

## FIRST ISAIAH

### Prophet of God's Holiness

### Part One: Chapters 1-12

In the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah, we have three books wrapped up in one—three books written by three different authors living in three very different historical situations.

Scholars believe that at least three different authors or communities, spanning over three centuries, wrote and edited materials that were eventually compiled into one book. Three names have been assigned to the three collections of writings.

- *First Isaiah* or *Isaiah of Jerusalem* (chapters 1-39) addresses Jews living in Jerusalem prior to the Babylonian Exile (740-687 BC).
- *Second* or *Deutero-Isaiah* (chapters 40-55) addresses Jews from the southern kingdom who were taken into exile in Babylon (540-537 BC).
- *Third* or *Trito-Isaiah* (chapters 56-66) addresses Jews who had returned from the Babylonian Exile (587-538 BC).

**Historical situation of First Isaiah.** In his book *The Men and Message of the Old Testament*, Fr. Peter Ellis, C.S.S.R., introduces us to First Isaiah and its historical situation in this way.

*A statesman saint, Isaiah is the Thomas More of the Old Testament. Like More he is a family man, a counselor of kings, a skilled writer, an ardent defender of God's rights against royal self-will, and in the end a martyr for the faith at the hands of his king. His response to his call (6:8) shows a generous, spontaneous, and naturally courageous nature in contrast to Moses (Exod. 3:11) and Jeremiah (1:6-8). His poetry and preaching reflect a soul sensitive and refined and endowed with extraordinary power of expression.*

*Isaiah was born during the prosperous but immoral reign of King Uzziah (784-742). He was a contemporary of Amos and Hosea in the northern kingdom and of Micah in Judah. He preached during the reigns of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1). His position as counselor to Ahaz (7:3-17) and Hezekiah (39:1-8), his knowledge of political affairs, his poetic language and exquisite Hebrew style, all indicate a cultured nobleman of high rank in the royal court. Married and the father of two sons he*

*appears to have done most of his preaching in Jerusalem. According to Hebrew legend he died a martyr for the faith around 687, when, by order of the infamous King Manasseh, he was placed in a hollow tree and sawn in half.*

*While manifesting many of the characteristics of Amos, the prophet of divine justice, and Hosea, the prophet of divine love, Isaiah is preeminently the prophet of holiness. Just as St. Paul's emphasis on the doctrine of the Mystical Body may be traced to the words he heard from Christ at the time of his vision on the Damascus road, "Saul, Saul, why persecutes thou Me?," so the emphasis given by Isaiah to the doctrine of holiness can be traced to the words he heard chanted by the seraphim at the time of his call: "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory." (p.306)*

**Importance of the king's relationship with God—Isaiah's vision of reality.** In his book *Reading the Bible*, Timothy Carmody has a very interesting piece on the importance of the king's relationship with God for the well-being of his nation.

*For Isaiah, God is the power behind all other powers, and the king and the people owe allegiance to God. Isaiah calls God the Lord of hosts and frequently speaks of God's holiness and power. The fundamental attitude required of the people is trust in God. However, because Isaiah has a hierarchical view of society, it is the king's trust in God that determines the well-being of the nation. With the king at the top of the social order and in closest contact with God, everything depends on whether the king is humble, trusts in God, dispenses justice and judgment, and brings about peace. If the king relies on God, then the whole social order will be stable and strong from the king down to the orphans and widows. If the king does not rely on God but relies on his own power or alliances and armies, the whole nation will suffer. The princes will plot, the priests will steal, the judges will be bribed, and the widows and orphans will be oppressed. There will be no justice, judgment, or peace in the land. The right rule of the king is discussed in two primary areas in Isaiah. First, Isaiah is concerned about the role of the king (and the nation) in international politics. The king must trust in the international policies of God and not make his own alliances with foreign nations*

or trust in his own military strength. Second, Isaiah is concerned about the administration of justice within the nation of Judah. The king is responsible for making sure that justice, right judgment, and peace are extended to all citizens. In the first twelve chapters, Isaiah laments the lack of proper government in Judah and looks forward to a future perfect king. (p.154)

## Division of Chapters

- Part 1:** Introductory prophecy (Chapter 1)
- Part 2:** Oracles against Jerusalem and Judah (Chapters 2-12)
- Part 3:** Oracles against pagan nations (Chapters 13-23)
- Part 4:** Apocalypse of Isaiah (Chapters 24-27)
- Part 5:** Human schemes and God's plan (Chapters 28-35)
- Part 6:** Stories from the time of Hezekiah (Chapters 36-39)

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## PART 1: INTRODUCTORY PROPHECY

### CHAPTER 1: Israel's sinfulness and a call to conversion

*Your new moons and festivals I detest;  
they weigh me down, I tire of the load.  
When you spread out your hands,  
I close my eyes to you;  
Though you pray the more,  
I will not listen.  
Your hands are full of blood!  
Wash yourselves clean!  
Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes;  
Cease doing evil; learn to do good.  
Make justice your aim: redress the wronged.  
Hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow.*  
(vv 14-16)

Most scholars regard chapter 1 as an introduction of the main themes of the whole book, i.e., imminent divine judgment, the necessity of social justice, and the painful process that transforms Zion (Jerusalem) into a holy and righteous city.

**Verse 1** situates the prophet historically. He preached during most of the second half of the eighth century BC (765-698).

**Verse 2** begins with a call to the people to "hear the word of the Lord." Heaven and earth are summoned like witnesses to hear the charges against Israel (in this case, meaning Judah, the southern kingdom). The law-court scene in which Israel stands accused before God is a very common rhetorical device in prophetic literature. It emphasizes the justice of God and at the same time provides an opportunity for arguments (v.18) and appeals (v.17).

In **verse 3**, the prophet appeals to reason suggesting that even six dumb animals have more sense than Israel in that they recognize their master, while Israel, because she has become so spiritually sick, cannot even recognize her father.

**Verses 4-15** continue to describe how depraved the nation has become—from head to toe (vv 5-6)—a situation that causes God to hate her festivals and offerings. True worship must have an ethical dimension: it must lead one to "cease to do evil and learn to do good," e.g., caring for the widow and orphan.

**Verses 18-19** are a call to true repentance and give an image of God who is always ready to take back his unfaithful bride.

**Verses 21-31.** The opening chapter of this book ends with a threat of punishment for political and social corruption. It is important to note that the purpose of the punishment is to bring Israel back to being the nation she should be. "I will restore your judges as at first, and your counselors as in the beginning. Zion shall be redeemed by judgment" (vv 26-27).

## PART 2: ORACLES AGAINST JERUSALEM AND JUDAH

### CHAPTERS 2-5: Zion, the Messianic Capital; Jerusalem humbled

*In days to come,  
The mountain of the Lord's house  
shall be established as the highest mountain  
and raised above the hills.  
All nations shall stream toward it;  
many peoples shall come and say:*

*“Come, let us climb the Lord’s mountain,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may instruct us in his ways,  
and we may walk in his paths.”  
For from Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between the nations,  
and impose terms on many peoples.  
They shall beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
One nation shall not raise the sword  
against another,  
nor shall they train for war again.  
O house of Jacob, come,  
let us walk in the light of the Lord! (vv 1-5)*

*Human pride will be abased,  
the arrogance of men brought low,  
and the Lord will be exalted on that day. (v.17)*

As we continue to read First Isaiah, we will do well to remember that this book has been called “a collection of collections” of prophecies written over a period of forty years. We see this especially in chapter 2. The contents of verses 2-5 are quite different from the series of oracles that follow.

**2:2-5—Vision of a world without war.** Isaiah’s vision of future peace is one of the best-known passages of all Scripture. It speaks of that glorious time when weapons of war will have been turned into instruments of peace that will serve to improve the deplorable condition of the human family. This is the ideal to which God has called Israel and the entire community, the vision that is integral to Isaiah’s message as prophet.

But then in the rest of chapter 2 and continuing in chapters 3-5, the prophet harshly condemns Judah for her selfishness, lack of justice, disregard for others and utter lack of concern for her relationship with God.

**4:2-6**, like 2:2-5, speaks about a messianic prophecy of the future glory of Jerusalem and the sanctity of the “remnant.” It looks forward to the transformation of the chaos that Isaiah’s listeners knew very well. According to Isaiah a holy remnant will receive God’s abundant blessings that include honor and protection. The Lord will wash away their sin. God’s presence will again be tangible as it was in Israel’s days in the desert through a smoking cloud by day

and a pillar of fire by night. On that day, God will bring about a new creation!

All of the grandeur of that day remained only an unfulfilled yearning until it was realized in an unexpected way in the coming of Jesus. In the rereading of Isaiah’s prophecy, no longer do people need to wait for a distant and uncertain future, but now in Jesus the rich blessings and abiding divine presence that were promised by Isaiah to Israel are available to all people.

**5:1-7** is a classic parable likening the irresponsible Israel to a carefully tended but inexplicably unfruitful vineyard.

**5:8-25** contains seven “woe sayings” in which are listed Israel’s sins, e.g., social injustice, materialism, pride—followed by a prediction of approaching punishment (vv 26-30).

**Pause:** In recent years could America have chosen a way to deal with international problems without going to war?

## CHAPTER 6: Call of Isaiah

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!”... Then I said, “Woe is me, I am doomed. For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts.”*

[After the angel purged Isaiah of his sin, God said:] *“Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” “Here I am,” I said, “send me.” (vv 3-8)*

Historically, this central and awe-filled event in Isaiah’s life occurs at the end of King Uzziah’s reign and at the beginning of King Ahaz’s. The setting for the vision seems to be the Jerusalem Temple during a high liturgy. The central focus of the temple building would have been the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant rests. Perched on the Ark are angelic seraphims, upon whose wings would hover the cloud—the glory of God’s presence. Caught up in this resplendent atmosphere, Isaiah is given a heavenly vision of God Most High. Isaiah sees the Lord *“seated on high and lofty throne.”* His garment seems to fill the temple—a way of saying God’s presence filled this holy place. The seraphim angels use their wings to cover their faces, implying that no one can look upon the face of God and live. They sing words now enshrined in our Mass: *“Holy, holy,*

*holy is the Lord of Hosts! All earth is filled with your glory!”*

Like Peter before Jesus (Lk 5:1-10), Isaiah becomes aware of his sinfulness and the sinfulness of his people. *“I am a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips”* (v.5). It has been well said that the more we experience the holiness of God, the more we become aware of our own sinfulness or lack of holiness. This probably explains why saints often saw themselves as the worst of sinners.

Then one of the seraphims (fiery angels) takes a hot coal from the altar of incense and presses it against the unclean lips of the prophet saying: *“Now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged”* (v.7).

Having been purified of sin, Isaiah is now prepared to hear God’s call to mission. When the Lord asks: *“Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?”* Isaiah responds: *“Here I am, send me”* (v.8). In contrast to Moses and Jeremiah, Isaiah is ready and willing to go on missions for the Lord.

It is important to note that Isaiah’s experience of the most Holy God deeply influenced his whole ministry and message. He is often called the prophet of God’s holiness. In the previous chapters, Isaiah frequently condemned Judah for her failure to be a holy nation.

**Pause:** Isaiah’s powerful vision of the All-Holy God gave new direction to his life. What would you consider to be the most important experience of your faith journey to this point in your life?

## **CHAPTER 7: Birth of Immanuel is prophesied**

*“The heart of the king and the heart of the people trembled....”* (v.2)

*“Unless your faith is firm, you shall not be firm.”* (v.9)

*“The Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child and bear a son and his name shall be Immanuel.”* (v.14)

Chapters 7-11 are sometimes called the “Immanuel prophecies” because they speak of a future ideal king who will follow God’s ways.

The historical background of this chapter is the political alliance between Syria (Aram) and the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) set up to depose Ahaz, King of the southern kingdom of Judah. Ahaz fears even more the threat of the powerful Assyrians. All of these threats make the heart of the king and his people tremble (v.2).

**Verses 4-9—Words of assurance.** Isaiah goes to meet Ahaz with his son. As in the Book of Hosea, Isaiah’s sons have symbolic names. This son’s name is *Shear-jashub*, often translated as “a remnant shall return.” Isaiah’s son’s presence is meant to be a part of the message he intends to deliver: *“A remnant shall survive in Judah no matter how bad things shall get.”*

Isaiah tells Ahaz not to let his courage fail him before the two stumps of smoldering brands (a reference to Syria and Israel whom the Assyrians will defeat). Then Isaiah challenges Ahaz to place his trust in God: *“Unless your faith is firm, you will not be firm”* (v.9). Isaiah is warning Ahaz that if he fails to stand with the Lord, he will not stand—period.

**Verses 10-17—Sign of Immanuel.** Now we come to another famous passage in Isaiah which speaks about “a virgin giving birth to a child.” The early Christians believed it referred to the virgin birth of Christ. But does it?

To help the king place his trust in God and not in human powers, Isaiah tells him to ask God for a sign. Ahaz declines as that would be ‘putting God to the test’—an act condemned in Deut 6:16. But the real reason for his refusal to ask for a sign is that he does not want to listen to Isaiah’s advice. With that, Isaiah blasts the king for wearying both God and man, and tells him that regardless, he will receive the sign of “a virgin with child” whose name will be Immanuel and who, at an early age, will be able to discern good from bad.

Isaiah’s prophecy regarding a virgin birth raises the question: Who is the mother and who is the child? Some scholars suggest the woman/mother/virgin is Zion (Jerusalem) and her son is the faithful remnant who will emerge from the sufferings of the exile. Others think that the woman is one of Ahaz’s wives who will give birth to a special child (Hezekiah, one of Judah’s better kings). The deeper meaning of the prophecy is that the birth of the special child will be a sign of God’s continued presence with his people.

The child will be a “symbol of hope in weakness, of new life in the midst of destruction” (Collegville Commentary p. 423).

While Isaiah most likely did not have the virgin birth of Christ in mind when making his prophecy, the early church did see the most complete fulfillment of the prophecy in the birth of the Messiah who was also a son of David. In biblical studies, this is often called the ‘fuller meaning’ of a text, which the author would not have seen.

**Verses 18-25—Rape of the land.** The prophet announces that Judah will soon be overrun and devastated by the very Assyria whom Ahaz has foolishly decided to turn to for help.

#### **CHAPTER 8: The sign of Maher-shalal-hash-baz**

*“...For before the child knows how to call his father or mother by name, the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be carried off by the king of Assyria.” (v.4)*

The first thing to note in this chapter is that Isaiah’s wife is a prophetess (must have been an interesting household!). We came across Isaiah’s first son Shear-jashub in 7:30. Now we meet his second son Maher-shalal-hash-baz whose name is translated in various ways. One translation—“quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil”—foreshadows the destruction of Damascus and Samaria before the child begins to talk.

**Verses 5-10.** Because Judah has placed its trust in Assyria and not in God, the waters will flood its mighty army up to its neck. Nevertheless, because of Immanuel, Assyria’s plan to crush Judah will not succeed.

**Verses 11-20.** Despite Isaiah’s warnings, Ahaz places his trust in man and not in God, which will be a disastrous decision. Confident that his predictions will be fulfilled, Isaiah has his disciples write down his prophecies and waits for them to be fulfilled.

#### **CHAPTER 9: Prince of Peace**

*For a child is born to us, a son is given to us;  
upon his shoulder dominion rests.  
They name him Wonder-Counselor,  
God-Hero, Father-Forever,  
Prince of Peace.*

*His dominion is vast and forever peaceful,  
From David’s throne, and over his kingdom,  
which he confirms and sustains  
By judgment and justice,  
both now and forever. (vv 5-6)*

This text is one of the best known messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. It is the first reading for our Christmas midnight Mass.

Zebulum and Naphthali (the names of two of the twelve tribes of Israel) are two of the first provinces to be overrun by the Assyrians. Many of the people are taken into exile.

Scholars differ about the identity of the child referred to in the text. As stated above, some believe that it refers to Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, one of Judah’s better kings.

*The Jerome Biblical Commentary* says that the oracle does not concern any historical king, but an ideal king who would introduce the definitive era of peace and justice. This ideal king would possess the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of David and the religious virtues of the patriarchs and Moses. Christian tradition has seen in Christ the fulfillment of this prophecy (see Matt 4:15-16, p.272).

**Pause:** What virtues or qualities do you look for in an ideal President or leader?

**Verses 7-20.** Isaiah has harsh words for his neighbor kingdom Israel. Because previous setbacks did not bring them to repentance, much destruction will come their way.

#### **CHAPTER 10: Condemnation of social injustices and Assyria**

*“Woe to those who enact unjust statutes....depriving the needy of judgment and robbing my people’s poor of their rights....” (vv 1-2)*

*“Woe to Assyria...I will punish the utterance of the king of Assyria’s proud heart.... By my own power I have done it....” (vv 12-13)*

**Verses 1-4** are a continuation of 9:7-20 in which Israel is condemned for her infidelity to God, in this case, for her failure to care for the poor.

**Verses 5-19—Condemnation of proud Assyria.** While God does use Assyria to punish, or better yet to chastise Israel, Assyria will not escape God's wrath. In verses 8-11 and 13-14, arrogant words are placed in the mouth of the king of Assyria. "*By my own power I have done it*" (v.13). The king of Assyria has seriously erred in failing to recognize that his power comes from God and that he is a mere tool in the hand of God. Thus, she will be punished. "*Instead of his glory there will be the kindling...of a fire*" (v.6).

Isaiah warns that those who rely on Assyria will be destroyed (vv 20-23); Jerusalem has nothing to fear from Assyria (vv 24-26); Jerusalem alone will survive the Assyrian invasion (vv 27-32); and God will cut down Assyria with an axe (vv 33-34).

#### **CHAPTERS 11-12: The ideal king—Song of Thanksgiving**

*"The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him:  
a spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
a spirit of counsel and of strength,  
a spirit of knowledge and of fear of  
the Lord."* (vv 2-3)

This oracle is closely related to the one in 9:1-6. It is a description of the ideal king from the line of David. His charismatic gifts—the seven traditional gifts of the Holy Spirit which we learned when preparing for confirmation—are named, and his rule is seen as the inauguration of idyllic peace, justice and worldwide knowledge of God.

Isaiah's splendid prophecy of the eighth century remained unfulfilled for centuries. When the Davidic dynasty ended, the hope of God's sending an anointed one was pushed ahead to a distant future when God would finally fulfill this promise. When we reread Isaiah's in light of Jesus' coming, all of the hoped-for glory in Isaiah's prophecy is seen in him, the Spirit-filled anointed one. The promise of God's action "on that day" is fully realized in Jesus.

**"Stump of Jesse."** Jesse is David's father. The 'stump' is a reference to the fallen house of David from which is to come at last a leader and standard-bearer.

**Verses 10-16.** This oracle comes from the post exilic era and speaks of Judah's return from exile and the reunification of the divided kingdoms—which did not happen.

**Chapter 12** is Israel's thanksgiving response to the mighty deeds of God which culminates in a new Exodus.