

**ISAIAH
FOR YOU**

TIM CHESTER
ISAIAH
FOR YOU



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COMPANY

Isaiah For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Isaiah For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- NIV: New International Version, 2011 edition. (This is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated.)
- NLT: New Living Translation.
- ESV: English Standard Version.

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH

“You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
‘Here is your God!’” (Isaiah 40:9)

A book of good news

Isaiah can seem somewhat intimidating. For one thing, it’s a big book covering an extended timescale. Sometimes we’re immersed in the politics of Isaiah’s day; sometimes he’s responding to events a hundred or so years in his future. It’s full of unfamiliar names and places, all set in a very different culture. You may be familiar with Isaiah’s vision of God’s holiness in chapter 6 or his description of the cross in chapter 53. But large sections may feel like alien territory.

But the book of Isaiah is full of good news and, as 40:9 highlights, it’s news worth shouting about. All the time it is pointing forward to Jesus. As a result, perhaps more than any other book in the Old Testament, Isaiah forms a kind of bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

We need this book for at least seven reasons:

1. *Isaiah enlarges our view of God.* Isaiah gives us a rich vision of an eternal God of overwhelming holiness, with a passion for his glory, who shapes the course of history, fights for justice, comes to rescue his people and dwells among the lowly.
2. *Isaiah enriches our love for Christ.* Many of our favourite Christmas and Easter readings come from Isaiah because Isaiah presents a vivid portrait of Jesus as the Spirit-empowered

Messiah* who reigns in justice and the faithful Servant who saves through suffering.

3. *Isaiah sharpens our understanding of salvation.* Isaiah provides a clear picture of the saving work of Christ as an act of liberation modelled on the **exodus** from Egypt and as an act of substitution through which Christ pays the penalty of our sin.
4. *Isaiah illuminates our Bible reading.* By seeing the exodus from Egypt as a blueprint for the ultimate deliverance of God's people, Isaiah massively shaped the New Testament understanding of Christ and thereby helps us read the Old Testament story as our story.
5. *Isaiah comforts our fears and sorrows.* Isaiah brought comfort to people facing major threats and big disappointments, and so points us to the rest and peace that come from entrusting ourselves to God.
6. *Isaiah excites our vision for the church.* Isaiah gives a delightful vision of the church as a community of justice, clothed in divine splendour, which brings light to the world and draws the nations to the ways of the Lord.
7. *Isaiah fuels our commitment to mission.* He invites us to lift our eyes from our parochial concerns to see God gathering people from the four corners of the world through the global mission of the church.

An orientation to the life and work of Isaiah

Isaiah 1:1 sets the prophet's **ministry** in its historical context: "The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of **Judah.**" This means Isaiah ministered about 800 years before Christ.

* Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 213).

Here are some key dates and events for understanding his life and message.

- *739 BC: King Uzziah dies.* Isaiah 6 describes Isaiah's vision of God in the temple and his commission to "go and tell [the] people" (6:9). This is often called Isaiah's call, but its position in the book suggests his ministry may have begun before this event. The vision took place "in the year that King Uzziah died", which was 739 BC. Uzziah's reign had been long and prosperous (he reigned 791-739). But now Tiglath-Pileser III, the king of Assyria, was threatening Judah. Assyria was to the north of Judah, and at this point in time it was emerging as the regional superpower.
- *734 BC: Israel and Aram threaten Judah.* Isaiah ministered at a time when the twelve tribes of Israel had split into two nations: the ten northern tribes, who were known as Israel or Ephraim, and the two southern tribes, who were known as Judah (where Isaiah was active). Isaiah 7 describes the alliance between King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Aram against King Ahaz of Judah. Isaiah exhorts Ahaz (who co-reigned or reigned 735-715) to trust in God, but instead Ahaz looks to Assyria.
- *701 BC: Sennacherib besieges Jerusalem.* Isaiah 36 – 39 describes the attack on Jerusalem by Sennacherib, the king of the Assyrian Empire. By then the king of Judah was Hezekiah, who reigned 729-686 (including a period when he reigned alongside his father). King Hezekiah turns to God in prayer, and Jerusalem is dramatically delivered.
- *587 BC: Exile into Babylon.* In time the Assyrian Empire gave way to the Babylonian Empire, also located to the north of Judah (in modern-day Iraq). The Babylonians would defeat Judah and destroy Jerusalem in 587 BC, leading many of the people away into exile (including Ezekiel and Daniel). Isaiah predicts this exile and the Babylonian captivity of Judah in 587 BC. In chapters 40 – 66 Isaiah addresses these exiles—speaking into a situation two centuries after his day. But these chapters also look beyond this

judgment to offer the hope of a new exodus through which God will gather his exiled people home to a restored land.

You may find it helpful to keep the following outline in mind so that you can set the details of what you're reading in the big picture of Isaiah's overall message. I've also highlighted some of the names of God that come to the fore in each section.

| Chapters | Initial Audience and Historical Context | Threat or Empire | Central Message |
|----------|--|------------------|--|
| 1 – 6 | The "overture"—a medley of key themes. | | The Holy King judges fruitless Jerusalem, but will renew her. |
| 7 – 12 | Isaiah invites King Ahaz to trust God rather than form an alliance with Assyria. | Aram & Israel | The LORD Almighty promises a new King. |
| 13 – 27 | Isaiah addresses the nations. | | The LORD Almighty will rule the nations through his King. |
| 28 – 39 | Isaiah invites King Hezekiah to trust God rather than form an alliance with Egypt. | Assyria | Human help is useless, but the Holy One of Israel gives rest. |
| 40 – 55 | Isaiah looks ahead to the exile in Babylon. | Babylon | I AM will redeem his people in a new exodus through the sufferings of the Servant. |
| 56 – 66 | Isaiah looks ahead to the return from exile. | Persia | The Warrior-God will gather his people from all nations through the mission of his servants. |

Reading the book of Isaiah

In each chapter of this book I've focused on one passage (indicated below the title) within the chapters of Isaiah under consideration. At the same time, although I've not provided detailed comments on every verse, I have tried to show how this passage is representative. In this way we will see the overall message of Isaiah. I hope, too, it might provide some pointers to those wanting to preach through Isaiah or study it in a small group.

For those who want to read through the whole of Isaiah, I've also provided a "reader's guide" in each chapter of this book. This offers a brief orientation to each chapter of Isaiah, along with some pointers to the way Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in Christ and his people.

Authors sometimes use an introduction to suggest how readers ought to read the book they have written. What advice would Isaiah give us as we approach his book? In 33:5-6 he says:

"The LORD ... will be the sure foundation for your times,
a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge;
the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure."

Towards the end of the book God himself says:

"These are the ones I look on with favour:
those who are humble and contrite in spirit,
and who tremble at my word." (66:2)

As with any book of the Bible, the real key to unlocking the treasures in the book of Isaiah is to fear the LORD and tremble at his word. We're not to come expecting to judge the value of what we read. Instead, we're to come with a humble and contrite spirit, expecting to be judged by the word. But we can also expect that through his word God will give us a foundation for our times, a rich store of wisdom and an experience of his favour.

1. GOD REVEALS HIS HOLINESS

FOCUS: ISAIAH 6

The American pastor A.W. Tozer famously said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” He went on:

“For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.”

(The Knowledge of the Holy, p 1)

One danger is to think of God simply as a bigger or better version of ourselves. We assume God is like us, but with more power or greater moral consistency. We think of ourselves first and then make God in our likeness. That’s the wrong way round. We only discover the truth about ourselves as we truly see God. Isaiah 6 describes a vision of God that became the defining perspective of Isaiah’s life and ministry.

Reader’s guide

Isaiah 1

*Isaiah 1 – 5 previews some of the key themes in the rest of the book, so it is not easy to link these speeches or **oracles** to specific historical events. In chapter 1 Isaiah condemns God’s people for their rebellion against God and their injustice towards one another (1:2-17, 21-31).*

But judgment can be averted if the people repent (1:18-20)—an offer that was not taken up. The “faithful city has become a prostitute” (1:21), but “afterwards you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City” (1:26).

Isaiah 2

Isaiah contrasts the glorious long-term future of Jerusalem (2:1-5) with the present reality of her sin and impending judgment (2:6-22). Isaiah’s vision of a city on a hill attracting the nations is picked up again in Isaiah 60 and fulfilled in the church (Matthew 5:14). First God’s people must be humbled. The “refrain” of this section is: “The eyes of the arrogant will be humbled and human pride brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day” (2:11; see also 2:17 and 5:15-16).

Isaiah 3 - 4

God is going to take his people to court, and the verdict will be condemnation (3:13-15). Their leadership will fail (3:1-12), and their finery will be lost (3:16 – 4:1). But God also promises to restore “the Branch of the LORD” (4:2). Elsewhere this describes God’s promised King (Jeremiah 23:5), but here it appears to refer to God’s people. God will wash away their guilt (4:3-4) and protect them as he did in the wilderness after the exodus (4:5-6)—promises ultimately fulfilled when Jesus cleanses us from guilt and leads us home to God.

Isaiah 5

Isaiah sings a love song in which God’s people are a vineyard that God has tended. But God is going to destroy his vineyard because it produces only bad fruit (5:1-7). (This image is graciously reversed in 27:2-6.) Isaiah then proclaims six woes against his people (5:8-25). God is going to whistle to the nations (as we might whistle for a dog to come), and they will come to judge God’s people (5:26-30).

Isaiah 6

In chapter 6 this message becomes personal as Isaiah himself sees a vision of God’s power and holiness. This vision defines his ministry (he often refers to God as “the Holy One of Israel”). Isaiah volunteers to go

as God's messenger, but his ministry will only harden people in their rebellion against God.

The LORD is King

Chapter 6 begins by locating this vision at a particular moment in history towards the beginning of Isaiah's career (fully outlined in 1:1). Isaiah **6:1*** begins, "In the year that King Uzziah died". King Uzziah had reigned for 52 years (having been crowned when he was only 16 years old). "He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success" (2 Chronicles 26:5). His was something of a golden age of peace and prosperity (2 Chronicles 26:1-15).

But now the winds of change were blowing. The old king had died, and the Assyrian Empire was like a dark cloud on the horizon. In this time of uncertainty and insecurity, what Isaiah sees is the true King.

God is first introduced as "the Lord". This is not God's **covenant** name, "Yahweh" (depicted in our English Bibles with capital letters). This word means "Lord", "sovereign" or "master". It describes God's role rather than his identity. God is the Sovereign who rules the earth. Isaiah calls him "the King" in **6:5**. **Verse 1** continues, "I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne". It's a royal description. Even today we talk about "Your Royal Highness" and monarchs "ascend" to the throne. A king or queen sits on a raised platform so that even when they are seated, they're higher than anyone else. Here in Isaiah's vision the Lord is physically above everyone else to show the supremacy of his power.

When Queen Elizabeth II was crowned in 1953, she wore the Robe of State, six yards of hand-woven silk velvet lined with ermine. It was so heavy that it required seven ladies-in-waiting to carry it. Think how impractical that is—it's an item of clothing that you can't walk in! But the point was to highlight her majesty and power. Isaiah sees God

* All verse references from the main passage in focus in each chapter are in **bold**.

wearing a royal robe. But it's not six yards long. Isaiah says, "The train of his robe filled the **temple**". It's wrapping round and round to fill the entire space. It's all designed to emphasise the supreme majesty and ultimate power of God.

Uzziah has gone; Assyria is coming. But God remains on the throne. We, too, live in times of change. Indeed, the rate of change at times feels dizzying. For many of us, the future feels full of foreboding. The church in the West is in decline and our values are marginalised. But God is still the Lord on the throne—just as he was in the year that King Uzziah died.

The LORD is holy

Isaiah **6:2** says, "Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying." Seraphim are angelic beings, made by God to attend him in his heavenly court. What Isaiah is interested in is their anatomy. They have six wings: two for moving around and four for covering their eyes and feet in God's presence. These are beings which have never sinned. You might think that puts them on a moral par with God. But not sinning is just the negative. What God also possesses are the positive attributes of holiness and purity. And he possesses them with such intensity that the seraphim, even though they have never sinned, must expend two-thirds of their energy simply on protecting themselves from God's holiness.

The reality of God's holiness that Isaiah sees in the seraphim's wings is matched by what he hears from their lips: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty" (**6:3**). In English, if we want to emphasise a word, we can underline it or put it in bold font. The Hebrew language achieves the same effect by repeating the word. So Genesis 14:10 speaks of "the tar pits". It's literally "the pit-pit of tar". In other words, this is the most pit-like pit of tar. Or 2 Kings 25:15 talks about bowls made of "gold-gold"—the golddest of gold or, as the NIV translates it, "pure gold". Jesus does the same thing. When he wants to emphasise something, he introduces

it with the words “Truly, truly”. The NIV translates it as “I tell you the truth”. It’s literally “Amen, amen”. This is the truest truth. Here in Isaiah 6 we hear the song of heaven. And what they sing is not just that God is holy-holy. God is not just the holiest of holy beings. Uniquely in the Bible, we get a *tripling* of intensity. They sing that God is the holiest of holiest of holy beings.

So Isaiah sees the holiness of God highlighted by the three pairs of wings on the seraphim, and he *hears* the holiness of God highlighted by their three-fold cry. Then, to complete the full sensory experience, he *feels* the holiness of God as the doorposts shake, and he smells the holiness of God as smoke fills the temple (6:4).

After God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, he met with them at Mount Sinai. “Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently,” says Exodus 19:18. The cloud was there to shield the people from the sight of God’s glory. Even the priests could not step onto the mountain, otherwise “the LORD [would] break out against them” (Exodus 19:22). The **tabernacle** and, later, the temple were built in part as permanent representations of this experience. The altar of incense, which stood before the curtain that separated off the **Holy of Holies**, was basically a kind of smoke machine, creating a permanent cloud of smoke to replicate the event of Mount Sinai.

And now Isaiah stands in the middle of all this noise and smoke. This is Mount Sinai all over again, and he’s bang in the middle of it. And in his mind must surely have been the words, “The LORD will break out against them”.

Not only that, but a few months before someone else had stood where Isaiah now stands. King Uzziah had for the most part been

This is Mount Sinai all over again, and Isaiah is bang in the middle of it.

a good king, but his reign had ended in tragedy. "After Uzziah became powerful," we're told in 2 Chronicles 26:16, "his pride led to his downfall". He went into the temple to offer incense on the altar of incense. When a group of "courageous priests" confronted him, Uzziah started "raging" against them. But, as he did so, the Lord afflicted him with leprosy. He had to be led from the temple and spent the few remaining months of his life in disgraced isolation (2 Chronicles 26:16-21).

So what does Isaiah think when he finds himself in the temple? Uzziah's judgment is still hot news. The last time someone stood where Isaiah is standing, they were struck down by God.

God's holiness is not so much an attribute of God as the perfection and intensity of all his other attributes. God's holiness is the perfection of his love, power, purity, wisdom, and justice. He is perfect love and purest purity. He has the wisest strength and the strongest wisdom. The Bible describes God as a consuming fire. Think of the white-hot heat of a bonfire. It's compelling. You can't take your eyes off it, and yet you feel its danger. Our God is a consuming fire, burning with the intensity of his holiness like the burning centre of a star. Anything tainted by sin is consumed in the presence of his powerful purity and perfect love.

Questions for reflection

1. Can you identify with Isaiah's sense of woe before the holy God? How does this passage help you have a greater sense of God's holiness?
2. When Isaiah saw this vision, his nation was full of fear for the future. When you feel afraid or uncertain, how does it help to remember God's sovereign power?
3. As you yourself get to know God better, what will you do or say in response to who he is?