

Our God Saves: Turn

Our God Saves: Turn – Believe- Live
Isaiah 1:1-18

Mark Vroegop

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: "Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged (Isa. 1:1-4).

Shortly after our family moved to Indianapolis, I received a panicked phone call from my wife. The tone of her greeting told me that she'd been crying.

"Mark, I'm downtown and I can't figure out how to get home. I'm lost."

This was before she owned an iPhone with a navigation app and prior to purchasing a GPS navigator. Frankly, when we lived in Michigan, there was no need for either of them. Our previous hometown had a few main roads, and the routes were not that complicated. But moving to a major metropolitan area created a major new challenge.

Without a smartphone or a GPS, how do you think I helped my wife get home? I asked her a series of questions. "Are you on the highway? What buildings do you see? Are they on your left or your right? Is the sun behind you or in front of you?"

Eventually, I was able to get her to I-465. I think she took a very long route home, but she made it. And we bought her an iPhone.

When you aren't sure where you are or when you are navigating complicated terrain, it's important to have some reference points. Major landmarks allow us to quickly orient ourselves so that we can determine our location and know how to chart our route.

Landmarks in Isaiah

Today we begin a yearlong journey through the Old Testament book of Isaiah. This prophetic book is historic, important, complicated, and timely. Isaiah records God's message to his people in the eighth century, seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus. It's the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. Isaiah records some of the most familiar prophecies about the Messiah, but it also includes some of the strongest calls for repentance. The sixty-six books of Isaiah address an immediate

crisis of trust with a looming external political threat while also making prophecies about the future. And it speaks into timely spiritual issues connected to what God's people place their hopes in, how they treat one another, and where deliverance is coming from.

The goal of this sermon today is to give you some landmarks and highpoints of the book of Isaiah so that you can know both where we are headed and where we are in the study. The title of this series and the artwork are designed with "wayfinding" in mind.

We're calling this series "Our God Saves." The title comes from the meaning of the name of Isaiah: "Yahweh (God) is salvation."¹ The book identifies that big problems require a big God. Isaiah is a masterpiece of prophetic literature that takes you to theological summits in order to gain perspective and to be spiritually refreshed.

I know that many of us are taking vacations this summer after a long, hard season. If you are a person who loves mountains, Isaiah is a book that takes you to fourteen thousand feet, shows you incredible beauty, and provides a reset. If you are a beach person, Isaiah is a book that spreads a blanket as you watch the sunset, marvel at the orange and red hues, and stuns you with creative beauty.

Isaiah is going to help us be reminded of who is really in control and where to place our hope.

Along with the title, we've included three key words which will remain with us through the entire series: turn, believe, live. These key concepts will serve as our big-picture outline of Isaiah.

- **Chapters 1-39** – turn from trusting in idols, hypocrisy, and disobedience
- **Chapters 40-55** – believe that God's promises are true and that he is faithful
- **Chapters 56-66** – live with hope in God's future deliverance as we obey him now

Keep the words "turn", "believe", and "live" in mind as landmarks as we journey through this amazing book. We'll come back to each of these sections later in the sermon.

The Prophet and His Setting

Every book of the Bible has an author and a setting. The Holy Spirit inspired people to write portions of the Bible which reflect their personality, style, and circumstances. Isaiah is no different, and we get a clear sense of this in the first few verses.

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: "Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me" (Isa. 1:1-2).

Let's start with the prophet. The book begins with an identification of the author and the audience. We don't know a lot about Isaiah, but there are some clues. His father is identified as Amoz, and Jewish

¹ Crossway Bibles, [The ESV Study Bible](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1233.

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tradition suggests that he was the brother of King Amaziah (see 2 Kings 14)². So, it's likely that Isaiah was an extended member of the royal family. Further, there's evidence that he was a scribe—perhaps a royal one. Isaiah writes as an insider who is deeply concerned about the spiritual trajectory of the nation.

At the time of Isaiah's writing, the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. His main focus is on the southern kingdom, but he also addresses the northern kingdom prior to the Assyrian invasion in 722 B.C. Isaiah 1:1 dates the writing with a list of kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. These names are references to epochs of history the same way as if I said, "This is the history of College Park during the days of Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden." The name represents more than who occupies the White House.

The reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah encompassed one hundred years. This is the setting for the first thirty-nine chapters of the book. It's an era of history with more good kings than bad—Uzziah, Jotham, and Hezekiah were kings who generally did what was right in the sight of the Lord. The nation experienced God's blessing in terms of land, military victories, and economic prosperity. But the people of God allowed their prosperity to dull their relationship with God. Their worship was fake. They failed to love one another. Idolatry and injustice reigned.

Isaiah's call to ministry comes in Isaiah 6 with these famous words:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple (Isa. 6:1).

And yet his ministry would be hard and not well-received:

And he said, "Go, and say to this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (Isa. 6:9–10).

Isaiah is a book of judgment and hope. God loves his people enough that he aims to win them back to himself through divine discipline which comes from prophetic words and fearful circumstances. God uses three nations as the means of his refinement: Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. These nations ebb and flow in their power over two hundred years. They are the means of testing, discipline, and deliverance.

One of the major themes in Isaiah is the way that God controls and uses foreign nations for his purposes. And the people will have to decide who they are going to trust and who they are going to obey. The central issue in Isaiah is whether or not our God saves.

² Gary V. Smith, [Isaiah 1–39](#), ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 99.

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And now, go, write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever. For they are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the LORD; who say to the seers, "Do not see," and to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel." Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel, "Because you despise this word and trust in oppression and perverseness and rely on them, therefore this iniquity shall be to you like a breach in a high wall, bulging out and about to collapse, whose breaking comes suddenly, in an instant; and its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that among its fragments not a shard is found with which to take fire from the hearth, or to dip up water out of the cistern." For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." But you were unwilling, and you said, "No! We will flee upon horses"; therefore you shall flee away; and, "We will ride upon swift steeds"; therefore your pursuers shall be swift. A thousand shall flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you shall flee, till you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill. Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him (Isa. 30:8–18).

Whether it's the eighth century, the sixth century, or the prophecies about the future, the question is the same: will God's people look to him to save them? Big problems need a big God. And the book of Isaiah continually moves from judgment to hope as the prophet calls God's people to turn, believe, and live.

With this background, let's look at each of the three divisions in Isaiah.³

Chapters 1-39: Turn

Isaiah's first message is a prophetic warning for God's people to see how they have strayed from God's ways and turn to him for deliverance. Their rebellious actions and religious apathy are serious. The biblical vision for the people of Israel was that their relationship with God would translate into their culture and society and that they would be a light for the nations.

Now, this section, along with the other two, moves between poems, narration, and dialogue. You need to read the book of Isaiah like you would read *The Lord of the Rings*.⁴ Don't read Isaiah like you read Romans! It's different by design.

³ The summaries in the three sections (turn, believe, and live) are informed by two very helpful overviews by the BibleProject:

Part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0A6Uchb1F8>

Part 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzdEPuagQg&t=21s>

⁴ J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 35.

Isaiah calls God's people to turn from their idolatry and injustice while offering them the hope of forgiveness.

"Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isa. 1:13–20).

God's vision for the nation is to be a righteous people:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Isa. 2:2–4).

This theme of turning from hypocrisy and the violation of God's heart flows through these thirty-nine chapters. We see it in chapter 6 when Isaiah, seeing the holiness of God, says "Woe is me" (v. 5) but then has his sin purged. What's more, we see it when Ahaz is told to not fear Assyria. And when he refuses to believe, Isaiah talks about a future deliverer (Isa. 11).

In chapters 13-23, Isaiah turns his attention to the other nations around Israel who also need to repent of their corruption, idolatry, and injustice. And chapters 24-27 detail the contrast between the sinfulness of the present world with the hope of a future kingdom. In chapters 28-39, the leaders of Judah are taken to task for their trust in earthly powers (Egypt). Hezekiah trusts God, and the nation is delivered from Assyria. But it isn't long until Hezekiah is rebuked for his attempt to curry favor with Babylon which will lead to destruction.

So we see this pattern that is central to the book of Isaiah. God's people continually struggle with placing their trust in other things rather than God, and it is reflected in how they live and treat one another. Isaiah calls them (and us) to see this and turn from it.

Chapters 40-55: Believe

This second section was written to those who were in exile because of the Babylonian captivity. Despite God's warning, the people of Judah didn't listen. In 586 B.C., Jerusalem was destroyed, and the people were deported. Judgment had come.

However, this section offers hope with the contrast between an earthly kingdom/king and God's kingdom/king. Consider the hopeful and familiar words of Isaiah 40:1-5:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (Isa. 40:1–5).

Despite all the promises, grace, and hope, the people of Israel still do not believe. Sadly, they are still rebellious, and God will fulfill his purposes through "His Servant" who is called "Israel"—the fulfillment of what God intended for his people (49:3).

However, this servant/king delivers his people not by might but by suffering, rejection, and death.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed (Isa. 53:3–5).

And the choice is either to believe or to be stubborn like the previous generations.

Chapters 56-66: Live

This final section looks into the future with a series of poems that reaffirm all the promises in the book which will be lived out in God's new kingdom. God's justice will be executed. The servant/king will rule, and his righteous subjects will bask in the glory of a remade holy world. "Holy, holy, holy" is not just what Isaiah saw in chapter 6 (v. 2); it's now lived.

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified (Isa. 61:1–3).

This glorious vision—“Our God Saves”—extends into a global dominion. The book ends with a beautiful image of redeemed people worshiping and praising God.

“For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD” (Isa. 66:22–23).

This book is amazing! It elevates the glory of God, and it invites us to be humbled. It calls on us to worship deeply and live righteously. It pleads for individual righteousness while calling on us to apply that righteousness in how we care for the marginalized. Isaiah invites us to take our big problems to a big God.

This eighth-century prophet still speaks. He calls us to turn, believe, and live.

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