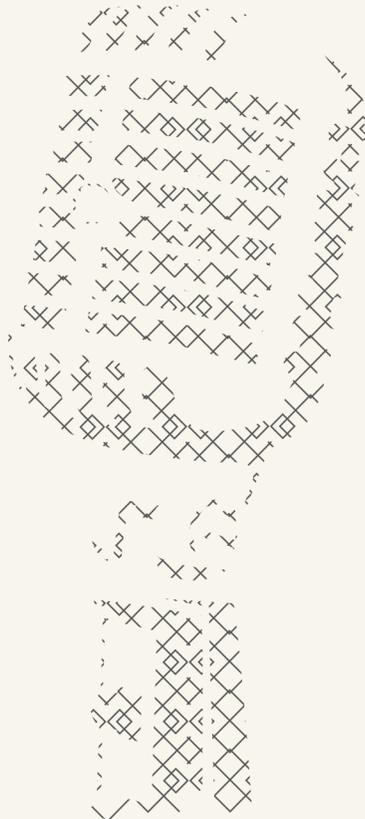


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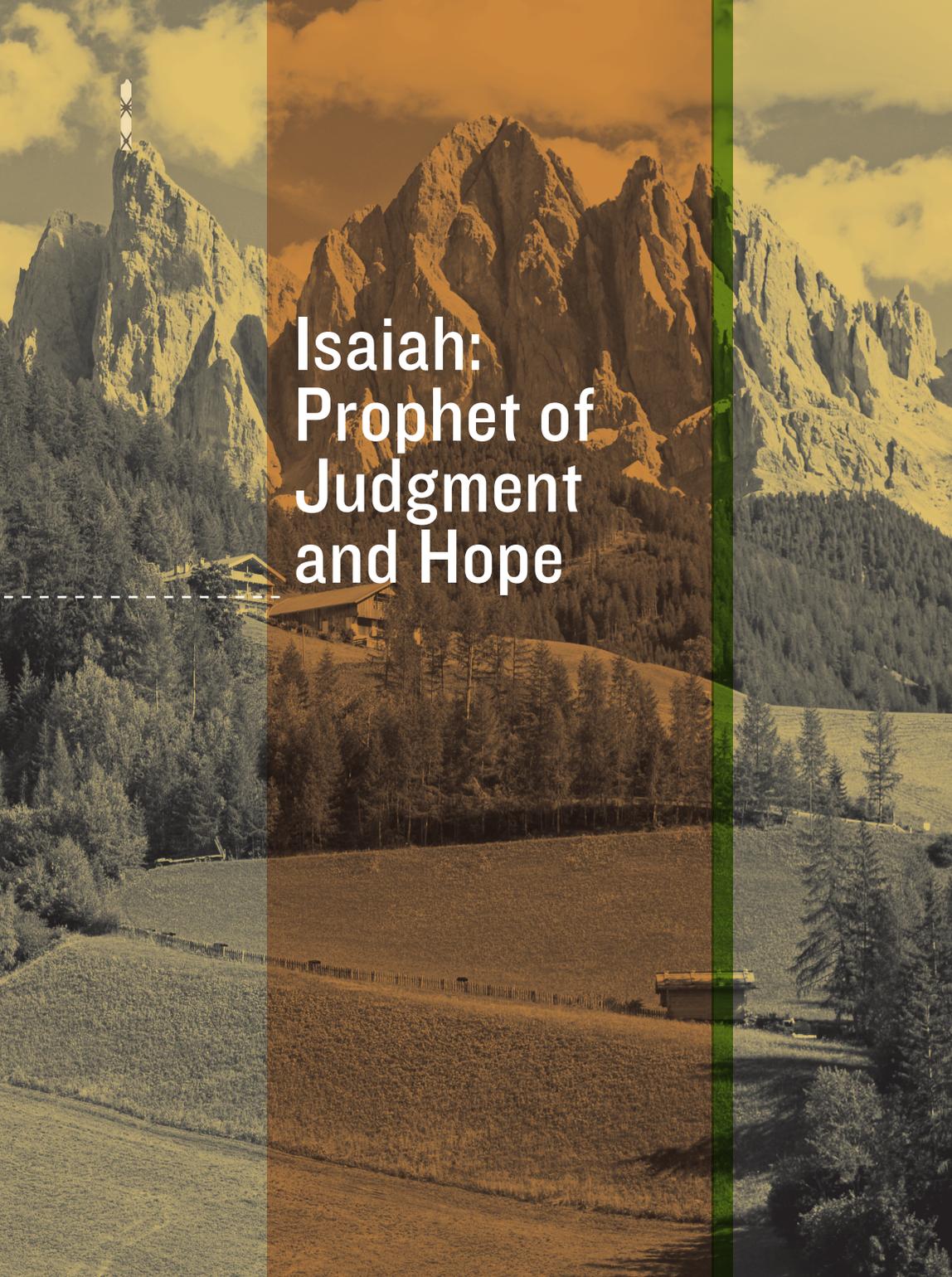
The Prophets

HEARING THE TIMELESS VOICE OF GOD



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Isaiah: Prophet of Judgment and Hope

Isaiah's name means "the Lord is Salvation"—it has the same meaning as the names Joshua, Hosea, and Jesus. His ministry finds its roots in an experience he had in the temple in the year that King Uzziah died, around 740 B.C. (see Isaiah 6). King Ahaz ignored his message, but Isaiah had more influence during the time of Hezekiah when Jerusalem was under attack from Sennacherib (701 B.C.) who had already conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The book of Isaiah has 66 chapters. The first 39 deal with God's impending judgment (this is the same number of chapters as there are books in the Old Testament). The last 27 chapters (the same number of chapters as there are books in the New Testament) focus on restoration, hope, and the coming ministry of the Suffering Servant. Obviously, we cannot cover it all, but we will lift out four high points of his message.

Through Isaiah, God tells us that He is holy and He calls His people to holiness as well.

Some 28 times in Isaiah, God is called "The Holy One of Israel" or some variation of it. There are 13 references to the Holy Mountain or Holy City and at least 50 references to righteousness as applied to God, the nation, and individuals. It is the absence of this righteousness that brings forth God's wrath and judgment. Our God is a Holy God, and as we see in chapter 6, when we experience Him, we are shamefully aware of our uncleanness. That prompts God to purify and cleanse us, for He wants us to reflect His righteousness. No nation will be more holy than its people. Hear God's words through Isaiah:

"I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. I will restore your leaders as in days of old, your rulers as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City

of Righteousness, the Faithful City. Zion will be delivered with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness. But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the Lord will perish” (Isaiah 1:25-28).

Those few verses summarize much of the prophetic message: sin, punishment, cleansing, restoration, and righteousness. (See also Isaiah 9:7; 33:15; 42:6; 60:21; 62:12)

This idea of holiness is important in the New Testament. It is also central to Wesleyan-Arminian theology and our very understanding of the atonement of Christ. For example, one of the clearest statements of the purpose of the cross is found in Hebrews 13:12 (emphasis added): “And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate *to make the people holy* through his own blood.” But we need to remember that this call goes back to the words of God at Mount Sinai in the beginning days of the Hebrew nation, “Be holy because I . . . am holy” (Leviticus.14:44 and 19:2). Usually, this call to holiness is surrounded by lifestyle issues. The message of Isaiah and the other prophets underscores the fact that God is looking for holy people, serving a holy God, in a holy community. He is often disappointed.

Reflect on this...

Many say holiness is impossible in this life. But throughout the Bible we are called to it. Ask yourself,

Do I believe that God can make me holy?

Am I willing for Him to do it?

God denounces the emptiness of their worship and describes true worship.

“Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. ‘Come now, let us settle the matter,’ says the Lord. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool’” (Isaiah 1:13-18, NIV).

Other passages to read for a background on this topic are more of Isaiah 1; 29:13-14; and 58:2-9. Additionally, other prophets have similar messages, as seen in Amos 5:21-24; Jeremiah 12:2; Ezekiel 33:31-32.

God’s words are strong and harsh. Even though their ceremonies are what God commanded of them, He finds their worship detestable and empty. Their songs are just noise (Amos 5:23). The problem is that God expects our worship to be reflected in our lives. (Jesus made the same point in places like Matthew 6:1-18 and Luke 20:45-47) Paul tells us that our “true and proper

worship” is when our very bodies are “a living sacrifice.” True worship is living worthy of the One whose name we bear.

Reflect on this...

What does God think of my worship?

Recently, various people have defined worship as singing praise songs to God simply because He is and because He deserves it. I remember a person once pointed to Isaiah 6 to demonstrate this: “Angels sang ‘Holy, Holy, Holy.’ Doorposts shook. Smoke filled the temple. It is all pointed in one direction—up—toward God. That’s worship!”

But both our experience and that very passage describe something more profound. The first direction is indeed upward—praise and adoration (vv. 3-4). The second direction is inward—reflection and self-examination (v. 5). We become aware of our own sinfulness and the evil of our world and stand condemned. The third direction is downward (vv. 6-7). God sends an angel from heaven to the guilty worshipper and brings atonement and cleansing. The fourth direction is outward—preparation for service (“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”) and our response (“Here am I. Send me!”) (v. 8). The fifth direction of worship is circular. Worship happened in the temple, in the presence of others, and in the presence of the heavenly hosts. We are always strengthened when we worship in the fellowship of believers.

God defines His greatness (chapter 40).

One of the most powerful and beautiful chapters in all of scripture is Isaiah 40. It contains God's promise of comfort (vv. 1-2) and is quoted in the New Testament as a prophecy about John the Baptist (vv. 3-5). It describes human frailty and mortality (vv. 6-8). But then, in the rest of the passage, God challenges us to compare Him to any of our own standards of greatness. He is all-powerful, but as gentle as a shepherd cradling a lamb. To compare Him and His might to an idol made from a tree that we cut down is ludicrous! The descriptions continue in the following chapters, but chapter 40 ends with encouragement. Even though we are weak, He will enable us to soar on wings like eagles!

God warns of *judgment* while He calls for *repentance* and promises *hope*.

The previous point has already acknowledged that the peoples' lack of righteousness (and ours) will bring God's judgment. Isaiah engages that theme in 1:2. God defines them as a sinful nation (1:4), compares them to Sodom and Gomorrah (1:10), denounces their worship (1:11 ff.), and calls them to purity and justice (1:16-17). Chapter 3 is a prediction of coming doom. Chapters 5 and 10 pronounce woe on the people for a long list of sins that anger God and break His law. And that anger is not only directed to the Hebrews, but to the surrounding nations as well. (Note the paragraph headings in chapters 13—14.) But chapter 35 is about joy and redemption—a redemption that calls us to repentance.

“This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: ‘In *repentance* and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it’” (30:15-16, emphasis added) *and* “‘The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who *repent* of their sins,’ declares the Lord” (59:20,

emphasis added). This coming redemption (which is referenced 30 times in Isaiah) is the shimmering lining of hope that accompanies God's wrath. That hope is the theme from chapter 40 on. And at the end of chapter 66 (v. 22) he foresees "new heavens and a new earth." That sounds an awful lot like Rev. 21:1!

This hope will ultimately come through the promised Messiah who will be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1-2 and Matthew 1:22-23), lead and feed His flock like a Shepherd (Isaiah 40:11 and John 10:11), and suffer like a sacrificial lamb, bearing our sin and sorrow (Isaiah 53 and Acts 8:32-35).

That Messiah, as He began His ministry among us, entered the synagogue in Nazareth, opened the scroll to Isaiah 61 and began reading. Then He announced to His neighbors, His generation, and to us that the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled in Him (Luke 4:14-21). There are over 20 references to Isaiah's prophecies in the Gospels. ●

Reflect on this...

Is my image of God too small?

Do I really put my trust in Him?

Will I experience His wrath or embrace His hope?

NOTES:

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The Prophets

HEARING THE TIMELESS VOICE OF GOD

Did you know the words of the Old Testament prophets can speak to us today? The prophets lived during specific times and spoke specific words to their listeners. Yet because their messages were from God, their words are timeless.

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