

Isaiah Intro #1 – the basics

This is the prophecy of **Isaiah**, son of Amoz. His name means “the LORD saves.” Isaiah began his ministry in the year 740 BC, and spoke as a prophet to the Kingdom of Judah, based in Jerusalem. (The term “prophet” means someone who speaks to the people on behalf of God.) At the time of his ministry, the vast Assyrian empire in the north threatened to capture the whole region. Locally, Judah was also being threatened by a new competing alliance formed between the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and Aram (Syria). Judah’s king Ahaz signed a treaty of protection with Assyria rather than assist the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Syria in their struggle against the empire. As a result, those northern kingdoms were captured by Assyria. Isaiah predicted that Judah would eventually be defeated because of their sin, but he also saw an ultimate redemption and restoration at the end of the story.

Major empires at play at this time and in the following centuries:

Assyria (conquered Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC)

Babylon (conquered Judah in 586 BC and took captives to Babylon)

Persia (conquered Babylon in 539 BC and sent the Israelites home)



Major themes of Isaiah: The judgment of God’s people, followed by their ultimate salvation.

While these themes can be most directly applied to the people’s current situation and relationship with Assyria and Babylon nearly 3 millennia ago, Isaiah’s prophecy also speaks of a *bigger story* as well: the judgment and rebuke of all world powers that work against the plans of God, and the final establishment of God’s kingdom of peace and justice on earth.

The first chapter of Isaiah begins an extended “book of judgment” (lasting for the next 39 chapters!). In these chapters, the prophet is speaking words of judgment against *many* different groups of people. There is judgment against Judah, judgment against Israel, judgment against all the surrounding nations...and ultimately judgment against everything in this world that works against the purposes of God – and no one is exempt. Following all of these devastating chapters of judgment, the final 26 chapters consist of a “book of comfort” – a vision of hope, reminding the people that judgment is not an end in itself, but eventually gives way to new blessing and new life.

So what is the purpose of *judgment* at all? What is the role of judgment in the big story of God’s plan for restoring the world?

I like to think about it this way...

In a court of law, there is a judge. The role of that judge is to examine the evidence that is presented, and to declare who is right and who is wrong in a particular lawsuit. That is what judgment means: declaring what is right and what is wrong. And when you think about it that way, it’s easy to see that judgment is a necessary step in the process of making things right. In order for things to get better, someone first needs to stand up and point out what is wrong

with the system. [*Note*: one of the common misconceptions (about the Bible and about basic grammar) is that “judgment” is equivalent to “punishment.” But that isn’t the point. Judgment means something more like “deciding.” Sometimes there might be punishment as a *result* of judgment, but that doesn’t mean they are the same thing. Try to process that distinction – it will be immensely helpful for understanding Isaiah!]

In the book of Isaiah (and in the whole Christian story), we are introduced to the idea that God is the ultimate **judge of the world**. God is the only one with authority to declare what is right and what is wrong in our world. We are also introduced to the idea that God is our **savior** – that God plans to redeem and restore a broken universe. These two ideas go hand-in-hand. They depend on each other. God is both the *judge* and the *savior*. This means that God has a plan to make all things right in the end, and that a necessary part of that process is declaring what is not yet right. This is the message of Isaiah the prophet. The judgment of God declares what is broken; the promise of God is to heal.