

Isaiah

Like the priests of the Old Testament, prophets had a special relationship with God as His representatives among His people. God called them to reveal His truth and sovereign will to His people. In doing so, they confronted the Israelites with God's commands and promises, regardless of whether or not the promises be of impending judgment or of present and/or future blessing.

Isaiah did just that. His prophecy, with its emphasis on the grace, mercy, judgment, and glory of God is considered to be one of the best prophecies found in Scripture.

Prophecies Recorded by Their Prophet

Among conservative, evangelical scholars, there is virtually no debate that the prophet Isaiah is the one who prophesied and wrote the prophecy found in the book that bears his name. It is a vision he received from God for Jerusalem and Judah during the "days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (1:1). Based on the reigns of these kings and the death of the Assyrian king Sennacherib mentioned in verse 38 of chapter 37, Isaiah's prophetic ministry can be dated roughly over a 59-year period between 740 and 681 BC.

Two Audiences and One Spirit

Isaiah's prophecy is commonly divided into two parts: chapters 1-39 and chapters 40-66. Chapters 1-39 tell the story of the impending judgment of God against the people of Israel and Judah for their repeated disobedience of His Law. Chapters 40-66 bring a message of hope that is found in the forgiving grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God. This hope will be personified in the coming Messiah and consummated in the establishment of His future kingdom.

These two parts were seemingly written to two different audiences. The first audience is the people of God during Isaiah's lifetime. They rebelled against God and thus corrupted themselves personally, religiously, and socially. Judgment was the result of their rebellion. The second audience appears to be the Judean exiles who were living in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. These exiles received comfort from Isaiah's prophecy because it announced God's promise to come with a world-changing display of His glory. They were not to be demoralized nor enraptured by the impressive, yet empty culture of idolatry in Babylon. They were to remain steadfast in their confidence in God to fulfill His promises.

The inevitable question, then, is: how can one man prophesy to two groups of people separated by 150+ years? The inspiration of the Holy Spirit is the answer. Isaiah's prophecy is the vision he received from God. As he prophesied regarding the sins of his contemporaries and the judgment to come, he prophesied under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Under the same Holy Spirit's inspiration, he prophesied regarding the hope of the coming Messiah and establishment of His kingdom, which was inaugurated 700 years in the future and has yet to be fully established. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that Isaiah's prophecy was applicable to both audiences in the same way it is to modern readers.

All For God's Glory

Through his vision, Isaiah reveals a God-centered way of seeing life and living it. Under God's inspiration, he uses symbols and reasoned thought to communicate and define everything by its relation to the one true God. Everything is either rightly adjusted to God as "the gloriously central figure in all reality"¹ or not. Therefore, as the *ESV Study Bible* commentators have written, "The central theme of [Isaiah] is God himself, who does all things for His own sake" (48:11).²

Eight Significant Themes³

Eight significant themes run throughout Isaiah's prophecy. A proper understanding of them provides the lens through which the prophecy is to be viewed. These eight themes are:

1. God is offended by religious ritual – however impressive – if it conceals an empty heart and careless life.
2. God's true people will become an eternal and multinational community of worship and peace.
3. God opposes human pride and the idols we foolishly create as a place in which we often put our trust. This is especially true when we foolishly place our trust in worldly powers and political systems.
4. Though God's judgment will reduce His people to a remnant, his final purpose is the joyful triumph of His grace and His people through the Messiah.
5. God is able to judge people by rendering them deaf and blind to his saving word.
6. The only hope of the world is bound up in one man – the Promised Davidic King, the Servant of the Lord, the Anointed Preacher of the Gospel, and the Lone Victor over all evil.
7. With a great and holy God ruling all things, man's duty is faith in Him alone and repentance unto life.
8. God's past faithfulness and the certainty of His final victory motivate His people toward prayer and practical obedience in the present.

Is Goodness Defeated by Sin?

A major question that Isaiah answers is: does the Israelites' sin and rebellion defeat the gracious and good purposes of God? Absolutely not! Although God must purify His people through judgment, He has an overruling purpose of grace. It begins with the redemption of Isaiah, spreads to Judah, then to Israel, and ultimately to the nations of the world. The proclamation of this good news – that God will glorify Himself through the renewed and increased glory of His people, which attracts the world's nations – is the sum total of the prophecy's purpose.

¹ *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2008), 1234.

² *Ibid.*, 1234.

³ *Ibid.*, 1237.