



Keep some basic ideas in mind, and you'll be well on your way.

# HOW CAN I UNDERSTAND ISAIAH?

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For a lot of us (including adults), the book of Isaiah is like physics—we know it's important, but we just don't think we'll ever get it. In fact, a while ago a young man asked the *New Era* to print an article to help him understand Isaiah. Though we certainly can't explain Isaiah verse by verse in a magazine article, we can give you a few keys and, hopefully, some motivation and confidence.

# GREAT REASONS TO STUDY ISAIAH

What can motivate you to put in the effort to study Isaiah? Consider these reasons:

- **Isaiah's words are for everyone.** The Savior said that the words of Isaiah were for all the house of Israel as well as the Gentiles (see 3 Nephi 23:2)—they're for everyone!

- **You can gain greater faith in Jesus Christ.** The prophet Nephi wrote that the words of Isaiah will “more fully persuade [you] to believe in the Lord [your] Redeemer” (1 Nephi 19:23).

- **You can gain greater hope.** Nephi told his brothers to read Isaiah's words “that [they] may have hope” (1 Nephi 19:24). In a world full of bad news and pessimism, this is a great promise.

- **The Savior commanded us to.** No Old Testament prophet was quoted by the Savior more often than Isaiah. And during His visit to the Nephites, the Savior commanded them to “search [the words of Isaiah] diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 23:1). There could be no better endorsement.

## FIVE KEYS FOR STUDYING ISAIAH

Now, to help you have some confidence as you study, here are five basic keys to focus on that can help you understand Isaiah's writings.

### 1. Realize you already know a lot.

If you know the basics of Heavenly Father's plan, you're a long way toward understanding Isaiah. Also, all of the things you do regularly to learn about the gospel (Sunday meetings, seminary, family home evening, personal study, prayer) help you in studying Isaiah, because those basic teachings are woven throughout Isaiah's writings—premortal life, the role of Jesus Christ, and the importance of faith, repentance, obedience,

### Use What You Know:

“He will swallow up death in victory” (Isaiah 25:8).

How does your knowledge about Christ's Resurrection affect your reading of Isaiah's words?

“How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!” (Isaiah 14:12).

How does your knowledge of premortal life, the council in heaven, and Satan's rebellion affect how you read this scripture?

and keeping covenants. Plus, according to Nephi, living in the latter days (when Isaiah's prophecies have already been or are being fulfilled) makes you more likely to understand Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 25:7–8).

**READING TIPS** If you're having trouble just understanding the words or the way things are phrased in Isaiah, try these tips:

- **Take your time.** There's no need to rush. Scripture study is not a race. Take the time you need to understand what Isaiah wrote.
- **Read it aloud.** Doing this can help you get a feel for the language and style of what you're reading.
- **Look it up.** If you don't understand a word or phrase, look it up in the dictionary, or, if there's a footnote by the word, read the footnote. Often you will find words or phrases explained or rephrased there. (Look for these kinds of footnotes: HEB [Hebrew], IE [in other words], OR [or], JST [Joseph Smith Translation].)
- **Add the quotation marks.** Try imagining quotation marks before and after each statement so that you can keep track of which words go with which speaker, whether it's Isaiah, the Lord, or someone else.
- **Look for repetition.** Isaiah teaches the same principles over and over in different ways, so keep track of these principles and spot the repeats.
- **Pay attention in English class.** Isaiah's style is highly poetic, so learn about poetry—particularly metaphor and imagery—and get a sense for how Isaiah uses it.
- **Ask for help.** Parents, Church leaders, or a seminary teacher could probably help you if you're struggling.

## 2. Know Isaiah's main topics.

Isaiah covers three main topics:

- **Jesus Christ**—His birth, His mission, His Atonement, and His Second Coming, which ushers in the Millennium
- **The last days**, particularly the Restoration, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the gathering of Israel, and the establishment of Zion
- **Events of Isaiah's day**, such as wars; the wickedness, apostasy, scattering, and captivity of Israel; and Assyria's and Babylon's fall (see the map on page 21).



## 3. Take advantage of the words of latter-day scriptures and prophets.

Modern revelation from God has shed light on Isaiah's writings. For instance, one of your best resources for understanding Isaiah is the Book of Mormon. Nephi in particular explained what the major topics of Isaiah's prophecies were, as well as what things will help us better understand Isaiah.

### See the Savior in Isaiah:

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows. . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, . . . and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4-5).

What aspects of the Savior's atoning sacrifice does Isaiah highlight here?

### Find signs of the times:

"The Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people. . . . And he shall set up an ensign for the nations" (Isaiah 11:11-12).

How does the image of an ensign (a flag flown high) describe how the Lord will set up His Church to gather Israel in the latter days?

### Learn ancient history and modern lessons:

"I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks" (Isaiah 10:12).

What can Isaiah's description of the fall of Assyria help us learn to avoid?

### Get help from modern scriptures:

"I, Nephi, write more of the words of Isaiah, for my soul delighteth in his words. . . . Behold, my soul delighteth in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ" (2 Nephi 11:2, 4).

How does Nephi's statement help you understand one of the major themes of Isaiah's writings?

Doctrine and Covenants 113 explains several verses in Isaiah 52 and Isaiah 11, saying that these verses relate to the restoration of the gospel in the last days, specifically the calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the restoration of the priesthood, and the gathering of Israel.

What does Doctrine and Covenants 113 teach you about how Isaiah's prophecies relate to our day?

## MOVE FORWARD

"Most teenagers readily understand the narrative of the Book of Mormon. . . . [But] the prophecies of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah . . . loom as a barrier. . . . You, too, may be tempted to stop there, but do not do it! . . . The Book of Mormon, another testament of Jesus Christ, will verify the Old and the New Testaments. . . . The Lord had a purpose in preserving the prophecies of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon."

President Boyd K. Packer, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "The Things of My Soul," *Ensign*, May 1986, 61.

## ISAIAH IN SONG

After the Psalms and Alma, no book of scripture has more references in our hymnbook than Isaiah. His beautiful language and visions of the last days inspired many lyrics, including "High on the Mountain Top" (*Hymns*, no. 5; see Isaiah 2:2-3; 5:26) and "How Firm a Foundation" (*Hymns*, no. 85; see Isaiah 41:10; 43:2-5). You may also know that Isaiah's words make up much of the text in Handel's *Messiah*.





GET TO KNOW ISAIAH'S WORLD BY FINDING OUT MORE ABOUT SOME OF THE THE PEOPLE AND PLACES HE MENTIONED.

**1 Assyria (Nineveh)**—Powerful and expanding empire in Isaiah's day. Conquered and ruled by terror. Destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and scattered the ten tribes. Under leadership of **Sennacherib**, they also besieged Jerusalem during Hezekiah's rule in Judah.

**2 Israel (Ephraim)**—Northern kingdom of ten tribes, wicked and idolatrous in Isaiah's day. Led by **Pekah**. Together with Syria, attacked Judah but were turned back. United with Syria in an unsuccessful revolt against Assyria. Then carried away captive by the Assyrians and scattered, becoming the "lost ten tribes."

**3 Syria (Damascus)**—Collection of kingdoms northeast of Israel. Grew weaker as Assyria grew stronger. Combined with northern kingdom of Israel and attacked Judah during the reign of Ahaz. Later, after a failed revolt against Assyria, Damascus was destroyed.

**4 Egypt**—Powerful force in the region. Rival of Assyria. For many years the policy of the kings of Judah was to be allied with Egypt against Assyria. However,

Isaiah opposed this alliance, warning against relying on Egypt and saying the Lord would deliver Judah against the Assyrians, which He did (see Isaiah 30–31; 36–37).

**5 Babylon**—Capitol of Babylonia, a rival and subject of Assyria during Isaiah's day. Isaiah prophesied of its future—that it would rise to power, conquer Judah, destroy Jerusalem and the temple, take captives from Judah back to Babylon, and eventually fall. In Isaiah, it is often a metaphor for the world and its wickedness.

**6 Judah (Jerusalem)**—Southern kingdom, where Isaiah lived. During reign of King **Ahaz**, attacked by Syria and Israel. In Isaiah's day, subject to Assyria, which threatened to destroy it. Miraculously spared. Enjoyed relative prosperity under King **Hezekiah**, who was righteous and took advice from Isaiah.

**7 Persia**—A great empire that conquered Babylon. Almost 200 years beforehand, Isaiah prophesied that King **Cyrus** of Persia would let the captive Jews in Babylon return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (see Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 13; Ezra 1).

**4. Get to know Isaiah's world.**

Nephi said Isaiah was difficult for his people to understand because they didn't know two things: (1) "the manner of prophesying among the Jews" and (2) "the regions round about" Jerusalem (2 Nephi 25:1, 6).

• **"The manner of prophesying among the Jews."** This phrase has to do with language and style. "A major difficulty in understanding the book of Isaiah is his extensive use of symbolism, as well as his prophetic foresight and literary style; these take many local themes (which begin in his own day) and extend them to a latter-day fulfillment or application. Consequently, some prophecies are probably fulfilled more than one time and/or have more than one application" (Bible Dictionary, "Isaiah").

• **"The regions round about" Jerusalem.** Isaiah refers to many places by name, so it makes sense that knowing the geography of the area would help you understand his writings.

**Learn how he prophesied:**

In a vision, Isaiah feels the weight of his sins and prays to be made clean. An angel flies toward him with a hot coal, lays it on his mouth, and says, "Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged" (see Isaiah 6:6–7).

How does this event symbolize the process of becoming clean from sin? (See 2 Nephi 31:17.)

Read the heading to Isaiah 10.

How does this chapter apply to both Isaiah's day and the last days?

**Get the lay of the land:**

Look at the map on this page, and read Isaiah 7:1–2.

What was the kingdom of Judah up against politically?

## ADDITIONAL HELPS

Here are some additional resources from the Church that can help you understand Isaiah:

- *Old Testament Student Study Guide, 2nd ed.* (seminary study guide, 2002), pages 138–55; available online at [seminary.lds.org/old-testament](http://seminary.lds.org/old-testament).
- *Book of Mormon Student Study Guide* (seminary study guide, 2000), pages 44–53; available online at [seminary.lds.org/book-of-mormon](http://seminary.lds.org/book-of-mormon).
- *Old Testament Student Manual: 1 Kings–Malachi*, 3rd ed. (institute manual, 2003), pages 137–210; available online at [institute.lds.org/courses](http://institute.lds.org/courses).
- *Book of Mormon Student Manual*, (institute manual, 2009), pages 72–100; available online at [institute.lds.org/courses](http://institute.lds.org/courses).

## 5. Commit to study by the Spirit.

Nephi said that “the words of Isaiah . . . are plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy” (2 Nephi 25:4). As the Apostle John learned, “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10). So Nephi is saying, in other words, that Isaiah is easier for people to understand if they have a testimony of Christ. Deepen that testimony and you’ll deepen your understanding of Isaiah.

As you study by the Spirit, you will feel the truth of the Savior’s words: “Great are the words of Isaiah.” **NE**

## HELPS IN THE SCRIPTURES

The LDS edition of the scriptures contains several resources that can help you as you study Isaiah:

- **Chapter headings.** If you read the chapter headings first, you’ll get a good overview of the book of Isaiah, as well as clues to some of the meanings of his prophecies.
- **Footnotes.** Whenever you read something you don’t understand, that strikes you as unusual or interesting, or that you want to know more about, look to see if there is a footnote for it.
- **Bible Dictionary.** The “Isaiah” entry in the Bible Dictionary gives a good explanation of who Isaiah was, what the major themes of his writings were, and what we need to bear in mind as we read his book.
- **Topical Guide.** One way to get an idea of what Isaiah said about a certain topic is to look it up in the Topical Guide and then scan for references to Isaiah under that topic. (A good place to start might be the various topics related to Jesus Christ.)

### Learn More

For more on this topic, read “Ten Keys to Understanding Isaiah,” by Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–1985) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles at [go.lds.org/322](http://go.lds.org/322).

