

3 Trust earth's true sovereign (Isaiah 25–39)

Isaiah's prophetic oracles are a revelation of God: "I saw the Lord," he said (6:1).

Isaiah warned God's people to turn back to him, and inspired them with visions of where God was leading them (Isaiah 1–12). All the nations of the earth are subject to the LORD of hosts (Isaiah 13–24). Any questions on what we've covered so far?

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Tonight, we'll hear Isaiah calling God's people to trust the LORD to save his people, not to rely on the rulers of this world since the LORD rules over them all (Isaiah 25–35). Then in our second session we'll hear how that worked out for one of the best kings of Judah as he faced impossible odds (Isaiah 36–39).

3.1 The LORD will save his people (Isaiah 25–35)

Salvation from the powers of sin and death (Isaiah 25–28)

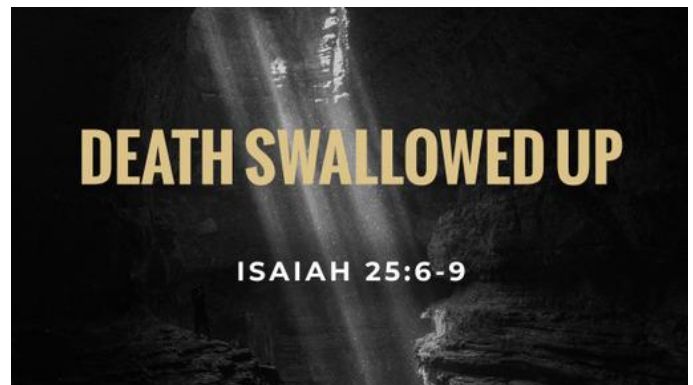
Isaiah 24 did not say God would completely destroy the earth; it said God would completely destroy all that's wrong with the earth. The next three chapters, therefore, burst forth into songs of praise and deliverance:

Isaiah 25:7-9 (NIV)

⁷ On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;

⁸ he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away
the tears from all faces; he will remove
his people's disgrace from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken.

⁹ In that day they will say,
"Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."



Very few passages in the Old Testament anticipate resurrection from the dead. The clearest examples are here and in Daniel 12:2-3.

When did God *destroy the shroud that enfolds all people* (verse 7), *swallowing up death forever* (verse 8)? Looking back after the coming of the Messiah, does the image of God destroying death on a mountain in Jerusalem mean anything to you? It certainly did to the apostle Paul. (See 1 Corinthians 15:54).

Isaiah goes on to speak of resurrection for the LORD's people (Isaiah 26:14, 19).

Including the nations in his reign (Isaiah 27–28)

As the Messiah rescues his people from the dominion of evil and death, even the nations that have been their enemies bow the knee to the LORD:

Isaiah 27:13 (NIV)

In that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.

Tragically, while the nations seek the LORD, God's people don't:

Isaiah 28:1, 9-12 (NIV)

¹ Woe to that wreath, the pride of Ephraim's drunkards, ...

⁹ "Who is it he is trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast?

¹⁰ For it is:

Do this, do that, a rule for this, a rule for that;
a little here, a little there."

¹¹ Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues
God will speak to this people, ¹² to whom he said,
"This is the resting place, let the weary rest"; and,
"This is the place of repose"— but they would not listen. ...

Ephraim (the northern kingdom) was drunk with their own power. Its leaders proudly held onto their own crown instead of recognizing the LORD and his anointed (verse 1).

The Torah called them into covenant relationship with the LORD as their sovereign, but they treated it as a list of rules, the way children do (verse 10). God would make them jealous by including the people of other nations in his reign (verse 11).

In Messiah Jesus, God called the nations under his authority (Matthew 28:18-19). Sharing his anointing with the people of the nations was a sign he was calling the Jewish people to himself (1 Corinthians 14:21). Seeing gentiles included in the people of God was meant to make them realize they were missing out (Romans 10:19; 11:11-14). Unlike previous sons of David (1 Kings 12:1-4), the king who restored his Father's authority promised rest for his weary people (Matthew 11:27-30). Isaiah 28:11-12 lays the foundation for all of that.

But it wasn't just the northern kingdom (*Ephraim*) who were at loggerhead with the LORD's authority. Isaiah sees the leaders of Judah doing the same:

Isaiah 28:14-18 (NIV)

¹⁴ Therefore hear the word of the LORD,
you scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem.

¹⁵ You boast, "We have entered into a covenant with death,
with the realm of the dead we have made an agreement." ...

¹⁶ So this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic. ...

¹⁸ Your covenant with death will be annulled;
your agreement with the realm of the dead will not stand.”

The covenant with YHWH promised life, but death for those who turned from him (Deuteronomy 30:19). Isaiah sees Jerusalem's leaders so obsessed with their own power that they'll make a covenant with death. Israel had done that at times, killing the prophets who spoke for the LORD (1 Kings 19:10, 14).

That entire history came to a head as the Jerusalem leaders chose to hand over God's Messiah to be killed (Matthew 23:33-39; 26:4), a covenant in his blood (Luke 22:20).

Isaiah's audience would not have understood how God would do this, but he annulled their covenant with death and installed Jesus as *the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead* (Romans 1:4). Paul and Peter understood Isaiah 28:16 as applying to Jesus (quoted in Romans 9:33; Romans 10:11; 1 Peter 2:6)

Trust the true sovereign, not the nations (Isaiah 31–35)

If God has the nations under his authority, it makes no sense for Israel to rely on the power of other nations for their survival:

Isaiah 31:1-3 (NIV)

¹ Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,
who rely on horses,
who trust in the multitude of their chariots
and in the great strength of their horsemen,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel,
or seek help from the LORD. ...

³ The Egyptians are mere mortals and not God;
their horses are flesh and not spirit.
When the LORD stretches out his hand,
those who help will stumble,
those who are helped will fall;
all will perish together.

Judah wanted Egypt's armies to help them repel the Assyrian Empire threatening them from the north. Egypt's army had the power of horses and chariots—the tanks of ancient warfare. But Judah's faith in armed forces and mortal rulers was misplaced: in chapter after chapter Isaiah has been calling them to rely on the One who reigns over all the nations and decides their fate.

No human army could bring Assyria down, but Assyria would fall when the LORD's people relied on him:

Isaiah 31:8–32:1 (NIV)

- ⁸ “Assyria will fall by no human sword;
a sword, not of mortals, will devour them.
They will flee before the sword
and their young men will be put to forced labour.
⁹ Their stronghold will fall because of terror;
at the sight of the battle standard their commanders will panic,”
declares the LORD, whose fire is in Zion, whose furnace is in Jerusalem.
32 ¹ See, a king will reign in righteousness ...

The LORD is king, and he has promised the anointed son of David who will reign in righteousness (9:7; 11:4-5). Isaiah calls them to trust the one who can save them:

Isaiah 33:22 (NIV)

- ²² For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver,
the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.

When God reigns, the world is transformed from a place where we struggle to survive into a world that flourishes in the reign of its Saviour:

Isaiah 35:1-6 (NIV)

- ¹ The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. ...
³ Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;
⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with
vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”
⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

Does that remind you of anything? (Hint: Luke 7:22.)

This song sums up everything we've seen in Isaiah 1–35.

We now have a historical interlude that explains how God saved his people from the Assyrian threat (Isaiah 36–39), followed by the second part of Isaiah where God promises to also bring his people back from the Babylonian exile (Isaiah 40–66).

People sometimes read these texts as if God was promising me a flourishing life personally. Is that what it means? What questions do you have from these chapters?

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3.2 The LORD did save his people (Isaiah 36–39)

Hezekiah prays for Jerusalem and God answers (Isaiah 36–37)

It's around 700 BC. Assyria ruled everything to the north and east of Judah, the places we know as Iraq, Iran, Syria, Phoenicia, Lebanon, and Israel. As the Assyrian army marches south to capture Egypt, it plans to swallow Judah too. Hezekiah is king in Jerusalem. How could he survive against such an enemy?

Isaiah had said that Assyria would fall (11:12ff). He said the LORD would shatter Assyria (30:31). We now have a historical interlude to tell us how that happened.

Chapters 36–39 of Isaiah are almost identical to 2 Kings 18–20. Compare the start:

2 Kings 18 (NIV)

¹³ In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. ...

¹⁹ The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah: ... 'On what are you basing this confidence of yours? ...

²¹ I know you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it! ²² But if you say to me, "We are depending on the LORD our God"—isn't he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed", saying to Judah and Jerusalem, "You must worship before this altar in Jerusalem"?"

⁸ "Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria ..."

Isaiah 36 (NIV)

¹ In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. ...

⁴ The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah: ... 'On what are you basing this confidence of yours? ...

⁶ I know you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it! ... ⁷ But if you say to me, "We are depending on the LORD our God"—isn't he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, "You must worship before this altar"?"

²³ "Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria ..."

Assyria tells Judah that no one can save them, no ally or god. Hezekiah asks Isaiah to pray:

Isaiah 37:5-7 (NIV)

⁵ When King Hezekiah's officials came to Isaiah, ⁶ Isaiah said to them, "Tell your master, 'This is what the LORD says:

"Do not be afraid of what you have heard—those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. ⁷ Listen! When he hears a certain report, I will make him want to return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword."

Then King Hezekiah prays, relying on the LORD, their true sovereign:

Isaiah 37:15–20 (NIV)

¹⁵ And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD:

¹⁶ “LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. ¹⁷ Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God.

¹⁸ “It is true, LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. ¹⁹ They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. ²⁰ Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, LORD, are the only God.”

LORD Almighty (verse 16) is LORD of hosts (*YHWH šēbā’ôṭ*). He rules over the all hosts of heaven and earth—including the Assyrians! “*You alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth,*” Hezekiah said. “*You have made heaven and earth.*” And the little kingdom Hezekiah ruled provided a house for their true king who sat *enthroned between the cherubim*.

Hezekiah prays for YHWH to save his people *so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, LORD, are the only God* (verse 20). That’s what Isaiah had tried to tell Ahaz (7:1-14). The good kings of Judah represented the LORD’S kingship rather than being preoccupied with their own. It’s why David wanted to build a house for the LORD in Jerusalem.

And that’s how Jesus lived: proclaiming the kingdom of God, calling people to trust the good news that the time had come for the kingdom of God to be restored in him (Mark 1:15). Jesus is restoring the kingdom of God not just to Israel but to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:6-8). Jesus fulfills the prayer of his ancestor Hezekiah: *that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, LORD are the only God* (verse 20).

God’s responded to Hezekiah’s prayer with this message from Isaiah:

Isaiah 37:33-35 (NIV)

³³ “Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria:

“He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it. ³⁴ By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city,” declares the LORD. ³⁵ “I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!”

Astounding! How could this be?

You thought Covid was bad, but listen to this:

Isaiah 37:33–38 (NIV)

³⁶ Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a 185,000 in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! ³⁷ So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.

³⁸ One day, while he was worshipping in the temple of his god Nisrok, his sons Adrammelek and Sharezer killed him with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king.

From there, Assyria's power began to decline. In less than 100 years, Assyria was captured by Babylon.

Hezekiah prays for his own need and God answers (Isaiah 38)

Now we jump back to before Assyria attacked Jerusalem:

Isaiah 38:1-6 (NIV)

¹ In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said,

“This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover.”

² Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD,

³ “Remember, LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.”

And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: ⁵ “Go and tell Hezekiah,

‘This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. ⁶ And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.’”

What difference does praying make? Is God immutable, unwavering, with everything planned out from the beginning? What's the point of praying if God has already decided what to do? It's a question people often ask.

This story challenges that view of God. “You are going to die,” God told Hezekiah (verse 1). But then God changed his mind in response to Hezekiah's prayer (verse 2). What does this tell you about God and our relationship with him?

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And don't forget, Hezekiah was an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:10). I wonder if God may have been giving Hezekiah a sense of what the Messiah would face. Listen to how he describes his impending "death" and coming back from the brink:

Isaiah 38:9-19 (NIV)

⁹ A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah after his illness and recovery:

¹⁰ I said, "In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?"

¹¹ I said, "I will not again see the LORD himself in the land of the living ...

¹⁸ For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.

¹⁹ The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today; parents tell their children about your faithfulness.

Hezekiah trusts an envoy from Babylon (Isaiah 39)

East of the Assyrian Empire was Babylon. The ruler of this region sought alliances to help him resist the power of Assyria. He reached out to Hezekiah:

Isaiah 39 (NIV)

¹ At that time Marduk-Baladan son of Baladan king of Babylon sent Hezekiah letters and a gift, because he had heard of his illness and recovery. ² Hezekiah received the envoys gladly and showed them what was in his storehouses ...

³ Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah and asked, "What did those men say, and where did they come from?"

"From a distant land," Hezekiah replied. "They came to me from Babylon."

⁴ The prophet asked, "What did they see in your palace?"

"They saw everything in my palace," Hezekiah said. "There is nothing among my treasures that I did not show them."

⁵ Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD Almighty:

⁶ "The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD.

⁷ And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

⁸ "The word of the LORD you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied.

For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime."

Isaiah has been telling us not to trust human rulers. "*Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,*" God said (31:1). Ironically, the Assyrian commander confirmed God's word, describing Egypt as "*that splintered reed of a staff which pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it!*" (36:6).

The warning is clear: do not look to the rulers of this world to save us. Presidents, prime ministers, and politicians all serve their own self-interest. Heaven has given only one name to trust to save humankind (Acts 4:12).

Trusting the envoy from Babylon was the biggest mistake of Hezekiah's life. Isaiah saw through the ruse. Babylon will eventually come back to take everything. The whole kingdom of God would fall.

In 612 BC, Babylon captured Nineveh (capital of Assyria). Assyria was swallowed into the Babylonian Empire. Then in 586 BC, Babylon captured Jerusalem.

But that's more than 100 years ahead of Hezekiah's time. Struggling to survive in the present, Hezekiah had no emotional energy to worry about the future.

3.3 So what?

The historical interlude in Isaiah 36–39 (repeating 2 Kings 18–20) brings us to the low point of the book of Isaiah. When we pick up the story in Isaiah 40, we've skipped forward about 150 years. Babylon has captured Jerusalem and taken the people into exile. Then Persia has captured Babylon and is allowing them to return.

In Isaiah 40, we hear a new voice bringing God's message of hope to his people. We've heard the last of Isaiah: the last mention of his name is in 39.5. The new prophet doesn't give us his name. Some commentators call him "second Isaiah" since he continues the ministry Isaiah began. It might be a community of prophets who hear the word of the LORD together rather than just an individual.

So what will this new voice tell us? What does God say to a people who have lost their country and been carried away into exile? How will God restore his fallen kingdom?

Isaiah 40–66 proclaims the gospel more clearly and with more detail than any other part of the Old Testament. The LORD of hosts will be the saviour and sovereign not only of his people but of the whole earth.

Are there any remaining questions over Isaiah 1–39? What stood out to you in these chapters?

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“The Near East in the first millennium B.C.” in *Understanding Biblical Kingdoms & Empires*, (Carta Jerusalem, 2010), 20.

In preparation for next time, **read Isaiah 40 and 43.**