

## ROTATION.ORG WRITING TEAM

# JESUS' BIRTH THROUGH THE EYES OF ISAIAH

## BIBLE BACKGROUND

### PASSAGE

**Story:** Isaiah 7:14; Isaiah 9:6-7

**Key/Memory Verse:** Isaiah 9:6

### PREPARATION

Bible Background

### ISAIAH HIMSELF

Isaiah is one of the most beautifully written books in the Bible. Its author was evidently from a distinguished Jewish family who lived in Jerusalem. Isaiah's long ministry lasted from about 740 - 680 BC. He was the son of Amoz, was married and had two sons. He remained in Jerusalem, and lived at the same time as the prophets Amos, Hosea and Micah. It appears that he was a statesman, scholar and poet, and that he had close access to the court. His ministry spanned the reigns of four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, and he witnessed the decline of Judah and the rise of the Assyrian empire. This was a time of tumultuous political upheaval, which saw the expansion of the Assyrian empire and the decline of Israel. Over and over again he implored the four kings who ruled during his ministry to seek an alliance only with God rather than with nations.

When he was about twenty-five years old, he had a vision of God in the temple, and this passage in Isaiah 6:1-8 is one of the most powerful visual images in the Old Testament. "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips," he declares. (Isaiah 6:5) Yet a seraphim comes to him with a burning coal to cleanse his lips, and the Lord asks him (imagine that! imagine the Lord asking you a question!) "Whom shall I send, and Who will go for us?" (Isaiah 6:7) to which Isaiah replies, "Here am I! Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8).

This was the beginning of his ministry. Over the course of forty years, he tried to persuade the kings not to trust in political alliances, because Judah was bound in an everlasting covenant with God. However, the kings did not support his beliefs, and Judah eventually fell.

Isaiah is known as "the Shakespeare of the Bible" for his clear and eloquent writing style. The key theme of the 66 chapters in his book is salvation -- indeed, the word Isaiah means "salvation is of the Lord" in Hebrew. The word salvation appears twenty-six times in Isaiah alone, yet only seven times in all the other Old Testament prophetic books. Isaiah insists that salvation is of God, not man; He is the supreme ruler and the only Savior. He predicts that Judah will eventually be overthrown, yet God will make good on His covenant with the Israelites by providing them a Savior to lead them out of darkness.

## **PROPHET**

A prophet is defined as one of God's messengers to nations and individuals, to tell of sins, failures and to describe what would happen to people if they did not repent and change their ways. Prophets were intensely focused on God and their desire to seek his will. Their singleheartedness and devotion led to amazing revelations and eloquent passages of scripture. The Hebrew word for prophet is "nabi" which means seer. Prophets and seers looked into the future to give signs, warnings and predictions of the future. Pagan seers however, were often influenced by self-preservation and political expediency. Prophets, on the other hand, were divinely selected to speak the words of God as commanded.

God's prophets were not sent when people were obedient to God, rather they spoke when the people had turned away and were deep in sin and far from God. Because of this, prophets were often extremely unpopular with the people of the times. Who, after all, likes to hear about the bad things we do, to be convicted of our evil ways. Rather the people say to the prophets, "Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel." Isaiah 30:10-11.

Prophets also brought hope and encouragement to persecuted people through descriptions of a different time and a coming savior. Such was the time when Isaiah wrote. The Jewish people's existence was threatened by the imperialistic armies of the time, particularly the Assyrians. Years of rebellion and failure to live by the covenant were about to bring about their destruction. The people were truly walking in great darkness. Yet it is in that darkness that the light shines more clearly. The glory of God becomes apparent only to those who have faced the darkness.

## MESSIAH

The "Messiah" or anointed one, the expected king and deliverer of the Jews, is foretold by several Old Testament prophets, but chief among them is Isaiah. The Greek form of the word Messiah (anointed one) is "Christ." Anointing is a special ritual performed regularly in Bible times when people were appointed or selected for a special task. Sweet-smelling olive oil (or other fragrant oil) was poured over their heads as a special blessing was said. The anointing indicated that God had chosen this person to do an important job.

Jesus Christ is the anointed one, the Messiah whom God sent for us. Even his name indicates his purpose. Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14) means "God is with us." Jesus (Joshua or *Yeshua* in Hebrew) means "the Lord saves." Christ means "anointed one" in Greek. So Jesus is "the anointed one whom God appoints to save us from our sins." Saving is the reason for Jesus' birth, the subject of his teaching, the cause of his death and resurrection. Jesus' purpose is to be our Savior. Jesus brings about a new method of salvation, a change from the old sacrificial system, yet one that retains some symbolic similarities to it especially the understanding of how one wins one's way back into God's favor, cleanses oneself from sin and restores relationship with God. Blood was central to this old sacrificial system and it is central to Jesus' sacrifice as well. We read many New Testament verses referring to "the blood of the lamb," "Jesus' blood shed for us for the remission of sins," and so forth.

In our theme verse, Isaiah beautifully predicts the coming of our Lord. He describes other names for our Lord, the Messiah -- "Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). He foretold of a prince of peace, rather than the military leader the Hebrew people of Jesus' time expected to save them from their subservience to Rome. Sin, however, is the much bigger problem, the root problem of the human race. Nearly a third of the content of the gospels concentrates on the death of Jesus. Clearly the gospel writers understood that Jesus had come into the world to die. Without minimizing Jesus' teaching, miracles and various encounters, they nevertheless focused on this primary issue -- that he should die. So why is this the "good news?" Only when we look through the lens of Jesus Christ as Savior, can this account of suffering and death be considered good news. Only by understanding our own need for a savior, our own human inadequacy to save ourselves can we begin to understand what God has done for us.

## ISAIAH'S PROPHECIES

Books of prophecy make up about one third of the entire Bible. Through prophecy God tells of his plans for the world. Prophecies contain three types of messages:

1. a message for the prophet's own time.
2. a message for coming events
3. a message for us today -- eternal principles of right and wrong

Isaiah is the first book of prophecy in the Old Testament and contains 66 chapters and some of the most famous passages in the Old Testament. New Testament writers quoted from Isaiah more frequently than any other book.

The early Christians were quite familiar with many of Isaiah's prophetic passages -- those foretelling the birth of a baby to a virgin, the naming of Immanuel (God is with us), the light in the darkness, the never-ending reign of the one from the House of David, but also the "suffering servant" passages from Isaiah 52-53. "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we, like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:5-6) The church understood these passages to describe Christ as Savior, the one who bears the sins and resultant punishment for others so that they might be saved. The imagery of these passages comes directly from the Hebrew sacrificial system, an innocent (blemish-free) victim who dies in the place of the sinner.

Recall that Jesus himself quoted from the book of Isaiah, when he read from a scroll in the temple, as described in Luke 4:17-19: "and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor'".

This was an ENORMOUS event at the time, because Jesus announced to the congregation that he, himself, was the Messiah whom Isaiah had predicted. Some were relieved and believed him; some were skeptical and were amazed at the boldness of this lowly carpenter. And the prophet whom Jesus quoted was none other than Isaiah! (Isaiah 62:1-2).

There are many prophecies of Isaiah which come true in the New Testament. Given the fact we're discussing the Christmas story, we will highlight his prophecies about the coming of Christ. The first, of course, is our theme verse,

Isaiah 9:6: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon his shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace". The other prophecies regarding Jesus' birth are:

Isaiah 9:7-8: "Of the increase of His government and peace, There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom." Prophecy is that Messiah shall come from the house of David.

Isaiah 7-14: "Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign; Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Prophecy is that He shall be born of a virgin, and His name shall be Immanuel.

## **SOURCES**

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