

Session 1

History You Need To Know Before You Know Isaiah

Isaiah Oracle by Oracle / Dr. Randy White

Session Purpose

Before reading Isaiah, we must understand the world he lived in. Isaiah is not abstract theology. He interprets real kings, real wars, real alliances, real fear. Without knowing the history, you will sentimentalize or spiritualize the prophecy.

I. The World Isaiah Entered

A. The Superscription

Isaiah 1:1 — The Superscription

Isaiah 1:1

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Key observations:

- Isaiah's ministry is dated by most chronologists to the 8th century BC (this is to be taken lightly, and relativity is more important than actual date).
- He prophesies across four successive reigns of Judean kings.
- His ministry likely spans 60+ years.
- This extended timeline accounts for tonal and thematic shifts throughout the book.

B. The Big Three Powers

Three major political powers shape Isaiah's context:

1. **Assyria** — rising imperial power threatening the region
2. **Israel (Northern Kingdom)** — declining nation in political and spiritual collapse

3. **Judah (Southern Kingdom)** — pressured, unstable, spiritually compromised

Isaiah's entire message interacts with these three entities.

II. Assyria: The Rod of Judgment

Isaiah presents Assyria in dual perspective:

- **Historical reality:** A real empire with armies, policies, and territorial ambitions
- **Theological instrument:** The LORD's chosen rod of judgment

Isaiah 10:5

O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation.

Key tension: Though Assyria serves as God's instrument ("rod"), it will itself face judgment for its arrogance (Isaiah 10:12–19).

A. What Assyria Was Doing (So You Understand the Pressure)

Assyria's western policy, as it touches Israel and Judah, follows a recognizable pattern:

1. **Extract tribute** (pay to survive)
2. **Install client kings** (reduce independence)
3. **Deport populations** (break national identity)

4. **Resettle foreigners** (create mixed peoples)

5. **Crush rebellion hard** (make examples)

Kings narrates this. Isaiah interprets it.

B. Key Assyrian Movements During Isaiah's Ministry

Movement 1: Assyria Reaches Into the Land (Northern Deportations Begin)

Tiglath-Pileser III

- Expanded aggressively into the Levant
 - Initiated first major wave of Israelite deportations
- Key Passages:**
- 2 Kings 15:29 — deportations from northern regions of Israel
 - 2 Kings 16:7–10 — Ahaz appeals to Assyria for help; Judah's entanglement begins

Key Points:

- Judah establishes a dangerous precedent: **solving covenant problems through geopolitical deals**
- Isaiah's central theme of "trust vs. alliance" becomes clear in the context of Ahaz's decisions

Isaiah Overlay:

- Isaiah 7 — Judah tempted to fear man rather than trust the LORD
- Isaiah 8:5–8 — "waters of the river, strong and many" imagery depicts Assyria flooding the land

Movement 2: The Northern Kingdom Collapses (Samaria Falls)

Shalmaneser V

- Besieged Samaria (three-year siege)
- Completed Israel's deportation

Key Passages:

- 2 Kings 17:3–5 — siege initiated
- 2 Kings 17:6 — Samaria falls; Israel exiled

Teaching Emphasis:

- Israel's fall = **Exhibit A** of covenant judgment in Isaiah's theology
- Judah loses northern buffer; now exposed to direct Assyrian threat

Isaiah Overlay:

- Isaiah 9:8–21 — judgment oracles against "Jacob/Israel"
- Isaiah 28:1 — "Woe to... Ephraim" (northern kingdom)

Movement 3: Assyria Consolidates and Expands (Samaria's Fall Claimed; Philistia Pressured)

Sargon II

- Consolidated Samaria's fall and extended Assyrian control
- Named explicitly in Isaiah 20:1

Key Passage:

- Isaiah 20:1 — Sargon sends his commander (Tartan) against Ashdod; captures the city

Teaching Emphasis:

- Isaiah 20 functions as prophetic sign-act: Isaiah walks "naked and barefoot" for three years (Isaiah 20:2–3)
- Purpose: visual warning against trusting Egypt and Ethiopia to deliver Judah from Assyria (Isaiah 20:4–6)
- Core issue: national temptation to seek Egyptian alliance instead of covenant faithfulness

Related Alliance Warnings:

- Isaiah 30:1–5 — condemns those who "take counsel, but not of me" and seek "strength... in the strength of Pharaoh"
- Isaiah 31:1 — pronounces woe on "them that go down to Egypt for help"

Movement 4: Assyria Comes for Judah

Sennacherib

- Invades Judah in Hezekiah's reign.
 - The centerpiece historical narrative in Isaiah.
- Key passages (narrative core):

- 2 Kings 18–19 (parallel: 2 Chronicles 32)
- Isaiah 36–37

Key sub-movements to teach:

1) Assyria Takes Judah's Fortified Cities

- 2 Kings 18:13 — "Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fenced cities of Judah, and took them."
 - Isaiah 36:1 — same event stated in Isaiah.
- Teaching emphasis:
- Judah is losing ground. This is not theoretical threat.

2) Hezekiah Attempts Tribute (The "Pay Them Off" Phase)

- 2 Kings 18:14–16 — Hezekiah pays silver and gold.
- Teaching emphasis:
- Tribute is not faith.

- Even a good king may resort to political survival instincts.

3) Rabshakeh's Psychological Warfare (Assyria Attacks Faith, Not Just Walls)

- Isaiah 36:4–20 — Rabshakeh's speech is propaganda:
 - “Do not trust Hezekiah”
 - “Do not trust Egypt”
 - “Your God cannot deliver you”
 - “Surrender and live”
 Teaching emphasis:
- The attack is theological: “No god has saved any nation from Assyria, so your LORD will not save you either.”
- Isaiah wants you to see the spiritual dimension of geopolitical pressure.

4) Hezekiah Responds With Prayer (The Turning Point)

- Isaiah 37:14–20 — Hezekiah spreads the letter before the LORD.
 - Teaching emphasis:
- This is the right response. Not alliance. Not tribute. Prayer and reliance.

5) Isaiah's Word: Assyria Will Not Take Jerusalem

- Isaiah 37:33–35 — the LORD sets the boundary:
 - “He shall not come into this city. . . .”
 - “I will defend this city to save it. . . .”

6) The LORD's Intervention

- Isaiah 37:36 — “Then the angel of the LORD went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians. . . .”
 - Teaching emphasis:
- The deliverance is decisive and humiliating.
- Assyria's greatest weapon (terror) collapses in a single night.

7) Assyria's Withdrawal and Shame

- Isaiah 37:37–38 — Sennacherib returns to Nineveh; later assassinated.
 - Teaching emphasis:
- Isaiah's theology is vindicated: Assyria is not ultimate.
- The LORD can use the empire and break the empire.

C. Isaiah's Theological Interpretation of Assyria (Not Just the History)

Isaiah gives you three doctrinal lenses for Assyria:

1) Assyria as Instrument

- Isaiah 10:5–6 — sent against “an hypocritical nation”
 - Meaning:
- Judah cannot treat Assyria as random politics.
- God is prosecuting covenant infidelity.

2) Assyria as Arrogant Usurper

- Isaiah 10:7 — “Howbeit he meaneth not so. . . .”
- Isaiah 10:13–14 — Assyria boasts as if it is god.
 - Meaning:
- God can use an evil power without endorsing its pride.

3) Assyria as Judged and Limited

- Isaiah 10:12 — the LORD will punish “the fruit of the stout heart”
- Isaiah 14:24–27 — the LORD's purpose against Assyria stands and cannot be annulled
- Isaiah 37:29 — the LORD puts His “hook” in Assyria's nose (restraint imagery)
 - Meaning:
- The empire is real, but it is not sovereign.
- The LORD sets borders, times, and outcomes.

D. What This Assyria Section Accomplishes For the Class

By the end of this section, students should be able to answer:

1. Why Isaiah constantly argues against “trusting Egypt.”
2. Why Isaiah interprets military crisis as covenant crisis.
3. Why the narrative block Isaiah 36–39 is not a detour but a hinge.
4. How Isaiah can speak of Babylon later without needing multiple authors:
 - Assyria is the immediate hammer,
 - Babylon is the future captivity,
 - the LORD is controlling both horizons.

III. Israel: A Kingdom in Collapse

Isaiah ministers during the final decades of the Northern Kingdom.

By the time Isaiah is preaching in Jerusalem, Israel (often called Ephraim in the prophets) is already unstable, compromised, and sliding toward destruction.

To understand Isaiah, you must understand that Israel is not strong. It is dying.

A. Political Instability — A Kingdom Eating Itself

2 Kings 15 reveals a pattern:

- Kings assassinate kings.
- Reigns are short.
- Conspiracies are frequent.
- National direction is absent.

Examples:

- Zechariah reigns 6 months (2 Kings 15:8–10).
- Shallum reigns 1 month (2 Kings 15:13–15).
- Menahem seizes the throne by violence (2 Kings 15:16).

This is not stability.

This is collapse from within.

B. Assyrian Pressure — Tribute and Loss of Territory

Under Menahem:

2 Kings 15:19–20

Pul the king of Assyria came against the land. . .

Israel pays heavy tribute.

Under Tiglath-Pileser III:

2 Kings 15:29

Northern territories are taken and people deported.

Assyria begins dismantling Israel piece by piece. Israel is not suddenly destroyed in 722 BC. It is weakened gradually through political compromise and foreign domination.

C. The Syro-Ephraimite Crisis — Desperation Politics

Israel (Ephraim) joins Aram (Syria) in an anti-Assyrian coalition.

Isaiah 7:1

Rezin the king of Syria, and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up toward Jerusalem. . .

Their goal: force Judah to join their resistance against Assyria.

This is the moment that reveals Israel's desperation:

- Instead of repentance, they form alliances.
- Instead of covenant trust, they pursue military strategy.

Isaiah tells Ahaz:

Isaiah 7:4

Take heed, and be quiet; fear not. . .

The northern alliance will fail.

D. The Fall of Samaria — Final Collapse

2 Kings 17:3–6

- Assyria besieges Samaria.
- After three years, the city falls.
- Israel is carried away.

2 Kings 17:6

In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria took Samaria. . .

This is the end of the Northern Kingdom.

E. Isaiah's Commentary on Israel's Collapse

- Isaiah does not treat this as mere geopolitics
- He interprets it covenantally

1. Judgment on Jacob

Isaiah 9:8–12

- The Lord sent judgment into Jacob
- Repeated refrain: "For all this his anger is not turned away. . ."
- Isaiah interprets Israel's collapse theologically, not merely politically

2. Woe to Ephraim

Isaiah 28:1

Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim. . .

Characteristics of Ephraim:

- Proud and arrogant
- Drunk with complacency
- Spiritually dull and unresponsive

Result: Its leaders are blind to impending destruction.

3. A Warning to Judah

Israel's fall serves as a prophetic sermon to Judah:

- Not isolated history—a covenantal warning
- If Israel (the Northern Kingdom) can fall, Judah can fall
- Isaiah repeatedly warns Jerusalem against repeating Ephraim's sins

F. The Role of Hosea

Parallel Prophet: Hosea

- Ministered directly to the Northern Kingdom during its final decades
- Key themes:
 - Spiritual adultery
 - Covenant unfaithfulness
 - Judgment through Assyria
- Isaiah and Hosea complement each other—preaching the same covenant reality to different audiences

G. Theological Significance

Israel's collapse demonstrates:

1. Covenant curses are not theoretical—they are enacted in history
2. Political alliances cannot substitute for covenant faithfulness
3. Assyria is an instrument of judgment, not the ultimate sovereign
4. National pride accelerates divine judgment

Most importantly:

- Judah is watching this unfold in real time
- Isaiah's audience witnesses Samaria's destruction
- The prophetic question confronting Judah: Will they learn from Israel's fate, or repeat it?

H. Summary

By the time Isaiah's ministry matures:

- Northern Kingdom: Internal political fracture
- Foreign policy: Reliance on external powers instead of covenant faith
- Strategic alliances: Desperate coalitions against Assyria
- Final outcome: Complete fall to Assyrian conquest

Result: Israel becomes a living warning to Judah—Isaiah preaches in the shadow of Samaria's ruins.

IV. Judah: Preserved but Not Faithful

Isaiah's primary audience is Judah and Jerusalem.

A. Uzziah

- Reign: 52 years (longest of Judah's kings during Isaiah's ministry)
- End: struck with leprosy for presuming priestly duties (2 Chronicles 26:16–21)
- Significance: Isaiah 6:1 — “In the year that king Uzziah died...”
 - The earthly king dies
 - The heavenly King is seen on His throne

B. Ahaz — Fear and Compromise

2 Kings 16; Isaiah 7

- Judah faces Syria and Israel in the Syro-Ephraimite crisis
- Ahaz responds with fear instead of faith
- Isaiah offers a sign from the LORD
- Isaiah 7:9 — “If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established.”
- Ahaz rejects the sign and appeals to Assyria for help
- Result: Political alliance replaces covenant trust

C. Hezekiah — Reform and Crisis

2 Kings 18–20; Isaiah 36–39

- Hezekiah initiates religious reforms
- Assyrian invasion threatens Jerusalem
- Divine deliverance from Assyrian siege
- Babylonian envoys visit Hezekiah (Isaiah 39)
- Isaiah prophesies future Babylonian captivity:

Isaiah 39:6

Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house... shall be carried to Babylon...

- Babylon named as future threat while Assyria remains the present dominant power

V. The Babylonian Horizon

Key Point: Isaiah 39 introduces Babylon before it becomes a dominant empire.

Significance: Isaiah's prophetic scope encompasses multiple historical horizons:

- Assyrian dominance (immediate reality during Isaiah's ministry)
- Babylonian captivity (future divine judgment)
- Messianic kingdom (ultimate restoration and hope)

Implication: The book addresses more than a single historical crisis—it presents God's comprehensive plan across generations.