

*discover*  
**ISAIAH**

Chapters 1 - 12



# LEADER GUIDE

*discover*

# ISAIAH

Chapters 1 - 12



*CoffeeBreak*





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# To the Leader

## **Prepare the Lesson**

Bible discovery leaders help people discover together what the Bible says and means. They are not teachers but guides, facilitators, and conversation leaders.

This leader guide is meant to assist you as a small group leader by coming alongside you in your own personal work. Always answer the study guide questions first, using the suggested basic steps of preparation. Then use the leader material to enrich your understanding of the passage.

We encourage you to study ahead of time so that you do not have to rely on the leader guide during your Bible study group meeting. You don't want to give the impression that the leader guide is an answer book. The answers are in the Bible; you are a guide to help your group find the answers in God's Word.

This leader guide aims to include helpful ideas on the book of Isaiah from a number of sources. Ideally you should use this information *only after* you have studied the text yourself. Read the passage and first ask your own questions. Allow God to speak to you through his Word. Look for answers in the text. What was God saying to the original listeners of the prophecy, and what is he saying to us today? Consult the glossary if there are names and places with which you are unfamiliar. In addition, the Historical Snapshot found at the beginning of this leader guide and in each study guide provides valuable information.

## **Get Ready to Lead**

Learn to think in terms of questions. As you prepare to lead a lesson, ask yourself questions and try to discover the answers yourself. This will prepare you to anticipate group members' questions and thus help others discover truths from God's Word.

The "Conversation" boxes in the study guide are for extra questions. The text of the leader guide includes many extra questions that you may wish to use to help build the group's conversation around the text. We also suggest that you write your own questions. You know the interests, personalities, and needs of your group members. You know what they will be curious about or when they will want to dig deeper into a Scripture passage. Put those extra conversation-building questions in the

“Conversation” boxes and use them during your group time to help get dialogue started.

Also, encourage group members to put their own questions and discoveries in the “Conversation” boxes. By doing this, they will also be preparing for the group discussion. You might want to start a group discussion by saying, “What is in your ‘Conversation’ box? What would you like to talk about together?”

If you are able to prepare and pray thoroughly before each group session, you will be able to lead without frequent references to your notes. This will free you to be more aware of the work of the Holy Spirit during your group discussion time and to focus more effectively on your facilitation and leadership responsibilities. You will also be able to keep better eye contact and listen more carefully.

### **Lead with Questions**

Use questions to direct the group discussion. Draw out positive contributions by asking questions. Break down difficult or unclear questions with smaller, concise ones. Also use questions to respond to wrong or problematic answers. As you learn to lead others into truth by using questions, you will grow as a Bible discovery leader. The questions in this study are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can also be used.

Use the comments in this leader guide to help the discovery process of your group. You are leading a conversation on the text, and you want to help guide the conversation so that group members will hear the “big ideas” from the text rather than getting bogged down in small details. Avoid using this leader material to “teach” the lesson. In addition to observations by the authors of the leader guide, explanations from some commentaries are included.

**Assume that you will not use all the information that is in this leader guide.** Ask questions that will help you get at what the text says and means. *There are additional questions in bold that may help to clarify the discussion. However, do not feel that you have to answer all of these questions.* Members of your group may have their own questions. Use questions as well as the comments in the leader guide only when it is helpful to guide and clarify your group’s conversation on the text. The information is given to help you guide the discussion and answer some questions that may arise. *Do not bring up information simply because*

*you find it interesting.* Introduce it only if it will help the members of your group. In other words, tailor the questions to your particular group members. If some people in your group are new to the Bible, make certain that you help to clarify information. But do not use extra background material that may add confusion. Feel free to delve a bit deeper with groups who may be familiar with the Bible. However, keep in mind the evangelistic purpose of this study and make certain that you are being most sensitive to members who may be new to Bible study and may not yet be believers in Christ.

Should differences of opinion arise, allow members to disagree. Your purpose is not to win arguments or even to defend a particular idea. Allow the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of your group members.

### **Help to Apply**

Ask God to guide you to ask application questions throughout the lesson when it seems appropriate for your group. For example, when you consider the question about the sign of *Immanuel* in lesson 6, you might ask, “What does it mean to you that a virgin would have a baby and his name would be *Immanuel*, which means, “God with us”?”

As leader, pray that God will first teach you what he wants you to hear from his Word. Then ask God to guide you in helping others hear what he is saying to them. **Keep in mind that the purpose of this study is not to fill minds with facts but to change hearts as we learn what God is teaching us through his Word.**

Gently help group members discover the meaning of God’s message for their own lives. Be careful not to be judgmental of persons who may not yet seem to be applying the truths you encounter together. It’s the Holy Spirit’s work to apply God’s Word to people’s hearts. Tactfully let the group know how the Spirit is applying the Word in your own heart and life. Pray faithfully for the Spirit’s work in others.

While giving people the time and space to apply biblical truths as the Spirit leads them, simply try to help group members see that there is a relationship between the Bible and life. Questions for reflection at the end of each session invite everyone to take some time for personal reflection and optional sharing. Try to offer at least a few minutes for reflection time toward the end of each lesson, and encourage group members to do additional follow-up reflection at home.

# Introduction

A study of the book of Isaiah can be challenging and rewarding. It can be a challenge because it is a long prophetic book with images and historical events that may be unfamiliar to you and your group members. In addition, the prophecies in this book can be about events occurring in the writer's lifetime, or hundreds of years afterward, or even deeper into the future. Further, some of the prophetic descriptions are about events that took place in a certain way at one time and may take place in another way in the future.

Studying Isaiah can be rewarding because you may find that in the middle of an unfamiliar and hard to understand passage, you suddenly come upon familiar phrases. Even if you are new to the Bible, some verses in Isaiah may sound familiar. That's because the words in many Christmas carols and in the well-known Handel's *Messiah* contain images and texts from Isaiah. If you have studied other books of the Bible, a number of passages in Isaiah may also sound familiar because Isaiah is one of the most quoted Old Testament books in the New Testament.

The book of Isaiah has two main sections. The first section (Isa. 1-39) covers what happened during Isaiah's lifetime. The second section (Isa. 40-66) focuses on later events after God's people went into captivity (exile) but anticipated deliverance and restoration from the Lord. These divisions have caused some scholars to question whether the entire book was written by the prophet Isaiah. They suggest that the second section may have been written by disciples of Isaiah under the authority of the prophet. The second section is characterized by a somewhat different style of writing and vocabulary. Nonetheless, some distinctive expressions and significant verbal parallels have been noted in both parts. And God could certainly have inspired Isaiah with prophecies about the future (see Deut. 18:21-22). The New Testament, in quoting Isaiah, seems to assume a single author, as does the book itself.

This study will cover chapters 1 through 12 of Isaiah, along with passages from the historical books of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles for understanding parts of the background story. Also included is a Historical Snapshot to summarize the background and context in which Isaiah lived and prophesied. Though it includes many historical references, this is not a study of ancient civilizations and events. Rather, it is a study about God's relationship with his people and how his kingdom of righteousness is

above all other kingdoms. It presents the God who judges justly but also forgives and welcomes freely.

As you read and study the wonderful book of Isaiah, allow it to “read” and “study” you. Ask God for help in applying its message to your life. Doing this with a group will help you discover things that you may not discover on your own. Your efforts will be richly rewarded as you listen to God’s voice through the prophet Isaiah.

# Historical Snapshot for Studying Isaiah

As a prophet, Isaiah was called to preach God’s Word with regard to many events—in the past, in Isaiah’s present day, and in the future. As a result, the book of Isaiah includes many historical references. The glossary can help with identifying many names and places. The following historical summary will provide some additional information, offering a brief history of the people of Israel and of significant places and events in the time of the prophet Isaiah.

Abraham was the father of God’s chosen people. God called Abraham to trust and follow him, and Abraham was promised a land that his descendants would inhabit. That promise was not realized in Abraham’s lifetime; instead, it was realized after the people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years and God miraculously delivered them under the leadership of Moses. After establishing his covenant with the people at Sinai, in which the people agreed to obey the law of God given through Moses (Ex. 19-24), God led the people to the land he had promised them, but most of the people’s leaders were afraid to go in and drive out the nations that lived there, as God had commanded. For disobeying God, the people were punished to wander in the desert for forty years. After that time, Joshua led the next generation of Israelites into the “promised land.” This was the land of Canaan, in the area of the present-day state of Israel. Members of the twelve tribes, named after the twelve sons of Jacob, Abraham’s grandson (also called Israel), were allotted sections of the land.

Conquering the promised land was not an easy task, and it was made more difficult by the constant disobedience of the people and some of their leaders. Because the people were often unfaithful to their covenant with the Lord, God sometimes punished them by allowing other nations to oppress them. But when the people cried out for God’s help, he raised up judges (spiritual and military leaders) such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson to deliver the Israelites from their oppressors.

Because the nations around them had kings, the people of Israel wanted a king as well. Saul became the first king of Israel and initially led the nation to military victories. But he turned away from God, so God chose David, described as “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), to be king in Saul’s place. David, the youngest of eight sons of Jesse, was a shepherd from Bethlehem. During a standoff between Saul’s army and

the Philistines, David killed the giant Goliath, the Philistines' champion. Years later, after Saul died, David became king and led Israel in military victories and in establishing Jerusalem as the city where God's temple would be built. In the Old Testament David became regarded as the greatest king in Israel's history. Though he committed some grievous sins in his day, he confessed and repented of them before God, and the Lord forgave him. David was also a musician and wrote many psalms that show the close relationship he had with God. God promised David that the royal line in Israel would remain with his descendants (2 Sam. 7).

David's son Solomon succeeded him as king and built the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. Solomon became renowned for the wisdom he asked for and received from God, but unfortunately he also violated many of God's commands. He made alliances with nations around him and built up a large harem of wives and concubines, falling into pagan religious practices in the process. Although Israel gained significant power and territory as a nation led by Solomon, the kingdom broke apart during the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam. Ten of the twelve tribes of Israel split away to form a northern kingdom, and the remaining two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, became the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom continued to be called Israel (or sometimes Ephraim, after its leading tribe), and they adopted Samaria as their capital; the southern kingdom became known as Judah, and Jerusalem remained their capital. The kings of Judah tended to be more faithful to God than those of the northern kingdom (Israel, Ephraim), but eventually both kingdoms were punished for their unfaithfulness to God and sent into exile.

The people of Israel and Judah were often tempted to adopt the religious practices of the nations around them instead of following the one true God. They mixed the spiritual practices God had given them with idol worship and the sexual immorality of local fertility religions. Some of them even sacrificed their children to idols.

God appointed prophets such as Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha to minister to the people during the time of the early kings. After them came a number of prophets over the next few hundred years, and Isaiah served as a prophet of Judah from about 740-681 B.C. One major purpose of all the prophets was to call the people back to God and to their covenant promises. The prophets were to sound the alarm that punishment was

coming if the people did not change. Often the prophets were ignored and even killed for the messages they brought.

Isaiah prophesied about the rise of three empires in Israel and Judah's history: Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia. Four kings of Judah are mentioned in the opening lines of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah's prophetic ministry began in the year that King Uzziah died (c. 740 B.C.). Isaiah then continued to prophesy during the reigns of Jotham (740-732 B.C.), Ahaz (732-715 B.C.), and Hezekiah (715-686 B.C.).

Jotham's reign was brief, but he managed to build towns and fortifications and to defeat the nearby Ammonites, strengthening the nation of Judah as he generally "walked steadfastly before the LORD" (2 Chron. 27:6). Toward the end of Jotham's reign Tiglath-Pileser III became a powerful military and political ruler in Assyria, and Jotham's son Ahaz sought an alliance with Assyria for protection after being attacked several times by closer neighbors—from the north by Israel, which had joined with Aram (Syria today), and from the south by the Edomites and the Philistines. In 2 Chronicles 28:3-6, 16-20 we learn that God had punished Ahaz through these attacks because Ahaz had engaged in "detestable practices" of idolatry, even sacrificing "his children in the fire" to the false gods of other nations. Isaiah warned Ahaz against making an alliance with Assyria, but instead of trusting in God to protect him, Ahaz looked to Assyria for military help. He paid heavily with silver and gold to maintain this relationship with Assyria. The alliance helped Judah for a while as Assyria wielded great power in the region. The Assyrians conquered Aram (c. 732 B.C.) and later routed the northern kingdom of Israel (722 B.C.), taking many of the people into captivity.

Hezekiah became king in 715 B.C., and he turned to Egypt for support instead of Assyria. But this didn't help him when the next Assyrian king, Sennacherib, and his army besieged Jerusalem. Hezekiah turned to Isaiah for advice. Isaiah prophesied that Sennacherib would not take Jerusalem. In a remarkable fulfillment of prophecy, the Assyrian army was devastated by a plague, and they left Judah (2 Kings 19; 2 Chron. 32).

Hezekiah ruled Judah for nearly thirty years, and his rule saw significant spiritual reforms. Unfortunately, his son Manasseh, who succeeded Hezekiah as king, reverted to rebellion against God and idol worship, undoing much of the spiritual rebuilding his father had accomplished (2 Kings 21; 2 Chron. 33).

Eventually, about 100 years after Isaiah's ministry, Judah was conquered by Babylonia, a new superpower that had overthrown Assyria, and the people of Judah were taken into captivity and exile. Then, after about seventy more years, Babylonia was conquered by Persia and Media, and the Persian King Cyrus freed the people of Judah to return to their land. Those who chose to return worked to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah). During the next four hundred years, the reconstituted people of Israel, who then became known as the Jews, came under the power of the Greek Empire and then later the Roman Empire. Leading up to and during the time of Jesus and the New Testament period, Rome controlled the territory while giving the Jews some authority to rule among themselves.

# Glossary of Terms

**Ahaz**—a king of Judah when Isaiah prophesied; Ahaz rebelled against God.

**Aiath**—possibly the town of Ai in Israel.

**Ammonites**—enemies of Israel to the east of the Jordan River, located where the land of Jordan is today; their main city was Rabbath Ammon. Jordan's capital, Amman, is on the same site today.

**Anathoth**—a town about five miles (8 km) northwest of Jerusalem.

**Aram**—a kingdom directly north of Israel; much of its land is in present-day Syria; the capital city was Damascus.

**Arpad**—a city about fifty miles (80 km) south of Carchemish.

**Assyria**—a powerful empire north and east of Judah. Nineveh was its capital.

**atone, atonement**—from the Hebrew word meaning “to cover over,” *atonement* implies a sacrifice to make amends for wrongdoing. In Old Testament times an animal was sacrificed to atone for sin (Lev. 16). Christ's death was the final sacrifice, providing atonement for all who believe in him.

**Babylonia**—a nation east of Assyria; Babylon was its capital. The Babylonians overtook Assyria in 612 B.C.

**Bashan**—a land north and east of Israel known for its impressive oak trees.

**Branch**—a name describing the faithful remnant of God's people; also a name for the Messiah.

**Carchemish**—a city on the upper Euphrates River.

**coastal lands of the sea**—area west of Israel along the Mediterranean Sea.

**Cush**—the upper Nile River region, where Ethiopia and Sudan are today.

**Damascus**—capital city of Aram (present-day Syria).

**Edom**—a kingdom south of Judah; its people were descendants of Jacob's brother, Esau.

**Elam**—a country east of Assyria and Babylonia.

**Ephraim**—one of the ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel; this name is often used to refer to the entire northern kingdom.

**Euphrates**—a major river running through Assyria and Babylonia.

**Everlasting Father**—a name of the Messiah, describing him as an eternal, caring provider and sustainer (Isa. 9:6).

**exile**—removal of God's people from their homeland after being conquered by the Assyrians and, later, the Babylonians.

**Galilee**—a region in the north of ancient Israel.

**Gallim**—a town neighboring Anathoth in Judah.

**Geba**—a town between Mikdash and Jerusalem.

**Gebim**—unknown place assumed to be near Jerusalem.

**Gentiles**—any people who are not Jewish.

**Gibeah**—a fortress town close to Jerusalem.

**Gideon**—an Israelite judge and military leader who defeated the Midianites.

**Hamath**—a city about 100 miles (160 km) north of Damascus.

**Hezekiah**—a king of Judah who turned to God; during his reign Jerusalem was saved from an Assyrian invasion.

**holy**—set apart, often for special service to God; in reference to God, this word means “pure, faultless, perfect.”

**holy seed**—refers to the remnant of God’s faithful people (Isa. 6:13; see also 4:3).

**house of David**—any members of King David’s family, especially rulers.

**Immanuel**—a name meaning “God with us”; ultimately this name refers to Jesus, the Messiah.

**Israel** (northern kingdom of)—a majority of Israelites (ten tribes) that split away during the reign of King Rehoboam; Judah and Benjamin remained with Rehoboam and became known as the kingdom of Judah. Earlier, Israel was the name of the entire nation of God’s people.

**Jacob**—The patriarch of God’s people who was renamed Israel (Gen. 32:28); Jacob was the father of twelve sons whose descendants became the twelve tribes of Israel. In the Old Testament, the name Jacob is often used to refer to all of Israel.

**Jerusalem**—Judah’s capital city, where God’s temple was located; it was supposed to be the spiritual center for the whole nation of God’s people.

**Jesse**—King David’s father.

**Jordan**—a river running south through the land of Israel to the Dead Sea.

**Jotham**—a king of Judah who made an alliance with the Assyrians.

**Judah**—one of the two tribes in the southern kingdom of Israel (the other tribe in this kingdom was Benjamin); the name Judah is often used to refer to the entire southern kingdom.

**Kalno**—a city about 50 miles (80 km) south of Carchemish.

**Laishah**—a town near Anathoth in Judah.

**last days**—a phrase referring to the coming of the Messiah (Isa. 9:6), as well as to the end times when the Messiah (Christ) will come again to bring about his kingdom fully (see Rev. 21).

**LORD** (with small capital letters)—In most English translations of the Bible, this name represents the Hebrew name YHWH (*Yahweh*), meaning “I AM WHO I AM” or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.” God identified himself by this name when he promised to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt and to fulfill his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation,” said God (Ex. 3:15).

**Madmenah**—as unknown place assumed to be near Jerusalem.

**Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz**—second son of Isaiah; his name means “quick to the plunder; swift to the spoil.”

**Manasseh**—one of the tribes of Israel. The tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim received their allotments of land as the inheritance of their father, Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob (Israel).

**Mighty God**—a name of the Messiah, denoting his strength and power (Isa. 9:6; see also 10:21).

**Mikdash**—a key pass on the way to Jerusalem.

**Midian**—a kingdom that often raided Israel in its early days; with God’s help Gideon won a miraculous victory against them (Judg. 7).

**Migran**—a town south of Mikdash.

**Moab**—a kingdom southeast of ancient Israel. Ruth, an ancestor of David, was from Moab (Ruth 1:4).

**Mount Zion**—see **Zion**.

**New Moons**—special festivals of sacrifice and worship at the beginning of each Hebrew (lunar) month.

**Naphtali**—a son of Jacob whose allotment of land was among the northernmost in Israel, in the region of Galilee.

**Nob**—a town about one mile (1.6 km) from Jerusalem.

**Oreb**—a Midianite leader killed by the Ephraimites on what became known as the rock of Oreb (Isa. 10:26; see Judg. 7:25). Its location is near the plain of Jezreel in northern Israel.

**Pekah son of Remaliah**—king of the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Ahaz, king of Judah.

**Philistines**—a coastal kingdom to the west of Judah who were often at war with God’s people.

**Prince of Peace**—a name of the Messiah, emphasizing his role as the author of true peace (Isa. 9:6).

**prophet**—one who speaks God’s message; a term generally used to refer to Old Testament preachers of God’s Word; at times, prophets also foretold the future as revealed to them by God’s Spirit (see Deut. 18:21-22).

**pruning hooks**—hooked tools used for pruning trees or plants.

**Ramah**—a fortress town near Jerusalem.

**remnant**—the people of God who would return from exile.

**Rezin of Aram**—a king of Aram who allied with the northern kingdom of Israel against Judah.

**righteous**—blameless, guiltless; we are declared righteous by God through faith in Christ, who came to pay for our sin by taking our guilt on himself and giving up his own righteous life for our sake.

**Root of Jesse**—a reference pointing to the Messiah, related to the image of “a shoot . . . from the stump of Jesse,” from whose roots “a Branch will bear fruit” for the flourishing of God’s kingdom (Isa. 11:1, 10). This phrasing seems to imply that the Root came before Jesse and has an eternal quality, which would apply only to the Messiah (see also Rev. 22:16).

**Samaria**—capital city of the northern kingdom of Israel.

**sabbath**—the day of the week for rest and worship of God.

**seraphs, seraphim**—angelic beings who honor and praise God; the name literally means “burning one.” Scholars note that these beings may correspond with the “four living creatures” of Revelation 4:6-9.

**Sodom and Gomorrah**—two cities destroyed by God because of their rebellious, evil ways (see Gen. 19; Ezek. 16:49-50); the names of these cities became synonymous with judgment.

**Shear-Jashub**—elder son of Isaiah; his name means “a remnant will return.”

**Shiloah**—a stream that brought water to Jerusalem; it flowed from the Gihon spring, a water supply that King Hezekiah later protected and rerouted so that the invading Assyrians couldn’t take it over (2 Chron. 32:30). In later history Shiloah fed a pool that was called the Pool of Siloam (Neh. 3:15; John 9:7).

**son of Tabeel**—This person is unknown but would have been a threat to David’s dynasty in Judah.

**stump (of Jesse)**—a term describing the cut-down tree of the dynasty of David, son of Jesse. From this stump a shoot (the Messiah) would grow, illustrating that new growth and goodness among God’s people would spring from him.

**terebinth**—a leafy shrub tree, sometimes described as oak. In Isaiah’s day the wood of terebinths and oaks may have been a favorite for making idols (see Isa. 1:29-30; 6:13).

**Upper Pool**—water source for Jerusalem.

**Uzziah**—King of Judah who had a long, prosperous reign. Isaiah began to prophesy in the year that Uzziah died (c. 740 B.C.).

- Wonderful Counselor**—a name for the Messiah, emphasizing his amazing wisdom and counsel and the wonderful plan God has for ruling his kingdom in righteousness (Isa. 9:6).
- Zebulun**—a son of Jacob whose allotment of land was among the northernmost in Israel, in the region of Galilee.
- Zion**—another name for Jerusalem, after the hill in Jerusalem on which the temple of the Lord was built.

# 1 Isaiah 1

## Judgment and Justice

### Getting Started

The prophecy of Isaiah beautifully reveals the amazing, surprising God who is the Lord of heaven and earth. Let's see what the opening chapter of Isaiah shows about this God, and how he calls his people to live.

The first chapter of Isaiah begins with an unflattering portrait of God's people. Because they have turned their backs on God, the people have brought judgment on themselves. As you go through the book of Isaiah, you will find that it contains many words of judgment. But don't let that discourage you. You will also find wonderful words of grace in the midst of the judgment.

If members of your group think of God as only a God of judgment, listen and pray that God will influence a change of heart. You as the leader are not called to defend God's honor by arguing with people in your group. Should they disagree in some way, simply allow Scripture to speak for itself. In fact, your acceptance of people who disagree will go a long way toward creating a climate in which God's Word can speak to individuals who may be hearing for the first time about ideas and values that are quite different from those in today's culture.

You may find the following insight from Miroslav Volf, a contemporary theologian, helpful in explaining the need for God's judgment. He points out that people living in the quiet suburbs of the West have the luxury of viewing God as only a God of love. However, those who live in areas of the world where horrific acts of violence have occurred, need to see God as both loving and just. Because God sees everything, he will bring justice to those who burn villages, rape women, and kill children in front of their families—even if that justice comes not in this lifetime but in the next. Volf maintains that belief in a God of justice is the only thing that will break the cycle of violence and vengeance.

### Optional Share Question

*Note:* The optional share question in each lesson may serve well at the beginning of your session, or it may fit better at some other time during your discussion. Use or adapt each share question in a way that works best for your group.

## **Was history a subject in school that you liked? Disliked? Why?**

Use this question to relax your group. Individuals new to the Bible may feel a bit anxious, but the optional share question is designed so that everyone can answer it if they choose. The question is intended to be answered in a couple of words or sentences, not verbal paragraphs. You don't want to spend a lot of time on it, but you may want to use it to open your group discussion with something light. If this question won't work well with your group, use one of your own!

## **What Does It Say?**

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### **1. Isaiah 1:1**

*What does Isaiah tell us about himself and his book in the opening verse?*

- **What is a vision?**
- **What was Isaiah's vision about?**

According to commentator Alec Motyer, the word for “vision” in the text of Isaiah refers to “the truth disclosed by God; not necessarily in visual experience but by supernatural revelation.” The book of Isaiah begins with a description of its contents: a revelation from the Lord, the covenant God of Israel and Judah.

Isaiah is identified as the son of Amoz, and verse 1 lists the kings of Judah during whose reigns Isaiah prophesied—Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. These kings ruled for about a hundred years between 792 and 686 B.C. During Isaiah's time of prophecy there were brief times of peace, but there was also a constant threat of invasion by powerful nations north and south of the land of Judah. Isaiah's message to the people was not positive. It may be helpful to refer to the glossary for a brief description of each king.

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### **2. Isaiah 1:2-9**

*What charge does God bring against his people? Describe their situation.*

- **In what way does this sound like a courtroom?**
- **Whom does God call as witnesses to this exchange? Who are the accused?**

Both here and in a number of places in the Old Testament, heaven and earth are called on as witnesses. God's charge is that his people are like rebellious teenagers who have had all the benefits of a relationship with him but have decided to go their own way.

- **How does Isaiah highlight the foolishness of the people's rebellion?**

The people's rejection of God makes them more foolish than members of the animal kingdom. At least animals know their masters and their source of food. The people have become beaten down because of the choices they have made, so there is nothing wholesome about them. They are vulnerable both personally and as a nation. Unless God allowed some people to survive, there would be nothing left of them or their country.

Scholars indicate that the national leaders at the time of Isaiah were not fools from a political perspective. They had great abilities, but these factors did not lead to national security because they had rejected God and his rule in their lives.

- **What were the people doing? What should they have been doing?**

God's people have forsaken God rather than seeking him; they have spurned and rebelled against God rather than obeying him.

- **What is communicated by the word "spurned" in verse 4?**

Notice that Isaiah says the people are not passively ignoring God. Rather, they have willfully and vehemently turned their backs on God. The people and their leaders are bringing pain on themselves and their nation. The people are described as if they were bruised and wounded without medical attention. The country is described as being attacked by foreign oppressors or, at the least, vulnerable to attack.

- **What parallels to this situation exist in our society today? If people continue to reject God, does he eventually let them go their own way? Explain.**

Members of the group may come up with a number of parallels to today's culture. It is true that people who continue to reject God's Word will bring trouble on themselves. However, take care that the discussion

does not move away from Scripture into the area of politics. Consider what happened when Judah looked to political alliances instead of to God to rescue them.

- **What does Isaiah mean when he says the people would have become like Sodom?**

The reference here describes God’s mercy in allowing some to survive rather than totally destroying everyone, as occurred in the destruction of Sodom. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is found in Genesis 19. The reference to Sodom and Gomorrah may remind some members of your group of the topic of homosexuality, but you can indicate to the group that the context here is dealing with the total destruction of a community. (See also Ezek. 16:49-50.) Notice also that in verse 10 Isaiah addresses the people as if they were Sodom’s rulers and Gomorrah’s people.

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### **3. Isaiah 1:10-15**

In the Old Testament, God set up a sacrificial system that became part of Israel’s covenant relationship with the Lord. Animals such as bulls, lambs, and goats would be sacrificed to *atone for* (“cover over”) sin. The purpose of this type of sacrifice was to bring the people close to God and seek his forgiveness. Ultimately the sacrifices pointed to Jesus’ death for our sins once and for all (Heb. 10:10; 9:26-28).

New Moon feasts (usually the first day of the month in the Hebrew lunar calendar) and Sabbaths were considered to be holy days of worship in the Old Testament. Appointed festivals and convocations were also religious celebrations, and many were established by the Lord (Lev. 23-25).

*a. What is God’s feeling toward the religious practices of the people?*

- **How does God express his displeasure to his people? Why did he command sacrifices in the first place?**

It may seem repugnant to some that animals were killed for sacrifices. It might be helpful to understand that in the time the book of Isaiah was written, it was an agrarian culture familiar with the killing of animals. Today, for people who are raised in cities or suburbs where the only meat they see comes packaged in the grocery store, the killing of animals is not something they are familiar with. It probably will not be helpful to get sidetracked on a discussion about animal rights. The most important

thing to note is that the Old Testament sacrificial system pointed to the sacrifice that Jesus would make for our sins.

- **Why does God describe the people’s offerings as vain or empty? Why is he rejecting their sacrifices and feast days even though he established them? Why does it seem that the people are only going through the motions of spirituality?**

There seems to be a great deal of hypocrisy.

- **When we describe someone as a hypocrite, what do we mean?**

Hypocrites pretend to be someone they are not. They only go through the motions of spirituality. Their religious expression is all style and no substance. Here the people of God were going through the motions of maintaining a form of religion. They were bringing animal sacrifices and keeping religious festivals, but they were not being sincere.

*b. Why will God not listen to their prayers?*

- **What does it mean that their hands are full of blood?**

The religious practices of the people should have brought them closer to God. Instead, God refuses to listen to their insincere prayers. Many people today indicate religious hypocrisy as something they hate—and God agrees. People who say they are religious and yet harm others are the kinds of people who are described here. They are people with either figurative or actual “blood on their hands.” Members of your group may readily cite some terrible things people have done while pretending to be religious—for example, a priest who abuses a child, or a “prolife” Christian who kills an abortion doctor. It will be important not to get sidetracked with a discussion of such kinds of gross hypocrisy. The main idea is that God wants his people to stop pretending to have a relationship with him while they defy his commands for everyday godly living.

It may be helpful to mention that corrupt religious practices in Israel and Judah had been going on for a long time. The religious practices of God’s people had become syncretized or mixed with the religious practices of the Canaanite religions that God totally detested. Idolatry, sexual immorality tied with fertility rituals, and even child sacrifice took place in Israel (see 1 Kings 11:4-6; 2 Kings 23:10). God had put up with this for many years.

c. *What is the difference between “religious performance” and “true spirituality”?*

We would never think of ourselves as having “hands full of blood,” but all of us have the potential for hypocrisy. If we are honest, sometimes we are more concerned with religious performance than with true spirituality, which focuses on loving God and loving others. (See Matt. 22:37-40; James 1:27.)

- **In what ways have we been hypocritical in our faith? How have we pretended to be spiritual?**

We all need to ask God to help us change.

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#### **4. Isaiah 1:16-17**

*Describe what God wanted from his people. What does God want from us?*

- **What priorities does God want in people’s lives? What is the symbolism of washing?**

Washing is symbolic of changing or purifying behavior. The people were to “clean up their act.” They were not only to stop doing evil but also to proactively seek justice for the most vulnerable in society. They were to show love for God in the way they loved others.

- **Is “cleaning up our act” something we can do on our own?**

A statement from Alcoholics Anonymous may be a helpful reference: “We are powerless to change ourselves.”

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#### **5. Isaiah 1:18-20**

*Discuss the choice that God lays before people.*

Even in the midst of his complaint, God reminds his people that they still have time to listen to reason. Earlier editions of the NIV and other versions have the phrase, “Come now, let us reason together.” The 2011 NIV says, “Come, let us settle the matter.”

- **What does God ask of the people in order to receive his blessing? What does it mean to be “willing and obedient”?**

The people can choose God’s grace and mercy or their own efforts. In other words, they can choose life or death. Scholars note that in the original language the word phrase translated as “reason together” or “settle the matter” appears to have legal overtones. In other words, God, as judge, has offered his people a free pardon and the opportunity to start a new life. God has “settled the matter.” An individual unwilling to accept such an offer has indeed lost all sense of reason. Who in their right mind rejects a pardon when they are guilty?

*Jesus paid it all,  
All to Him I owe;  
Sin had left a crimson stain,  
He washed it white as snow.*

These lyrics by Elvina Hall (1865) are just one example of a song based on the imagery in these lines of Isaiah. The stain of sin would one day be washed clean through the sacrifice of Christ’s blood. After Christ’s gift of his life, we have no need to shed blood to make atonement for sin. Isaiah is beginning to reveal the work of Christ in this book. Although the word *Christ* is not mentioned in Isaiah, the Messianic description of the suffering servant who would take on himself the penalty for our sins refers to him (see Isa. 42; 49-53). It is his sacrifice for us that removes the stain of sin from our lives.

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## 6. Isaiah 1:21-31

a. *What is the city like now, and how will God deal with it?*

- **How are the city and its people described?**

The language used to describe God’s people is very harsh. They are described as unfaithful (like a prostitute), rebels, murderers, thieves, and those who are unjust.

- **Describe the rulers. What have they done to their people?**

Notice that they love bribes and do not defend those who are most vulnerable, such as orphans and widows.

God will bring punishment and judgment on all rebels and sinners who do not repent, “and those who forsake the LORD will perish” (Isa. 1:28).

b. *What will the city be like in the future?*

c. *What will it take to be part of the future city?*

The city of the future will be restored and will become known as righteous and faithful. In other words, the people will be repentant and faithful instead of unfaithful. They will be righteous, living in a way that honors and pleases God. They will show concern for the needs of others.

- **What does it mean to repent?**

God wants a radical change. Repentance means turning away from sin and going in the opposite direction, back to God. Notice that God is the initiator of the relief and change (Isa. 1:24-27). Although God calls for repentance, he also moves us to see our sin. And he is the one who takes away all the impurities of the people (1:25).

- **What does it mean that “Zion will be delivered [or ‘redeemed’] with justice” (1:27)?**

“Zion” refers to Jerusalem—and, in particular, the hill on which the temple of God was built in Jerusalem—and the statement in Isaiah 1:27 means that God will ransom his people and put in place true justice for everyone.

- **How might we strive for such a city or community today?**

A perfect city is impossible now, but, by God’s grace and strength, we can work to help God restore and strengthen our communities as much as possible. Christians are taught by Christ to bring justice and righteousness to this world as we show God’s love to our neighbors. We must always look to God for guidance because our efforts will be imperfect. Only God can work in our hearts to provide proper motivation and love while we seek the best for others—nearby and around the globe.

## **Taking It Home**

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*What messages of hope do you see in the midst of God’s judgment?*

Even when we reject God and go our own way, the Lord provides a way back for us. God desires a faith that is genuine and makes a difference in our lives and in the lives of the people around us. He takes away our sins, and even though there may be trouble all around us, God calls us to trust in him to protect us and spare us from the complete destruction

we would otherwise bring on ourselves. God also promises that when he restores us, we will honor him in all we do, building a community that reflects his righteousness and faithfulness.

The prophecy of Isaiah beautifully reveals the amazing, surprising God who is the Lord of heaven and earth. As a prophet of God's people in Judah from about 740-681 B.C., Isaiah had the task of calling the people back to God. He was to sound the alarm that punishment was coming if the people did not change their destructive ways of rebelling against God.

From Isaiah we learn that some punishment did come for God's people. Sin has its consequences. But redemption and forgiveness would come too. As God had promised long before, he would send a deliverer to rule in righteousness and with justice for all. This worthy ruler would be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6)—and today we know this unparalleled King as the Messiah, Jesus Christ. He came as promised to deliver God's people, including us and people from all nations, from sin and the self-destruction it drags us into.

This study helps us see how we need the one true, amazing God as much as the people did in Isaiah's day long ago.

*Discover Isaiah: Chapters 1-12* features 10 lessons from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. This material is intended for small group Bible study, but it can also be used profitably for personal study. Guides for leaders and group members are available.

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