

YEAR OF
BIBLICAL
LITERACY

1. Week 17: Prophetic Rewind, Part 1 (Isaiah 1-39)

2. Recap & Preparing for CG:

Daily Reading for Week:

- Isaiah 9-12, Psalm 111
- Isaiah 13-17, Psalm 112
- Isaiah 18-22, Psalm 113
- Isaiah 23-27, Psalm 114
- Isaiah 28-30, Psalm 115
- Isaiah 31-35, Psalm 116
- Isaiah 36-38, Psalm 117

Resources for Week:

- Read Scripture Video: Isaiah 1-39
- Read: Isaiah 6 & 30

3. Focus of time together:

To become oriented with Isaiah and the pre-exile prophets in general through reading several chapters of Scripture together in order to explore the profundity of the prophets and their thinking around communal sin and guilt.

4. Weekly ground rule / goal / value:

Goal: Practice empathetic listening. As we read accounts of Israel's history, practice empathizing with what their felt experience would have been. And as you read this way, allow that practice to help you also listen empathetically to the felt experience of each person in your community. By the end of your time together, try to know and feel what it is that others are longing for, weary of, frustrated with, or excited about, and try to put yourself in their shoes to be able to better know and love them.

5. Connection and Unity Exercise (Mutual Invitation, 15 minutes):

This week's connection and unity exercise will take place after the opening prayer.

6. Opening Prayer:

Have one person read Psalm 79 aloud, and as you listen to the psalm, try to discern how much you are able to identify and empathize with the psalmist's sentiments.

Then use **mutual invitation** to answer the following question: What parts of the psalmist's thoughts and feelings were you able to feel and empathize with? What parts felt foreign, uncomfortable, or difficult to connect with?

7. Intro to Discussion:

Last week, we finished reading 2 Kings, which ended in the dramatic and tragic exile of Judah into Babylon. Though the northern tribes of Israel had been conquered by Assyria about 140 years earlier, now even the southern remnant of Judah has been besieged and removed from their place in the land. This event is what will now be referred to as "*the exile.*" It was the painful and disorienting event that meant God's promise and plan to redeem the world through making Israel a special people to live as a light to the nations in the Promised Land had somehow fallen apart. Israel had failed, and God had finally lost His patience, leaving them to suffer violent consequences. This catastrophic turn of events should shock us as readers just as it shocked ancient Israel. Exile was never part of the plan.

Psalm 77 voices the questions that this downfall produced:

Will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor again?

Has his unfailing love vanished forever?

Has his promise failed for all time?

Has God forgotten to be merciful?

Has he in anger withheld his compassion?

(Psalm 77:7-9)

Psalm 79 further expresses Israel's bewilderment:

O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance;

they have defiled your holy temple,

they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.

The have left the dead bodies of your servants
as food for the birds of the sky,
the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.
They have poured out blood like water
all around Jerusalem,
and there is no one to bury the dead.
We are objects of contempt to our neighbors,
Of scorn and derision to those around us.

How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?
(Psalm 79:1-6)

Appreciating this sentiment of bewilderment and despair, of faith mixed with incredible doubt, is crucial to understanding the Old Testament. It is the worldview from which the historical books, books of the prophets, and even much of the wisdom literature were written and compiled. As we read through the rest of the Old Testament over the next few months, try to stay grounded in what it would have felt like to be part of Israel during this time.

Over the next four weeks, we're going to do a sort of rewind with the pre-exile prophets. This means we're going back into the same part of Israel's story that we just read through in 1 & 2 Kings, reading the poetic, prophetic books that recount the ministry of the special men called by God to rebuke and exhort Israel on His behalf. Much of what we'll see is that this horrific exile shouldn't have come as a complete shock. God had given them more than a fair warning. Through the prophets, He gave Israel numerous chances to repent.

As we begin this rewind this week with first Isaiah (Isaiah 1-39), try to orient the prophetic message within Israel's historical timeline. You've already read the high-level story of what was happening. And you've met Isaiah before in 2 Kings 19-20. Now we're going backward and zooming in a bit, approaching the story from a different vantage. The messages of Isaiah, Amos, and Hosea, for example, aren't tacked on to the end of this history, but rather were the representation of God's heartfelt response to Israel's actions *during* their history. They were the gracious communication of God to His people, meaning there is much to be learned through them about God, humanity, religion, judgment, mercy, and what it does and doesn't mean to be God's people in the world.

8. Questions for Large Group Discussion (45 minutes):

Questions for Basic Understanding:

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

To help ourselves get oriented by placing the content of the prophets within the context of Israel's history, we're going to spend much of the time this week reading together.

Read Isaiah 1:1 & 6:1, 2 Kings 15:27-18:13, and Isaiah 36-39. Underline passages that seem significant as you read along and write down any thoughts or notes that jump out to you. (A few notes: King Azariah and King Uzziah are the same person just with different forms of the name. Also, Isaiah 36-39 – the closing chapters of the first part of Isaiah – are almost identical to 2 Kings 18-20, which helps clearly align the two texts. Compare if helpful.)

1. When did Isaiah's ministry take place? Where in the story are we when we read the first part of Isaiah? Who was he addressing and where?
2. What was the state of the nation (both kingdoms) at the time he was commissioned, and what important events did he witness?
3. Recall Isaiah 36 and 37 (or 2 Kings 18:13-19:37). How did Isaiah's relationship with King Hezekiah successfully thwart Judah's destruction at the hands of Assyria?
4. Recall 2 Kings 17:1-23. Why was the northern kingdom of Israel unable to avoid falling to Assyria in this way?
5. Recall Isaiah 39 (2 Kings 20:2-21). How did witnessing the exile of the northern kingdom and the waywardness of Judah allow Isaiah to consider even the possibility that Jerusalem itself would one day fall?

9. Questions for Small Group Discussion (25 minutes):

Questions for Self-Examination:

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware and honest about who we are in light of our interaction with Scripture, and consider any appropriate action.

Jewish thought and theology adheres to a much stronger sense of communal social identity than we modern Americans do. We typically think very individually, asking "What sin have I done, and what does God feel toward **me**?" But as an Israelite, the sin of your people was also your sin, and you would have to take ownership and responsibility for how God felt toward not just you but also your community.

1. Considering this, how can Israel's history and the prophets teach us to think about and respond to evil and injustice in our society or community that we haven't personally committed but have potentially benefitted from? In other words, what should we do with sin that we haven't overtly committed, but that we are complicit to just by the nature of the community to which we belong?
2. Specifically, how does it make you feel to think about owning your community's sin? Are you able to embrace this idea, or do you feel resistant to it?
3. Where does your mind immediately go when you think of your community's sin? Your family, your city, your nation, company, community group, subculture, etc.?

Questions for Practicing Community:

These questions are to help us reflect thoughtfully on our felt experience together in light of our shared ground rules, goals, and values.

1. Are there any sins or failures for which your community group or this small group should consider communal conviction, confession, and repentance?
2. Are there any ways that you have felt hurt, frustrated, or unloved recently because of how you've experienced others in community? If so, what would you like to ask of the group? Is it one person or the community as a whole that you'd like to acknowledge and take responsibility for the offense?

10. Closing (5 minutes):

Have one person close your small-group time with a brief prayer, expressing what you've heard each person share with God.