



LifeLight

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 1:4

Isaiah, Part 1



LEADERS GUIDE



An angel reached out with a burning coal, touched Isaiah's mouth, and said: "Behold . . . your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (Isaiah 6:7). What Isaiah experienced that day must have both shocked and thrilled him. In the presence of the Holy One of Israel, he learned about his sin and also about the atonement for sin that only the Lord can provide. As you study Isaiah's prophecies you, too, will be touched and thrilled by the Lord's Word for you.

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Edward Engelbrecht, editor

Revised from material by Andrew H. Bartelt and Jane Fryar; contributions by Edward Engelbrecht

Denise Muhly, Lavern Schmidt, and Rick Gallagher, field-test coordinators

LifeLight field-test sites: St. Peter Lutheran Church, Lodi, CA—Rev. Zimmermann, Pastor; Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Lakewood, CO—Rev. Dyer, pastor.

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Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

In-depth means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;
- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership team and discussion leaders meetings.

The Small-Group Coordinator (*optional; the director may fill this role*)

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

The Small-Group Discussion Leaders

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 51.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (**see p. 51**);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;

- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;
- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion-leaders training meetings.

Leadership Training

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week’s work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week’s lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

The LifeLight Weekly Schedule

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week’s assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week’s

study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). Those congregations may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

Recommended Study Resources for Isaiah

Concordia Self-Study Bible, New International Version. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986. Interpretive notes on each page form a running commentary on the text. The book includes cross-references, a 35,000-word concordance, full-color maps, charts, and timelines.

Delitzsch, Franz. *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah.* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1973. An important classic resource.

Keil, C. F. and Franz Delitzsch. *Isaiah—A Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament.* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971. A standard Old Testament commentary by two outstanding conservative scholars. A careful study of the original text and its implications for biblical theology. Although somewhat old, it is still a helpful resource.

Leupold, Herbert C. *An Exposition of Isaiah.* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977. A careful exposition of Isaiah and its messianic prophecies.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary.* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible is tailored for lay use.

Young, Edward J. *The Book of Isaiah.* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992. The magnum opus of a great conservative scholar. Carefully interprets the many prophecies of Isaiah in their context; also stresses their messianic import.

Every Voice a Song: Pipe Organ Accompaniment for 180 Hymns and Liturgy. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no. 99-1565). Use this music CD for worship hymn accompaniment.

Isaiah, Mighty Seer

Isaiah 1, 6, and Related Historical Texts

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

As we begin this study of Isaiah, we meet its author. We set the social, political, and spiritual stage for the Book as we probe conditions in the nation of Judah in the seventh century before Christ. We also catch a glimpse of God's glory as He reveals Himself to Isaiah and calls him into the prophetic office.

Objectives

That the participant, led by the Holy Spirit through the Word, will

1. understand the political, social, and spiritual scene into which God sent Isaiah as His spokesman;
2. comprehend Isaiah's message as one of both sin and grace, Law and Gospel;
3. realize that the message of repentance and forgiveness that Isaiah spoke to God's Old Testament people is the same message our Lord speaks to us today;
4. respond to that message in humble confession and confident peace, assured that his or her sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 51.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn and the prayer printed in the study leaflet. Hymn accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran*

Worship (LW, refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.)

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

In the year that John Kennedy died . . .

On the morning the space shuttle Challenger exploded . . .

On the day the towers fell . . .

Do you recall significant times in your life by linking them with historical events like these, especially with traumatic ones? If so, you'll more likely understand the shudder that shook the hearts of the people of Judah as they heard these words from Isaiah's lips: "In the year that King Uzziah died . . ." (Isaiah 6:1).

1 In the Year King Uzziah Died

We receive a full account of the events from 2 Chronicles 26. Uzziah's fifty-two-year reign was marked by prosperity and national accomplishment. What an administrator! The people of Judah benefited from Uzziah's various national programs. His ambitious building projects fostered national pride, as well as boosted the economy. Uzziah's agricultural policies no doubt ensured a plentiful food supply and put many unskilled laborers to work. Even Uzziah's military exploits to the west and south probably proved popular. For one thing, Judah reclaimed territory from its glory days. For another, the tribute Uzziah extorted from those he defeated in battle would have helped lower the tax rate at home. Flags flew high in Judah as long as Uzziah sat on David's throne.

But prosperity has its hazards, hazards perhaps more treacherous than adversity. We may let down our guard. We may forget the dangers we face, dangers from with-

out and within. We tend to lose touch with the conditions of the heart. Isaiah reminds us that this subtle hazard has proven deadly time and again throughout history for kings, as well as for us more common folk.

2 Uzziah's Fall

When Isaiah was growing up, Judah was rising up under Uzziah's leadership. Uzziah had fifty-two years on the throne—twelve years more than David or Solomon. Hearts and flags soared in Judah, and Uzziah began to believe his own publicity. While the sixteen-year-old Uzziah "did what was right in the eyes of the LORD according to all that his father Amaziah had done," (2 Chronicles 26:4), the prosperity the Lord gave Judah during Uzziah's reign awakened tragic pride inside the king's heart.

In 2 Chronicles 26, we learn that during the latter years of his reign, Uzziah turned his attention more and more to concerns of military might and prosperity, while his heart grew spiritually numb.

The Scriptures tell us (2 Chronicles 26:16), "But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense."

Uzziah thought himself invincible. He thought himself above the law, even God's law. After all, he may have reasoned, why would a wise and accomplished ruler such as himself need a lowly priest to represent him before God's throne? Who would deny an accomplished ruler access to the temple and its altar? Why shouldn't a king who commanded so much political power also wield a measure of spiritual authority as well?

The king took a censer and bullied his way into the Holy Place of the temple to burn incense. Rebuked by Azariah and eighty other courageous priests who dared to stand up to him, Uzziah became enraged. Impenitent and furious, Uzziah suddenly found himself struck with leprosy. He rushed out of the temple, spurred on by the priests. For the rest of his earthly life, he suffered the lonely consequences of his scheme to grab more honor and power for himself.

3 Assyria—A New Superpower

Isaiah begins with Uzziah's death. The people of Judah were probably fearful and insecure. During Uzziah's fifty-two-year reign, the nations had undergone drastic change. Most notable was the rise of Assyria, the new superpower of that era.

The approach Assyria took to warfare permanently changed the balance of power in the area and chilled the hearts of everyone who lived within striking distance.

Until then, enemy armies would march to the borders of a weaker kingdom, threaten that kingdom's ruler, and demand tribute. Those who were able or willing to pay escaped harm. Those who could not afford to pay the tribute or who thought they could defeat the attacking enemy would march off to war to defend their right to keep their wealth.

The Assyrians changed all that. They put a program of permanent conquest in place. They would round up the populations they defeated and herd nearly all the people off for permanent resettlement in another part of their far-flung empire. Then they would import other captives to resettle the conquered territory. By uprooting the people they conquered, they put an end to rebellion.

How frightening it must have been for the Judeans to face the possible loss of their homes, culture, and perhaps even their language and identity as a people! Imagine yourself being captured by an invading army and then resettled in a village somewhere in the heart of Afghanistan. Imagine that neither you nor the members of your family would ever go home again. In Isaiah's day, the people of Judah found themselves facing that very kind of threat.

Uzziah, the king and Judah's protector, was dead. In 2 Chronicles 27, we learn that Jotham, a young man with an unimpressive track record, had officially ascended to the throne of David. The nation's future looked rocky at best. At least, that's the way the people of Judah must have seen it. But it wasn't the way the Lord saw it. And it wasn't the way He wanted His people to see it either.

4 Isaiah—Mighty Seer

Enter Isaiah, Isaiah the seer, the prophet who by God's grace saw the true dangers Judah faced, and who saw the sins of the past, the spiritual dry rot of the present, and the judgment on the horizon.

In Isaiah 6:1, we learn that in the year King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the King—the ruler of heaven and earth—high and lifted up. Not King Uzziah, but Yahweh, the Lord. The train of His royal robes filled the temple.

We know from Exodus 33:20 that “man shall not see Me [the Lord] and live.” Isaiah says that he saw the Lord. But note well that Isaiah never describes the Lord. Instead, He describes the evidences of the Lord's presence. He focuses especially on the seraphs surrounding the throne that correspond with the “living creatures” mentioned in St. John's vision of heaven (Revelation 4:6–9). In that revelation, as here, each of these angelic beings had six wings. With two wings they flew. Two wings covered their faces in their awe of the divine glory. Two wings covered their feet in their consciousness of the depth at which creatures stand below their great Creator.

King Uzziah had died, but Judah's heavenly King was alive and well. His people were alive also, alive but sick (Isaiah 1:5–6): “The whole head is injured, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of your foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil.”

Face-to-face with the Holy One of Israel, Isaiah felt the searing shame of his own sinfulness. He cries out in anguish (6:5), “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

“I could have died,” we sometimes say. We usually say it as we try to express deep embarrassment over some incident or another. “I could have died.”

In that moment, Isaiah the seer could have died. He saw himself in the blinding light of God's holiness. He saw his people in that same blinding light. He saw the reality of his sin, and he fully expected to die from the encounter.

When was the last time we truly felt that way as we

approached our holy God with our sins? When was the last time we found ourselves face-to-face with our guilt and the penalty our heavenly King could rightly demand that we pay? When was the last time we really saw the wretched self-centeredness and nauseating infection of the sin that churns inside our own hearts?

Isaiah saw that the words of his lips did not match the actions of his life. He realized that he personally had contributed to the hypocrisy of his outwardly religious but inwardly self-righteous society. Isaiah recognized the futility of trying to make up for his sin by performing a few outward rituals each time he went to church. But the most painful thing of all that Isaiah saw that day was the truth that he personally deserved all the judgment His righteous King could dispense.

It was at that point that Isaiah the seer saw something else (6:6), something wonderful. He saw one of the seraphim—one of the angels whose name means “the burning ones”—fly to the altar and remove from it a burning coal. Isaiah watched the seraph fly to the place in the temple where he stood and with that white-hot coal touch his lips.

As the seraph did that, Isaiah the seer heard. He heard the strong Word of the Lord (6:7): “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

The words spoken by our pastors in worship parallel what happened to our brother Isaiah as he stood in the presence of the seraphim that day. We, too, stand before a holy God. We stand there as His forgiven and dearly loved children. How fantastic is that forgiveness! Lord, let us see Your mercy more and more fully, just as You enabled Isaiah to see it.

Then God spoke again (6:8). This time He spoke an invitation and a challenge: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?”

Did you catch it? Do you hear in the “Us” the invitation of the Holy Trinity? God approached Isaiah to ask—not command, but to ask—him to take on the role of ambassador for heaven's King. The psalmist says (Psalm 18:35) of our Lord, “Your gentleness made me great.” In His gentleness, the Lord asks, “Whom shall I send?”

Isaiah 6:9–12 requires special comment. In verse 9, the Lord calls the people “this people,” not “My people.”

They have ceased listening to Him, and He is separating Himself from them. Isaiah's message will deepen the separation. He will dull their eyes, ears, and all their senses in order that they might continue toward destruction. Notice the poetry of verse 10. The Lord comments on their hearts, ears, and eyes. Then He reverses the order to eyes, ears, and hearts (an example of chiasm). The Lord begins with their hearts and ends with their hearts. Their hearts are the problem. The Hebrew term translated "dull" or "calloused" literally means "fat." Their hearts are fat with contentment so that they will not hear and see the truth.

Take note, hearers and readers! As you study Isaiah's prophecies over the coming weeks, do not close your eyes and ears. That temptation will arise as the prophet continually focuses on the Assyrians and Babylonians and repeats his message about the lack of repentance in Israel. Your mind may wander, and your heart may wonder, "What does all this Old Testament history have to do with me?" Exercise your hearts with careful study of the text. See with Isaiah's eyes, and hear with his ears lest your hearts grow dull and fat.

5 Isaiah's Task

Isaiah's assignment would not be easy. None of God's prophets slept in a bed of roses. Like other prophets, Isaiah would speak a hard word. He would point his long, bony finger at the people's sins. He would name names. He would warn and confront. After a while, people would cross the street when they saw him coming. Eventually, if tradition tells the truth, his own people would saw him in half.

From the world's point of view, this prophet, like most of God's Old Testament prophets, was, quite frankly, a nobody. We know little about Isaiah. He mentions his father, wife, and two children in his Book. That's about it as far as our background information goes. All we have is his message. He spoke for Yahweh, the Lord, the King in whose presence the angels veil their faces. Isaiah spoke the Word of the Lord to a people who needed so badly to hear it.

Isaiah spoke of human sin and the judgment the King of kings would rightly impose on those who did not repent. But Isaiah also spoke of a time when Yahweh Himself would come as King, Deliverer, and Savior.

But we're getting ahead of the story. For now, we're stuck with King Jotham and his spiritually sick, impenitent subjects.

Chapter 1 paints a somber picture, a picture rendered in the grays and deep purples of grief. We see the holy, heavenly King crying tears over the rebellion of His people. God's heart aches.

Isaiah 1:3 summarizes the seriousness of the problem. A barnyard animal as ignorant as an ox knows its master, the person who feeds, waters, and cares for it. A donkey at least knows its manger and where to come for food each night. But Israel? Israel knows . . . knows . . . what? The Hebrew sentence simply ends. It ends without a direct object to complete the thought of the verb. Israel knows . . . nothing. As we might say today, Israel just doesn't get it.

In verses 13 and following, the Lord throws up His hands in disgust. "Bring no more vain offerings," He shouts. "Stop trying to appease Me with meaningless rituals! Stop tracking mud across the floor of My holy temple and thinking that I'm pleased that you've come to pray to Me! Your hands drip with the blood of those you've hurt. Your worship services reek with the stench of the lovelessness in your lives. Stop being religious and start being righteous!"

Still, even in judgment, Yahweh longs to show mercy to His people.

Thus the invitation of Isaiah 1:18: " 'Come now, let us reason together,' says the LORD: 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.' "

Although now a harlot (v. 21) chasing after idols, Judah would be Yahweh's faithful bride once more (vv. 25-26). Now unrighteous and polluted, Judah would be purged, cleansed, and restored, not by working at it, jumping through more hoops, or whipping up God's pity by performing more religious rituals, but by simply coming to the one they had offended and admitting their need.

King Uzziah is dead. King Jotham is dead now too. Even the great Assyrian ruler Tiglath-Pileser has passed into the dust of time. But the Lord, the King who sits on an eternal throne high and lifted up still lives. He lives forever. He's alive and well for your sake. And His Son who was crowned with thorns and drenched with

scarlet and crimson is seated at His right hand. And He will come again in glory—for you.

Lord, open our eyes so that we can see clearly just as Isaiah saw. We ask for Your mercy to remind us of Your great love for us even in our deepest need. Let us see on these pages the promises of forgiveness in Christ Jesus for us, for each of us personally, even in our ugliest sin.

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Concluding Activities

Distribute the enrichment magazine and encourage participants to read it as part of their weekly study. Make any necessary announcements.

Close by singing or speaking together the words of the first stanza of “Today Your Mercy Calls Us” (*LW*, 347), or by speaking the words of the prayer found in the study leaflet. Follow this by reading 1 John 1:8–9 to the group.

The Day of the LORD

Isaiah 2–5

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

In these chapters, Isaiah confronts God’s people with their sins of pride and idolatry. He unmasks their smug self-satisfaction and describes the coming “day of the LORD,” the day of God’s judgment and wrath.

But God’s prophet also preaches the Gospel, saying, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD . . . that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths” (Isaiah 2:3).

Objectives

That the participant, led by the Holy Spirit through the Word, will

1. see clearly the implications of God’s wrath and judgment on human sin;
2. identify in Judah’s sins of pride and idolatry his or her own rebellion and disobedience;
3. receive the grace and goodness of God in His forgiveness won for him or her by the “branch of the LORD,” our Savior, Jesus; and
4. grow in a life of fruitfulness as he or she continues to “abide in the vine,” drawing strength from Him.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 54.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn and prayer printed in the study leaflet. Hymn accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Worship*

(refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It’s especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.)

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

Close your eyes. Go ahead. Close them. Now think about a time you felt at peace. Imagine the waves lapping against the rocks on the shore. Or the arm of a loved one around your shoulder as you walked together. Or the sound of the doctor’s voice speaking the blessed word *benign*. Or the faint scents of wine and burning candle wax as you knelt at the altar and awaited the touch of your Lord in the Sacrament.

(Pause 10–15 seconds; give participants time to recall and relax in their memory.)

Peace. It’s wonderful, isn’t it? Perhaps we value it so much because we experience it so seldom. If human beings have proven anything, it’s that we’re incapable of bringing peace into our own hearts or relationships. And even when we do experience peace temporarily, we’re never quite able to sustain it.

Optimists keep trying to bring us into a time of world peace. They arbitrate and mediate. They preach and propose utopias. They send ambassadors and sponsor conferences, all in an effort to produce peace.

The optimists cry, “Peace, peace.” But there is no peace. There is so little outward peace because there is so little inward peace. The sinful human heart seethes with unrest, greed, and most critically, rebellion against God and His law.

Peace has never broken out in the world because peace—true peace with God—has so seldom broken through human hardness to make its home in human hearts. True peace is beyond human comprehension. That’s why it must come to us as a gift, God’s gift.

1 The Peace of the Lord (Isaiah 2:1–4)

Isaiah begins chapter 2 with a poem that describes the peace to come “in the latter days.” When are these latter days? The Bible most often uses this phrase to refer to the coming Messiah and to the time that would follow His appearing. The Prince of Peace would come in the latter days, and He would bring His people peace. How would He accomplish that?

Verses 2–3—The poem itself pivots on a central, critical thought:

“He may teach us His ways . . . that we may walk in His paths.”

We cannot walk in the paths of God’s peace unless He teaches us.

But first He must draw us to Himself. The poem pictures people of all nations, a river of humanity, streaming up to the “mountain of the LORD.” A river flowing uphill defies the laws of gravity. Then the mountain itself grows. Twenty-five-hundred-foot Zion surpasses twenty-nine-thousand-foot Everest to become a spiritual giant. Barring miracles, such things don’t happen. Rivers don’t run uphill, mountains don’t climb, and sinful human beings do not spontaneously long for closeness with a holy God either. Barring a miracle, we avoid Him; we run from Him.

But a miracle has occurred. Jesus was lifted up on Golgotha. Mount Calvary became in a very real sense “the mountain of the LORD.” Jesus promised that when He was lifted up, He would draw all people to Himself (John 12:32). And He did. At Pentecost, thousands fell on their knees to proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord. They brought glory to the Father, and the Father poured out His peace into their hearts.

The miracle that happened that day is the miracle that keeps on happening and that will keep on happening as long as the earth stands. Our Lord keeps calling, gathering, inviting, and drawing sinners to Himself. He keeps on giving people His peace, one heart at a time.

The peace that fills our hearts changes our lives, and as we change, we also change the society around us. As the Scriptures declare, that change will not be complete here on earth. Even so, the peace Christ offers is no illusion. It’s no empty promise. It’s here. It’s now. It’s a

precious gift to each of His subjects from the Prince of Peace Himself.

Verse 4—When our Lord Jesus does come again, His reign of peace will fully invade the hearts of the faithful. As His family, we will live in perfect peace with Him and with one another forever.

Until then, we rest in His promise, and we invite others to receive His peace (v. 3): “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob.”

2 The Pride of God’s People (Isaiah 2:5–22)

The people of Isaiah’s time wanted peace on earth—by human definition. They wanted a god they could manipulate. They sought economic security and relished their silver and gold (v. 7). They sought military security and relied on war horses and chariots (v. 7). They designed their own methods of issuing religious security and multiplied idols (v. 8) while they sought psychics (v. 6). They were secure—secure in their sins.

So Isaiah, burning with zeal for God and love for the people, delivered a stinging message of Law, a message designed to shake the complacency out of the people’s hearts. Verses 12–22 describe the folly of human pride and the security blankets we humans try so desperately to weave together from the rags of our own accomplishments and abilities.

Every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. We will bow in reverent love or in wide-eyed spasms of terror, but we will bow.

Verses 20–22—The Israelite carpenters and smiths created their pagan gods locally from carved wood or cast metal. A typical idol was covered with gold or silver and had its eye sockets plastered to make them white. The people would gather under trees to worship these idols and offer sacrifices, including the sacrificing of children. But in that day, the wicked would throw their idols over their shoulders in a mad dash for a cave in which to hide from the terror of the Lord as He poured out His wrath on the ungodly.

The phrase “in that day” is a favorite for Isaiah. He uses it fifty times. This major prophetic theme appears in 2:11. The expression can mean a particular time or some future event (e.g., the invasion of the Assyrians

in the eighth century; 7:18, 20, 23), but it most often means Judgment Day.

3 The Judgment that Purifies (Isaiah 3:1–4:6)

How different for those in Christ. The Day of the Lord—the final day of judgment and Christ’s second coming—will bring full peace for those who love Christ and full judgment for those who reject His gracious gift of salvation and eternal life. But we experience that peace even now, and we see that judgment fall even now.

The apostle Paul tells us, “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance” (Romans 2:4). Though we fall into sin, He continues to love and bless us. He coaxes, urges, and invites us to return to Him in repentance and faith. In love, He lets us experience the consequences of our actions. In love, He calls us to account.

That, in essence, is what was happening to the people in Judah. All would fall. Isaiah, the mighty seer, saw it. He warned the people. Still, most weren’t ready to hear.

Verses 1–15 of chapter 3 describe a catastrophic leadership crisis:

- Verse 1—Supplies of food and water would disappear, setting up conditions of severe need among the people.
- Verses 2–3—Heroes, warriors, judges, prophets, counselors, craftsmen—anyone with any skill, experience, or ability in making decisions, giving orders, organizing others for specific tasks, giving advice, making laws, or protecting society—would all die or be deported.
- Verses 4, 12—The leadership vacuum created by war and political defeat would be filled by children who lack the ability, wisdom, and perspective to govern well.
- Verse 5—Anarchy would result. The rule of law would give way to the rule of the jungle. No one would respect any authority except the authority of brute force.
- Verse 6—No one would even want to lead. Note the “qualifications” for leaders given in this verse: “You have a cloak; you shall be our leader.”

Despite the disaster that will befall them, the people will refuse to confess their sin. Brazen to the end, they will remain as impenitent as Sodom. They will continue

to speak and act in rebellion against the Lord, and they will not even try to hide that fact (vv. 8–9).

The outcome would be clear. Those who were righteous (v. 10) would receive from the Lord’s gracious hand rewards for the righteous deeds they had done. But those who were wicked would receive their just deserts.

What distinguished the righteous from the wicked? Then, as now, it was God’s grace through faith.

All in Judah who believed in the Messiah, whom God had promised to send, received that righteousness. But those who refused God’s gift, those who hardened their hearts and thought they had no need for God’s righteousness, faced the storm of God’s judgment alone. They had no place to hide, no place of shelter. Then as now, those who reject mercy receive justice. Isaiah 3:9 says it well: “Woe to their soul!” (NKJV)

Verses 13–15—The leaders in Judah were no better than the people. They bore special responsibility, not only for their own personal sin, but also for leading the nation astray. They had “devoured the [Lord’s] vineyard.” The very people who by virtue of their office as God’s representatives should have set an example of righteousness and fruitful, godly living, had plundered the poor instead.

The Lord did not take this lightly. Nor did He take it impersonally. Note the “My people” of verse 15.

Verses 16–26—The unrighteousness of Judah’s leaders did not excuse the people for their pride. Ignoring the poor, the women of Judah preened and primped themselves. But soon, all the perfume, scarves, nose rings and earrings, gowns and ankle bracelets, cosmetics and party dresses would disappear. Complete justice would overtake the proud and the selfish.

Isaiah 4:1—Many of Judah’s men would die in battle or be deported. Judah’s women would experience the shame and victimization known by women and children who had no men to support or defend them in that culture. How markedly different from the views of modern feminism! Seven women would beg every man who escaped death or capture, “Let us earn our own living. We won’t burden you. But give us your name. Take away our social shame and the defenselessness of widowhood.”

Isaiah’s horrifying picture of judgment ends with a

picture of grace (4:2–6). We see the Lord once again stretching out arms of welcome toward His disobedient people. Isaiah 2:1–4 and 5:2–6 stand as bookends of grace, framing the threats of judgment that come in between. Both Law and Gospel have the heart of God as their source, the heart that cries out for the salvation of His people.

As at the beginning of chapter 2, the grace expressed at the end of chapter 4 offers peace to all who will receive it. Again, the Lord takes the initiative. He provides the blessings that make peace possible.

- Verse 3—He declares His people holy.
- Verse 4—He washes away the filth of their sins. He uses the fires of judgment to burn away the impurities of their hearts.
- Verses 5–6—Just as He provided for His people in the wilderness after they left Egypt, so He will continue to provide light in times of darkness, shade when His people find themselves taking heat, and a place of refuge and shelter from life's storms.

The branch who was to come would make that cleansing, purifying, sheltering work of God possible. Ancient Jewish sources such as the Aramaic Targums naturally associated the “branch” of 4:2 with the Messiah. But later commentators as far back as John Calvin (1509–64) have rejected this interpretation. They contend that while “branch” (v. 2a) could refer to the Messiah, its poetic parallel “fruit of the land” (v. 2b) certainly could not. Therefore, these interpreters conclude that the branch must talk about Israel, not the Messiah.

However, reflection on the care of a vineyard and on the variety in Hebrew poetry may offer a better explanation. After a grapevine is pruned back—an image of judgment in the Scriptures—one sees only the dry gray and black bark of the vine. Life appears absent. But with the change of seasons comes sudden new growth. Vivid green branches rapidly shoot out of the vine. Leaves unfold, and fruit clusters soon appear. In a matter of weeks, the dead-looking vines become beautiful and begin to produce fruit.

What an excellent picture of the coming of the Messiah and the blessings to follow His appearing! Instead of viewing the “branch” and “fruit of the land” as strict poetic parallels, one should see a progression in those

verses as the promise of the Messiah and His blessings unfold. (See Psalm 1:1–3 for an example of progressive thought in Hebrew poetry.)

4 The Planting of the Lord (Isaiah 5:1–7)

The song of the vineyard starts out like a passage from Solomon's Song of Songs. The repetition of “beloved” and the faithful care he shows for cultivating the vineyard provide a romantic scene. Though we do not know the context in which the prophet first delivered this song, we can easily imagine contented guests lounging on cushions around a table as the song begins. The table is covered with plates of food but, more important, cups of wine. Conversation is polite. The atmosphere is relaxed. Swiftly the singer reaches the questions in verse 4. The guests have only a moment to ponder them. Then suddenly the song vigorously accuses and condemns the wine-sipping guests. Perhaps Isaiah never delivered his song in this surprising way, but even a singing or reading of this passage at the temple would have brought a shocked reaction from the people of Judah.

As the song crashes to this abrupt end, Isaiah explains its meaning in no uncertain terms. The people of Judah were the planting of the Lord. He had lovingly tended His vineyard. He had cared for them. He had guarded them. He had provided all they needed and had every right to expect fruitfulness—lives of increasing godliness—from them. Instead, when He went to gather His fruit, He found only oppression and injustice.

As New Testament believers though, we have an advantage because we've heard our Lord Jesus—the one who Himself is the branch of whom Isaiah wrote—explain this truth further. We've heard His words from John 15 (1–5):

“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of Mine that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit HE prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me

and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

5 Woe to Those . . . (Isaiah 5:8–30)

Too often when we read the Old Testament, we come away with this attitude: “Boy, weren’t those Israelites foolish? They couldn’t see God’s will for their lives at all. I’m sure glad we’re not so foolish today.” Such a response only demonstrates our flabby spirituality. The young lions of justice lick their lips in anticipation.

Exercise your faith by examining your life in view of Isaiah’s woes in 5:8–22. See in these woes not simply a condemnation of sinful actions, but a call to righteous actions. Ask yourself these questions: Do I protect the property of others (v. 8)? Am I addicted to the deeds of the Lord (v. 11)? Do I promote righteousness in my community (v. 18)? Am I speaking up for the truth (v. 20)? Can I walk away from my mirror (v. 21)? Do I defend the innocent (vv. 22–23)?

Also recognize that for every woe spoken through the prophet Isaiah, your Savior has a word of blessing. He protects you as His very own child. He breaks your addiction to your favorite sins. He promotes you before the heavenly Father. He *is* the truth. He shatters the mirror of self-righteousness and in His wisdom declares you righteous by His suffering, death, and resurrection.

When Jesus hung on the cross at Calvary, His arms were outstretched so that the Father’s arms could stretch out wide in love and welcome you and me. I’m so thankful I can fall into those arms of love and receive His forgiveness and peace, aren’t you? Let’s thank Him for that right now.

Concluding Activities

Ask the participants about their use of the enrichment magazine. Encourage participants to read it as part of their weekly study. Then distribute the study leaflet for the next session. Pray the following prayer:

O Lord, Your mercies are new to us every morning. Great is Your faithfulness! We run to Your arms and find rest there. We cherish Your gracious promises that as we simply abide in the vine, we will produce much fruit. Continually remind us that without You we can do nothing—not a few things, not the easy things, but nothing. Strip us of all self-righteousness, and continually assure us of the perfect righteousness that is ours in Christ Jesus. In His name we pray. Amen.