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Introduction: Why would anyone read Isaiah?

It's long. It's mostly poetry (and let's face it, most of us didn't like studying poetry at school). It's filled with strange language, weird imagery, and has a complicated historical background which you have to get across if you're going to understand it. So why would anyone read it? Why should we read it?

Well, here are a few reasons. Firstly, it's one of the most quoted books in the New Testament. When the first Christians try to make sense of who Jesus is and what he's done, it's *Isaiah* they come back to time and again. Secondly, it's one of Jesus' favourite books for explaining himself to people. Finally, it tells us so much about God's plan of salvation, in such detail and with such foresight, that many scholars have called it 'the fifth gospel.' In fact, it speaks so plainly about Jesus that when a church once letter-box dropped copies of *Is* 53 in a Jewish area, it got complaints about distributing Christian propaganda! If the scholars, the New Testament, and Jesus himself all think that *Isaiah* is worth reading, then we probably should too.

However, before we get into it, some background will be useful. Isaiah (the man) prophesied between 740BC and about 687BC. Around two hundred years before this, the original nation of Israel had divided into two kingdoms, one in the north (which *Isaiah* normally calls 'Israel') and one in the south (called 'Judah'). Isaiah prophesied in Judah, and especially its capital city, Jerusalem. Isaiah's prophecies revolve around two main threats to Judah's security.

The first is one that existed during Isaiah's lifetime: Assyria. Assyria was the local superpower at the time and, in 735BC, demanded that Israel become its financial slave. Israel refused and was destroyed in 722BC. Assyria made the same threats to Judah. Judah refused and Jerusalem was besieged in 701BC. Who would Judah and its king trust to save them? Its army and political allies, as Israel had done, or God? God had some big things to say to Judah through Isaiah during this period, and these prophecies make up the first half of *Isaiah*, chapters 1-39.

The second threat is one which existed well beyond Isaiah's lifetime: Babylon. At the time Isaiah was living, Babylon was a minor political player in the region and one of Judah's allies. But Isaiah foresaw a day when Babylon would grow mighty and turn against Judah. Who

would Judah and its kings trust to rescue them from *that* enemy, when the time came? Themselves? Or God? And if they mucked it up, and Babylon did ruin them (as they did in 586BC when they destroyed Jerusalem and exiled most of its residents), would God give them another chance, or would that be the end of them? God has some big things to say to Judah through Isaiah about this period, too - even though it is a hundred years in the future - and these prophecies form the second half of *Isaiah*, chapters 40-66.

But through the whole book, there is one common thread: Jerusalem. In that city, God sees a microcosm of everything that is good and bad about his people - both Judah and Israel. Jerusalem is the city in which God lives among his people, in the temple, so it should be a city devoted to his glory. But when he looks at it, he sees the opposite: drunkenness, deceit, ambition, and false worship. What will he do?

As the completely holy God, he has to destroy it. In that sense, *Isaiah* is the tale of one city: what Jerusalem should have been and what it is. But thankfully, it is also the tale of what God will do once he's destroyed Jerusalem - and all it stands for - and made a new city, one in which he'll be glorified. In that sense, *Isaiah* is a tale of two cities: Jerusalem and the New Jerusalem - the new heavens and new earth. It is that move - from Jerusalem to New Jerusalem - which guides the whole book, and it is that move which gives *Isaiah* - and us as its readers - its and our hope.

For those who find it helpful to have a visual summary, The Bible Project has once again provided a really useful overview:

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/isaiah/>

If you're looking for a helpful commentary to refer to, a good option is *The Message of Isaiah* by Barry Webb in 'The Bible Speaks Today' series (1996, IVP)

Finally, a note on the format of these studies. We recognise that there is value in reflecting on things we've previously learnt, so have tried to build that in. We also recognise that we all have a favourite 'mode' of application, and it's good to be encouraged to think about different ways we need to respond to God's word. This is the reason for the structure of the application section of each study.

4. Is there any hope for Jerusalem? If so:
a. what is it?

b. who is it for?

c. and when?

5. Isaiah 2:1-4 says that in 'the last days' when Jerusalem has been restored, 'all nations' will stream to it to hear God teach them his ways.

Read Acts 2:5-12, 22-24.

a. Who has come to Jerusalem?

b. About whom is the message they hear?

c. How is this a manifestation of the vision of Isa 2:1-4?

Application

Trust

What elements of Jerusalem's behaviour or attitudes in Isa 1 can you see in our community and in your life?

Say

Memory verse: Isaiah 1:18. Aim to speak this to yourself each day in the coming week.

Do

What choices in your life are in harmony with Isaiah 2:1-4? What needs changing?

Pray

Isaiah calls the people of Judah and Israel to repent from their sinful ways and turn to God, so he can cleanse them (Isaiah 1:18). Take time acknowledging our sins that have been brought to mind by this passage and bringing before him the sins of our world and asking him to cleanse us.

Study 2 – Cut Down to Size

Isaiah 2:5-4:6

Looking back

Last week, we saw Isaiah warning Israel and Judah to turn away from their wickedness and turn to God or else face his judgement. Has God impressed upon you any particular sins in your life or in our community during the past week? Use the following prayer (or your own words, if you prefer) to bring your sins before God in confession:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,

We confess with shame the sins we have done, against you, and against those whom you have made. We have not loved you with our whole heart, and we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.

We are sorry, and turn from our sins. For the sake of your Son who died for us, forgive us, cleanse us and change us. Set us free by your Spirit to live for you, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Read Isaiah 1:18 and then Isaiah 53:5-6 as a reminder of God's mercy to us in Christ.

Background

As Isaiah continues his critique of Jerusalem in his day, he moves on to the theme of its immense pride and God's determination to break it. To do so, he presents a series of pictures of proud things: human idolatry (2:5-22), leaders (3:1-15) and ladies (3:16-4:1).

Observation and interpretation

Read Isaiah 2:5-22

1. How have Judah become scheming and self-reliant in the way they think?

2. How will God respond?

Read Isaiah 3:1-15

3. What will God do to the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem?

4. What will be the result for the nation and city?

Read Isaiah 3:16-4:1

5. How does God describe the leading ladies of Jerusalem?

6. How will God deal with them?

Isaiah has painted a grim picture: a city of proud thinkers, leaders and women all about to be cut down to size by a humiliating God. What a relief 4:2-6 is, then!

Read Isaiah 4:2-6

7. Isaiah has already used a term similar to 'in that day' (see 2:2). When does this make you think he is talking about?

8. Who is Isaiah talking about in this vision?

9. What will they be like, in contrast to their predecessors?

Read Philippians 3:4b-11.

10. How has Paul taken on board the lessons of Isaiah when it comes to being proud of human accomplishments?

Application

Trust

What accomplishments in your life might tempt you to become proud and self-reliant? What do you need to remember to keep this in perspective?

Say

Let's not just gloss over the simple exhortations of this passage. As odd as it might feel, pair up with someone in your group and take a moment to speak the following verses to each other, reflecting together on one situation in life where you need to put this into practice.

Isaiah 2:5

Isaiah 2:22

Do

What can you do to remind yourself and others to depend on God daily?

Pray

Thank God for his gift of righteousness that he has given us through Jesus. Pray that we will learn to place our confidence for salvation in Jesus alone and not in our accomplishments. You might consider using Philippians 3:4b-11 as a prompt for prayer.

Study 3 – The King’s Ambassador

Isaiah 5-6

Looking back

Last week, we considered the accomplishments in life that might tempt us to become self-reliant instead of depending on God. How has God reminded you of his faithfulness and dependability in this last week?

Background

Isaiah 5 is another critique of Judean society in the eighth-century B.C., especially its greed (5:8-10), drunkenness (5:11-17), foolishness (5:18-21) and worship of false heroes (5:22-30). It’s a picture that bears remarkable similarities to twenty-first century Australia, but for reasons of time we won’t get to it now. Just read it in your own time. What we’ll focus on instead is Isaiah 6 and its contrast between two kings: Uzziah and God.

Observation and interpretation

Read 2 Chronicles 26:1-5, 16-21 (you can read 6-15 as well if you have time)

1. What was Uzziah like as a king?

Read Isaiah 6:1-8

2. How does the description of God as king contrast with the descriptions of Uzziah as king we’ve just read?

3. Summarise the stages of Isaiah's encounter with God in 6:1-8
(If you're feeling creative you could try to draw each scene).
v1-4

v5

v6-7

v8

4. Why is Isaiah so reluctant to be commissioned as God's spokesperson?

Read Isaiah 6:9-13

5. What is so unusual about the message God tells Isaiah to give his people?

6. When will Isaiah's strange mission be over?

7. Is there any hope in this chapter?

Read Matthew 13:10-17

8. How is the time of Isaiah's strange mission over now that Jesus has come?

9. In what sense is the period of God's judgement on those who have decided not to listen to him still ongoing, even now that Jesus has come?

Read Mathew 28:16-20

10. Like Isaiah, we too have been commissioned to be spokespersons for God. What is the message we have been given to carry and to whom are we to carry this message?

11. How similar or different is our message to the message the prophet Isaiah took to Israel and Judah?

Application

Trust

People often reject the gospel, even though the true king, Jesus, has now come. How does Isa 6:9-10, and Jesus' interpretation of it in Mt 13:10-17, help you understand and cope with this?

Say

Not all 'kings' in life are worth speaking on behalf of. What are some of the 'kings' - causes, worldviews, etc. - for which you sometimes find yourself speaking up, even unwittingly, and yet you wish you wouldn't?

Do

How can you be a better messenger of the true king, Jesus?

Pray

Think of someone in your life that you hope to talk to about Jesus. Pray with each other for opportunities to have such a conversation.

Study 4 – God With Us – in more ways than one!

Isaiah 7:1-9:7

Looking back

Last week we read about Isaiah being commissioned with a message of judgement to carry to the people of Israel and Judah. We learnt that, like Isaiah, we too have been commissioned as spokesperson, for God, and we started praying about people in our lives that we hope to talk with about Jesus. Has there been any progress in this? Are there things to give thanks for, things to ask God for? Pray again for these people and your desire to share with them about Jesus.

Getting started

At Christmas, we remember that one of Jesus' names is 'Immanuel', 'God with us.' We assume that 'God with us' must always be a good thing, but is that necessarily so? What circumstances might make it a bad thing?

Background

Isaiah 7 needs some historical context for it to make sense, which we can glean from 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28. The year is 735BC, five years after Isaiah was commissioned as a prophet. Ahaz is king of Judah. Assyria is threatening Judah's northern neighbours, Syria (also known as 'Aram') and Israel (also known as 'Ephraim'). Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, king of Israel, have formed an alliance to oppose Assyria and try to force Judah to join them by besieging Jerusalem and then, they hope, installing a puppet king to be their ally (7:6). In 7:1, we enter the story right in the middle of the siege.

Observation and interpretation

Read Isaiah 7:1-9

1. What is Ahaz's predicament in 7:1?

2. What is Ahaz's reaction to his predicament in 7:2?

3. What is Isaiah's message to Ahaz in 7:3-9?

Read Isaiah 7:10-12

Ahaz thought he only had two choices when it came to Judah's survival: side with Syria and Israel, or side with Assyria. God has offered him a radical, third choice: side with neither of them and trust God instead. To reinforce this, God volunteers to prove his trustworthiness to Ahaz by offering him a sign (7:10).

4. How does Ahaz respond to God's offer of a sign and what does this look like on the surface?

5. Read 2 Kings 16:5-9. What does this show us about the real reason behind Ahaz's answer to Isaiah?

Read Isaiah 7:13-25

Ahaz refuses God's offer of a sign because he has already chosen who he will ask to help him in this fight: Assyria, not God. In response, God insists on giving him a sign anyway, but it comes in two stages.

6. Remembering that Immanuel means 'God with us', let's consider what the sign is that 'God is with' Judah:
 - a. From v16, what will happen *before* the child is old enough to know right and wrong? (see also the timing of the birth of Isaiah's own child in 8:3-4).

 - b. From v15 and its explanation in v18-25, what will life be like *when* the child is old enough to know right and wrong? (see also 8:5-8).

7. What does it mean for God to be 'with' Judah in each of these timeframes?

The child 'Immanuel' is a sign that God is 'with' Judah in two very different ways. In the short-term (before the child is old enough to know right from wrong), God is 'with' Judah in the sense that he is on their side. He will defeat Israel and Syria and so protect Judah from them. This sign came true in history. A son born at this time (735BC) would be a young boy when Syria fell to the Assyrians (732BC) and a young adolescent when they conquered Israel (722BC). God was 'with' Judah in salvation. However, in the long term (by the time the child had grown up), God is 'with' Judah not in salvation but in judgment. In 701BC, when the child would be about thirty years old, Judah fell almost completely into Assyrian hands and only narrowly avoided Jerusalem being captured (see Is 36-37). In this sense, God will be 'with' Judah in judgment.

In summary: because of Ahaz's stubborn refusal to trust God and instead trust in 'mere humans' (2:22), Judah will only stand in the short term, not the long (7:9). God will be 'with' them in the last way they'd ever want him to be. The picture for Judah is gloomy!

Read Isaiah 9:1-7

8. As v1 implies, the picture for Judah has been pretty gloomy so far! How do these verses provide hope?

9. What is the contrast between this royal son and Ahaz?

Read Matthew 1:20-23

10. Matthew helps us see the ultimate and far greater fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 7. The woman is not merely young, but the virgin mother Mary. The child is not merely a reminder that God is with us, he literally is God with us. How is this Immanuel much greater news than the Immanuel of Isaiah's day?

Application

Trust

Isaiah 7 helps us see that 'God with us' can be good news or bad news depending on where we stand with God. How conscious are you of God's presence in your life and how does this affect the way you carry yourself in public and how you spend your private time?

Say

It's been said that we don't really understand something until we can explain it. Split into pairs and explain why 'God with us' can be both a warning of judgment as well as a message of hope.

Do

Humanly speaking, where we stand with God is determined by whether we stand firm in the faith (Isaiah 7:9). What is one practical step you can take this week to stand firm in Christ?

Pray

Thank God that through Jesus he has come to live with us not to condemn us but to forgive our sins and enable us to rejoice in his presence with us. Pray that we will stand firm in his love for us and be encouraged to reject sin that grieves him.

Study 5 – The Fear of the Lord

Isaiah 8:5-9:7

Looking back:

In the last study we learnt that “Immanuel” which means God is with us can be both a good thing because he is our salvation and a bad thing because he is our judge. However, in Jesus, God is with us to save us from our sins, and this should fill us with gratitude and hope and embolden us to reject sin. What is one way that God has encouraged or challenged you in this during the past week? Take a moment to thank God for this.

Getting started

What are some of your childhood fears that you have since overcome as an adult?

Background

In chapter 7, King Ahaz was informed of an impending attack on Judah by Israel and Syria. Ahaz and his people reacted in fear but God sent Isaiah to tell King Ahaz not to fear but rather to place his faith in God if the kingdom was to survive. Instead King Ahaz rejected God’s message and sought help from the king of Assyria. In the following passages, God reminds the people of Judah why he alone is to be feared.

6. How would you sum up from this passage why Israel and Judah should fear God alone and not the pagan Kings of Syria and Assyria?

Read 1 Peter 2:4-8

7. Noting that Peter alludes to Isaiah 8:14-15 here, how are God's promises of judgement and redemption fulfilled in Jesus?
8. How does this passage in 1 Peter help us further reflect on how we demonstrate our fear of God?

Application

Trust

What people or situations in your life could cause you to fear them more than God? How does this passage help you deal with such fear?

Say

Last week we practised explaining how 'God with us' can be both warning and hope. This week, split into pairs and explain from this passage what it means to fear God.

Do

What can you do routinely to help you grow in your reverent fear of God?

Pray

Use 1 Peter 2:4-8 as a prompt for prayer, that we would grow in the fear of the Lord and invite others to join us in being built into God's household.

Study 6 – The One Who Will Make All Things New

Isaiah 9:8–12:6

Looking back

Last week, we learnt that God alone is to be feared because he is both the ultimate judge and saviour of his people. Has this reality impacted your week at all? If yes, how? (and give thanks!) If no – praise God for his patience with us and ask that he'd help us to put his word into action.

Getting started

Do you ever find it hard to believe that God really will restore the world to order in the new creation? Why? Why not?

Background

Isaiah 9:8–10:34 is a description of the thoroughness of God's justice: he will not stop until every sin has been punished. God will punish Israel for its sin but, even when that has been done, his anger will still not have been exhausted (9:12, 17, 21). Judah still needs to pay for its crimes, and will do so via Assyria (10:1–4). But even then, God will still have justice to mete out, this time to Assyria itself, for its pride in seeing itself as anything more than a weapon in God's hands to carry out his will (10:5–34). It is only when every sinner – Israelite, Judean or Assyrian – has been given justice that God can rest.

But when all that has been done, the way is clear for some hope: a new king who will rule for the benefit of all of God's people, not just in Judah but in every nation on earth. This is the theme of Isaiah 11:1–12:6.

b. destroy?

5. When?

Read Isaiah 12:1-6

6. What is the great theme of this song of praise?

Isaiah refers to this figure as a 'shoot ... from the stump of Jesse'. By mentioning Jesse, the father of King David, Isaiah tells us he is talking about the dynasty of David's line, and hence that this 'shoot' will be a new king. The fact that Isaiah goes on to mention the Spirit in the next verse therefore makes perfect sense. Historically, the Spirit empowered the kings of Israel to perform their kingly duties (1 Samuel 10:10; 11:16; 16:13-14). If the kings did not have the Spirit, they couldn't do their job. If they did have the Spirit, they could. In fact that was part of how you identified a king of Israel: by whether he had the Spirit or not. So with all that in mind

Read John 1:29-34

7. How did John know who Jesus really was?

8. What does this tell us about who Jesus really is?

Application

Trust

How often do you reflect on God's promise to restore the world to order in the new creation? Does this passage challenge or affirm your attitude towards God's promise of the new creation?

Say

Here's a memorisation challenge: commit Isaiah 12:4-6 to memory.

Do

How does the guarantee of a place for you in the new creation shape the way you live and respond to the evil and injustice that you see in life now?

Pray

Pray in thanksgiving to God that he will one day bring all evil and injustice to an end and establish his Kingdom of peace, righteousness and justice. Pray that we will not grow weary of warning those who reject Jesus about the judgment of God that awaits them if they don't repent.

Study 7 – A Heart for the Nations

Isaiah 13-20

Looking back

How did you go committing Isaiah 12:4-6 to memory? What impact did it have, saying this over and over to yourself?

Getting started

Have you ever considered overseas mission work? Why? Why not?

Background

Isaiah 1-12 is about the transformation of Jerusalem. Jerusalem has been ruined through poor leadership, hypocrisy and injustice, and will face God's anger in the form of the Assyrian army. However, the city also has a great future which will be achieved by a God-like king.

Isaiah 13-27 is a new section with a new topic: the transformation of the nations. The nations, including Israel and Judah, defy God and will face God's anger. But a day is coming when even the nations can be included in the city of God. Isaiah 11 had pictured a gathering of God's people from around the world, and this idea is developed in chapters 13-27.

Isaiah 13-20 is a series of oracles against the nations surrounding Judah.

3. Now get back together and briefly summarise your findings. Are there any similarities? Differences?

4. Isaiah 11:9 told us that God has plans for the whole earth to be filled with the knowledge of him. How do we see the first glimmers of this hope in these chapters, even in the midst of God's judgment on the nations?

Isaiah tells us that the only hope the nations have of escaping God's wrath for their sins is to escape as refugees to Jerusalem.

Read Revelation 21:1-4, 22-27.

5. How does this hope find its ultimate fulfilment?

Application

Trust

Do you see yourself as a refugee running to God? What do you need to trust about this world, and what do you need to trust about God, to view yourself in this way?

Say

It's been a few weeks since we've spoken specifically about the people in your life that you hope to be able to talk with about Jesus. How are those conversations going?

Do

How are the hopes of Isaiah 14:1-2 coming true today in Christian world mission? What can you do to support such mission?

Pray

Use Revelation 21:22-27 as a prompt for prayer for our world. Take time to pray for our Global Mission partners who are serving across cultures around the world.

Study 8 – Money and Power

Isaiah 21-23

Looking back

Begin this time together where we ended last study – praying for world mission, asking God to bring many people from every nation into his Heavenly Jerusalem for refuge at the throne of his Son.

Getting started

'Money and power are two of the Christian's greatest temptations.'
Discuss.

Background

Isaiah 21-23 is another series of oracles against the nations. In this sense, it is no different from chapters 13-20. However, as it closes the cycle of these messages, it focuses on two nations who held particular temptations for Judah: Babylon and Tyre. For the first readers of *Isaiah*, Babylon was the epitome of power and Tyre was the epitome of wealth. For a nation struggling against a massive superpower like Assyria, both of these nations seemed like attractive allies. But Isaiah wants to warn Judah that their best hope lies not in power or money, but in God. And so he records these (at times very strange) visions.

Observation and interpretation

Read Isaiah 21:1-10

1. Isaiah doesn't tell us who the vision is about right until the very end of the vision. What is it about? (21:9).

2. What does the vision foresee?

3. What is the implication for Judah and Jerusalem?

Read Isaiah 23:1-18

4. Who is this vision about?

5. What does the vision foresee?

6. What are the implications for Judah and Jerusalem?

Babylon and Tyre were real, historical cities that suffered real, historical fates, as Isaiah foretold they would. But they also held symbolic value for Isaiah's readers: they epitomised everything that was impressive and alluring in the world, and in particular the seeming security of power and wealth. Later biblical writers would use them to convey the same symbolism of a world relying on power and money, rather than God.

Read Revelation 18

7. Which bits of this (equally strange!) vision talk about Babylon? Which bits seem to be talking about Tyre?

8. What does it say about the future of 'Babylon' and 'Tyre'?

Application

Trust

How can we be tempted to rely on power and money for our security rather than the gospel? How has this reliance been challenged in what we have read?

Say

Like the Israelites we struggle with the allure of wealth and power, but we can be blind to our own failings. How might we give permission to each other to speak into each other's lives, asking the hard questions, encouraging a dependence on God?

Do

Revelation 18:4-5 calls for action. Are there actions you need to take to extricate yourself from a dependence on power or wealth that undermines your dependence on the Lord?

Pray

Take time to confess your hunger for worldly security. Ask God to grow us in our dependence on him.

Study 9 – A Tale of Two Cities

Isaiah 24-26

Looking back

We talked about taking action last week to extract ourselves from dependence on power or wealth that undermines our dependence on God. How did you go with this last week? Are there things to give thanks for or ways we can pray for each other to keep putting this into action?

Getting Started

Can you think of a time when you've taken the credit for something that really belonged to someone else? (or maybe you did the right thing and deflected the praise to where it rightly belonged?)

Background

With chapters 13-23 we've seen the sweep of God's righteous judgement of the nations, with glimmers of his grace shining through. Chapter 24 sums this up with a picture of his world-wide judgement, while chapters 25-27 reflect on a promise of world-wide renewal. Isaiah's attention will then turn back to Judah in a more focused way, which we'll see culminating in chapters 36-39 in the next study.

Observation and Interpretation

Read Isaiah 24:1-13

1. What is the point being made in v1-3?

2. V4-13 expand on this with numerous images to explain why this is happening and what it will be like. What stands out to you from this section? If you're feeling creative, draw some of the scenes described here.

3. How is the image of a city used in v10-12 to describe the way human pride is to be judged? You might find it helpful to think back to some of the cities that we've read about so far in Isaiah.

The rest of chapter 24 unpacks more of the devastation of God's coming judgment upon all the earth. In v14-16 Isaiah alludes to the remnant of humanity who are like the gleanings left after the grape harvest (v13), saved from God's judgment and raising their voice to praise God. Yet Isaiah is dismayed by the state of the world and the prospect of the coming judgment (v16-18) and he continues to describe the outcome of God's righteous rule. In chapter 25 his tone changes as he speaks from the perspective of the future, looking back on these acts of judgment.

Read Isaiah 25:1-8

4. In light of the terrifying judgements of chapter 24, how do v1-5 help us to see that God's judgement is a reason to praise God?

5. What do v6-8 promise for 'all peoples'?

6. Looking back over what we've read in 25:1-8,
a. How much of this was fulfilled in the historical events in the years that followed after Isaiah's lifetime (eg: destruction of Assyria by Babylon, destruction of Jerusalem and exile to Babylon, destruction of Babylon by Persia, return of some of God's people to Jerusalem)?

b. How much of this was fulfilled in Jesus' life, death and resurrection?

c. How much of this is still waiting to be fulfilled?

As Isaiah looks forward to this final expression of God's judgement, he piles up song after song, with 25:9-12 providing a further song of praise, and more songs to follow in chapter 26 and 27. In chapter 26 Isaiah returns to the image of two cities to describe the glory of God's character and actions.

Read Isaiah 26:1-8

7. From the description in these verses, who are the people that will sing this song of praise?

8. From v1-6, how are the two cities described and what is the contrast between them?

9. Verse 8 provides a great summary of the person who dwells in the 'strong city' with its walls of salvation (v1), who trusts in the Lord forever (v4). The verse can be broken into three sections. Each section sums up some of Isaiah said to Judah, as well as giving us plenty to think about in terms of how we live today.

	What would this have looked like for Judah?	What does this look like for us today?
Walking in the way of your laws		
We wait for you		
Your name and renown are the desire of our hearts		

Application

Trust

What is an area in your life where you find it hard to wait for God – either in his promise to bring justice or his promise to bring renewal?

Say

Isaiah 25:1 sums up a really good reason to speak God's praise to one another. Take a moment to reflect on something wonderful that God has in his perfect faithfulness as planned long ago. But don't just think this – say it out loud!

Do

How do the vision of the new creation given in 25:6-8 and the 'mission statement' of 26:8 need to shape our everyday decisions with our time, money and energy?

Pray

Pray that 26:8 would be true in our lives.

Study 10 – Flawed king, Faithful King

Isaiah 36-39

Looking back

Have there been ways you've been challenged to let go of your dependence on wealth and power in this last week?

Getting Started

What has stood out to you from our time in Isaiah so far?

Background

Isaiah 36-39 is notable within Isaiah as an extended passage of historical narrative. 2 Kings 18 provides an account of King Hezekiah's ascension to the throne and describes his reign saying, 'He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done.' (v3) In the fourth year of his reign Assyria destroyed Samaria and deported the Israelites of the Northern kingdom, and ten years later they returned and laid siege to Jerusalem. This is where Isaiah picks up the story in chapter 36 (and his account is quoted in 2 Kings 18-20). It comes on the back of chapters 28-35 that outline the foolish alliance Judah has entered into with Egypt (eg 30:1-5, 36:6), and it is followed by Hezekiah's foolish decision to court an alliance with Babylon in chapter 39. Yet sandwiched in between is this account of God's king standing firm in faith in the Lord (see 7:9). As a brilliantly recorded narrative it repays the effort of reading it in full as we meet Hezekiah at his best. On the one hand he stands as a great example, yet at the same time his fallibility leaves us longing for a truly faithful king.

Observation and Interpretation

Read Isaiah 36:1-22

1. Verse 1 is brief, but how would it have felt for those living in Jerusalem to see the Assyrian commander approaching?
2. How would you sum up what the Assyrian field commander says to the Judean officials in v4-10?
3. How would you sum up what he says to the people in v13-20?
4. Based on what we've seen in Isaiah so far, what are the possible reactions we might expect from Hezekiah?

Read Isaiah 37:1-38

5. How would you describe Hezekiah's response to the Assyrian threat? How does this relate to what we have read in Isaiah about fear and trust?

6. What is Sennacherib's response? How does this relate to what we have read in Isaiah about pride and humility?

7. How does God respond? How does this relate to what we have read in Isaiah of his character?

Read Isaiah 38:1-20

8. Having faced down a terrifying foe at a national level, here we see Hezekiah in the privacy of his bedroom. How does this episode portray Hezekiah? In what ways does he exemplify the ideal of God's king?

Application

Trust

The Assyrian field commander ridiculed the Lord: "Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, 'The LORD will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria' (36:15) Read Matthew 27:38-43. How does Jesus' demonstration of faith in God tower over Hezekiah's? When we face insult from outside or doubt from within, how does his faithfulness assure us of our salvation?

Say

Hezekiah recognised that God used his sickness as a means to grow him and his healing was much more than just physical (38:15, 17). He responds in praise, saying this is the natural response for anyone who has experienced God's saving work (v19). Our praise could be spoken to Christian family, a non-Christian friend or even the hairdresser. Who can you tell this week about God's faithfulness? What is one thing you could share with them about God's faithfulness?

Do

Isaiah's account of Hezekiah has reminded us of what we have read in previous chapters about pride vs humility and fearing the Lord vs fearing others. As you reflect back over the practical change that we've talked about throughout these studies, is there action you need to take this week? Are there changes you want to make for 2021? Note down what you want to change, what you'll do to change it, and when you'll take that action.

Pray

Earlier we suggested Isaiah 1:18 and 12:4-6 as good memory verses for this series. Use them as a prompt for prayer.

