

OPENING LECTURE 2025

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We welcome you to another year of Bible study for People of the Word . . . a study of the book of Isaiah. As you may know, if you've studied with us before, we generally spend one year in the Old Testament and one year in the New Testament. Last year we completed the Gospel of John and a study of his three letters 1-2-3 John. If you stay with us, we'll cover the entire Bible in 13 years.

The purpose of my talk today is to give you a look at the times in which Isaiah lived, some background information on the book, and a glimpse of what we can expect in this year's study.

Most of you know the skeleton of the Old Testament . . . After creation and the flood, God called Abraham and began working through the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons, was sold by his brothers to Egypt, he rose from the depths of prison to the power of right-hand man to Pharaoh. Eventually, famine brought the family to Egypt and reunion with Joseph, but as the Hebrews multiplied, so did Pharaoh's fear of them and they were put into slavery for 400 years.

God called Moses to bring His people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, to the foot of Mt. Sinai where He gave them the Law. The twelve tribes of Israel were now to become a nation . . . they needed to learn how to serve a holy God.

Joshua led them into Canaan to settle the Promised Land but they never fully obeyed God by driving out all the heathen nations. True to God's Word, their idol gods proved to be a trap and snare for the Israelites.

Soon the people would get into trouble, cry out to God for deliverance, and God would send a "judge" to rescue them. Over and over again, as times got good, they slipped back into their idolatrous ways. One of the judges was named Eli, who raised the prophet, Samuel. As Samuel ministered, the people cried out, "We want a king like the other nations have." God assured Samuel – "They are rejecting Me, not you. I will give them what they want, but they won't like it." So, Samuel anointed Saul (who ruled for 40 years), then David came to the throne and ruled 40 years, followed by his son, Solomon, who also ruled 40 years. This is the period known as the United Kingdom.

When Solomon died, however, the nation split about 930 B.C. – 10 tribes went to the north, called the northern kingdom of Israel with its capital of Samaria, and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin stayed in the South with the capital of Jerusalem. The books of Kings and Chronicles goes back and forth as it tells first of what's going on with the kings of the north and then with the kings of the south. The divided kingdom experienced civil war for hundreds of years.

While it can get confusing reading the books of Kings and Chronicles, the important thing to remember is that a slow and silent force called erosion had set in to both the north and the south.

Edward Gibbon, in his work titled *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, spoke of five things that led to the fall of the Roman Empire:

1. An undermining of the dignity and sanctity of the home, which is the basis for human society.
2. Higher and higher taxes, and spending public money for free bread and circuses for the populace.
3. A mad craze for pleasure, with pastimes becoming every year more exciting, brutal, and immoral.
4. Building great armaments, although the real enemy was within – the decay of individual responsibility.
5. Decay of religion – faith fading into mere form, losing touch with life and losing power to guide the people.

How does that sound when we think about what has happened today in our country?

In Israel for a period covering over 200 years there were 19 kings and not one of them walked with God. But God sent prophet after prophet – faithful men like Elijah, Elisha and Amos. They told the truth; they warned of God's chastisement to come. God planned to bring Assyria in as an instrument of judgment against their wickedness and, in 722. B.C., that took place. The northern kingdom was deported and never resumed power as a nation again. Often you hear of the "ten lost tribes of Israel."

Meanwhile in the southern kingdom of Judah there were 20 monarchs – and of them 8 were considered "good" kings. They had a heart for God. Isaiah lived and ministered among both types – the good as well as the evil. Uzziah was the 5th good king, Jotham the 6th good king, Ahaz was an evil king and Hezekiah was the 7th good king. While the "good" kings were able to delay the judgment of God, the prophets warned that Babylon would come and take the nation captive for a period of 70 years. Then they would be restored to the land. Some of the prophets we read in the Old Testament ministered directly to what is called the restored kingdom – the time when the people returned from Babylonian captivity.

While God intended to chastise His people to bring them back into a holy relationship with Him, He did not intend to let the surrounding nations go unpunished for what they contributed to the erosion of godliness. Isaiah opens in chapters 1-12 with judgment against Judah. In chapters 13-23 is the judgment against the surrounding nations. Isaiah reveals what God intended to do to them. It is both a foretelling of future events and a source of hope for those feeling what Thomas Brooks termed as the "smarting rod of God."

The outline for the rest of Isaiah has chapters 24-27 describing the Day of the Lord; 28-35 describing a judgment and a blessing; 36-39 a historical interlude; and then a shift to chapters 40-48 showing the supremacy of the Lord; 49-53 describing the

servant of the Lord; and 54-66 revealing the future plan of the Lord. Throughout all of it is the call of the Lord . . . repent . . . return . . . rejoice . . . I have it under control.

Perhaps it's helpful if we remember the difference between a priest and a prophet.

Priests were people's representatives to God, while prophets were God's representatives to people. If the Hebrews wanted God to forgive their sins, they called out to Him through a priest who offered prayers and sacrifices on their behalf. But if God desired to communicate with His people, He spoke through a prophet.

The prophets' ministry was both forth-telling and foretelling. Prophets would tell forth God's message to the people, firmly revealing to them the truth they needed to hear. They would also foretell the future, predicting God's judgments as well as His hopeful plans for tomorrow. And how did you know if he was a true prophet? The test was 100 percent accuracy according to Deuteronomy 18:20-22.

The prophet's primary messages concerned human sin and God's righteousness. These two themes weave their way through all the prophetic books, as do two others – the people's need to repent and the blessing God would give if they did. The prophets weren't always proclaiming doom and gloom. Shimmering like silken threads were God's hopeful promises that, if the people returned to Him, He would forgive their sins and comfort them.

We have a series called "The Prophets Speak" that is a study of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. They along with Isaiah make up what are called the Major Prophets. The other 12 prophets in our Bible are called Minor Prophets. This is not because their message is less important, the classification is based on the length of their works.

Isaiah, who has been termed "The Prince of Prophets," is a unique book to study and he was a unique man. Let me remind you . . . There are 66 books in the whole Bible; 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament.

Isaiah, as I said, has 66 chapters – the first part of Isaiah has 39 chapters with an emphasis on human sinfulness and the righteousness, holiness and necessary judgment of God – much like the Old Testament. The last 27 chapters, like the New Testament, stress the grace of God, His glory and compassion and redemptive grace in the Messiah ending with a bright future. Isaiah is a type of Bible within the Bible. Some of you may be thinking – how are we going to do all this between now and May? Well, one lesson at a time.

One of the reasons it's important that we undertake the study of Isaiah is that there are 66 direct quotes from Isaiah in the New Testament and some have even found as many as 85 quotations and allusions to Isaiah. He is quoted in 20 of the 27 books of the New Testament. We know the Lord Jesus quoted from Isaiah's words

about the Messiah when He said in Luke 4:21 "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Some try to say that Isaiah was written by two different people since the tone of the last half is so different from the first part. But in John 12:37-40 is a quote from both parts – and both are attributed to Isaiah. As I said, he is sometimes called the "Prince of Prophets" or "St. Paul of the Old Testament." Isaiah's contribution lies not in his own princeliness, even though he was born of an aristocratic Jewish family and ministered in the courts of four kings, but in his revelation of the Prince of Peace – the Lord Jesus Himself.

Through Isaiah's pen we see Christ's virgin birth, His character, His mission, His death, His resurrection, and His Second Coming all presented clearly. As I said, Isaiah is a unique book to study.

I also said that Isaiah was a unique man. I've already mentioned his background . . . aristocratic and a voice of God to four kings. His name means "The Lord Saves." He began his ministry in 740 B.C., the year King Uzziah died . . . and according to unsubstantiated Jewish tradition, he was sawed in half during the evil reign of Manasseh. Martyrdom was often the penalty of speaking for God. We know he was married and had at least two sons. He probably spent most of his life in Jerusalem. All that, perhaps, does not necessarily qualify him as unique.

What does qualify as unique is his vision of the Lord that we'll study in chapter 6. He was about 17-20 years old and he writes, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him were six seraphs, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple filled with smoke. "Woe is me!" I cried. "I am a ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:1-8.)

One of the books in my library is titled *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* by Os Guinness. Very often we think to have "the call" is something like the vision Isaiah had . . . grand, majestic, awesome. The call from Jesus Christ, however, was simple and direct, "Follow Me."

To enter into that disciple lifestyle there is a direct link between the profession of faith and the practice of faith. **Practice what you preach and you commend your**

faith; don't and you contradict it. St. Francis of Assisi said it well, "Preach the gospel constantly and, if necessary, use words."

Os Guinness relates the story of Arthur F. Burns, the chairman of the United States Federal Reserve System and ambassador to West Germany. He was a man of considerable gravity, medium in height, distinguished, with wavy silver hair and his signature pipe. He was economic counselor to numerous presidents from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Ronald Reagan. When he spoke, his opinion carried weight and Washington listened.

Arthur Burns was also Jewish, so when he began attending an informal White House group for prayer and fellowship in the 1970's, he was accorded special respect. No one in fact knew quite how to involve him in the group and, week after week when different people took turns to end the meeting in prayer, Burns was passed by – out of a mixture of respect and reticence.

One week, however, the group was led by a newcomer who did not know the unusual status Burns occupied. As the meeting ended, the newcomer turned to Arthur Burns and asked him to close the time with a prayer. Some of the old-timers glanced at each other in surprise and wondered what would happen. But without missing a beat, Burns reached out, held hands with the others in the circle, and prayed this prayer: "Lord, I pray that you would bring Jews to know Jesus Christ. I pray that you would bring Muslims to know Jesus Christ. Finally, Lord, I pray that you would bring Christians to know Jesus Christ. Amen."

Does that surprise you as it did them? We are called to follow Jesus. In everything we do it is to bring honor and glory to Him. We do so with a focused goal, learning from Jesus Himself, the supreme example of servanthood. We are not studying just to increase our knowledge of Scripture, but to see into God's heart, to see His plan, to grasp His love to His people then and to us today.

Isaiah's call was to go . . . and his response was "Here am I. Send me!" We're going to see in chapter 20 that it was not an easy road – Isaiah was called upon to go stripped and barefoot for three years as a sign against Egypt in whom Israel had put their hope. Egypt would be led away stripped and barefoot by the king of Assyria. Israel's hope was not in Egypt . . . their hope was in the Lord.

Isaiah was not ashamed to be what Paul called "a fool for Christ." Makes us ask ourselves, "Am I?" Isaiah was willing to do whatever the Lord asked of him. So, Isaiah did go . . . to a people, to a nation, to kings, and even to us . . . leaving us Scriptures that bring us hope and encouragement from a messenger of God.

Many of your favorite Scriptures come from the book of Isaiah. We have used the soaring eagle on our invitations because it so reflects Isaiah 40:31 ". . . but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not faint."

Certainly, it is my prayer that you have had your own personal encounter with the Lord God Almighty. . . . that you have come to know the Messiah that Isaiah writes about . . . the Lord Jesus Christ and that if you're claiming the name Christian, you truly know and are willing to follow your Leader. We know the Holy Spirit has led you here to this study – to either learn more about our holy, awesome God or to perhaps come to know Him. In either case this will be an exciting study.

People of God are expected to recognize His calling in their life, to be willing to stand alone with rugged determination like Isaiah. They are people of prayer and untarnished integrity, willing to speak out against social ills and be zealous for the things of the Lord. They are people who study Scripture and look forward to the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus with great anticipation. People of the Word – that's what we're all about.

We're excited about this year . . . I hope you are too.