; no problem with that. His description ended with him being given *a portion among the great* and *dividing the spoils with the strong*. Nothing wrong with that either. The problem was that those descriptions were just the thin bookends, either side of the main prophecy.

The awesome focus was on, not only a servant who might appear to be totally insignificant, but one who would suffer extreme torture and a horrific death. Isaiah's description was so graphic that we are left with a picture of a man's body so badly beaten that it no longer resembled a human being. What had he done wrong?

Nothing. He had done nothing wrong. However, the people hated him so much that they were determined to extinguish his life. Yes, they watched him, listened to him, but wrote him off as an imposter. After all, he wasn't a king; he didn't come from the 'right' family and there were a whole lot of rumours about his birth and childhood. Added to which the Scriptures seemed to be very silent on a place called Nazareth. Moreover, Capernaum and Galilee were hardly the most venerated places in Israel.

Worst of all, Jesus was hung on a cross, which was expressly described as a punishment worthy of the curse of God. So how could this man be the Messiah? Rather, it seemed to confirm that God Himself wanted him dead. God orchestrated his rejection, betrayal, suffering and death. Everything that happened with Jesus seemed to be God ordained – His life, His suffering and His death.

Yet, Isaiah's description was both genuine and viable. The lifting up Jesus received was both on

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the cross and when He was described as The King of the Jews. Yes, His suffering was so great that those who looked at Him whilst He was hanging on the cross were totally appalled at what they saw. He was God's suffering and totally obedient servant. He was our divine sacrifice.

As Isaiah pointed out, we have all turned away from God and gone our own way. We have said in effect, "*We will not have this man to reign over us.*" Through our ignorance and arrogance, we have turned our backs on God and caused Jesus to die. He died in our place as the supreme sacrifice. That is why He is our Messiah, our Saviour.

Jesus was also lifted up when He arose from the dead. His final lifting up will be when his enemies become the footstool for His feet and when those who love and serve Him are finally reunited with Him – to worship Him, in the glory of Heaven.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Righteous judgement requires righteous sacrifice. The spotless animals used in sacrifice all pointed forward. Just as humans are imperfect, so too animals. Animals could only have been a sign of something more significant. Jesus is the only One who is perfect, pure, holy and righteous, and thus able to be the total, unique and ultimate sacrifice. He died, sinless for the sinful – in our place – and made peace with God, so we can now know God as our Heavenly Father.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You for Your awesome plan of salvation. Thank You for sending Jesus as Your Messiah and suffering servant. Thank You for revealing Him as the spotless Lamb of God, who takes away all our sins. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Psalm 22:1-18
- Matthew 27:26-46
- Hebrews 10:3-25

### **Questions**

1. In what ways did Jesus suffer?
2. Why was it necessary for the Messiah to be a servant?
3. Which was the worst aspect of Jesus' suffering?

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### **Lesson 16: Isaiah prophesies a bright future for Zion**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 54:1-17**

I guess there is a sense in which this chapter could only come after the previous one.

In the previous chapter, we were given a description of a Messiah and Saviour. Someone who would die for the sins of the people. Someone so badly mutilated that the people could scarcely believe the body to be human. On top of all that came the frightening charge that all that transpired was caused by God, the Father. According to the people, He was the One who initiated all the suffering and agony. And God did it because He was determined to teach this Someone the penalty of blasphemy – for calling Himself God.

However, according to Isaiah, that Someone was not dying for His own sin, but for ours. Although we had tried to deflect our sense of guilt away from ourselves and onto Him, the truth of the matter was that the crucified Lord was innocent. Innocent of all wrong to humanity and innocent of any wrong or rebellion towards God. Yes, the Lamb took upon Himself the sins of the world. Your sin and mine. And yes, it was all part of God's eternal plan.

Jesus wasn't a victim. He wasn't a victim of the hatred of mankind. He wasn't the victim of the arrogance of the religious leaders and their murderous intentions. Jesus wasn't the victim of the volatile masses, the ruthless Romans or a weak and impotent Pilate. Nor was Jesus the victim of Judas' betrayal.

No, Jesus was not only the focus of the events, He was also an integral part and designer of the plan – the Divine Plan of Redemption. God's plan for redeeming the whole of humanity. There was only one plan: Plan A. There was no plan B. And Jesus fulfilled the plan perfectly and without demur.

Yes, chapter 53 had to come before chapter 54. Because the success and application of chapter 54 could only be possible and realised subsequent to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Chapter 54 demanded a Saviour. That Saviour was revealed in chapter 53.

Because their sins had been forgiven, the people could sing. Because God had already paid the price of their rebellion and faithlessness, the future glory was secure. God had Himself come down and rescued the people, so from then on their future was clean and bright.

Yes, God had promised separation, humiliation, devastation and exile. But now there was hope. Their past had been paid for and the future revealed before them, with all the potential of a new era. God not only challenged them to be positive and expect great things, He also challenged them to think outside the square.

*Enlarge the place of your tent. Spread out to the left and the right.* They were to forget their shame and reproach and begin to live. Live within the renewed relationship with their Creator God, who would be like a father and a husband. Someone who would love them unconditionally and sacrificially, always seeking their best interests. They could now live in peace; peace with God, peace with their neighbours and even peace with their enemies.

On top of all that, God would be their Shield and Protector. Even if the enemy came against them with weapons of war, their God, the God of technology, would ensure that *no weapon forged against them would succeed and any accusing tongue would be silenced.* God, their Maker, their

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Protector, their Saviour would also be their Champion and Defender.

The truly amazing fact is that God said He would do it, not just for Israel but for you and me as well – *This is the inheritance of the servants of the Lord and this is their vindication from me, declares the Lord.*

Aren't we a blessed people? God is so merciful and kind and loving. What a mighty and awesome God we serve.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

God is a Holy and righteous God. He has to deal with sin, rebellion and idolatry; however, He is also a God of infinite mercy and grace. Once Israel's sins were atoned for (by Jesus), God restored them to His land and they remained His people forever.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much for recording the history of Your people Israel for us and for showing through Your dealings with them that You are indeed an awesome God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and mercy. Please continue to be merciful and gracious to me, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Psalm 126
- Joel 3:16-21
- Jeremiah 51:5-23

### **Questions**

1. Why do you think some people see the God of the Old Testament as different from the God of the New Testament as revealed in Jesus?
2. How would you describe the character of God as revealed in the Old Testament?
3. How would you describe the character of Jesus?

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### **Lesson 17: Isaiah and the invitation to the thirsty**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 55:1-13**

We are told that everyone throughout the world, regardless of ethnicity, gender, social status, with or without any religious affiliation, has three basic needs that we are constantly trying to satisfy.

The first is security. Security in that I need to be unconditionally loved. In other words, we all desperately need to know that someone loves us, regardless of what we think, say or do. Most of us look for security in human relationships, particularly with a partner or spouse. Unfortunately, we soon realise that they are seeking exactly the same from us and, being human, we fail to satisfy the other person's needs. In the process, conflict or unrealised expectations appear and cause a strain or break in the relationship.

The second is self-worth. We all need to know that we have inherent value. Most often expressed in the desire to have our views and values respected. When people treat us in a way that seems inappropriate to us or cause us to feel undervalued, we become resentful and often withdraw into ourselves as a means of self-preservation. We can't handle rejection and yet go out of our way to gain acceptance, often to such a degree that others find our advances too demanding and thus withdraw from us.

The third is significance. We want to feel that our life is worth something. So we accumulate wealth, certificates and accolades of academic achievement, sports successes and trophies, amass bigger, better or brighter toys, a more significant job or the largest house on the street with the most magnificent views. However, we soon realise that the dream of owning those things shines a lot brighter than the actual acquisition, with a new dream extinguishing any temporary happiness gained by the previous acquisition.

Yes, within every beating heart is an insatiable desire for security, self-worth and significance – a thirst for satisfaction, joy, peace and fulfilment. These desires are nothing new. They are totally legitimate because it was the Creator of the world who placed these needs within us. However, God did not expect us to look for them to be satisfied within the created world, however beautiful and powerful it is. Nor did He design us to find total satisfaction in the work of our hands.

God created us to have a relationship with Him. Until we begin to understand that, we will never satisfy the thirst and hunger within us. However, as we read in our passage from Isaiah, the door is always open and the entrance is free to all.

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend your money on what is not bread and your labour on what does not satisfy?

If there was ever a message for today, it has got to be this. In a world that is being challenged everyday, by the incredible acts of nature: earthquakes, tsunamis, famines, starvation, diseases, pandemics, snow storms, tornadoes, cyclones, floods and fires; by the wilful acts of humans: wars, terrorism, rebellion, ethnic cleansing, tribal jealousies, rape, looting, robbery, home invasions and domestic violence; by the impotence of our own values and systems, the failure of communism, socialism and capitalism, added to which is our individual selfishness – is it any wonder that our hearts cry out for meaning, security and hope?

Where can we find our needs satisfied? In God alone. Yes, God allows us to live our lives the way



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we want to, but look where that has got us. The cry from Heaven's throne is the same today as it was in Isaiah's prophecy – *Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord and He will have mercy on Him, and to our God for He will freely pardon.*

God is not like us. He doesn't think like us. He is pure, righteous and holy and yet invites us to come back into relationship with Him as our Heavenly Father. Our Father who loves us with unconditional love – if we will let Him.

Yes, in that intimate relationship with God we find, joy, peace and fulfilment. It is then that we see the wonderful beauty of God's creation all around us.

Be encouraged, God is still on the throne of Heaven. He still rules Creation and maintains it in balance; He still holds the breath you breathe in His hand. He loves you and longs for you to love Him in return.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Take time out to stop and think what life is really all about. It's not all about work, achievements, wealth, power or happiness. It's all about a relationship with God as your Heavenly Father, a relationship that starts on earth and carries on into eternity. Have you worked that out in your life yet? If not, do so today – it's the most important thing you will ever do.

### **Prayer**

Father, please give me a thirst and hunger for You. Please help me understand what the really important and significant things are in life, both on this earth and for eternity. Amen.

### **Additional Readings**

- Jeremiah 2:1-13
- John 4:1-42
- Revelation 22:1-17

### **Questions**

1. What are the values you live by?
2. What is your ambition in life?
3. What does it mean to live with eternity as its focus and goal?

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### **Lesson 18: Isaiah describes God's idea of fasting**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 58:1-14**

As I re-read this passage today, I felt as if I was hearing Jesus raising His voice on the shores of Galilee. The heart of God has not changed. God is more interested in our lifestyle and values than in organised religion. The Sermon on the Mount, as we call it, was a revelation of God's heart. Jesus said, *You have heard it said... by the religious leaders... but I tell you.* Jesus expanded the law and yet at the same time enveloped it with grace and mercy.

Jesus changed the legalism of the leaders into a lifestyle for communal blessing. He challenged the leaders and people alike to look behind the words to the underlying values. To look beyond the presenting problem to the root causes. Jesus longed for the people to understand the grace and mercy of God, rather than concentrate on the consequences of disobedience.

Indeed, was not Samuel's challenge to King Saul the same? *Obedience is greater than sacrifice.* So often, it seems, we settle for going through the motions rather than stopping to think about what we are actually doing. To me, the cry of God's heart throughout the Bible is a cry for genuine heartfelt worship, rather than putting on a show or pretense.

As we compare the offering of Esau with the sacrifice of Abel, we get a glimpse of the difference between someone going through the motions to appease a God whom they consider unreasonable in that He demands respect, honour, worship and sacrifice from His people with someone who responds to blessing and grace, out of gratitude, by offering the best they could give with a willing and joyful heart.

God's cry, through Isaiah, is that His people would stop thinking that He is a God who demands that they go through the rites and rituals without considering the purpose behind them. That there is more to fasting than being able to tick a box to show that they have gone without food. Just as Paul says later that the circumcision God requires is not of the flesh but of the heart, so Isaiah's message is to point out that the fasting God is looking for is not just a case of going without food. It is about a lifestyle surrendered to God and lived each day according to the values and desires He has for us and for society in general.

Jesus said, *I am the way, the truth and the Life...* I am the one true and genuine reality. Live like me. Live not just with words but with actions, and let those actions flow from a heart that is in tune with God's heart. *Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

God then goes on to describe the outcome – *Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help and He will say; Here am I.* Please also read the rest of the chapter as it is a wonderful reflection of who our God is – it reveals the eternal heart of God.

Yes, the God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament and the same God Almighty of today; His character and promises are everlasting.

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### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

God is not into religion that is made up by humans. God is into righteousness, justice and mercy. They are the values God expects us to live by.

### **Prayer**

*Father, please help me remember that You are a holy and righteous God, not a God of rules and regulations. And help me live the way You would like us all to live. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Nehemiah 1:1-11
- Micah 6:8
- Matthew 6:16-18

### **Questions**

1. Why is the Church perceived by those outside as a place of negativity?
2. What is the difference between a religion and Biblical Christianity?
3. How often do you fast?

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### **Lesson 19: Isaiah prophesies a glorious future for Zion**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 60:1-22**

When I look at Israel, as revealed to us in the Bible, it is as if I am looking into a mirror. The people were disobedient, wayward, wilful and faithless. I am too. They were also compromising. They had allowed the values of the surrounding nations to infiltrate their culture and so were reaping the rewards of idolatry and injustice. They were lost and helpless.

God looked down from Heaven on His people and was filled with compassion. He knew that, of themselves, there was no hope. Their problems began when they turned their backs on God. The happiness they thought they would enjoy through being released from obeying God and His laws was very short-lived. They started to find that the other nations were a lot worse off than they had been. Wickedness was rife and they were caught up in the duplicity and fear.

Even so, God would not abandon His people. Yes, they had rejected Him. Yes, the people had got themselves into a rightful mess through their own rebelliousness. Yet, God saw them in utter ruin and decided to rescue them Himself.

God would take His own destitute people and make them a nation once more. He would take the dying embers and rekindle them into flame through the wind of His Spirit. Their light would shine, however, not because of who they were or what they had done, but as the light of the glory of the Lord that shone upon them.

Israel would once more become the envy of the nations. People would come from all over the world to see them. Foreigners would want to see the reason for Israel's glory. Not only would Israel's own people return to their country, but people from other nations would help repair the broken walls of the city. Foreign visitors would bring wealth, and expensive and exotic gifts.

Isaiah prophesied a time when the nation would prosper beyond their imagination; wars and intimidation would cease and all the people would dwell in peace. A time when their brilliance could only be attributed to the fact that God was once more dwelling amongst His people. *"The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine upon you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the Lord will be your everlasting light and your days of sorrow will end."*

It reminds us of the vision that the Apostle John saw, as recorded in Revelation 22. *"The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city... There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light."*

Isaiah's message is equally applicable for us. As I said before, Israel is a mirror of us. I am the same as them. I am just as rebellious as they were, and when I ignore God and go my own way, chasing the illusion of happiness as portrayed by the enemy, I end up helpless and hopeless.

God looks down upon us and sees our ruined condition and has compassion on us. Yes, He looked down and realised our helpless state and drew up a plan of Salvation. It required His Son to come to earth to pay the supreme sacrifice by dying on the Cross for us – that sacrifice we celebrate on Good Friday.

Because the sacrifice paid by Jesus was perfect and sinless, God accepted it on our behalf. God rescued us through the sacrifice of His Son. Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee of the final victory

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when sin, death and hell will be defeated and destroyed. From that moment on, God will dwell with His people and be their light in everlasting peace and joy.

No wonder we celebrate Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday – it brings the hope of a new tomorrow, everlasting light and everlasting life.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Out of utter despair God shines His radiant light. Out of the deep darkness of hopelessness God reveals His splendour. Whatever circumstances you are going through today, know this: there is a light at the end of the tunnel and its brilliance transcends the sun.

### **Prayer**

Father, thank You so much for showing the people of Israel, through Isaiah's prophecy, that You are both merciful and awesome. Please help me reflect some of Your glory into this sad and grey world. Amen.

### **Additional Readings**

- Psalm 149
- Ezekiel 47:1-12
- Revelation 22:1-6

### **Questions**

1. Why is Israel God's chosen?
2. Why did God forgive Israel and restore her fortunes?
3. How do you think God will deal with us when we fail Him?



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### **Lesson 20: Isaiah's anointing**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 61:1-11**

For me this is one of the most significant of all the Scriptures. God used it to cause a profound impact on my life.

It was, of course, a time of great suffering and despair for Israel. They had forsaken God for the idols of the surrounding nations and, as a consequence, were suffering defeat, famine and the threat of exile. The allies they had established in the past were now proving to be impotent. Israel stood alone against her foes, with no human agency to call upon. To call on God now was an anathema. Israel found herself in one of her lowest moments in time.

Into this milieu, Isaiah was given a prophetic word. A word that shone like a shaft of brilliant light piercing the darkest night. Isaiah's prophecy suggested that God had invaded man (Isaiah) with divine power – through the Holy Spirit.

There are other references in the Old Testament to people being filled, anointed or used by the Holy Spirit, but they are few and far between. Indeed, we get the distinct impression that they were specific people, anointed by the Spirit at a specific time for a specific purpose.

Bezalel was filled with the Holy Spirit for the artistic work of building the Tabernacle, Gideon was anointed with leadership in order to lead the Israelites against the Midianites, Samson was anointed with strength to defeat the Philistines. Here, Isaiah was anointed for preaching and to bring in the Kingdom of God.

*“To preach good news to the poor... To bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.”*

What a fantastic and yet awesome message that was. It would transform life as they knew it, and society in general. It would be a case of bringing Heaven to earth. It undoubtedly brought hope to the hopeless, and inspired confidence and courage in those who were despairing or feeling defeated.

It is quite evident from the rest of the chapter that Isaiah realised all this was not due to his righteousness, ability or cleverness, but came about as a result of God's extraordinary grace and power alone. In fact, Isaiah was overwhelmed with praise and worship that God would use him in such an incredible way.

Whilst the prophecy was wonderful for Isaiah and the people living at the time, it nevertheless was not realised for a long time. Life soon returned to normalcy and drudgery. That was until Jesus came to earth.

It is an amazing fact that after Jesus was baptised in water, filled with the Spirit and returned in the Spirit to Nazareth following His time of severe temptation by Satan, He called in at the synagogue. There He was given the scroll of Isaiah to read from. Luke records that Jesus turned to this passage and read it aloud for all to hear. On completing the reading He went and sat down. For some reason everyone in the synagogue could not get their eyes off Him. Realising their deep

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interest, Jesus responded by saying, *“Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* In other words, ‘you thought this just applied to Isaiah and is now history, but I’m telling you that today I am here to fulfil this prophecy.’ Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God through the fulfilment of that prophecy.

I shall never forget the time the Lord prompted me to speak on this reading. I thought how encouraging it would be for us to contemplate the time when Jesus turned up at church and revealed His Awesome Deity. No wonder everyone fixed their eyes upon Him. How great it would be if Jesus turned up in our service that night!

The Holy Spirit then started a discussion with me. *You can say the same as Jesus.* No, I’m not Jesus! That would be blasphemy! *Are you saved?* Yes. *Are you a Christian?* Yes. *Do you have the Holy Spirit in you?* Yes. *Is the Holy Spirit in you the same Holy Spirit that was in Jesus?* Yes. *Then you have been anointed to bring the same message. You have been anointed to preach good news, bind up the brokenhearted and set at liberty the captives.* Wow! That revolutionised my preaching and, by God’s grace, I have often witnessed the Holy Spirit bring in the Kingdom of God when I have preached.

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

The Holy Spirit who anointed me is the same Holy Spirit who anointed Jesus. He is the same Holy Spirit that God wants to anoint you with.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You so much for sending the Holy Spirit to us. Please fill me again today so that I may live in the same anointing that Isaiah brought to the world in his day, and the very same anointing that Jesus did in His. Amen*

### **Additional Readings**

- Psalm 146
- Luke 4:14-21
- 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

### **Questions**

1. According to Jesus (Acts 1: 8), why was the Holy Spirit given to His disciples?
2. Can we do the same ‘signs and wonders’ as Isaiah and Jesus?
3. Do we have to be in church in order for the Holy Spirit to work through us?

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### **Lesson 21: Isaiah promises New Heavens and New Earth**

#### **Reading: Isaiah 65:17-25**

At the beginning of this chapter, Isaiah gives us a picture of God calling out to His people, longing for them to have an intimate relationship with Him. However, He found them self-centred, obstinate, wilful and rebellious. Although, He was their Creator and God, their Protector and Provider, yet they collectively turned their back on Him to serve other man-made idols and seek help from godless heathens.

Into this milieu, God spoke forgiveness, grace and hope. He still remained their faithful, covenant keeping God. Although His special people might reject Him, He would never reject them.

God considered their failure and faithlessness and somehow His compassion exceeded them both. Even though God was rejected and betrayed, He longed for His people to live in righteousness and prosperity. The fact that they turned their back on His overtures of love and forsook the covenant did not cause God to give up on His people.

Yes, God is a good God. He is a gracious God and a God who is prepared to do anything and everything to bless His people.

We often determine to never allow ourselves to suffer rejection a second time. We build barriers and defenses of escapism into our lifestyle in order to protect ourselves from getting hurt again. On the contrary, God became vulnerable and provided the ultimate sacrifice in His Son, Jesus Christ, who died on the Cross for the sins of both Israel and the world, in order to reconcile us to God. The awesome event that we celebrate at Easter. Yes, God allowed His heart to be broken that we might experience the extent of His love for us.

Having paid the price, through sacrifice, to redeem us and make us clean and whole again, God was determined to make a new start. Paul reminds us that creation itself suffers because of our sin, so it is totally appropriate that the first creation is released from its burden, and a new Heaven created for a new era. An era which would be unlike any other; an era we find hard to contemplate.

God, being a good God and a God of purity and righteousness, cannot co-exist with sin, wickedness and rebellion. Consequently, that order, that era must pass. Earth and Heaven must be subject to a new beginning, a new creation.

Yes, part of the picture that God gives us, through Isaiah, suggests the Millennium reign of Christ on earth, when peace, order, love and harmony will be shown to be possible, even within the old order of this world. A picture of people living in peace, the animal kingdom living in harmony with each other and natural life expectancy extended. The wolf and the lamb eating side by side and those that die, having reached a hundred, will be considered just mere youth.

However, I think there is also a hint of the Revelation John and Paul had of a totally new creation, of a new Heaven and a new Earth. When and where the finite gives way to the Infinite, mortality to Immortality and humanity becomes engulfed with the Divine.

Paul describes the new order, and John reveals a time and a place where sin and death, sickness and pain, weeping and mourning will be present no more. It is the Christian's sure hope. We all experience pain, injustice, mourning and grief in this life. However, the good news of Jesus Christ is that, having died on the cross, He paid for our independence, sinfulness and selfishness. When

## **The Cloud of Witnesses**

He arose from the dead, He demonstrated that there is life after death. A life of resurrection power, where death will never conquer again, for it has itself been conquered once and for all.

A life of hope, peace, joy, excitement and fulfilment. A totally different life, lived in a totally different dimension and a totally different environment. Where God becomes the centre and focus, where evil exists no more and the past is no longer a burden or threat.

God longs for you and me to join Him for eternity. He has paid the price, opened the way and stands, with His arms outstretched, in welcome. All we have to do is ask for forgiveness for what we have done wrong, accept Christ's sacrifice on our behalf and welcome the Holy Spirit into our lives. Then we can live in the anticipation and expectation of being with Jesus Christ in the New Heaven and New Earth, for eternity.

No wonder Paul wrote – Death is swallowed up in victory. The Christ's and ours!

### **Isaiah would say to us today...**

Our earthly experience is not all there is. We are on earth for such a small space of time. Never forget the best is yet to come and it will be out of this world.

### **Prayer**

*Father, thank You that You are preparing us here for what You have in store for us in eternity. Thank You that what we experience on earth is not all there is and we are destined to live eternally with You. Amen.*

### **Additional Readings**

- Genesis 6: 1 – 13
- 1 Corinthians 15:35-58
- Revelation 21:1-14

### **Questions**

1. What are you looking forward to in the new Heaven?
2. How do you feel about this earth being destroyed by God?
3. How should the prospect of eternity impact our lives?