

Lesson 1 Introduction to Interpreting Isaiah

Introduction

I have an exercise that I like to do sometimes with participants in class or Bible study. I will read you a passage of Scripture, and I'd like you to tell me who the passage is talking about and who wrote it. Who do these words describe and who wrote the description?

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| ³ He was despised and forsaken of men,
And like one from whom men hide their face | A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. |
| ⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, | And our sorrows He carried;
Smitten of God, and afflicted. |
| ⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
The chastening for our well-being <i>fell</i> upon Him, | He was crushed for our iniquities;
And by His scourging we are healed. |
| ⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray,
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all | Each of us has turned to his own way;
To fall on Him. |
| ⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, | Yet He did not open His mouth;
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth. |
| ⁸ By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
That He was cut off out of the land of the living | And as for His generation, who considered
For the transgression of my people, to whom the
stroke <i>was due</i> ? |
| ⁹ His grave was assigned with wicked men,
Because He had done no violence, | Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth. |
| ¹⁰ But the LORD was pleased
If He would render Himself <i>as</i> a guilt offering,
He will prolong <i>His</i> days, | To crush Him, putting <i>Him</i> to grief;
He will see <i>His</i> offspring,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in
His hand. |
| ¹¹ As a result of the anguish of His soul,
By His knowledge the Righteous One, | He will see <i>it and</i> be satisfied;
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities. |
| ¹² Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
Because He poured out Himself to death,
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, | And He will divide the booty with the strong;
And was numbered with the transgressors;
And interceded for the transgressors. |

Who was that about? He was pierced through for our transgressions... like a lamb led to the slaughter... he would render himself as a guilt offering... My Servant will justify the many? That's got to be Jesus. Right? Who else could that be?

Ok. It is about Jesus. Who wrote it? Who wrote that description? The most common response I get is Paul. "He will justify the many." That sounds like Paul. But Paul did not write that. Who then? The next response I get is one of the Gospel writers. "A lamb led to the slaughter." Or "With a rich man in his death." Sounds like the Gospels. But this was not written by Matthew, or Mark, or Luke, or John. Who wrote it? These are the words of Isaiah, 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

We are starting a new series, Interpreting Isaiah. In this series we will use Alec Motyer's titles for the three major sections of Isaiah. He calls them, The Book of the King, The Book of the Servant, and The Book of the Anointed Conqueror. Those are all Messianic titles. Jesus is King. Jesus is Servant. Jesus is Conqueror. There is so much prophecy in Isaiah concerning the Messiah and humanity's rescue from sin and corruption, this the book is sometimes referred to as, The Gospel of Isaiah.

Isaiah's words regularly find their way into Christian hymns, ancient and modern. The earliest Christians felt a strong affinity to Isaiah. When we consider direct quotations of the Old Testament (allusions to the Old Testament are trickier to count), but when we consider direct quotations, Isaiah is the second most quoted book by New Testament authors. It is quoted more than 80 times, more

than all the other prophets put together, and ahead of number three - Deuteronomy - and just behind the book of Psalms.

Isaiah not only gives us conceptual background to New Testament thought and a wealth of prophecy concerning Jesus; Isaiah's vision of God and call to faithfulness in a time of religious lip service, internal turmoil, and international politics proves to be quite relevant to modern times. Isaiah saw God full of His glory filling the earth. Isaiah saw the corruption of society, but not only as one standing on the outside judging. He saw his own corruption, as well. "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips!" He felt his own sinfulness in contrast to feeling the holiness of God. As a result of his vision of God and His holiness, and recognition of his own corruption, Isaiah sought to live in faithfulness to that vision of God in every level of life; on the level of personal morality, on the level of social justice, on the level of national politics. And he called the faithful followers of Yahweh to live in the same way. Isaiah urged his contemporaries to live by faith according to a true vision of who God is and with a humble awareness of their own human frailty. Isaiah's witness in this prophecy will display the glory of God's nature. It will pierce our souls with wonder and conviction. It will urge us towards a sincere, faithful walk with God.

Now, before we get into the text of Isaiah, there are two major topics to address if we are going to interpret Isaiah well. Modern readers face two major challenges in reading and understanding the prophets. First is historical context, and second is poetry. The prophets wrote to the people of their times. The primary context for them was not historic. It was modern. It was their times. If I make a reference to the Middle East, or the Kardashians, or the White House, you know what I am talking about. The people of Isaiah's day would have no clue what I was talking about. This happens all the time in sermons. The speaker knows he can assume a basic knowledge about people, and places, and events. So, he doesn't give explanation. And that creates a problem for us in reading the prophets. They do not explain their references, just like a teacher today would not explain his references. So, looking back into their writings, we need some help with the historical context. We also, at least most of us, need help with poetry. Poetry is not easy to read a lot of and to understand. And I know this is true for those of you educated in the West. We just don't spend a lot of time anymore learning how to appreciate poetry and how to read poetry. And the poetry of the Bible has its own distinctive qualities.

So, it's true, even if we do not understand the context or do not do well reading poetry, pieces of Isaiah still speak to us. Like Isaiah 43:1, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!" It's lovely. It speaks to your soul. That's not the voice of God to people 2700 years ago. That's to you! That's to me! Enough of Isaiah is accessible to us to help us see the beauty, and importance, and relevance of the book. But to understand the flow of thought of the prophet, but if we're going to get into the book of Isaiah, to begin to understand the flow of thought more and more on our own, we are going to have to address the historical context and poetry. We will do that as we go through this series as we are in the text. I also want to do it by way of introduction in our first two episodes. In this one, we will begin with the historical context and then, in the next episode I will give an introduction to Biblical poetry as we get more into the text of chapter 1.

The Goal of This Series

Ok. Before we talk about historical context. Here are a few words about the approach I will be taking with this series. I am considering this series a serious first pass of Isaiah. We would get bogged down in the details, if we were to address every verse of Isaiah before we have a strong grasp of the book's structure and flow. We kind of need to do two things at once. We need to be looking at the details and keeping in mind the bigger picture. I don't just want to give an overview of the big picture. I want to get into the text. That is the goal of observetheword. So, we are going to get into a lot of text. But at times, to keep us moving along in this first pass, I will cover some larger sections by addressing representative passages. We will just get into parts of the text, not every verse.

I also want to say, I am not an Isaiah expert. I am an amateur who is growing in love and appreciation of the book of Isaiah. I will in this series focus on giving you what I see from my own observations in the text and how I interpret that text. For assistance, especially with the historical context and poetry, I will be looking to some experts for help. The two commentaries I am depending on the most are John Oswalt's two volumes on Isaiah in the in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament series, and Alec Motyer's, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*. So those two last names are O-S-W-A-L-T and M-O-T-Y-E-R. Those are the two guys I am depending on the most. If you don't have access to those commentaries or the money to pay for a technical commentary, but you still want a commentary you can use to kind of check your own observation, do a search for Tom Constable, C-O-N-S-T-A-B-L-E, a former professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. His notes are all online. You can them for sure at netbible.org in the notes window, which is on the right under the tab, Constable's notes. Constable provides a good introduction to Isaiah and helpful background notes through the text. And he has made his commentary available for free. So that is a big plus.

That said, I encourage you to spend most of your study time doing your own observation of Isaiah. The word of God is alive and active through the power of the Holy Spirit. And our own familiarity with the Word that enables us to discern what we read in the commentaries and the teaching we hear from others. You know, we need to know the text ourselves. It does take some hard work with Isaiah. It takes some reading over and over. And the more we do it, the more it will start to make sense.

Alright. Now we are ready for an introduction to the historical context of Isaiah. And to figure our historical context, we have to ask who is the author, what was the time of writing, and who was the first audience?

Author: Who wrote Isaiah?

We start with the author. Who wrote Isaiah? Well, that seems simple enough. Isaiah 1:1,

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

The prophecy only refers to Isaiah as the author. There is no suggestion of another author in the book of Isaiah or in the New Testament. New Testament authors quoting from all the major sections of this book attribute their quotes to Isaiah. So, beginning to end, the whole book is attributed to Isaiah. So we can say that the internal Biblical evidence clearly asserts Isaiah to be the author of the whole text. And there is no direct external evidence that anyone else wrote Isaiah.

Nevertheless, if you study theology or religion in a state school or a liberal Christian institution in the United States, somewhere like Yale or Princeton, or if you read a commentary from someone who does not accept the literal inspiration of Scripture, you will encounter the widely accepted hypothesis that Isaiah comes from three sources. You know, three Isaiahs. Isaiah of Jerusalem wrote chapters 1-39 or most of it. Second Isaiah wrote chapters 40-55. And third Isaiah wrote chapters 56-66. Furthermore, Second and Third Isaiah are not necessarily individuals, but understood to be schools of Isaiah followers who have worked together to produce their perspective sections of the book.

For me personally, I am fully ready to accept the internal witness of the Bible that recognizes Isaiah as the sole author of the book. But since there is this widespread view outside of those who accept the Bible's authority, it is worth saying a few words about it. And as critical questions often do, addressing the challenging will give us helpful insight into the literature and historical context of Isaiah. Three significant issues are raised by those who propose multiple authorship: style, content, and historical context. Let's start with style.

Style

You do not have to be an Isaiah scholar to notice the difference between chapters 1-39 and chapters 40-66. You know, the more you read it, the more you'll see these don't feel quite the same. The first major section of Isaiah alludes often to contemporary historical events and mixes in some prose narrative with the poetry. We encounter a narrative about Isaiah and King Ahaz in chapter 7 and then later in chapters 36-39, another narrative about Isaiah and King Hezekiah. And looking at the poetry of chapters 1-39, there appears to be a combination of spoken messages spanning Isaiah's career that were later brought together in a carefully arranged structure. you know, not written all at once but having different points, and sometimes out of chronological sequence but then carefully put together.

We do not encounter any more prose narrative about historical events when we move into chapters 40-66. And the allusions to historical events cease to be contemporary. In these chapters, we are looking much further into the future. It becomes difficult to connect the prophecy in 40-66 with a specific time in Isaiah's life. And the poetry of 40-66 flows together as a whole. It doesn't seem to have been put together as a product of an oral ministry, but rather as a complete written work that flows from beginning to end. Scholars tend to evaluate this poetry in these later chapters as even better than what is found earlier in Isaiah.

So, we can recognize these differences in style between chapters 1-39 and 40-66, and that moves us to ask, "Why? Why are the sections different?" The answer that there is a different style because there are different authors is not the necessary answer to the question. In fact, one of the problems for posing three authors to Isaiah is that there only seem to be two different styles. The modern hypothesis separates 40-55 and 56-66, but those sections do not show significant stylistic differences. Not only that, but parts of 1-39 seem to be right in line with the style of 40-66. So, three different authors is not clear at all.

It is also not clear that the same author is not able to employ different styles. Consider the differences between the Gospel of John, the letters of John and Revelation, all written by the same author, but they are very different styles, different genres. If Isaiah did write the whole book towards the end of his ministry, but he used previous oral messages as a basis for 1-39 and then wrote 40-56 as an original work for the book, that would be one cause for differing styles. He put the parts together differently.

My favorite Old Testament professor, Dr. Jeffrey Niehaus, became a Christian the same month that he received his doctorate in English poetry from Harvard. He believes there is one author of Isaiah. His dissertation was titled, *Dialectical Process in the Poetry of Shelly*. So, he is as much a poetry expert as he is a theology expert. I remember Dr. Niehaus using W. B. Yates as an example of a poet who wrote over a lifetime employing significantly different styles. He also argued that we should expect development in the life of a poet who has a long career. So, if Isaiah did bring together earlier poetry in the first half of his book and then later in life wrote the second half, we should not be surprised at all if the second half does seem more mature. In fact, we might expect that.

Content

Another argument offered for different authors has to do with a difference in content between chapters 1-39, 40-55, and 56-66. The argument depends on the claim that there are significant differences in repeated words and phrases between those three sections. But if Isaiah has intentionally created a three-part section to his work, and he develops different major themes in each section, we should not be surprised at a change of terms: that some words would show up a lot more in one section than another section. For example, if the first section focuses on the Messiah as King, but not the Messiah as servant, the terms associated with Davidic kingship may be emphasized much more in that first section, you know, chapters 1-39, whereas terms related to a suffering servant would pick up in chapters 40-55. Again, that is not evidence of two different authors.

On the other hand, we also see certain words and phrases remain consistent through the book. Isaiah has a favorite special name of God that connects to the vision of God he had in chapter 6, you know, the "holy, holy, holy." He refers to God as the Holy One of Israel 29 times. And yet, outside of

Isaiah, that name for God appears only 7 times in the rest of the Old Testament. So, 29 times in Isaiah, only 7 times outside of Isaiah. But the usage in the book of Isaiah is consistent: 13 times in chapters 1-39 and 16 times in 40-66. That title seems to link the two halves together as though there was one author.

So, it is good for us to recognize these differences in style and content, but even as we do so, there is no need to suppose separate authors. What about historical context?

Historical context

The three different contexts in the book are possibly the most significant reason scholars propose for separating Isaiah into three sources. Let's do a bit of historical review. The first verse of the book gives us the span of Isaiah's ministry.

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

So, from Uzziah to Hezekiah. And we should probably start at the end of Uzziah's reign, since Isaiah's vision and calling in chapter 6 happened the year Uzziah died. Moving from Uzziah to Jotham, it's hard to see events in Isaiah connected to that king. The prophecy picks up in chapter 7 with Ahaz and carries through Hezekiah's reign. Tradition says that Manasseh, who followed Hezekiah, executed Isaiah. Manasseh's reign began in 697 BC. So, Isaiah's ministry, from the death of Uzziah to the beginning of Manasseh, covers roughly 40 years, from 740 to 700 BC.

That time span coincides with a rise in power that took Assyria from being one of the regional powers between the two rivers Tigris and Euphrates, to being the major power of the Middle East, an unstoppable empire that would subjugate even Egypt eventually. Tiglath-Pileser III came to the throne in 745 BC. He is the cause for the initial crisis described in chapter 7. Ahaz decides to be pro-Assyrian, which does not turn out well for Judah, but ends up even worse for Israel. Shalmaneser V takes the throne after Tiglath-Pileser and before he dies, he conquers the Northern Kingdom of Israel and exiles its people.

Sargon follows Shalmaneser and Sennacherib follows Sargon. In this period, Hezekiah reverses Judah's policy, deciding not to be pro-Assyrian but to be anti-Assyrian and pro-Egyptian. That does not go well for Judah, either, though after repentance on Hezekiah's part God rescues Jerusalem.

Chapters 1-39 cover this span of time from the Judean kings Uzziah to Hezekiah, and the expanding Assyrian empire from Tiglath-pileser to Sennacherib. The Assyrian crisis, the fall of Israel and the near escape of Judah, that is the historical context of chapters 1-39. The same period covers the span of Isaiah's ministry.

Chapters 40-55 look ahead to the eventual fall of Judah and the Babylonian exile. The cry that begins chapter 40 is not for the Northern Kingdom already carried off, but for the Southern Kingdom that will eventually bring the full extent of the Covenant curse down on itself. Chapter 40 begins this way,

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| ¹ "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.
And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,
That she has received of the LORD's hand | ² "Speak kindly to Jerusalem;
That her iniquity has been removed,
Double for all her sins." |
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That is a cry to comfort Judah for the exile that is going to come under Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon a hundred years after Isaiah. The Babylonians and the Medes will accomplish the unthinkable, defeating the mighty Assyrian army. Nebuchadnezzar will assert himself, consolidating his empire and turning against Judah for refusing to pay tribute. The first defeat of Judah comes in 600 BC. Three waves of exile ensue with the eventual destruction of the Temple in 586 BC. Then something even more unthinkable than the defeat of Assyria happens. Coming out of nowhere, the Persians defeat the Babylonians and take over their empire, extending it to unheard of proportions. Cyrus the Great's rise of power is marked from 539 BC. The Persians allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem. They rebuild the Temple in 515 BC, 70 years after it had been destroyed. More Jews return with Ezra in 458 BC and then more with Nehemiah in 444 BC.

This period, then, from about 600 BC to 450 BC is the period covered by the prophecy of Isaiah in chapters 40-55. So, it is either an example of the first Isaiah seeing into the future, or a second writer prophesying during those times. The book of Isaiah looks even further into the future in chapters 56-66. Those are post-exile times, looking ahead even to the end of the age.

It is very helpful to recognize that we are addressing three different historical contexts in these three main sections. It is also helpful to recognize that most Biblical prophets are speaking first to their contemporary situation and then applying future prediction to those circumstances. Prophets are usually calling the people of their day back to Covenant obedience and telling them what is going to happen if they don't return to God.

Scholars have then taken these principles and applied them separately to the three sections of Isaiah. There are three different historical contexts. Biblical prophets speak to their contemporary society, so we must have three different prophets speaking in three different periods.

But that is not a necessary way to view what is going on in Isaiah, nor is it even the most helpful way to understand Isaiah. Chapters 1-39 establish the contemporary context of the prophet. Those are his days. In chapters 40-55, Isaiah is doing what all Biblical prophets do. He is communicating future consequences that will come on Judah if they refuse to walk in Covenant faithfulness. And he is communicating the eventual restoration that God will provide after God executes punishment on Judah. Biblical prophets often shift from future calamity and blessing into prophecy about the far distant future, the end of days. Isaiah does that in 56-66.

The three different historical contexts we find in Isaiah are not contrary to the types of future prophecy we find in the other Biblical prophets, though Isaiah has provided a highly developed vision of the future.

And that turned out to be the real problem for scholars who do not believe the Bible is truly God's Word. We come to the problem of prediction for those who have an anti-supernatural bias.

Prediction and Anti-supernaturalism

Personally, I believe this is the main motive for holding on to the theory of different authors in light of continually growing voices insisting on the unity of Isaiah and the consistent quality of the poetry within the book. The book truly gives the stamp of a single author.

But that idea creates significant problems if you do not accept the possibility of supernatural prediction of future events. If Isaiah of Jerusalem wrote this book, then the book contains some awesome, impressive prediction.

Now, Isaiah prophesied that Judah would escape the Assyrian threat and Israel would not. And that happened in his lifetime. Well, Isaiah prophesied that the much weaker kingdom of Babylon would somehow be the power that would defeat Judah and send them into exile. That happened a hundred years later. Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus, an unknown king of a barely known people would somehow overthrow Babylon and for some unknown reason show enough favor to Israel that he would allow for their return. That happened more than a 160 years later. Isaiah further prophesied that a child would be born of a virgin, that a light would shine in Galilee, that a son would be given, that a servant would be pierced, and that our iniquity would be taken away. That happened more than 700 years later.

How do you handle that if you believe that true scholars, true historians must reject the supernatural? You handle it by suggesting three authors at three different times, so that they weren't really predicting the future. And then you build your arguments around that proposition. So, it is not the text of Isaiah that ends up suggesting the presence of three authors. It is the unspoken presupposition that supernatural prediction cannot happen that truly underlies the theory.

Not too long ago, the accepted opinion about Isaiah 53, the passage I read at the beginning of this episode, the accepted opinion was that some Christian inserted that section of poetry into Isaiah some time after the death of Jesus. It is just too accurate to have been written before the death of

Jesus. The scholars were sure, you know, this is clear evidence of Christian tampering with the text. It did not help the Christian cause that the oldest copy of Isaiah was in a manuscript from 900 AD. so that's a lot of time separation. That is 1600 years from the original. We have no way to prove that that copy of Isaiah really represented the writings of someone from 700 A.D. We couldn't prove that a Christian had not inserted that passage.

But then one day in 1947, a Palestinian shepherd boy, watching over his sheep, began tossing rocks into a nearby cave. Why was he doing it? Why not. That's what boys do. How far back can you get the rock in? He listened to the dull sound of rock against rock. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Shatter! That wasn't rock on rock. That was a clay pot. And he knew it when he heard it.

The clay pots discovered in that cave contained seven scrolls. The cave was about a mile or 1.6 kilometers northeast of the Dead Sea. One of those Dead Sea scrolls contained the entire text of Isaiah in Hebrew. Even non-believing scholars attested that the scroll was at least as old as 100 BC. And that text was essentially identical to the manuscript that we had from 900 AD. In 1000 years of copying, there were not significant differences to the text. In this scroll, copied at least one-hundred years before the birth of Christ, was that same text of Isaiah 53 that we have translated in our Bibles. The suffering, death, and atonement of the Messiah was prophesied at least a hundred years before Jesus, I believe 700 years before Jesus, by Isaiah. Those predictions came true. And if those predictions came true, why would we also not consider that the exile to Babylon and the return under Persia were true predictions?

The only reason to deny Isaiah as the true author of the book of Isaiah is a rejection of the Bible as the Word of God and a rejection of supernatural prediction through the Holy Spirit. Isaiah was written by Isaiah of Jerusalem, a prophet of God who served Him during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

That is the answer to the question about authorship and that establishes the broad historic context that we are looking at. I have two more questions about the precise historical context. What was the time of writing and who was the primary audience? We can answer those questions quickly based on these prior comments.

Time of writing: What was the context when the book of Isaiah was written?

Time of writing: What was the context when the book of Isaiah was written? We know that Isaiah 1-39 spans the whole of Isaiah's ministry from Uzziah to Hezekiah. When did he actually put together the book of Isaiah?

We cannot know for sure. This is what I think was going on. I believe we have passed through the events described in chapters 36-39. The Northern Kingdom has fallen. Sennacherib's army was turned back at the gates of Jerusalem. Hezekiah is close to death or has died. Manasseh's reign is about to begin or has begun. And that is a dark time for the faithful in Judah. Manasseh set up Canaanite idols in the Temple of God, encouraging the worship of Asherah and Baal in Yahweh's house. This is the point of no return for Judah. 2 Kings 21:11-13 reports God's judgment.

¹¹ Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who *were* before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols; ¹² therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am bringing *such* calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears will tingle. ¹³ 'I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.

Isaiah wrote very close to this time period with an awareness of Judah's decline that was not wholly dependent on a vision of the future. This beginning of the end of Judah was his time. This is when I think he wrote this book.

Audience: Who was Isaiah written for?

For whom then did Isaiah write? Who was his audience?

I believe Isaiah's primary audience was the faithful remnant living in those challenging times. Idolatry, oppression, and sexual immorality were becoming the norm. Judeans paid lip service to God, going through the motions of religious ritual, feeling secure in their inherited religion, but not even trying to translate their beliefs into God-honoring practice in their nine-to-five life.

Isaiah calls the faithful remnant back to a vision of God found in the written Word. We get a particular example in Isaiah 8:16-18,

¹⁶ Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. ¹⁷ And I will wait for the LORD who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him. ¹⁸ Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. ¹⁹ When they say to you, "Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter," should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? ²⁰ To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

Isaiah was writing for these faithful Jews walking with God in dark times. The state of Judah would go up and down, but the road will steadily descend. Isaiah challenged them to live according to their vision of God. Do not put your trust in your own passions. You will find no salvation in following your heart. Do not put your trust in pro-Assyrian or pro-Egyptian politics. You will find no salvation through any human leader. Do not put your trust in the spiritual practices of the culture around you. You will find no salvation in false religion. In this difficult cultural reality that you live in, turn to the Word, turn to the testimony, know your God. He is your dawn. Look to him in the darkness and eventually you will see light rise up over the horizon.

That's written for those Jews, written in that time period after the fall of Israel and the beginning of the end under Manasseh. It is also written to us. "To the law and to the testimony!" This is why we study Isaiah. We are responding to his call. We are returning to God's Word because we want a fresh and growing vision of who God truly is. We study Isaiah's times to better understand our times, so that we can live as faithful followers of the one true King.

Reflection questions

1. On a scale from 0 to 10 how comfortable do you feel with your ability to study the Old Testament prophets? (Compare that with the book or portion of Scripture you feel most comfortable studying and the portion of Scripture you feel least comfortable studying).
2. What are some reasons the prophets are hard to study or understand or apply?
3. What is your favorite prophetic book to study or the one you know best? And why?
4. Was the historical context provided in this lesson just a review for you or did you learn some things you did not already know? What stood out to you? What is a part of that history you would like to know more about?
5. Skim through the beginning and end of each major section of Isaiah. Look at chapters 1, 36-39, 40, 55-56 and 66. What are some things that stand out to you when you just skim over these sections?
6. Make a plan for observing Isaiah or parts of Isaiah in conjunction with listening to the Interpreting Isaiah series. You may decide to read through the whole of Isaiah. What parts would you also like to observe closely? If the book seems too big to tackle, what are one or two parts you would like to start observing more closely?
7. Consider downloading the Kings and Prophets chart from observetheword.com. Print the chart and stick a copy in your Bible so you can reference when it would be helpful.