

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Isaiah

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Introduction: God is Bigger Than You Think

With whom will you compare me or count me equal?... I am God, and there is none like me.

(Isaiah 46:5, 9)

If the book of Isaiah doesn't make your head hurt, you are not reading it properly. It was designed to stretch your mind and blow your senses with the greatness of God. Jesus of Nazareth understood this. It's why he quoted more from Isaiah in his teaching than from any other book in the Old Testament except for Psalms. The apostle Paul understood this too. It's why he quoted more from Isaiah in his letters than from any other book in the Old Testament. Those who know God best have always understood that the book of Isaiah gives unrivalled insight into his character. It tests our understanding to the limit as it explains to us that God is far bigger than any of us thinks.

Isaiah has a special name for God which underlines this truth. Twenty-six times Isaiah calls him *"the Holy One of Israel"*. The Hebrew word *qādōsh* is difficult to translate. The closest English words are "holy" or "sacred", but it carries the concept of "completely set apart" or "entirely in a league of its own". God is only called by this name six times in the rest of the Bible, but Isaiah makes it the very heart of his message to the Jewish nation. He wants to persuade them that all their problems stem from dragging God down to their own base level, and that their only hope lies in getting back a bigger view of God. *"To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One...*

'I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me'' (40:25 and 46:9).

The first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah are known as the "Book of Judgment". They confront the Jewish nation with God's perfect character and spell out what he will do to them unless they turn from their sinful behaviour and become like him. The final twenty-seven chapters are known as the "Book of Comfort". They console the Jewish nation with God's love and mercy, wooing them with promise after promise of what he will do for them if they turn to him and embrace him as their Saviour. Many readers see a parallel here between the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New, because the "Book of Judgment" and the "Book of Comfort" summarize the message of the entire Bible. In Isaiah, we have the Bible in miniature.

More than any other book in the Old Testament, Isaiah reveals *the depth of God's character*. In addition to God's supremacy, majesty, sovereignty and stunning generosity, Isaiah also reveals God clearly as Trinity. He tells us that God is the Father of all those who love and serve him (63:16 and 64:8), that he saves them through his Son (7:14 and 9:6) and that he promises to fill them with his Holy Spirit (32:14-15 and 44:3). Isaiah has such profound insight into God's character that he is almost single-handedly responsible for the fact that Christians call the third Person of the Trinity the Holy Spirit. When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would give birth to Jesus, he used terminology from the book of Isaiah to inform her that *"The Holy Spirit will come on you... so the child to be born will be called the Holy One, the Son of God."*¹

More than any other book in the Old Testament, Isaiah also reveals *the depth of the Gospel*. In his "Book of Judgment", Isaiah describes the vast gulf between God's character and our own,

¹ This is a literal translation of Luke 1:35. Isaiah 63:10 and 63:11 are the only two places in the Old Testament, except for Psalm 51:11, where the third Person of the Trinity is referred to as the *"Holy Spirit"*.

using the compelling logic of a gifted barrister to pass a guilty verdict on every man, woman and child. In his “Book of Comfort”, Isaiah explains the only way in which that guilty verdict can be overturned. God will himself become a man and sacrifice his own sinless body and soul so that justice can be satisfied, even as the guilty are declared innocent of any crime. That’s why Isaiah has been dubbed “the evangelist of the Old Testament” and his prophecies have been hailed as “the Romans of the Old Testament”. The great fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa urged the early Christians to give the book of Isaiah their avid attention because *“This great prophet knew the mystery of the religion of the gospel more perfectly than anyone else.”*²

Consequently, more than any other book in the Old Testament, Isaiah reveals *the depth of God’s great plan for world history*. Unlike most of his Jewish contemporaries, Isaiah knew that God wanted to save people from every nation of the world. He spends long chapters warning the pagan nations around Israel that God will judge them, but he also includes them in God’s astonishingly merciful offer of salvation. When God the Father speaks to God the Son in Isaiah 49:6, he declares that *“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”* Jerome was so surprised by Isaiah’s insight into this when he translated his book into Latin that he marvelled, *“All the mysteries of the Church of Christ are described so clearly that you would assume he was not prophesying about the future, but was composing a history of things past!”*³

We still need Isaiah’s insights far more than we know. We are like my ten-year-old son, convinced that he is the greatest goalkeeper in the world because he has been playing in the

² Gregory of Nyssa, writing in c.380 AD in *Against Eunomius* (5.1).

³ Jerome in the preface to his translation of Isaiah in c.405 AD. Some modern scholars respond by arguing that Isaiah did not write the “Book of Comfort” at all. More about this in the chapter “Isaiah Sawn in Two”.

school playground far too long. We have too high a view of ourselves and too low a view of God. Reading the book of Isaiah is like stepping into goal against Manchester United in the FA Cup Final. All of our school playground assumptions evaporate in a moment – about God, about ourselves and about what is truly going on in the world.

Isaiah wants to bring you to your senses. He wants to convince you that **God is holier than you think** (Isaiah 1–12) and to warn you that **God is sterner than you think** (Isaiah 13–35). After a quick **half-time substitution** (Isaiah 36–39), he wants to change his tone with you. He wants to reassure you that **God is stronger than you think** (Isaiah 40–55) and to call you to action because **God is closer than you think** (Isaiah 56–66).

Isaiah wants his prophecies to kill off all your little-league ideas about God. He wants to free you from the naïve self-confidence which you have picked up in the playground of this world. He wants to open your eyes to the Holy One of Israel. He wants to stretch your mind and blow your senses with the reality of God.

Whoever you are and whatever your background, Isaiah has good news for you. God is far bigger than you think.

The Beatles and the Angels (6:1–13)

*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth
is full of his glory.*

(Isaiah 6:3)

The year 740 BC spelled disaster for Isaiah and the people of Judah. After three years of siege, the Aramean city of Arpad finally fell to King Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria. After the bloodbath that followed, he turned his greedy eyes south towards Jerusalem and at that moment, just when his people needed him most, the king of Judah suddenly died. King Uzziah was a military genius who had won wars against the Philistines, the Arabs and the Ammonites. When he succumbed to the leprosy with which he had been stricken for underestimating the greatness of God and barging into the sacred inner room of the Temple, King Uzziah left his throne to a far lesser man. The year 740 BC was therefore a year of great trouble abroad and great disaster at home for Judah.¹

Isaiah responded by going to worship in the Temple courtyard. There he saw a vision of God which turned him into the answer to his own prayers. King Uzziah had just been replaced by the weak King Jotham, but Isaiah “*saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne*” as the real King of Judah, a King so magnificent that even the hem of his royal robe completely

¹ King Uzziah was also known as Azariah. You can read about his reign in 2 Chronicles 26:1–23.

filled Solomon's Temple.² In contrast to Tiglath-Pileser's burning ambition, the Lord was surrounded by fiery angels who proclaimed that *"the whole earth is full of his glory."*³ Standing in the Temple courtyard, Isaiah could see that their voices were powerful enough to shake the 10-metre-high bronze pillars that held up the Temple portico, and yet they did not dare to gaze upon the Lord.⁴ As the Temple filled with smoke, Isaiah suddenly realized that Uzziah had never been the real king of Judah. He gasped in wonder, *"My eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."*⁵

Isaiah never actually describes what the Lord looked like in his vision. He describes God's throne, God's robe and God's angels, but he does not dare describe God himself. He simply tells us that the angels cried out to one another in Hebrew that he is *qādōsh qādōsh qādōsh*, meaning *"holy, holy, holy"*. There is a hint here that God exists in three Persons, since he asks in 6:8 *"Who will go for us?"* and since the New Testament tells us that Isaiah saw, not just the Father, but also the Son and the Holy Spirit in his vision (John 12:37–41 and Acts 28:25–27). Nevertheless, the angelic song also means more than this. When 2 Kings 25:15 seeks to describe pure gold and pure silver in Hebrew, it says *"gold, gold"* and *"silver, silver"*. When the angels look for a way to describe God's pure holiness, they therefore have to invent an even stronger superlative in Hebrew. God isn't just *qādōsh* and

² The Hebrew word *shūl* in 6:1 is used for the hem of the high priest's robe in Exodus 28:33–34 and 39:24–26.

³ *Seraph* is Hebrew for *one burning with fire*. Glorious though these angels are, they use their wings to cover their own imperfections from the Lord and to shield their eyes from his utter perfection. They even sing their song to each other rather than to the Lord, for fear that they might catch too powerful a glimpse of him.

⁴ These two massive bronze pillars had Hebrew names which meant *Stability* and *Strength*, yet even they could not stand still before the majesty of the Lord (1 Kings 7:15–22).

⁵ Smoke speaks of God's glorious presence in 1 Kings 8:10–12 and Revelation 15:8.

he isn't even *qādōsh qādōsh*. He is *qādōsh qādōsh qādōsh*. He is far holier than any human language can ever properly describe.⁶

That's why Isaiah's initial reaction to his vision of the Lord is not encouragement but despair. He is immediately convicted of his own sinfulness and of that of Judah: "*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.*" Whatever self-confidence he may have had on his way to the Temple, his reaction shows us how we will all feel when we finally see the Lord on the Day of Judgment. Isaiah is in such distress that one of the angels flies to the altar in the middle of the Temple courtyard and retrieves one of the coals that burns with fire sent down from heaven.⁷ When Isaiah's neighbours ask him later how his lips came to be scarred, he will be able to share with them the angel's promise of forgiveness: "*See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.*"⁸

Isaiah does not resent this facial wound at the hands of the angel. He immediately volunteers to use his wounded lips to speak God's message of forgiveness to the people of Judah. He wants to tell his countrymen what he has seen, that God is far bigger than they think, and to use his scarred face to convince them that the Holy One wants to make us holy too. He begs God for the privilege of telling his nation about the one whose death is prophesied by the bronze altar of blood sacrifice in the Temple courtyard. Those who have truly seen the Lord always want to tell the world about him.

The Lord grants Isaiah's wish but warns that, like

⁶ The only other place in the whole of the Bible where such a superlative is used again is in Revelation 4:8, where the angels in heaven fall back on the same language, worshipping the Lord as "*Holy, holy, holy*".

⁷ 2 Chronicles 7:1-3; Leviticus 6:9-13; 16:12.

⁸ The Lord also touches Jeremiah's mouth in 1:9. If we are to speak the words of God, we need to be very careful what else comes out of our mouths (James 3:9-12). It is a serious thing to speak for God.

Cassandra of Troy, he will speak the truth without being believed. The Gospel never leaves those who hear it unchanged – it always softens or hardens their hearts towards God – but in Isaiah’s case it will generally make people hard-hearted, deaf and blind.⁹ Martin Luther emphasizes this in the preface to his German translation of Isaiah:

You should not think of Isaiah except as a man who was despised among the Jews and considered a fool and madman. For they did not regard him as we now regard him, but, as he himself testifies in chapter 58, they shot out their tongues and pointed their fingers at him and held his preaching as foolishness, all except a few godly children in the crowd, such as King Hezekiah. For it was the habit of the people to mock the prophets and hold them madmen; and this has happened to all servants of God and preachers; it happens every day and will continue.

We need to be prepared for this. The theme tune of our culture is “Love, love, love” by The Beatles. It is a very different theme tune from the one the angels teach us to sing: “*Holy, holy, holy*”. It takes courage to speak of God’s holiness to a world which opposes his standards as old-fashioned bigotry and intolerance. Each of the four gospels quotes the words of 6:9–10 to remind us that the world hated Jesus’ message, and Acts quotes them to warn that it will often hate our own words too.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Lord still asks, “*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*” He still calls us to reply with the same courage as Isaiah, “*Here am I. Send me!*”

The Lord promises that, if Isaiah faithfully prophesies in the face of opposition, his words will clear the ground for “*the*

⁹ Isaiah will emphasize this feature of his ministry again in 28:11–13, 29:9–14 and 42:18–25.

¹⁰ Matthew 13:14–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:37–41; Acts 28:25–27.

holy seed” to grow. If we faithfully proclaim Jesus as the holy seed of Israel, we can trust the Lord to use our message, even if it seems to fall on deaf ears much of the time. Isaiah invites us to gain the same perspective which he gained when he “*saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne*”. Isaiah wants us to join him in telling the world the good news that God is far bigger than we think.

You're Gonna Need a Bigger Boat (49:1–6)

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob... I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

(Isaiah 49:6)

After Isaiah 48, the name of Babylon is whispered no more. Cyrus has won and it is therefore time for Zion to taste the fruits of his victory. We need to listen very carefully when the Messiah sings his second Servant Song to tell us what this means. These six verses celebrate a victory which is far bigger than the people of Judah can imagine.

Initially the tune sounds very familiar. It reaches out to the same distant nations and far-off islands as the first Servant Song in 42:1–4. It is just as cryptic about who the servant is, since in verse 1 he sounds like Cyrus, in verse 3 he sounds like Israel and in verse 4 he sounds like Isaiah! But as soon as we listen carefully to the lyrics of the Song it becomes clear that something big has changed. There is a progression taking place. Whereas the first Song described the servant, this second Song is sung by the servant himself. Whereas the first Song proclaimed him a victorious king and general, this second Song describes him as a prophet, whose rejection leads to total vindication.

Thanks to the New Testament, we are in the know about who the singing servant is. Paul quotes from 49:6 in Acts 13:47 and explains that these words were first sung in all their fullness by Jesus the Messiah. He was called by God the

Father long before his birth (1 Peter 1:20) and given the name Jesus from the moment he was conceived in Mary's womb (Luke 1:26–35 and Matthew 1:18–23). The Father kept him in obscurity for many years in Nazareth while he turned him into a perfect weapon against the Devil (Luke 3:23). Only fools rush into battle. Jesus was happy to be hidden in the shadow of his Father's hand while his mouth became sharp enough to minister with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel.¹ He was happy to be concealed in his Father's quiver while he grew in his knowledge of the Scriptures and of how to fly unswervingly in ministry.² We tend to assume that Jesus had nothing to learn, but Hebrews 5:8 tells us that this isn't true at all. If Jesus needed thirty years of preparation before he was ready to be revealed to Israel, we mustn't grow impatient that the Lord seems slow in using our own lives.³

Modern-day Jewish rabbis take verse 3 to mean that the singing servant is the nation of Israel. They are not wrong; they are simply not completely right. Because they refuse to listen to Paul, they miss the meaning of the Song. They do not understand that Jesus is claiming to be the true and perfect Israel. Matthew emphasizes this in his gospel, since he writes primarily for Jews, presenting the early life of Jesus as an echo of the great Jewish story. He is the true son of David and the true seed of Abraham (1:1). He becomes a fugitive in Egypt and experiences his own mini-Exodus (2:15). After his own equivalent of crossing the Red Sea (3:13–15), he spends forty sinless days in the desert, which parallel Israel's forty sinful years (4:1–11). Having succeeded wherever Israel failed, he then climbs up a hill to

¹ Matthew 8:16; Mark 1:27; John 6:68; Hebrews 4:12; Revelation 1:16; 2:12; 19:15.

² A fletcher spends a long time making the shaft of an arrow perfectly straight and its feathers perfectly balanced, all for a single moment of flight. Its success rests on the quality of this patient preparation.

³ John 7:6–8, Romans 5:6 and Galatians 4:4 all remind us that the Lord is the God of perfect timing.

deliver the Sermon on the Mount as his own re-enactment of Israel receiving the Law at Mount Sinai (5:1). Isaiah prophesies to the people of Judah that their Messiah will be the true and perfect Israel.

They needed him to be. In the very next verse, Isaiah prophesies that their nation will largely reject him. Those Jews who receive him will only be saved through faith in his work, not in their status as a nation. As a Gospel preacher, I find the words of verse 4 extremely encouraging. They tell us that even Jesus had moments when he was tempted to be discouraged by his apparent lack of fruitfulness in ministry and cried out to his Father, *“I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all.”* Knowing that Jesus felt as I do gives me strength to overcome my own discouragement and to finish the prayer: *“Yet what is due to me is in the Lord’s hand, and my reward is with my God.”* Suddenly the Messiah’s prayer of faith blows this Servant Song wide open and Isaiah prophesies that his eventual fruitfulness will be out of this world.

One of the most famous moments in the Steven Spielberg movie *Jaws* sees Roy Scheider on a fishing boat, throwing bait into the ocean to locate a great white shark that is terrorizing the local beaches. Suddenly the shark leaps out of the water. It is enormous – over twenty-five feet long and weighing at least three tons. He staggers back into the cabin and tells the owner of the fishing boat the news: *“You’re gonna need a bigger boat.”*⁴

The first Servant Song only gave us part of the picture. This second Servant Song tells us much more because, if God can empower a cattle herder from Anshan to defeat Babylon and conquer the world, he is able to do much more through the sinless carpenter from Nazareth. He will do more than simply fish for souls within the Jewish nation. Isaiah gives us a God-sized vision. We are going to need a bigger boat.

In verse 5, the Messiah prophesies that *“God has been my*

⁴ *Jaws* (Universal Pictures, 1975).

strength.”⁵ He will be strong enough to rescue many Jews.⁶ But verse 6 tells us that the Father has made an even bigger promise to his Messiah. Jesus will have the full reward of his suffering by rescuing many Gentiles too: *“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”*

This is the verse that Paul quotes as he leaves the synagogue in Acts 13:47, but note that he does not simply put these words in the mouth of the Messiah. He proclaims that *“this is what the Lord has commanded **us**.”* In other words, the victory of Jesus over Satan is so colossal that, when Christians make puny plans for ministry, they are not being humble. They are insulting the Lord. If Jesus is truly greater than Cyrus, if the gates of Babylon are truly powerless to resist him and if he has the nations of the world in his sights, then only God-sized plans are worthy of him.

Take a moment to consider what that means for your own life every day. What does God want to do through your life, your family, your church? Whatever the specifics, at least one thing is certain. One glimpse of the Messiah means that you are going to need a bigger boat.

⁵ As we will see in Isaiah 52–53, Jesus deliberately came in human weakness. He is the ultimate fulfilment of the Father’s promise throughout this section of Isaiah to grant weak humans his divine power.

⁶ Verse 5 can be translated, *“Even though Israel is not yet gathered, I shall be honoured in the eyes of the Lord.”*