

EXPERIENCING GOD WITH ISAIAH

What does it mean to experience God? While each experience is different, because we are unique individuals and because God is God, some people seem to experience God more fully than others. Few have had such an experience as the prophet Isaiah. We, as readers of his book, can take a peek at these holy moments. As we allow ourselves to truly enter into these texts, we see anger, heartbreak and hope. And as we allow ourselves to be a part of Isaiah's story, the prophet can help open doors to our own fresh experience with the Divine.

REST STOP #1 & 2: 15 Days With Isaiah

One way to become acquainted with the book of Isaiah is to zero in on one chapter and spend time and energy there. Isaiah 40 is one such chapter that is worth the effort. Below is a 15-day schedule for working through the chapter. Enjoy!

Day 1: Read Isaiah 40:1-2. Do you know anyone who has "received double for his/her sins?" Would that apply to you? Talk to God and ask for one specific comfort that you need. Is that comfort connected to sins from your past? If so, ask God to forgive you.

Day 2: Read Isaiah 40:3-5. This prophecy was fulfilled through the life of John the Baptist. He did in a spiritual way what workers accomplished in a physical way when a king was about to travel through an area—that is, fix the road. Land travel depended on useable roads, which were few and hard to maintain. So when kings wanted to travel by land, workers were hired to make a special "king's highway" (there is still a road in Palestine and Jordan called The King's Highway). Either a pre-existing road was refurbished or a completely new one was made. This involved filling in all low places (every valley shall be lifted up), leveling mountains (every mountain and hill be made low) and making roads smooth and straight. The job sometimes took years to complete. But the arrival of a king in one's town was worth all the effort.

John the Baptist also filled in valleys and leveled mountains. He tackled valleys of low self-esteem that people dug out through their shameful behavior. He leveled mountains of greed, lust and pride as he called all people to repentance. Why? He was making the hearts of people ready for the King.

What do you need to do ... to get ready?

Day 3: Read Isaiah 40:6-7. Do you agree? Are all people like grass? What does that mean? How can seeing yourself as "grass" help you re-evaluate your life? How can this being a freeing concept for you?

Day 4: Read Isaiah 40:8. How does this verse help reshape verses 6-7? List the things in your life that, if you're honest, are going to fade. Make another list of the things that will last. Is God integrally connected to the first list? The second list? Thank God for his promise that the word of God will never fail.

Day 5: Read Isaiah 40:9. In the ancient world, the role of the messenger was very important. In a world without radio or TV, the messenger was the communication link. People longed for good news from the messenger.

Sometimes these heralds posted themselves on a high mountain. Here they could announce the coming of an army (bad news) or the homecoming of the king (good news). Here Isaiah envisions the herald looking out over the horizon and seeing the King coming. "Here is your God!" It is a vision of triumphant, victory of good over evil.

Who is your herald? Who in your life can climb up high enough to see the long view and see God coming? How can you be a herald of good news for others?

Day 6: Read Isaiah 40:10-11. What are the two images of God in these verses? So ... which is God? Warrior or shepherd? How is God both? Does the shepherd image reshape the warrior image? What is it that God truly fights? Jesus always fights evil with good (Romans 12:20-21) and he is the only one who can defeat evil. What does this say about how we should live our lives?

Day 7: Read Isaiah 40:12-15 several times. See, in your mind's eye, God holding the oceans in his hands, God weighing the mountains on a scale. Draw a picture or write a poem, using new images, finding new ways of expressing God's infinite power and wisdom.

Day 8: Read Isaiah 40:16-17. Are the US or Canada, great superpowers, less than nothingness to God? That's hard to imagine. If that is true, what does that say about all the trust we put into our governments? Does this truth—that God sees governments as less than nothing—fill you with hope or fear? Why?

Day 9: Read Isaiah 40:18-20. Try to picture this scene in your mind. A young boy sits in front of a big, plastic box, where fast moving images flash before his eyes. He sits mesmerized, oblivious to the world around him. What he sees in the box he understands as absolute truth. He takes his cues about how the world works and what he should value from the stories that box tells him. He buys what the images and words tell him to buy. He sits there, for hours on end.

Yes, this is just a boy sitting in front of a TV. But how different is that than from the worship of idols in the ancient world? If we are not careful, we obtain our security from material things, we understand our reality from the 7 PM sitcoms, we value what the commercials tell us to value. And the TV is but one idol among many. When push comes to shove, which would you rather have? A secure 401K or a relationship with God?

Why are idols so wrong? What's the big issue? What is really secure and reliable in our world today?

What are your idols?

Day 10: Read Isaiah 40:21-23. In some ways, these verses are responding to the verses above, both 18-20 that deal with idolatry and 15-17 that deal with nations. God created the world, not some idol. God brings down rulers and princes. So ... if God is that big and that strong and also full of divine love, then why is there still evil on earth?

Day 11: Read Isaiah 40:24. Oh how small and insignificant the rulers of the earth are! Do our leaders act as if they believe this? What does this verse say about power? How is this verse connected to verses 6-8?

Day 12: Read Isaiah 40:25-26. Go outside tonight and count the stars. Take a walk to a park if you need space and a green lawn to help you with this exercise. If it is a cloudy night, then try to count the blades of grass in one square foot of lawn or the number of bird and insect sounds you can hear. Can you count the stars? Can you even begin to imagine how far away they are? (A star that is 7 light years away means that the light from that star took 7 years to reach earth, traveling at the speed of light). God made each star. And God counts each star and names them. God knows the number of hairs on your head (Matthew 10:30-31).

As wonderful as the stars are, God cares more about you and me. God doesn't let one star get

lost, so how much more does God care for a person like you or me made in his image? The awesome power and wisdom it took to make the stars is the same wisdom and power God wants to use in our lives. But God asks gently. Will we say yes?

Day 13: Read Isaiah 40:27. What would you like to keep hidden from God? If this verse is right, then your efforts at secrecy are in vain. Is it possible that these secrets that really are not secrets are also eating away at your soul?

Day 14: Read Isaiah 40:28. Maybe it's not so much a matter of not hearing that the LORD is the everlasting God; it's believing it. What stands in your way of believing? And if you do believe, does it help to know that his understanding is unsearchable or beyond us? Does it help to know that God does not grow weary?

Day 15: Read Isaiah 40:29-31. Now it is not only God who never wearies, but also those who wait on the LORD. In one part of the chapter, humans were compared to grass that withers after a few days. Now humans are like eagles, soaring in the sky with boundless energy. What is the difference? What does it mean to wait upon the LORD? And how is that waiting connected to being powerless (vs. 29)?

May we wait more and more upon the LORD. May we soar in the limitless sky.

REST STOP #3: Jesus' Purpose, My Purpose

There is a lot of talk in religious circles these days about purpose. Some have even named set purposes that should drive every step of a Christian's life. I'm not so sure that it's that easy or that being driven is a good thing (or at least a good way to define our Christian lives). But if it is appropriate to name 5 or 6 or 3 purposes that set out our course in life, then I think that Isaiah 61 is the place to go.

Why? Because more than anything else, these were the verses Jesus used to state his purposes. Luke 4 describes Jesus in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus had been away for awhile, including 40 days in the desert, and so, being a special guest, was asked to read the scriptures that day. Whether he chose Isaiah 61 or the priest (or God), we don't know for sure. The scroll of Isaiah was given to him and Jesus found chapter 61. I tend to believe Jesus chose these verses. He used them, here in his hometown, to declare his mission.

"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."¹

After Jesus finished the reading, he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down in the place of teaching. The eyes of the crowd were glued to him. He said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This is the clearest statement Jesus made in the

gospels about why he came, about what he came to do.

So, there we have it—our purposes. Straight from Jesus, who used Isaiah. So why don't we use these statements? Bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, healing the blind and freeing the oppressed. Why don't we do these things?

Well, according to some, we do. These are fine purposes, if we interpret them to mean spiritual blindness, spiritual captivity from sin and so forth.

Is that what Jesus meant? Surely Jesus working through the church can bring release from the captivity of sin. But in the context of this scripture, both in Isaiah and in Luke, Jesus and Isaiah were speaking to people who knew physical captivity as well. People who remembered Egypt and the cruelty of Pharaoh, people who remembered the pain of the exile to Babylon. Several people in that synagogue with Jesus probably had a relative in a Roman jail for not being able to pay taxes that were almost impossible to pay.

The same is true for blindness and oppression. While both words can have spiritual connotations, physical blindness and political oppression were daily realities to Isaiah's people, to Jesus' people. Who needed a God who just spoke of spiritual release?

And when they heard words like captives, blindness and oppression, they thought of the laws of Jubilee. In the wilderness God set down stipulations that helped bring shalom justice to the people. "Every seven years you are to set your slaves free. Every seven years you are to let the ground rest from farming. Every seven years you are to cancel all your debts. And every 50 years you are to give the land back to its original owners." These four laws didn't squelch initiative; they were only put into effect every seven years or once in someone's lifetime (every 50 years). But they did help build a society where people could have a second chance, where all had enough to eat and the dignity of honest labor.

We know Jesus was referring to Jubilee by the last phrase he used: "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor." This year, the Jubilee year, was the proper name for the fiftieth year. Jubilee meant economic and political good news, as much as it meant spiritual good news.

Why bother understanding all this? Because in our North American Christian culture, many Christians dichotomize the spiritual and the physical. We only want to deal with spiritual captivity. Is that because we would have to change our way of life to really bring good news to the poor? Do we focus only on the spiritual because we are part of the bad news to the poor?

I think so.

What captives have I helped release? Have I said a word about child labor in China, or do I just enjoy the cheap shoes at Walmart? Have I written any letters about the millions of Americans who suffer without medical insurance (not a problem in Canada—good for you!)? Do I bother to look at the deeper reasons why they can't afford insurance or why they need to go on welfare? Or do I just label them lazy? Have I said a word about racism? Have I confronted my own?

Jesus took these purposes one step further. He dared to say they were for Gentiles as well as Jews (Luke 4: 25-27). The Jews got so mad at him (even though they loved his words in verse 22), they tried to throw him off the cliff. They didn't like his purposes either.

What would it mean, as a church, to adopt the purposes of Jesus?

Jesus came to bring good news to the poor. Is that a description of our North American

churches today? Do I represent good news to the poor, and not just the spiritually poor?

He came to release the captives. Does my church work at releasing captives? Has anyone in my church even stepped inside a prison?

What would it mean, as a church, to adopt the purposes of Jesus?

It means we would have to change our economics. It might mean people getting mad at us. It means more people in the world would get a chance—just to live.

Spirit, anoint us.

Footnotes

¹ Jesus stopped at the middle of verse 2 (although we have no idea if there were such divisions at that time). Jesus stopped before reading the part about the “day of vengeance of our God.” Could that be because the fulfillment of that prophecy—the day of vengeance—will only happen at the end of time?

REST STOP #4: Isaiah’s First Prophecy to North America, 2005

If Isaiah lived today, in North America, what visions from God would he report? Here is one such speculation, inspired by Isaiah 1.

(If you are offended, well ... then you know how the people of Jerusalem felt.)

The visions of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning the United States and Canada in the days of President Bush and Prime Minister Paul Martin.

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;

For the LORD has spoken:

I brought my people to a new land in the West,
with a new start from persecution and hardship
but they have rebelled against me.

Kids obey their Little League coaches

And musicians play at the conductor’s command;

But North American Christians act like they have no master

They think they have life totally figured out.

Ah, sinful people,

People laden with meanness,

Descendents of the Reformers—doing evil

Children of the persecuted who plan corruption on others,

Who have forsaken the LORD,

Who have despised the Holy One of Israel,

Who are now utterly lost!

Why do you keep asking for it?
Why do you continue to rebel?
The whole society is sick,
Like a cancer that makes the body grow faint.
From the sole of the foot to the top of your head,
There are no healthy cells,
But tumors and sores
And bleeding wounds;
Pockets of infections that haven't been drained,
Festers that you just ignore.

Your country does not yet lie desolate
Nor are your cities burning with fire—yet
But still, in God's name, you bomb other cities.
Are you sure this is what the LORD your God would have you do?
Change now, while there is still time!

Hear the word of the LORD,
You big denominational leaders!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
You rural Christians, the quiet of the land!
What do I care about the multitude of your Sunday morning services?
Says the LORD;
I have had enough offerings
and special Sundays of the month
I do not delight in all your volunteering
To teach Sunday School.

When you come to appear before me,
Who asked for the pretty bulletins and polite litanies?
Trample my house of worship no more;
Bringing offerings is futile;
Praise songs and hymns are abominations to me.

Advent and Renewal Sunday and youth convention—
I cannot endure your meetings because of what's going on during the week.
Your new initiatives and your potlucks
My soul hates;
They have become a burden to me,
I am weary of listening to them.
When you fold your hands in prayer,
I will hide my eyes from you
Even though you make many prayers,
I will cover my ears;
Your hands are full of blood.
Wash yourselves; clean up your act;
Stop the violence and greed
From before my eyes;
Cease to do evil.
Learn to do good
Seek justice,
Rescue the oppressed
Defend the homeless
Plead for the minorities.

Come now, let's talk this out,
Says the LORD:
Though your sins seem like permanent tattoos on your skin
They shall be like a baby's bottom;
Though they are red like permanent ink
They shall be like new fallen snow.
If you are willing to really change—everything,
You shall experience the true "good life;"
But if you refuse or pretend not to hear me,
What you think is the "good life" will swallow you whole.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

How the once just Washington DC
Has become a whore!

Parliament and Congress—places full of justice,
Care for the poor was central to them—
Now full of self-centered politicians?
Your gold doesn't do well against the yen anymore,
Your natural resources are fading away,
Your young adults are rebels,
They see and imitate the behavior of the adults.
Everyone can be "bought,"
And people will do anything for recognition,
Nobody cares how our global economies hurt third world people
And the AIDS crisis is yesterday's news.

Therefore says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One:
Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies
And it will turn out to be against my own people!
I will turn my hand against you;
And I will clean out your closets
I will use rust remover and bleach to get rid of your stains!
I will put people of integrity back into leadership positions
And renew your wise pastors and preachers like before.
Afterward you will be called the country of justice,
My faithful church.

Winnipeg shall be redeemed by justice,
Chicago shall once again have peace
If there is true repentance,
If people really turn 180 degrees from their wicked ways
But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together,
And those who just pretend to be Christians shall be consumed.
When this comes down, you'll be ashamed of your 401K's
In which you put your trust;
And you shall blush at the career
That you sacrificed your children for.
And you shall be like a Wall Street investment
That goes belly up

And like a career that ends up in the gutter.
The "pillars of the town" shall become like tinder,
The work of church leaders will act like a spark
They and their work will go up in flames
With no one to call the fire station.