

Our God Saves

Overview of Isaiah

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To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint (Isa. 40:25–31).

Several months ago, I read the authorized biography of Eugene Peterson by Winn Collier entitled, *A Burning in My Bones*. It's a delightful narrative of the life, ministry, and thoughtfulness of Peterson. There's a story in the biography that made me laugh out loud, and it directly connects to this final sermon in our year-long series on the book of Isaiah.

Eugene Peterson is well-known for many of his books. But his contemporary translation of the Bible called, *The Message*, may be his most notable work. It started accidentally during a small Bible study on the book of Galatians. Those attending the study seemed to miss the meaning and poignancy of Paul's words. Peterson brought a fresh, earthy translation of one chapter, and the class environment dramatically changed. He translated all of Galatians, and it wasn't long until a publisher invited him to work on the entire New Testament. The Old Testament followed.

I believe that Peterson started with the Psalms which must have been published separately because they piqued the interest of Bono, the lead singer of U2. Before a concert Bono, along with The Edge, Adam Clayton, and Larry Mullen, Jr., would read one of the Psalms in *The Message*. They found it to be deeply meaningful. Bono eventually reached out to the publisher and asked if they could meet.

At the time, Peterson was working hard on the translation of Isaiah. He was pressed for a deadline. And he had no idea who Bono was. He declined the meeting. Somehow his kids learned about the request, and they pressed him to change his mind. "Dad," they said, "it's Bono." To which Eugene Peterson said, "Kids, it's Isaiah."

Eventually, they did meet, and they even developed a unique friendship that lasted several years.

But I think I understand what Peterson is saying because I've felt the weightiness, the hope, the grandeur, and the significance of this majestic book. I often marvel at how the Holy Spirit orchestrates our journey through the Bible with our journey through life. Isaiah has been incredibly timely and relevant.

I hope that encourages you. It's good to be reminded that God speaks to us through his Word. It's helpful to celebrate the practicality of the Scriptures in our lives. It's motivating to consider that there's more to learn and new ways to apply the Bible. The Scriptures are "living and active" (Heb. 4:12).

My aim today is to do two things: (1) to give us a high-level overview of Isaiah and (2) to highlight some key principles that I hope remain with us long after we end this series.

Our God Saves: Turn-Believe-Live

What is the book of Isaiah about? I hope that you could answer that question better now, in June 2022, than you could have in June 2021. In short, the book is about God – who he is, what he's done, and what he promises to do. Isaiah is a book of hope that's written to God's people as they faced external and internal threats.

What does this book tell us about God? Isaiah shows us over and over that our God saves. The title comes from the meaning of the name of Isaiah: "Yahweh (God) is salvation."¹ 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.

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. They are the means of testing, discipline, and deliverance.

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

Turn: Chapters 1-39

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

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

culture and society and that they would be a light for the nations. 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).

When the people of God faced real threats from earthly invaders, God called upon them to turn from their trust in their military, politics, and money. Ahaz is told to not fear Assyria, but he fails in Isaiah 11. 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.

Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD. And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: "O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD" (Isa. 37:14–20).

While God delivers Hezekiah and the city of Jerusalem, it isn't long until Hezekiah attempts to curry favor with Babylon. It's a decision that will eventually lead to the Babylonian captivity.

Over and over God calls on his people to turn to him from their misplaced trust and their spiritual hypocrisy. God's people continually struggle with placing their trust in anything but God, and it is reflected in how they deal with a crisis and how they live and treat one another. Isaiah calls them (and us) to see this and turn away from it.

Believe: Chapters 40-55

This second section is written to those who are in exile because of the Babylonian captivity. Despite God's warning, the people of Judah didn't listen. In 586 BC, 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 fulfil his purposes through "His Servant" who is called "Israel" – the fulfilment of what God intended for his people.

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).

This servant/king delivers his people not by might but by suffering, rejection, and death. God's people are invited to believe when life is really hard and dark. Our God saves through a suffering deliverer.

Live: Chapters 56-66

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; 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 book is amazing! It elevates the glory of God, and it invites us to be humble not haughty, receptive, not resistant, and obedient, not obstinate. 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 live for another kingdom – a kingdom guaranteed by promise:

“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 eighth-century prophet still speaks. No book is quoted in the New Testament more than Isaiah. If the Old Testament were the Himalayas mountain range, Isaiah would be Mount Everest. He calls us to turn, believe, and live. Isaiah began by rebuking God’s people for their false worship. Isaiah ends with the establishment of true worship in the presence of God’s glory.

Our God saves. But from what? From being on the wrong side of God’s glory. Isaiah is the Old Testament record of God’s plan to save sinners. Our God saves! So turn, believe, and live.

Key Principles

One of the many reasons I love this book is because of its applicability and relevance. Isaiah speaks to where we live right now. I hope there have been many personal applications and points that you’ll remember for a long time.

As I was preparing this sermon, I asked our staff to send me their most memorable principles or applications from Isaiah. With their help, let’s consider six key principles.

There are many important themes in this majestic book. But here are a few to consider:

1. Big problems require a big God

Isaiah is a book about big problems. Scary problems. Impossible problems. There are external threats from invaders. There are internal threats with fake worship. And yet Isaiah reminds us that God is holy. He’s the Creator. The nations are a drop in the bucket. Heaven is where he sits. The earth is his footstool. He can be trusted. Remember who God is, especially when life is hard.

2. Beware of idolatry and spiritual inconsistency

There are many warnings about worship in Isaiah. On the one hand, Isaiah warns us about the way good things can become god-things. Throughout the history of God’s people, we often turn to other things for comfort, security, identity, and power. Idolatry is allowing “a” thing to become “the” thing. God offers to help us, and yet we turn to our idols. You can either carry your idols or have God carry you.

And the other frequent problem is spiritual inconsistency. God’s people are often guilty of saying one thing in worship and living another way in the world. What’s more, there’s a long history of finding

spiritual-sounding reasons why we shouldn't care for those who are hurting or marginalized. God was outraged by their hypocrisy. And we should be careful ourselves.

3. Fear and anxiety are familiar but not fatal

Much of Isaiah is written in response to scary things or events out of human control. There are so many assurances about who the Lord is. But there are also statements about how to respond to our fear and our anxiety. One of the things that I've appreciated about Isaiah is to realize that fear and anxiety are normal experiences of God's people. Isaiah has been helpful to remind me that I can trust the Lord when I'm afraid or when I'm nervous. Isaiah has helped me to stop being afraid of my fear and not worry about my worries. I can trust the Lord. Our God saves!

4. Waiting on God is how you live by promise, not performance

The trust battle in Isaiah relates to whether we're going to put our confidence in our ability to figure things out or in God's ability to work things out. Waiting on God means that I focus on what I know to be true about God when I don't know what's true about my life. Waiting means that I learn to live on the promises of God. The kind of promises that we saw in Isaiah 41:

- I am with you
- I am your God
- I will strengthen you
- I will help you
- I will uphold you

Those are promises to live by.

5. You can't buy manna in bulk

I wish I had thought of that. It's a quote from Betsy Childs Howard from her book on waiting. God gives us daily bread, and throughout Isaiah, we've seen the way that God continually invites his people for him to be their supply. God's people are called to make decisions in their lives and as they face their fears for the Lord to provide what's needed. Eventually, that would be the provision of a suffering Savior. But it also included strong words to kings like Ahaz and Hezekiah whose safety would only be found in trusting in the God who saves.

6. God is going to help you. He has to.

I end with the wisdom of my wife. It connects so beautifully to the big picture message of the book of Isaiah. You may remember at a dark moment in the last year when fear and anxiety were having a "hay-day" with me, she made the teaching of Isaiah deeply personal and practical. He promises to help his people. He has to help us because he promised that he would.

You see, it's not just that our God *saves*. That's true! It's also true that our *God* saves. That's right. But it is personal. *Our* God saves.

So, the next time fear, uncertainty, or anxiety comes knocking at your door. Remember this book. The next time your mind is plagued with thoughts like, “It’s scary! It’s frustrating! It’s impossible,” I hope that you’ll acknowledge that those thoughts are real. But then take your heart to the center of the Bible and remind your soul: “But it’s Isaiah.”

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