

YOBL

Year of Biblical Literacy

Week 18: Prophetic Rewind, Part 2 (Isaiah 40-66)

Daily Reading for Week

- Isaiah 39-41, Psalm 118
- Isaiah 42-44, Psalm 119:1-32
- Isaiah 45-48, Psalm 119:33-64
- Isaiah 49-51, Psalm 119:65-96
- **Isaiah 52-54, Psalm 119:97-128**
- Isaiah 55-57, Psalm 119:129-152
- Isaiah 58-60, Psalm 119:153-176
- **Read Scripture Videos: Isaiah 40-66, The Gospel of the Kingdom**

Focus of time together

To examine the second part of the book of Isaiah and to spend time training ourselves as a community to think and reflect corporately rather than individualistically.

Connecting Exercise

Take a minute, be silent and notice how you are actually feeling. Share with the group how you are feeling and what you are bringing in the room.

Opening Prayer

Have one person read the prayer in Isaiah 63:7-64:12 aloud as a prayer.

Intro to Discussion

Last week, we studied the first part of Isaiah. We looked at the overlap with 2 Kings and how the prophet Isaiah lived before the exile of Judah and spent his life warning the people to recognise their sin and repent, or else even Jerusalem would fall. As we know, the people for the most part refused to listen. Now, beginning in Isaiah 40, the text is looking at Israel and its history from a totally different vantage point. The exile has already occurred — Jerusalem and its temple have been destroyed and most of the Israelites are living in captivity in Babylon. Whereas Isaiah 1-39 was indeed a rewind back to a few generations before the exile, these later chapters actually come from further along in the story. They're speaking and reflecting from within the suffering and

despair of the exile and looking forward toward what will happen next. Again, Psalm 79 captures the despairing mood of this moment:

*O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple,
they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.
They have left the dead bodies of your servants
as food for the birds of the sky,
the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.
They have poured out blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there is no one to bury the dead.
We are objects of contempt to our neighbors,
Of scorn and derision to those around us.
How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?*

(Psalm 79:1-6)

Earlier in the story, while exile was looming, the prophets warned of future judgment and destruction; now that the punishment has befallen them, they mostly speak of a future hope. Rather than berating the people to change their ways, God and the prophets now comfort the remaining remnant of Israel, responding to those questions with great, great news. Isaiah 57:17-19 is an example:

*“I was enraged by their sinful greed;
I punished them, and hid my face in anger,
Yet they kept on in their willful ways.
I have seen their wars, but I will heal them;
I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel’s mourners,
Creating praise on their lips.
Peace, peace, to those far and near,”
Says the Lord. “And I will heal them.”*

What we see in the second part of Isaiah is the arrival of the great news of God’s gracious faithfulness toward His servants. He is on His way to set them free and will restore them, remain “married” to them, and bless them forever. This good news, or gospel, is what they’ve been hoping and praying for as we read the prayer in chapter 63 and 64 — for God to come down, judge the violent nations oppressing them, forgive their sins, and deliver them from captivity into freedom once again. When we pick up in the post-exile historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we’ll see how this is exactly what happened. But in these profound chapters, we also see that the pain of exile was intended to teach and transform Israel so that the remnant who would return and rebuild the nation would be strengthened and purified as silver refined by fire. Exile wasn’t just punishment, but also intentional chastisement, meant not to bring Israel’s story to a halt but to propel it forward into new territory. Isaiah is proclaiming that God is planning to usher in a very new season in the life of His people, but that it all depends on allowing the exile to change their hearts and minds.

Whole Group Discussion (40 minutes)

Questions for Interacting with Scripture

These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

1. As you read Isaiah this week, what parts left you confused and what did you find really profound, beautiful, or worth meditating upon?

Questions for Listening to Scripture

These questions are to help us be affected by Scripture in the way it was intended to affect us.

1. Read Isaiah 40:1-10, 52:1-12, and 60:1-5. If you picture an Israelite watchman sitting upon the ruined walls of Jerusalem scanning the horizon for any sign of news or hope, what do you imagine he/she would have been hoping to see or hear? Or imagine you're a Jewish slave in chains in Babylon — what would have been the best news imaginable?
2. Read Luke 4:14-20. In what way did Jesus believe He was personally bringing about this same kind of much hoped-for good news?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture (part 2)

These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

1. Much of Isaiah speaks about the nature of being the “servant of the Lord,” typically referring to Israel’s identity and vocation, as well as a “suffering servant.” Consider Israel’s calling to help God redeem the broken world through living as a holy priesthood and leading the nations to God. How do you think the experience of suffering in exile helped shape this understanding of a suffering servant (Isaiah 52-53)?
2. How do you think Jesus’ understanding of Israel’s identity and His own unique vocation as the true Israel and Israel’s true king was shaped by these texts in Isaiah?

Small Group Discussion (15 minutes)

Questions for Practicing Community

These exercises/questions are to help us reflect thoughtfully on our felt experiences together as community and provides opportunities to build on it further.

We modern Westerners tend to think about life and interpret the Scriptures through an incredibly individualistic lens. However, as we’ve pointed out, most of the Old Testament’s focus on sin and guilt and subsequent forgiveness is primarily at the corporate level (nation, people group, society) rather than private, individual level. Isaiah explained that God punished Israel with exile for her collective sin of idol worship, child sacrifice, violence, oppression, and covenant unfaithfulness. The whole nation suffered even though it’s very likely that not every single person was idolatrous, violent, and unjust. In other words, God cares not just about individual piety but also and perhaps even more about large-scale systems and societies that we are a part of and accountable for. Ancient Jews, including the prophets, saw themselves as inseparably

connected to and accountable for the actions of their nation. Isaiah gasped, for example, when he saw the Lord, saying “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (Isaiah 6:5).

1. Can you think of a time you have experienced feeling the corporate weight of the sin committed by a community you were a part of even though you personally didn't commit the sin?
2. An ancient Israelite like Isaiah felt a kind of guilt on behalf of his sinful community and expected the entire nation, himself included, to suffer the consequences unless the nation as a whole repented. Have you ever felt like you've suffered the consequences of a sin committed by a community you were a part of? How did this make you feel?
3. Now focus specifically on your home group. Are there any sins or shortcomings that the group as a whole could identify with and become accountable for, even if not every member is personally guilty of such things? If you can't think of anything concrete worth addressing, reflect for a few minutes on Jesus' example and teachings of what it means to truly be God's servant community. How could your group together recognise corporate room for improvement and strive together toward being a more Christlike community?

Closing Prayer

Gather once again in one large group and have one representative from each small group share what you came up with. Be gentle and gracious but forthright and direct. After every small group has shared, close in prayer, allowing time for people to offer short prayers of confession or repentance on behalf of the group. Even if the shortcomings acknowledged do not feel like your own individually, seek to own your connection to the group and pray in love as an inseparable part of the community.