

# Isaiah Series 1

## Lesson 1

### “Introduction”

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**Objective** - To understand the meaning of specified passage from Isaiah for both the original audience, and what it came to mean to those that came later; especially to the Jews of the first century A. D. The passages were specifically selected because of their usage in the Gospel of Mark, either as direct quotes, or as allusions. The goal is to understand this material better in its original context to its original audience, and in the fall to be able to examine the Gospel of Mark with a better understanding of the role of Isaiah in the theology of that Gospel.

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**Materials** - Commentaries, Journal articles, Targums, Books.

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#### Procedures

1. We will seek to set the basic background for the writing of the book of Isaiah.
2. Choose the texts that are applicable to Mark's Gospel.
3. Translate those texts from the Masoretic Text, with reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targum of Isaiah.

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4. I will search commentaries, journal articles, and books for understanding of these texts both to their original audience and to later Judaism, especially the Judaism of the 1st century A. D.

Isaiah's name (יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ), in Hebrew, means "The Lord has saved," and is related to other biblical names such as "Joshua" (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ) and "Jesus" (Ἰησοῦς). We know that Isaiah was the son of Amoz, but nothing further is known about his father Amoz. Isaiah had two sons: *Shear-jashub* (7:3 שְׁאָר יָשׁוּב); his name means "a remnant shall return;" and *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* (מָהֵר שְׁלַל חֹשׁ בָּז); his name means "swift is the plunder and speedy is the prey." Isaiah gives these names to his two sons as a demonstration of his faith in God's plan for Judah's future. The name *Shear-jashub* pointed toward God's preserving of a faithful remnant from the people of Israel. *Maher-shalal-hash-baz* represented an announcement of God's swift judgment upon the enemies of Judah. Isaiah served as a prophet for the royal court of Judah. Judah was the main focus of his prophecies, but he also had prophecies directed at the northern kingdom of Israel and other nations. Two of the kings of Judah that received prophecies of Isaiah were king Ahaz and King Hezekiah. Ahaz placed little stock in the words of Isaiah (7:3-13), while it

appears that Hezekiah placed great faith in the words of Isaiah

(37:2-7, 21-35; 38-1-8; 39:3-8).<sup>1</sup>

We know that Isaiah was married (8:3); that he lived in Jerusalem and that he made his appearance as a prophet in the year that King Uzziah died.<sup>2</sup> The year was 740 B.C., when Uzziah (who is also known as Azariah), Judah's great king, who had reigned for fifty-two years, died. Uzziah had become king at sixteen years of age following the assassination of his father, Amaziah. Uzziah had accomplished a great many things on the behalf of his people, defeating enemies, solidifying Judah's borders, and enhancing the defenses of Jerusalem. On a spiritual level Uzziah had generally done well too. However, at the end of his reign he became proud and tried to burn incense in the temple - this was a task strictly reserved for the priests and God struck Uzziah with leprosy for his sin (2 Chronicles 26:16-23; 2 Kings 15:4-7). Uzziah's son, Jotham served as co-regent the last eleven years of Uzziah's life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 354-355.

<sup>2</sup> C. F. Keil, translated by G. C. M. Douglas, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 282.

<sup>3</sup> Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, in the Encountering Biblical Studies series (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 24.

With the death of a king comes peril. At such times enemies might choose to attack, forcing the new monarch to prove his power immediately upon ascension. Citizens often become uneasy at such times of transition wondering what changes might come with the new king. It was at just this time that God sent his messenger, the prophet Isaiah, to bring his message to a people that were perhaps confused and concerned. Rabbinic sources suggest that Isaiah himself may have been of royal lineage. He may have been the cousin of King Uzziah who ruled Judah from 792-740 B.C. It has been suggested, by some, that this accounts for why he appears to have had such regular access to the kings of Judah (7:3-17; 37:6-7; 21-35 cf. Talmud, *Sotah* 10b). It must however, be remembered that other prophets appear to have had easy access to the royal court without such a pedigree, prophets such as Nathan (2 Samuel 7:2-17; 12:1-15; 1 Kings 1:22-27). It might be the case that kings regularly had reason to consult with prophets.<sup>4</sup> This could then account for Isaiah's easy and frequent access to the kings of Judah.

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<sup>4</sup> Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, p. 24.

Rabbinic tradition suggests that Isaiah died as a martyr during the reign of King Manasseh, Hezekiah's son (*Martyrdom of Isaiah*). According to tradition, Isaiah was placed between two boards and sawn in two. It is possible that the writer of the book of Hebrews was aware of this tradition and was alluding to Isaiah in his list of the heroes of the faith (Hebrews 11:37). Isaiah's dramatic encounter with Yahweh laid the foundation for his prophetic ministry as a messenger of the heavenly king (Isaiah 6:1-8). The passion of the prophet can be seen in this event as he relayed the words of God to Judah. He was not necessarily known for his symbolic acts like Ezekiel, but he did go around for three years naked as a sign of the impending judgment that was to befall Judah (Isaiah 20:1-6).<sup>5</sup> This in itself would likely be sufficient cause for us to disregard the words of such a person today. How many naked people do you listen to for a message from God?

Modern scholarship has chosen to focus a tremendous amount of attention to dissecting the text of Isaiah to determine who wrote what, when it was written, and so forth. There is a certain nobility to

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<sup>5</sup> Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, p. 24.

these efforts, but there are also tremendous dangers. It is very easy to become so involved in such discussions that one gets lost in the details and misses the point of the prophecies in the history of the people of Israel and of the church. Certainly it is the case that we should ask who delivered the prophecies and what was the setting of their delivery. This contextualizes the prophecies and helps us to anchor them in a historical setting and provides understanding. However, what has often been the case in biblical scholarship is that speculation and theorizing have been engaged in to such a degree that doubt, innuendo and human speculative arguments have overshadowed both the intent of the prophecies and their significance to the religious world where they were studied, revered, and preserved. Whether there was one Isaiah, two, or even three impacts the usage made of these prophecies in Judaism, or in Christianity very little, if at all. Much of this type of speculation can be summed up to fact that modern scholars approach the text with a set of presuppositions. Brevard Childs states it like this, "With the majority of modern scholars, I strongly doubt that the problem can be resolved by portraying the eighth-century prophet as a clairvoyant

of the future.”<sup>6</sup> There are no manuscripts of Isaiah that demonstrate the views of modern scholars dividing Isaiah into two, or even three parts. It was not even evident to any of the readers of Isaiah that there were distinct parts until sometime late in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>


Clearly we must understand that the ancients view of citing sources was significantly different from that of the modern world. They approached the text with their own set of presuppositions and a part of this was that the prophet Isaiah brought them a message from God. The view of the Jews, and subsequently of the church, for most of its history, has been that the true inspiration of the prophecies of Isaiah was indeed Yahweh. Certainly there could be reams of discussion regarding the meaning of inspiration, and there has been, and continues to be. That is a discussion to be pursued at another time and place. The reality is, that for thousands of years people have accepted that the source of the prophetic ideas conveyed in the writing we know as Isaiah, was Yahweh. Yahweh sought to

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<sup>6</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Paul V. Niskanen, *Isaiah 56-66*, in the Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry series (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), p. ix.





communicate with his covenant people through a messenger commissioned by him to deliver that message. Down through the centuries, this intent has been accepted and people have been inspired, challenged, and filled with a sense of expectation as they have read the words of Isaiah. These words are not written using scientific jargon, or mechanistic accuracy, but they are intended to convey ideas and concepts that would challenge us in our views of God, our views of the universe, while most importantly helping us to recognize the nature of God, our relationship to him and his plan and strategy for his covenant people. The words of Isaiah are meant to change people's hearts and minds while at the same time inspiring them to live in such a way that their lives reflect their trust in Yahweh.

The Jewish people found in the words of Isaiah, hope, and a level of understanding that challenged them to continually seek the face of Yahweh in spite of hardships and distractions. For those who chose to approach the words of Isaiah as the ancients did, trusting that these words bring a message from God, there is today a message of hope and challenge that leads toward the fulfillment of God's

promises. As a literary form, Isaiah is a liturgical drama that is able to absorb other diverse genres of literature. As we examine the individual parts of this drama it is important to recognize that they remain part of an overall literary whole. Individual plots are developed, but may be connected with other plots, or themes in the book. These themes, or plots are put forward at the beginning and find their resolution at the end of the drama. The theme may be a familiar one, but in the drama it is interpreted against a wider, or different horizon. The dramatic tension results from the diverse counteractions, interactions and conflicts that are related to the topic. If we miss some of these, interpretation can prove either impossible, or very difficult. It is important for us to understand that emotional involvement and the understanding of the mind are the aim, the purpose, for the drama. A certain reaction, or action is being sought. This is not literature that is just meant to be read without any sense of engagement.<sup>8</sup> This is literature that sets out to reach the soul and to call the soul to obedient trust in Yahweh.

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<sup>8</sup> Klaus Balzter, Translated by Margaret Kohl, *Deutero-Isaiah*, in the Hermeneia series (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 7.

The drama is addressed to a particular audience, and it is crucial for that audience to be in agreement with the understanding of the author, and all those who act as righteous players in the drama. Understanding of a common reality is crucial in understanding the message of the prophet. The language used is often the language of poetry, even in those instances where everyday speech is used. Even as we use the word drama it is easy for us to then associate that word with our ideas of modern theater. This concept can prove helpful as we interpret the writing, but we must take care to note that our modern view of drama will differ from their perspective and we must be cautious. This is a liturgical drama and as such it is closely connected with worship and with the cult of Israel. The drama uses forms and subject matter that will have been present and familiar to the adherents of early Judaism. We must remember that, and hold this in our mind. They were not thinking of the church as they interpreted these words. We have very little ancient liturgical dramatic material to use as a comparison for Isaiah.

This produces unique challenges for us as we seek to reconstruct the setting for the material here.<sup>9</sup>

Brueggemann says that, “The book of Isaiah is like a mighty oratorio whereby Israel sings its story of faith. Like any oratorio, this one includes interaction among many voices, some of which are in dissent.”<sup>10</sup> As we read the Bible we so often approach it expecting certain things. Some come with the expectation that this is God’s word and God is a good communicator and therefore it will be easy for any person of any educational level, of any time, or any culture, to clearly and easily understand what God intends. Some think that all that is necessary is to ask God to reveal the meaning and it will come as a feeling, a dream, a vision, or some other form of inspiration. Others come to the text with a slide rule and a calculator thinking that they can scientifically dissect the text and come up with the intended meaning. There are elements of truth to all these perspectives and perhaps to others that are used to approach the text, but the reality is that Yahweh is a complex being that is far more than we often

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<sup>9</sup> Klaus Balzter, Translated by Margaret Kohl, *Deutero-Isaiah*, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, in the Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 1.

think. He measures the heavens with the span of his hand (Isaiah 40:12) and as complex as the universe in which we live is, God is more complex and greater.

In broad terms the story told in Isaiah is the long account of Israel's existence during the midst of a challenging and demanding sequence of imperial powers. The book holds in its purview an international geopolitical horizon traversing the chronology of the Assyrian Empire from the incursions of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 B.C.) to the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib in 701 B.C.; the Babylonian Empire ruled by Nebuchadnezzar on to the radically altered policies of the Persians under Cyrus that resulted in a benign support of a new form of emerging Judaism. The ongoing interaction between Judah and the several imperial powers is a central element in the staging of the story. The book of Isaiah is not just a telling of the political story of Judah, nor of the sequence of domineering superpowers. It is not a work that is concerned with political theory, or with history. The distinctive element in the book

of Isaiah is the unfailing attentiveness to Yahweh, who is seen as the primal player in the life of Judah and indeed the universe.<sup>11</sup>


Isaiah is neither history, nor theology in the modern sense of that word. The convergence of history and theology come together in Isaiah in a form that results in a distinctive genre of documentation for which the best term available to us is prophecy. Prophecy in this context may be understood as a “redescription” of the public processes of history transmuted through the lens of the purposes of Yahweh transmitted in human utterance. From this perspective the decision of any human, whether they be a Judaeen king, an imperial overlord, or an authorized priest, was not the final word. The ultimate and final word is what comes from Yahweh and he has an infinite capacity to do something utterly new, surprising, disjunctive and elusive. Because of this, the book of Isaiah appears to us as disjunctive, and in places unbearably harsh while at other points as astonishingly healing.<sup>12</sup>

Through the book of Isaiah the city of Jerusalem is regarded as the center of Yahweh’s attentiveness, as the seat of the best hope for

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, pp. 1-2.



humanity for true well-being, but it also appears as the site of the most profound and recalcitrant disobedience. Jerusalem is displayed in this tradition as an epitome of Yahweh's creation, which owes its life and existence to him, but all the while seeks, with a great resourcefulness and determination, to have a life other than the one that Yahweh would give.<sup>13</sup> This remains the struggle of humanity today as we have a vision for what heaven is, and should be, that differs from the vision of Yahweh. We, as arrogant, and disobedient, children continue to dictate terms and conditions for our acceptance of any input from Yahweh and he patiently and yet powerfully continues to proceed with his agenda that in reality is the one that will ultimately exist because it comes from the source of all creation, Yahweh. We today need the message of Isaiah, perhaps more than even the original audience, as our arrogance has grown with our physical accomplishments and understanding to virtually godlike proportions.

Our goal in the study of the Book of Isaiah, or at least the parts of it that we are going to examine, is to make the book come alive for

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p. 2.

us today. Our efforts will be directed toward trying to enter into the drama and to understand how that drama can be translated for us living in a very different world, with a different world-view than they had. This presents unique challenges for us. It is important for us also to keep in the back of our minds that the particular passages that have been chosen for this study were selected because they are either directly quoted by Mark in his Gospel account, or they are alluded to by him. We do need to keep that in the back of our minds and not focus too early on this aspect, or else the richness and texture of the journey will be lost. For the people of ancient Israel, Isaiah came to be of tremendous importance as they sought to understand their world, to redefine their world and then to live in that redefined world. From the eighth century onward Israel would go through many trials and tribulations that would challenge them. One of the most significant of these would be the destruction of the first temple, which would shatter many of Israel's notions of who God was and what he desired in the lives of his covenant people. Isaiah would even challenge Israel's view of the Exodus and begin to draw them into an understanding that this was a type of something fuller



and much richer than simply being about promising, secure and rich land.

The community at Qumran relied heavily upon the prophecies of Isaiah to give the impetus for their separation from the Temple and its worship and in their expectations for what to expect in the future. Despite the fact that modern scholars have cast doubt on parts of Isaiah being written by the original eighth century prophet because of its predictions about the future, and the fact that those predictions are accurate, this was exactly how generations of Jews continued to view the prophecies. They viewed them as foretelling what was going to happen in the future because God gave those promises to his people about what would happen before they took place. The book of Isaiah explicitly points to events that are datable (Isaiah 7 - 734 B.C.; Isaiah 20 - 714-712 B.C.; Isaiah 45-46 - 540 B.C.); these events move forward in a fashion that is very chronological and accurate. The chronological period covered by this book is beyond the lifespan of one man, and yet the superscription for the book

indicates that there is a link to the vision and the words of Isaiah in the eighth century B.C.<sup>14</sup>

Watts suggests that the book establishes the credentials for Isaiah's vision in 7:1-16 and in 20:1-6, including words that are not found in other quoted accounts, or in chapters 36-39. In the book of Isaiah the reactions to that message are traced in the royal Judaeen policies of the eighth, seventh and early sixth centuries B.C. and in the responses of the exilic and post exilic generations. The book of Isaiah proclaims that Isaiah the prophet, in the eighth century B.C. revealed Yahweh's decisions and strategy concerning Israel, Judah and the empires around Israel and Judah. The claim is that the strategy of Yahweh has not varied throughout that period and that the words of Isaiah continue to be valid. The audience of this book needed to be assured that Yahweh is in control of even the imperial powers that now seem so threatening to Judah. Israel and Judah are called to passive acceptance of imperial rule (Assyrian and Persian). Judah is to demonstrate their faithfulness to Yahweh by their conformity to the vision given through Isaiah (2:1-4). The vision of

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<sup>14</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Revised Edition, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 24 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. xxxvii.

the book also recognizes that the generations that have practiced Isaiah's vision of passive political acceptance have been few and despised (Ahaz and Manasseh). Even those that appeared to accept the prophecies of Isaiah regarding the political aspects demonstrated no inclination to make Jerusalem a pure sanctuary devoted to the worship of Yahweh. This then becomes a rejection of the total strategy of Yahweh.<sup>15</sup> It must be remembered that the strategy of Yahweh is not a buffet, we cannot take part and leave some. It is all or nothing.

This rejection of the vision and strategy of Yahweh has, and will continue to mean that Judah and Israel will be failures. No change to this failure is expected in the time of the prophet and for a considerable time afterward. It appears to Israel that God has changed his strategy in Isaiah: this is a response to the farce of the divided kingdom and the faithlessness of Israel and Judah. God reacts to the sinfulness, the disobedience of the people of Yahweh and he responds.<sup>16</sup> This should not be a surprise to anyone. Yahweh always indicated that there would be a response to disobedience

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<sup>15</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Revised Edition, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.

<sup>16</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Revised Edition, p. xxxviii.

(Joshua 24:20). The prophet Isaiah lays out that strategy and also explains much of what is happening and what will happen so that the people need not be confused. God has not forsaken his covenant, he is keeping his covenant which included not only the promise of blessings, but also the promise of consequences for failure to abide by the covenant. In punishment, banishment, and in the failed expectations, God was still fulfilling all the obligations of his covenant. Continuing to bless Judah and Israel in the same ways, while they remained in their sin, would have perhaps amounted to collusion in that sin. Certainly such an accusation could never be leveled at Yahweh. There are consequences to disobedience.

It must be kept in view that the book of Isaiah was more than a puzzle to be solved, a mystery to be unraveled. For those who were willing, and are willing, to take the time and the effort to listen, Isaiah is the message of Yahweh about his strategy and his vision. In this strategy and vision much is revealed about the nature of Yahweh and much more about the people he seeks to lead into the light of his kingdom. This is often seen as literature by us today, but it is meant to be far more; it is intended to impact us at a spiritual level that

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transforms our worldview, our day to day lives, and our aspirations for the future. Isaiah sets out the vision of God for his creation and his creature.

# Synopsis


It is important for us to remember that the goal of this study, in the first instance, is to understand how these prophecies were understood by their original audience. Beyond this, we will seek to explore how they have been interpreted by the Jewish people down through the centuries and then by the early church.

We know very little about Isaiah, or his ancestry, but we do know that he is a man who held a great faith in Yahweh, that he prophesied primarily to Judah and that his prophecies were by and large ignored by the kings of Judah. His prophecies began in the year 740 B.C. after the reign of King Uzziah, and it appears from tradition that he may have died a martyr's death by being sawn in two. He appears to have delivered his prophecies from Yahweh in the royal court of multiple kings of Judah. He even went around naked for three years as a symbol of the coming judgment of Yahweh upon Judah.

There have been tomes written by modern scholars trying to discern who wrote what, when, and so forth, but there is no evidence

of multiple texts demonstrating that this material ever circulated in a form different from the single volume that we have today. Two largely complete manuscripts of Isaiah were found at Qumran giving us a very early witness to this text, certainly before the first century of this era and there are no divisions in the text that would lend credence to modern theories of multiple authors. For our interpretive purposes such theories of composition provide very little of use and therefore will be largely disregarded. We will seek to examine this book from the perspective from which it was viewed by the early Jewish and Christian communities, which was as an inspired message from Yahweh.


For many centuries the words of Isaiah have been a message of hope, challenge and vision that have inspired the transformation of people and their communities. As a literary form Isaiah is a liturgical drama that employs a diversity of literary genres. In spite of this diversity it is important for us to recognize that this document has circulated as a single document throughout known history. The drama of Isaiah is addressed to the covenant people of Judah, living in the southern portion of the divided kingdom and it challenges



them to come to obedience and understanding of Yahweh and his covenant with them. It calls them to faith with a cacophony of a voices and forms that bombards all the senses of the reader. It is a complex work reflecting the complexity of Yahweh and his relationship with his people. It requires careful and detailed attention to detail in order to understand its message. The story of Yahweh dealing with, and calling his people comes out in a convergence of history, theology, and promises that draws us forward in faith to follow him with patience and endurance.

Isaiah demonstrates a powerful response to a people that have on a perennial basis proven to be faithless and disobedient. Yahweh continues his pursuit of relationship that at times seems harsh and unyielding, and in the next moment tender and merciful beyond our comprehension. This range of emotion is a demonstration of Yahweh's passionate pursuit of his people and his supreme desire to be merciful and nurturing. Yahweh never gives up on his vision for humanity, but neither does he acquiesce to their sinful nature and allow their disobedience and faithlessness to dictate his response. Israel is shown to continue to fail to follow fully the vision of Yahweh





portrayed in Isaiah and as a result they continue to be a failure as a people. Only when they follow Yahweh do they have a measure of true success. Only the vision from Yahweh will ultimately prevail, and only the people who follow that vision will prevail and be a part of the kingdom of God.

# Questions

1. Why do you think it might be important to understand the background of Isaiah?
2. If you were God, how might you choose to communicate with human beings? Why?
3. Why do you think it is so difficult for human beings to understand God?
4. Why do you think it seems to be even more difficult for people to follow God?
5. What are some ways that you and your family express your faith in God? Why those ways?
6. What are some things that you would like to learn from a study of the book of Isaiah?
7. Why do you think kings should listen to prophets? What about modern political leaders?
8. Why do you think there has continued to be interest in the book of Isaiah?
9. What do you think it means for something to be inspired by God?
10. How can we tell if something has been inspired by God?
11. Why do you think people have through the centuries believed the book of Isaiah to be inspired by God?
12. If Isaiah is inspired by God what does that mean for us today?
13. How might an understanding of Isaiah change the way that we view the world today?
14. What parts of the book Isaiah do you think apply to us today, and why?
15. What parts of the book of Isaiah are not a message for us today, and why?