

The Greatest Story Ever Told

Basic Biblical Stories and What we Can Learn from Them

Who Was Isaiah: And What Does His Message Mean for Us?

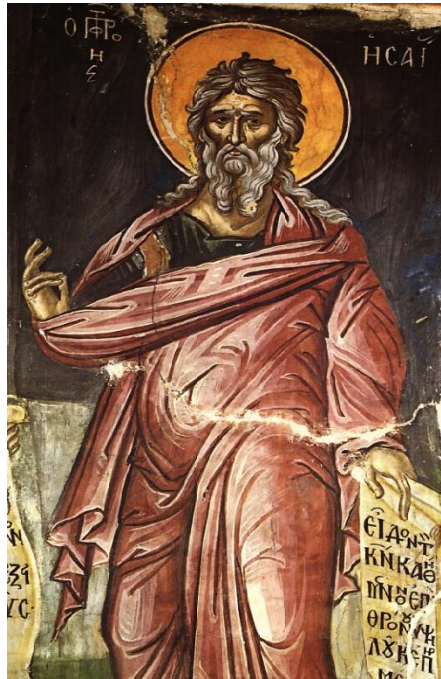
Isaiah... We read quite a lot from the Prophet Isaiah in the Mass but who was he? Who was the man and what was his message. Each of the issues with which he dealt is still with us, even though we live in a far more secular world than he could have imagined. Let's consider key elements of his life, his struggle, and his message.

Isaiah was born in 760 B.C. He is further identified as the son of Amoz (Isaiah 1:1). His name in Hebrew (Yeshayahu) means "Yahweh is salvation." He lived this name well, insisting that Judah's kings and people trust only in God, make no alliances with foreign nations, and refuse to fear anyone but God.

Isaiah lived in the terrible period following the great division of the northern kingdom of Israel (with its ten tribes) from the southern kingdom of Judah. Jew opposed Jew in a kind of civil war. In the period prior to Isaiah's birth, the northern kingdom had nothing but godless kings. The first king, Jeroboam, erected golden calves (of all things!) in two northern cities and strove to dissuade northern Jews from going south to Jerusalem (in Judah) for worship at the Temple. Other ugly moments in the north featured King Ahab and the wicked Queen Jezebel, who advanced the worship of the Canaanite fertility god, Baal, and who persecuted Elijah and the few others in the North who sought to stay true to the faith of Abraham.

By the time Isaiah began his ministry (742 B.C.), the division was some 200 years old. Though living in

Judah to the south, Isaiah prophesied doom for the north and warned the kings of the south to rebuke wickedness and fears and to form no foreign alliances against the growing menaces to the north (Israel) and the east (Assyria). In this passage, he warned of northern destruction: *In a single day the Lord will destroy both the head and the tail ... The leaders of Israel are the head, and the lying prophets are the tail* (Is 9:14-15). Though speaking this of the north, Isaiah's own region of Judah to the south remained the focus of his concern and warnings.



Isaiah's mission and ministry in Judah spanned four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. It is likely that he was a cousin of King Uzziah, which gave him both access and influence. Isaiah's eloquence and influence also suggest that he

received a royal education; little else is known of him personally.

As noted, Isaiah's prophetic call seems to have begun in 742 B.C., "the year King Uzziah died," and is described in Chapter 6:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple..... for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" ... And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me" (Is 6:1-8).

While God accepts Isaiah's offer, He warns that Isaiah's message will be resisted. Isaiah asks, sadly,

"How long, O Lord?" And he said, "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without men, and the land is utterly desolate, and the Lord removes men far away, and the forsaken places are many...(Is 6:11-13).

Sure enough, the first 39 chapters of Isaiah describe a fiercely stubborn resistance to Isaiah's calls, though he had limited success in working with King Hezekiah at a critical moment.

The winds of war were blowing. Assyria was expanding and the ominous clouds of its destructive conquest were moving westward. Israel to the north joined in a coalition to fight Assyria and tried to strong-arm Judah in the south to join. They threatened invasion and overthrow if there was no agreement. Let's just say that Ahaz, of Judah was anxious, and

all of Judah with him—threats to the north, threats to the east, and the Mediterranean to the west. There was no real escape. God dispatches Isaiah to Ahaz with the following message:

... Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands ... [who have] devised evil against you... Thus says the Lord GOD: It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass (Is 7:4–7).

In other words, trust God. Make no alliances and do not give in to your fears. Stand your ground! God offers Ahaz a sign that a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, Immanuel (God is with us). But Ahaz, caving in to his fear, sends tribute to Assyria and offers to become a vassal state in exchange for protection from Israel to the north.

In the end, this frees Assyria to concentrate on destroying Israel to the north. And while it can be argued that Israel's wickedness brought her destruction, Ahaz helped seal the fate of fellow Jews in the north through his fearful and self-serving political calculations. The northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 721 B.C. and the survivors were carried off into exile. It was farewell to the Ten "Lost Tribes." Only Judah and the Levites in the south remained intact.

Though Judah was spared, the relief from threatening Assyria was to be temporary. In 701 B.C., Assyria came to collect past-due tribute and to assert who was boss. Jerusalem was surrounded by troops and her fate seemed sealed. But Isaiah summoned the new King, Hezekiah and Judah to courage:

"Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city, or shoot an arrow here, or come before it, for I will defend this city to save it! Is (37 33-34)

And Indeed: *the angel of the Lord went forth and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians...(Is 37:36).* The few Assyrian survivors left and returned by the way they had come.

So, trusting God brought victory to Judah. *Now* maybe, people would listen to Isaiah and trust God rather than foreign alliances! Well, not so fast. Hezekiah began to form alliances with the Babylonians, who were then emerging as a power to the east. And because it looked like another alliance was being formed with a pagan state, Isaiah warned:

"Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. (Is 39:5–8).

But Hezekiah did not heed this warning. Alliances and dalliances with foreign lands and a corresponding lack of trust in God would continue to plague Judah despite the recent miraculous deliverance from Assyria.

We know little of Isaiah's final demise. According to an extra-biblical tradition (and hinted at in Hebrews 11:37), he died by being sawed in half by Hezekiah's unfaithful son, Manasseh.

Lessons from Isaiah:

First, despite often disappointing results, Isaiah never gave up. God told him to prophesy and so he did. Isaiah lived what he preached. He feared God, not man. He never thought twice about going up to kings and declaring to their faces, "Thus saith the Lord!" Isaiah was willing to rebuke and encourage people regardless of their standing.

Second, Isaiah's message is remarkably clear: Do not fear! Fear

leads all of us to a lot of foolish decisions. It is through fear that the devil holds us in bondage (Heb 2:15). The solution to this fear is trust in God, even unto martyrdom.

Third, alliances and partnerships with pagan or secular governments should be rejected. They manifest a lack of trust in the Lord with the following thinking: "Can God really save us? Maybe, but just in case He doesn't come through, let's make sure we have a plan B."

Such alliances with foreign lands opened Judah to the false religions of the nations, introducing the wicked practices such as child sacrifice and other Canaanite atrocities. These alliances manifested a lack of trust in God and introduced, the adultery of "sleeping with" other gods.

As a Church, we should also be wary of too many entanglements or partnerships with the world and increasingly hostile secular governments. Many strings are attached to the federal and state monies we accept to serve the poor. Government entanglements increasingly demand compromises of us. Some sectors of the Church (especially our universities and social service agencies) are caving in to the power and money of this world and are compromising on important teachings on life, marriage and sexuality. We need to be more willing to say no to funding which requires us to make compromises. Serving the poor is important, but we cannot let even that become an idol.

More broadly, many Catholics allow political views to overrule our faith. Catholics need to be Catholics first before being members of a political party. We must be willing to denounce sin and evil no matter who perpetrates it or promotes it. Too easily do we slip into adultery with the world.

Do not be afraid! God will provide! Saint Isaiah, pray for us!