



# Isaiah's Prophecy of Hope

## *The Hope of the Messiah*

### About the Story

In 586 BCE, the city of Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonian Empire after an extended siege. The city was destroyed and the people of Israel were sent into exile in Babylon. The Book of Isaiah was written in stages, before, during, and after the siege and exile. Its message shifts from warning to comfort to exhortation, based on the needs of the people who would have first received it.

### The Point:

**God will bring justice and peace.** Isaiah is speaking comfort to people who have been the victims of human power struggles. The stark reversal promised in this passage assures them that God is still on their side, even in dark and uncertain times.

Today's passage comes from what is known as "Third Isaiah," indicating that it is addressed to a community who has returned from exile around the year 538 BCE, and is now coming to terms with the extraordinary task of rebuilding a city and a nation. They have waited for more than a generation, and have finally been granted the right to return to their beloved Jerusalem. However, their initial elation and excitement has been replaced by disappointment, frustration, and even anger. The land that was once theirs (or their ancestors') has been claimed by foreigners. The city and the temple have been razed. The population has been decimated. The long-awaited return has been a letdown.

Into this context, Isaiah speaks a word of hope and encouragement. This passage reminds the people that God's promises do not end with their return from exile. There is more to come! Drawing on language from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, especially Leviticus 25, God promises through Isaiah that a time is coming when God's order will replace humanity's order. The people are urged to commit themselves to the daunting task ahead, trusting that God is working even through this setback toward God's purposes.

### Opening Prayer

Begin your time together with this or another prayer:

Faithful God, you are always working through us to bring your purposes to light. Be with us as we study your Word together. Help us to hear your promises and to be encouraged by them to do your work in the world. In your name we pray. Amen.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, Joel gave the people a word of hope for God’s ongoing presence and help, even after they have returned from exile. This week, Isaiah speaks to the same audience, those who have received God’s promised release but find that they are still in need. Isaiah’s words point to a promised future in which God will bring justice that turns the established worldly order on its head. Next week, Mary will sing a song that echoes these same promises, reiterating God’s reversal of the world’s order with the arrival of a Messiah through the most unlikely means.

Into the Story

In pairs or trios, share a story about a time when you waited anxiously for something good, only to find yourself frustrated or disappointed by the actual outcome. Did you wish you had never gotten what you wanted at all? How did the experience change the way that you wait? What advice would you give to others who wait?

Learning the Story

*God has just declared through Isaiah that the long-awaited light has come to Israel and that Israel will become a beacon to other nations. Now, God paints a picture of how the people of Israel will behave differently from others as they usher in God’s coming justice.*

**Read Isaiah 61:1-3a – The Good News**

- ❓ What are the actions—verbs—in this section? What exactly has God sent the speaker to do?
- ❓ Who will be the objects of these actions?
- ❓ In verse 3, there are several pairs of opposites. Where do you find yourself among these?

**Read Isaiah 61:3b-4 – The Reward**

- ❓ Who is “they” in this passage?
- ❓ As above, what are the actions and who are the objects of those actions?
- ❓ What is being promised here? How might this promise be for you today?

**Read Isaiah 61:5-7 – The Names**

- ❓ What seems to have happened in verse 5? What is the significance of the strangers and foreigners mentioned?
- ❓ The “you” in verse 6 appears to refer to the same people as the “they” in verse 7. What is promised to “you” and “them” in these verses?
- ❓ Does the speaker assume that you, the reader, know something that would help you understand this passage?

Bible Connections

- ✚ God describes for Moses what the time after exile will be like (Leviticus 25).
- ✚ Jesus preaches in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30).
- ✚ The story of Lazarus and the rich man brings good news for those who have been oppressed. (Luke 16:19-31)

**Read Isaiah 61:8-9 – The Speaker**

- ❓ Who is speaking in this passage? Is this the same speaker as in the first seven verses?
- ❓ Does the speaker shift from line to line or verse to verse? Does this help or hinder your understanding of the passage?
- ❓ How does the blessing in the passage connect with blessings you have experienced?

**Read Isaiah 61:10-11 – The Praise**

- ❓ There is a new speaker in these last two verses. What purpose might the shift in voice serve?
- ❓ What are the metaphors being used? Do they still work today?
- ❓ Does this passage (verses 1-11) bring comfort or distress? Do you hear good news or bad? Does the news feel like it is meant for only one time and place, or could it apply to the present day?

**Living the Story: Prayer**

Set up the candles on the table and gather in a circle around them. Take turns lighting candles around the circle. As you light a candle, name a current situation that you would ask God's justice (as explained in the sidebar below) to enter into, or name a person or group of people who you feel need God's justice. Go around as many times as necessary to allow everyone to speak the prayers on their hearts. If you run out of candles, simply speak your prayers. Close by praying the prayer below together (or ask one to pray on behalf of all).

**Supplies**

- ✝ Candles
- ✝ Matches or a lighter

**Closing Prayer**

Pray this or another prayer aloud together:

God of promise, we know that our human motivations do not always match your plans for us. Help us to see and hear your purposes, and give us the courage to act for your justice. Turn our hearts to you, and bring us into your peace. Amen.

**Bible Nuts & Bolts: Justice and Peace**

While human justice is often preoccupied with punishment or revenge, God's justice is about comfort, liberty, and healing. God's justice reverses the human order that insists on dividing people according to what they deserve, and instead provides for each person what they need. When God's justice happens, the result is God's peace, or shalom. This is a peace that is more than the simple absence of conflict or war. This is the peace that comes when all of creation is in harmony, and everyone has what they need to thrive.

At Home

- ✚ Look for examples of justice each day. Do they illustrate God's or humanity's justice?
- ✚ Is there a prison ministry in your community? Consider volunteering or visiting with and supporting those who work there.
- ✚ Is there a refugee community or a resettlement organization near you? Find out how they help exiles return home or make new homes where they are.

Daily Readings**Sunday—Read Isaiah 61:1-11**

Isaiah presents a vivid image of the world that God's justice is bringing about. Draw a picture or make a collage depicting what this world looks like.

**Monday—Read Leviticus 25:8-12**

The law prescribes a sabbath for the land and a Jubilee year of freedom every fiftieth year. What pros and cons can you think of for such a system?

**Tuesday—Read Genesis 1:1-5**

The first act of creation is bringing light and order into darkness and chaos. Write a diary entry in God's voice showing how this creation is being continued in Isaiah 61.

**Wednesday—Read Isaiah 42:1-9**

The Lord introduces the servant who will act to bring about justice and peace. Why do you think this chapter of Isaiah has been so important to Christian communities throughout the centuries?

**Thursday—Read Zechariah 9:9-17**

The Lord promises the day when Israel's king will be restored and judgment will be proclaimed against Israel's enemies. For whom is this disturbing imagery good news and for whom is it bad news?

**Friday—Read Luke 1:5-24**

The angel Gabriel foretells the birth of John the Baptist, and his father, Zechariah, is struck unable to speak. When do you feel unable to speak or respond to God's will for your life?

**Saturday—Read Luke 1:57-80**

Zechariah's power of speech is returned, and he responds with a song of praise and prophecy. What song would you sing in this situation? Either write your own or find a popular song that reflects what you imagine Zechariah would be feeling.