

Isaiah 2:1-5



Focus Statement

Even though we live in a world beset by war, poverty, and unrest, with great expectation we long to walk in the light of God's peace today.

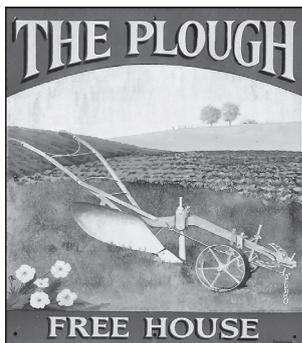


Key Verse

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Isaiah 2:4



Focus Image



The sign outside The Plough, Walcott, Lincolnshire, England.

Peace for God's People

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

Great expectations. Certainly we all have them in one form or another throughout our lives. We are eager to begin new studies, a marriage, a family or a career. There is something about a clean slate that gives us hope and the desire to move into the future. For some people, Advent is a time of new beginnings—the old year is passing away and the new year is shiny and bright and waiting for us to walk into it. As you begin experiencing Isaiah with your group, embrace your time together with great expectation!

Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need, for example chart paper or a whiteboard, art supplies, editorial cartoons, news magazines and glue sticks.
3. If you are using *Great Expectations: Studies in Isaiah* during Advent, and local fire codes allow the use of candles, consider lighting an Advent wreath. Assign a candle to each of the expectations: peace, hope, joy, and promise. The Advent wreath holds a variety of meanings for Christians around the world. Using a pink candle for the third week, "joy," is an Advent tradition shared by many. Perhaps group members could do the same at home.
4. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.

Session Overview

This is the first of four sessions that focus on the words of Isaiah. These sessions focus on the great expectations we have as people of God. Today's session leads us on the path of peace.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Uzziah reigned as king of Judah from 783 to 742 B.C.E. and is well-known as the ruler who built up the economic and military strength of the country. Through this buildup of strength, King Uzziah conquered the Philistines, the Arabians, and the Ammonites. Successful as a king, Uzziah was also a great administrator and commander in the army. This combination of leadership skills played an instrumental role in helping Uzziah



Prophet:

a person who speaks for God or a deity, or by divine inspiration (in the Old Testament); a person chosen to speak for God and to guide the people of Israel, Moses was considered the greatest of Old Testament prophets; one of the major or minor prophets; one of a band of ecstatic visionaries claiming divine inspiration and, according to popular belief, possessing magical powers; a person regarded as, or claiming to be, an inspired teacher or leader; a person who foretells or predicts what is to come; a spokesperson of some doctrine, cause, or movement.

rule over the largest part of Judah after the kingdom was divided into two. Unfortunately, because of Uzziah’s strength as a king, he became proud of all that he had been able to accomplish, and this ultimately led to his downfall.

In 750 B.C.E. Uzziah was stricken with leprosy and his public presence was taken over by his son, Jotham. Jotham’s faithful rule was rather uneventful from the perspective of the biblical record; however, the seeds of his father’s pride would come to full bloom in Jotham’s son, Ahaz. Ahaz is remembered as one of the most infamous of Judah’s monarchs and the early focus of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry. Even though it was during the year that Uzziah died (approximately 742 B.C.E.) that Isaiah was called to be a prophet, Isaiah survived both Jotham and Ahaz. His prophetic voice extended into the days of King Hezekiah and beyond.

What we know about the **prophet** Isaiah is found almost entirely in the first 39 chapters of the book named after him. We know that Isaiah was perhaps in his twenties when he was first called to this role, and that he most likely spent his entire life in the city of Jerusalem. Because of references to his access to the king, we can assume that Isaiah was from a family of influence or even a family that belonged to the court. Isaiah’s career as a prophet ranged over a time period of half a century, during which a group of disciples gathered around him as followers.

LITERARY CONTEXT

The world has never been without war, and even today, there are wars in many parts of the world. The Old Testament is full of stories of war, and it is in this context that Isaiah comes as a prophet for peace to the people of God.

During Isaiah’s time, war provided the pinnacle of human ingenuity. Weapons of war were the pride of humankind. Iron swords, impenetrable walls, and fast chariots gave power to all of the nations that possessed them. People and nations went to great efforts to prove their worth and their place in the world through the avenue of war. And what has really changed? Along with the destruction that has resulted from war throughout the ages, war causes people to shift their worship to idols of wealth and power, thinking they are wise in their own hearts and minds and therefore not dependent on God.

This is the world that Isaiah came into—a world of idolatry and of nations consumed by their own arrogance and assumptions

of might. Isaiah uses the tools of the time to make his point for peace: swords will be beaten into **plowshares** and spears into pruning hooks. It is then that nations will no longer worship idols but will hunger for God's Word and place in their lives.

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

Luther began his work in Isaiah by defining the role of the prophets. Luther saw that the prophets transferred the ideas of a physical kingdom over to that of a spiritual kingdom, and in doing so they were often regarded as fanatics. Beginning in chapter 1 of the book of Isaiah, the prophet warns of the divine punishments in store for the people because of their sin and lack of godliness. While Isaiah follows these judgments with some hope for the limited restoration of God's people after their captivity, ultimately, the book of Isaiah pins its greatest expectation for the peaceable kingdom on the coming of the Messiah.

Luther identifies that Isaiah is speaking spiritually in chapter 2 when he describes the church of Christ and depicts it as a kingdom ruled by the gospel: "Wherever this Gospel is proclaimed with sincerity, there this kingdom of Christ is." Luther continues by explaining that the gospel has to begin somewhere, although it is definitely not bound to a physical place. Knowing that Mount Zion is highly praised as the dwelling place of the Lord, the prophet transfers the significance of this physical mountain into one that is spiritual and, therefore, God's kingdom is spiritual as well. Luther spends time focusing on the word *established*; it is used here in the **Hebraism** to mean confirmed, attested, or made stable. Luther explains that no matter how much the church will be or is harassed or trampled down by sin, death, Satan, tyranny, or **heretics**, the mountain shall be established and exalted above all other mountains. This is the only kingdom that endures and this takes place by Word alone.

The virtue of a church that is established on the gospel is evident in its capacity to attract all nations so they will come to it freely by their own choice and will, according to Luther. He expounds on the fact that this mountain is where souls come and gather through faith. And it is here, when the gospel is heard, that hearts will not only soften, they will rejoice and come running to draw near to God. In other kingdoms (of humankind) we see force and demands, but in this kingdom of grace people will come willingly and freely to join with others who are likeminded. What comes out of Zion (the law and the word of the Lord) will influence and

? Plowshare:

an important agricultural tool that has been pushed by farmers and pulled by animals and tractors over the centuries to cut through hardened soil, turning it and preparing it for planting seed. The syllable *share*, an Old English word meaning "to divide equally," is often dropped from the term.

? Hebraism:

an expression or construction distinctive of the Hebrew language; the character, spirit, principles, or practices distinctive of the Hebrew people.

? Heretic:

a professed believer who maintains religious opinions contrary to those accepted by his or her church or rejects doctrines prescribed by that church; anyone who does not conform to an established attitude, doctrine, or principle.

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draw the nations so they flow to Christ and learn the gospel. Luther uses the phrase *swords into plowshares* in the figurative sense and expands its meaning as a sign that people will return to complete harmony and peace.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

Peace is something we long for in our world today—not only peace for countries or nations, but inner peace that calms us and keeps us close to God. Anxiety and fear linger around the edges of our lives as a constant threat to the peace of mind that we have as God’s children. The peace we have from God doesn’t depend on the circumstances we find ourselves in as much as it depends on the One in whom we trust. This isn’t easy for people who don’t know Christ to understand, especially as this inner peace is often most clearly present when we are in the most difficult times in our lives.

In the New Testament, Paul continually reminds us to actively seek the “peace that passes all understanding.” Peace comes when we relax and let God’s way become clear to us, sometimes through prayer or Bible reading, other times through the words and guidance of others. When we step in, trying to redirect and control our lives for the outcomes we assume to be best, peace seems to be just out of our grasp. The times of the most peace come when we live as Paul tells us to in Philippians 4:4-7: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Facilitator’s Prayer

Holy and loving God, although the world around me often seems to be a swirl of chaos and confusion, I look to you to find a calm center of peacefulness. Thank you for the reminders of peace you place throughout my day—a child’s hug, a kind word from a friend, a dog’s wagging tail when I arrive home at the end of a long day. Help me to be a place of peace for the people I meet in my journey of life. Amen.



Gather (10-15 minutes)**Check-in**

Welcome everyone as they arrive and invite them to take time to greet one another. Set the tone for learners to introduce themselves to one another by introducing yourself first.

Pray

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection save us from the threatening dangers of our sins, and enlighten our walk in the way of your salvation, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (ELW, p.18)

Focus Activity

World peace and inner peace are common desires, but as God's people, can we ever truly experience peace in a broken world? The apostle Paul links peace with grace in the majority of his salutations in letters to the early church: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

- What is the connection Paul is trying to make with his use of the words *grace* and *peace*?
- How do grace and peace relate to one another? How does one affect the other?
- A plowshare is an agricultural tool used for cultivating and planting. How does that connect with Paul's image of grace and peace?
- In what ways does the Focus Image portray the idea of peace in the world?

**Open Scripture** (10-15 minutes)

Hold your Bible in your hand and read this text aloud as learners listen with their eyes closed. Pause, and then ask them to list the words they heard that helped form pictures in their minds about what this passage is about.

OR

Give learners pieces of paper and markers to sketch with. Have them listen while someone reads the Isaiah passage aloud and draw or sketch symbols of what they hear in the text: mountain, Lord's house, paths, nations, swords, plowshares, spears,

**Tip:**

As this may be the first time that this group meets together, don't rush these introductions. Putting people at ease and encouraging their interaction here will serve as a solid base for the many opportunities of great conversation to follow throughout the coming weeks. Provide nametags for learners to wear, and encourage them to write a word or two next to their name telling of a peaceful place where they like to spend time.

**Tip:**

Although prayer is an important part of the group experience for many people, it can be intimidating. Be sensitive to those who are comfortable with praying aloud or leading the group in prayer and consider asking one person to lead the group today with the prayer printed in the guide. If no one seems ready for this, take the lead and ask them to join you in prayer.

**Tip:**

Many people can visualize what a plow is and how it is used on a farm. Never assume, however, that everyone knows what it looks like or what it's used for. If possible, locate photos or drawings of plows as well as swords to share with the group.

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Tip:

Encourage learners to jot down any questions or ideas they have about the readings each week and bring them to discuss with the others. Affirm everyone's contribution to the discussion, and if some questions or thoughts are not addressed, ask a group member to record them to discuss the next time you meet.



Tip:

Invite learners to offer their definitions for *prophet* and *apostle*. Follow-up with dictionaries to firm up the group's understandings.



Bonus Activity:

Isaiah's words often bridge the Old and New Testaments. Invite learners to use concordances to find references to Isaiah in the New Testament. Among the 22 direct quotes and many other allusions, there are significant connections between Isaiah 53 and the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 8:17) as well as how people received Jesus' ministry in light of what we read in Isaiah 6:9-10 (John 12:27ff).



Tip:

Find several news quotes or editorial cartoons about working for justice and making peace to share with the group. Make copies for learners to take home and think about throughout the week. Encourage learners to become more aware of the prophetic pursuit of justice and peace in the world around them.

pruning hooks, war. Tape or tack the completed sketches around the room as a visual representation of Isaiah 2:1-5.

Read Isaiah 2:1-5.

- What emotions well up as you hear or read this passage? What images are the strongest?
- What does the phrase “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” mean for you?
- Are there any personal, news, or historical events that come to mind in this moment?



Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

Historical Context

We might think of the book of Isaiah as an anthology of his most memorable words, along with a few references to his life, most likely collected and assembled by his followers.

1. When we think of God's messengers in the Bible, apostles and prophets are among the best-known. Although not exclusively so, prophets are most often thought of as belonging to the Old Testament and apostles to the New Testament. What insight does Isaiah 6:1-10 give to the life of a prophet?

Because prophets of the time primarily delivered their messages in an oral form, the words that we attribute to Isaiah were not necessarily written down by him, but rather evolved through the recording of oral tradition into the form we have today.

2. Think about current world conditions and events. Can you identify a prophet of these times? Is it as easy to identify a prophet in real time as it is to identify someone as a prophet in hindsight?