

# Two Cities

Isaiah



**9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
SMALL GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS**

# Two Cities

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**Isaiah**

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*Two Cities*

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# *How to make the most of these studies*

## **1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?**

These ‘interactive’ Bible studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. The studies will take you through Isaiah, pointing out things along the way, filling in background details, and suggesting avenues for further exploration. But there is also time for you to do some sight-seeing of your own—to wander off, have a good look for yourself, and form your own conclusions.

In other words, we have designed these studies to fall halfway between a sermon and a set of unadorned Bible study questions. We want to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do a lot 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 sections of text to introduce, summarize, suggest and provoke. We’ve left plenty of room in the margins for you to jot comments and questions as you read. Interspersed throughout the text are two types of ‘interaction’, each with their own symbol:



### **Investigate**

Questions to help you investigate key parts of the Bible.



### **Think it through**

Questions to help you think through the implications of your discoveries and write down your own thoughts and reactions.

When you come to one of these symbols, you'll know that it's time to do some work of your own.

## **3. Suggestions for individual study**

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in Isaiah and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. You may be spurred to pray again at the end of the study.
- Work through the study, following the directions as you go. Write in the spaces provided.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the *Think it through* sections. It is important to think about the sections of text (rather than just accepting them as true) and to ponder the implications for your life. Writing these things down is a very valuable way to get your thoughts working.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you've learnt.

## **4. Suggestions for group study**

- 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 threesomes. Get together with a friend/s and work through them at your own

pace. You don't need the formal structure of a 'group' to gain maximum benefit.

- It is *vital* that group members work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how side-tracked you get!), but only if all the members have done the work and are familiar with the material.
- Spend most of the group time discussing the 'interactive' sections—*Investigate* and *Think it through*. Reading all the text together will take too long and should be unnecessary if the group members have done their preparation. You may wish to underline and read aloud particular paragraphs or sections of text that you think are important.
- 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 important sections of text to emphasize, 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.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies (the appendices should not be thought of in this way). This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of Isaiah, 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 at 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.



# 1

Isaiah 1:1-2:4

## *Choosing a city*

The opening chapter or so of Isaiah introduces many of the themes that will recur throughout the book. Without any further ado, let's dive straight in and have a look at it.

### **Investigate**

Read Isaiah 1:1-2:4. 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 nations; 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, in the words of Charles Dickens' famous novel, 'a tale of two cities'. The story of these two cities is the story of God's 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. It is **Jerusalem**, known elsewhere in the Bible as 'Zion' or the 'City of David'. This is the city which God's king, David, captures and into which he moves the Ark of the Covenant—the sign of God's presence with his people. Jerusalem is the city where the temple of Solomon is built, consecrated and blessed with God's presence. It is God's city.

Two cities: Babel and Jerusalem. One ruled by God, the other devoted to humanity. 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 heart. It is a place from which God rules his world; a place wherein the people of God live and rejoice.



## Investigate

Read Isaiah 1:1-2:4 again.

1. How is God's city described? What is life like in Jerusalem/Zion?
2. Summarize as simply as you can Isaiah's message to Judah and Jerusalem.
3. 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. He tells us about 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 prophesied.

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





4. How do you?

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

6. What sort of actions should we take as a consequence?