



Isaiah series beginning October 27th 2013 Facilitators' overview

Overview of the Book of Isaiah Series

For 5 weeks, commencing October 27th 2013, the preaching and small group studies will be looking at some passages from the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

October 27 th	Isaiah 1.1 – 2.5	A tale of two cities
November 3 rd	Isaiah 40	A way through the wilderness
November 17 th	Isaiah 53	The suffering servant
December 1 st	Isaiah 58	Faithworks
December 8 th	Isaiah 61	The year of God's favour

Introduction to the Book of Isaiah

For 5 weeks, beginning October 27th 2013, the preaching and small group studies will be looking at some passages from the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

Handel's Messiah has made some of the passages of Isaiah known all over the world and for the classically and musically minded it is hard to hear familiar readings of Isaiah without thinking of the tune with lines such as:

- comfort ye my people (Isaiah 40. 1,2) and
- the voice of him that crieth on the wilderness (40.3)

A reading such as 'The virgin will be with child and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means God with us' can bring a sense of Christmas, the smell of candles, and Christmas trees and the singing of 'Once in Royal David's City'.

Now is our opportunity to explore the book from which those much loved passages come - a book rooted in the reality of a very broken world and the reality of the transforming presence of God. As we approach the Advent and Christmas season with this book, we can be helped to see the coming of God in the past, present and future, bringing to us and all the world amazing hope and light amidst much darkness.

The book of Isaiah is a collection of different sorts of writing – from speeches, prophetic messages, and imaginary court scenes to songs. It is also rooted in history. It brings us the message that God is at work in the story of nations and communities as well as individuals.

Down the centuries this book has given Christians spiritual gems that have helped them on their journey of faith. It is a book full of passion for God and as a result compassion for the world. God looks for the fruit of love for him in love for our neighbour. It is a call to the prodigal people to come home to God, to his plan, purpose and promises waiting to be fulfilled and to bring God's transformation to the world through us.

Background

Isaiah is one of the largest books in the Bible. Isaiah greatly influenced John the Baptist, Jesus, and New Testament writer whose words include 411 quotations from Isaiah.

The book is attributed to Isaiah, and scholars debate hotly whether others have contributed. From the book we learn that Isaiah son of Amoz was a Judean, probably living in Jerusalem and his ministry extended from the death of Uzziah and through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. He had easy access to the king (7.3) and leading priests (8.2). He was married to a prophetess and had 2 sons (7.3; 8.3). His ministry extended over 40 years. For at least part of this time he was a contemporary of the prophets Amos, Hosea and Micah.

Isaiah had a very deep sense of mission and of God's call on his life. Chapter 6 tells the story of his vision of God and his holiness, his sense of unworthiness (6.5), his cleansing and empowering for God's plan and purpose (6.7) and commissioning and commitment. This vision of holiness travels through the book with the challenge for God's people to be like God.

Prophecy

It can be confusing reading Isaiah and trying to work out when his prophecies will be fulfilled. To explain this, the metaphor of a telescope is sometimes used. You can look through a telescope and see a nearer scene, you can open it half way and see a scene slightly further off, or you can extend it fully and see far into the distance. Isaiah had the gift of seeing into the 'then', the 'now' and the 'not yet'. We, who are part of the future can see that many of the promises God gave through Isaiah have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We also gain the hope of knowing that God is active in ALL of history, including our own.

Isaiah speaks with both the near present and far future in mind. His prophecies do not necessarily apply to one event but may apply to a series of present and future events (e.g. in Isaiah 2 2-4 God gave him the gift of looking into the future and seeing what would eventually happen to Jerusalem and in Revelation 21 there is a depiction of the fulfilment of this, giving hope for the future).

Isaiah teaches about God

God as the Holy One, as Saviour, Redeemer, and as Sovereign and Creator of all the world. Isaiah has more to say about the Spirit than any other Old Testament writer. The Spirit enables God's work to be done (61.1).

Isaiah teaches about ourselves

The message of Isaiah *criticises*. Isaiah speaks on God's behalf about all that's wrong with God's people, the nation, and nations. It is so challenging.

The message also *energises* as Isaiah brings not only the reality of their mistakes but the reality of God's way of living that restores people, communities, cities, and countries to places of good relationships, justice, mercy and compassion. We are called to be the change we long to see and to see God at work. The glimmers of God's glory that we see exist to strengthen our resolve to increase those glimmers, striving with God's Spirit to make God's kingdom more present on earth. It is so encouraging.

Exploring Isaiah

During this series you might want to consider setting some time aside prayerfully to read the whole of Isaiah, highlighting bits that really speak to you. Kip found it hard work but very rewarding. Perhaps you could invite others to join you in the challenge and then share how you got on.

Guidance for facilitation

In order to do this series justice you may wish to allow yourself more preparation time than usual. You are receiving a facilitator's guide, a guide to be distributed to each group member and Small Groups Notes for all 5 sessions so that you can view them holistically, assess how they can be best used for your particular group and, as appropriate, gather and prepare any additional resources required to make the sessions run smoothly. As small groups are a place to belong, be cared for and to grow, this should be an excellent opportunity for spiritual growth. The diversity of groups is acknowledged and therefore, the material has been designed to be flexible in order that you can achieve best fit to the needs of your group.

NB You will have the master copies for your group. You can e mail them onto group members or print off as many extra copies as appropriate and as you deem necessary.

For discussions

- You will know when to lead, develop and challenge the discussions if they feel superficial and you will recognise the opportunities to allow discussion to travel on the occasions where you feel that it will be fruitful, without feeling any pressure to complete all the questions.
- You will be able to choose to conduct whole group discussions or break into smaller group discussions- whichever you judge will achieve best results.
- You may want to consider Neil Hudson's advice and ask yourselves the following questions:
 - How does the text challenge our culture and the world we live in today?
 - What does the text reveal about Jesus/ God/ the Gospel?
 - How does this shape my understanding of what it means to be a disciple?
 - Reading this in the light of where I have been today/this week
 - What do I notice? How am I challenged? How does it shape me?
 - Thinking together about this passage makes me want to pray that....and
 - In the light of the discussion do I need to take any specific actions?

We aim to be whole life disciples. Let this series be life changing for us! Enjoy it and let our wonderful God continue His work within you and within the lives of your group members!

A Prayer

God of all comfort, where we are stuck, release us,
where we have given up hope, inspire us.
Where we focus only on ourselves, help us to see the needs of others;
transform us by your Spirit to be the people you have called us to be,
spreading your love and proclaiming your presence throughout the world.
We ask this through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.