

TWO CITIES



9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



ISAIAH

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 **matthiasmedia**

Two Cities

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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God's word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of 'interaction'—interaction with the Bible, with the things we've written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

Each study contains five main components:

- short sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- a set of numbered study questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- an ‘Implications’ section that helps you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Getting started in Isaiah

Studying Isaiah is something of a daunting prospect. It is a huge book in every respect. It is big on length, on thematic breadth and grandeur, on complexity, and on importance. Isaiah has been described as the 'Romans' of the Old Testament, and one can see why. It is full of essential and profound biblical ideas, such as the sovereignty of God, sin, judgement, salvation and the new creation. With the possible exception of the Psalms, Isaiah is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament more than any other Old Testament book.

With such a book before us, a detailed verse-by-verse study of every chapter is not the best way to grasp the meaning of Isaiah as a whole. That would require a very much thicker book of studies, and would leave us somewhat in danger of missing the forest for the trees. Instead, we'll be studying the nine key passages which, taken together, provide a solid understanding of Isaiah as a whole.

Whether you're meeting in a group or using this study book on your own, it would be a good idea at some stage to read right through Isaiah. Set aside a wet Sunday afternoon and read it in one sitting. If you can't manage this, you could try to read steadily through Isaiah while you're working through the studies—say, seven chapters a week, if you're doing the studies in a group over nine weeks.

We also suggest that, before you begin, you read appendix 1 to understand the historical context of Isaiah. It will be an enormous help in identifying many of the historical figures and events that are being referred to as the book unfolds. Make sure you read this appendix at least before you get to study 3.

If you would like to do any further reading on Isaiah, the best commentaries are those by John Calvin (hard to read these days but worth the effort) and the volume in the New International series by Oswalt. Barry Webb's commentary in the Bible Speaks Today series is excellent.

6. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

» STUDY 1

CHOOSING A CITY

[ISAIAH 1:1-2:4]

ISAIAH IS A VERY BIG BOOK. It's the kind of book that makes you feel uncomfortable just looking at it. Wouldn't it be good to get 'the big picture' of what it's all about before we start reading? One of the great things

about Isaiah is that the first chapter introduces many of the big themes of the book. Reading Isaiah 1 is the best way to get into Isaiah. So without any further ado, let's dive straight in and have a look at it.

Read Isaiah 1:1-2:4.

1. Without spending too much time, jot down the big ideas or themes that strike you as important.

A tale of two cities

PEOPLE TELL THE STORY OF THE Bible in lots of different ways. Some focus on the history of the Jewish nation; others talk about the theme of salvation; yet others speak about God's promises to his people. Each of these ways of talking about the Bible is helpful and true.

One way to tell the story of the Bible is as 'a tale of two cities' (to borrow the title of Charles Dickens' famous novel). The story of these two cities is the story of God dealing with his world and his people.

Babel is the first city of any size mentioned in the Bible (Gen 11:1-9). It lies on the plain of Shinar and is also known as 'Babylon'. Babel is famous for its humanism—that is, it is a city where the people are centrally concerned about themselves and their betterment. Babel epitomizes the self-centred human dream; it is a place where humans are in control, building a better world for themselves and determining their own future.

The Bible also presents a city where things are different—*Jerusalem*—known elsewhere as 'Zion' or the 'City of David'. Jerusalem was the city captured by God's great king, David. It became the resting

place of the Ark of the Covenant—the sign of God's presence with his people. It is the city where the Temple of Solomon was built, consecrated and blessed with God's presence. It is God's city.

Two cities: Babel and Jerusalem. One devoted to humanity, the other ruled by God. One me-centred, the other God-centred. The two cities are images of two ways of life.

A book about Jerusalem

Isaiah is a book about Jerusalem. It begins and ends with Jerusalem and talks about it everywhere in between. And because Jerusalem is God's city, God has a dream for it. That dream is celebrated in the Psalms, in particular Psalms 46 and 48, where we see some of the characteristics of God's ideal city. (You might like to quickly read Psalm 48 to capture God's dream.)

The ideal Jerusalem of Psalm 48 stands in stark contrast to the city of Babel in Genesis 11. Jerusalem is clearly identified with God and has him at its heart. It is the place from which God rules his world; a place where the people of God live and rejoice.

Re-read Isaiah 1:1-2:4.

2. How is God's city described? What is life like in Jerusalem/Zion?
3. Summarize, as simply as you can, Isaiah's message to Judah and Jerusalem in these verses.
4. Outline the future of Jerusalem as described in this passage. Is everybody's future within the city the same?

Inside the walls

IN CHAPTER 1, ISAIAH TAKES US inside the walls of Jerusalem. As soon as we are inside it becomes quite obvious that the dream is not the same as the reality. In reality, Jerusalem is a place where:

- people don't know God (Isa 1:2-3)
- covenants/contracts are broken (Isa 1:4-9)
- people refuse to be God's people (Isa 1:10-12)
- twisted and perverted worship is carried out (Isa 1:11-14)
- wickedness, injustice and disobedience flourish (Isa 1:15-17, 21-23).

In short, *Babel has invaded Jerusalem, and human-centredness has pushed God out of his own city.* This is the situation addressed by Isaiah. He belongs to a community who rightly claim to be God's chosen people, and yet they are a people of "unclean lips" (Isa 6:5). They are a rebellious city. How can the Holy One of Israel dwell in the midst of a city like this?

He cannot. Isaiah goes on to tell us about the fate of Jerusalem. The city must be purified, and those who continue to resist God's rule will be destroyed. This is the main point of the first half of the book—Jerusalem has become defiled and is therefore doomed. This message reaches its climax in chapter 39, where the end of the city is promised.

Isaiah 40-66 addresses a destroyed Jerusalem and a nation in exile in

Babylon. The message of these chapters is very different in tone from the first half of the book. The first half is mainly about judgement, with glimpses of salvation here and there. The second half is more about salvation, with reminders of judgement here and there. In Isaiah 40-66, although Jerusalem has been judged, the hope of a redeemed, ideal Jerusalem remains. God will again dwell in the midst of his people. Isaiah ends with a picture of God's goal being reached—a new heavens, a new earth and a new Jerusalem, in which righteousness and peace dwell.

We will return to these majestic themes in due course. In the meantime, chapter 1 of Isaiah introduces us to many of these ideas. It functions as an introduction to the book as a whole and in some ways as an overview of it. Many of the ideas mentioned in it are repeated throughout the book. The contrast between the two cities, Babylon and Jerusalem, will arise time and again. It is a story that reminds us that God has a purpose—to complete a world centred on himself. This purpose will be accomplished. For those who align themselves with God's purpose, this will mean life, salvation and blessing. For others, who continue in human-centredness, this will mean death, judgement and curse.

We will eventually discover that, in a quite unexpected way, God will bring salvation and judgement together to achieve a stunning victory and the fulfilment of all his plans.

» Implications

- Look back over Isaiah 1. Imagine you are an Israelite hearing Isaiah speaking these words. What would your emotional reaction be? Why would you feel like this?

- How do the people of the 'rebellious city' show their allegiance? How are those who are loyal to the 'future Jerusalem' different?

- How do people around you show their allegiance to either city?

- How do you?

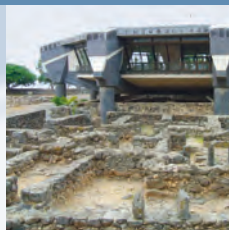
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- God says that 'Jerusalem' is his future for his world. If this is where things are headed then what does it mean for you?

- What sort of actions should you take as a consequence?

» **Give thanks and pray**

- Give thanks to God for his promise of a new Jerusalem and for his promise that justice will one day be done.
- Pray for our world, which continues in rebellion against God. Pray people would hear God's call to repentance. (You might like to pray for one or two specific people or family members.)

TWO CITIES



The strange language, the weird descriptions, the complicated historical details—we wonder what God intended us to get from books like Isaiah. And yet, Isaiah is frequently quoted in the New Testament and tells us much about God's plan of salvation. It's a book we should read.

Two Cities is designed to help us get a grip on—and be gripped by—the message of Isaiah. It cuts a highway through the 'branches', 'stumps' and 'deserts' scattered across Isaiah's terrain. It takes us to a two-way intersection and shows us the road to the city of destruction and the road to the city of God. **Two Cities** draws together the meaning of Isaiah's many prophecies of woe and songs of praise. We come to see that, as Isaiah prophesied, Christ is both our servant and our king.

Ideal for both individual and small group study.

