Isaiah:
How to Stay Close to God

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Isaiah

**Why read this book?**

Have you known Christians who lived double lives? Who only seemed to be playing with God? Isaiah knew people who lived a double life—the nation of Israel—and he shared God’s hatred for their compromise. He challenged them to shape up and love God with all their hearts and minds. Isaiah hoped that his readers might clearly see their hypocrisy and change their ways.

**Who wrote this book?**

Isaiah, the son of Amoz. Some claim that he could not have written later material in the book, describing events that occurred after the prophet’s death. But others think such a view discounts the supernatural element of God’s revelation. Prophecy, given by the inspiration of God, can predict future events.

**To whom was it written and why?**

Isaiah lived in Judah, the southern kingdom of the divided nation of Israel. He was a prophet to four kings of Judah from about 740 B.C. to 681 B.C., but he preached repentance and salvation to the whole nation.

**What was happening during this time?**

Israel had faded from its former prominence and was now a second-rate nation. Though Judah was threatened by Assyria and Egypt, it was spared from their destruction, largely through Isaiah’s influence. The northern kingdom, however, was demolished by Assyrian forces.

**What to look for in Isaiah:**

Paradox. Isaiah was a piercing poet, who understood the two-sided nature of God’s character: mercy and judgment, grace and discipline, justice and forgiveness, exile and salvation. The tension of these great paradoxes fills the pages of Isaiah’s writings, awaiting a resolution only the reader can bring—faith or unbelief.

*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*
Isaiah: How to Stay Close to God - Study 1

LEADER’S GUIDE

Standing Small
Learn the humble prayer that bonds the Most High God to the most lowly person.

The prophet Isaiah lived 700 years before Jesus Christ. In his writings, Isaiah describes the deep intensity of his relationship with God. The evidence of this intensity can be seen in Isaiah’s spiritual discipline. Here was a man who placed a high value on prayer and displayed a keen awareness of how to approach God.

This study will help you stay in touch with God by practicing humble prayer wherever you are.

Scripture:
Isaiah 57:15; Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4, 18:10–14; Psalm 51

Based on:
"Direct Connection: How to Stay Close to God," Series Builder by Bill White, PREACHING TODAY SERMONS
PART 1
Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participants Guide included at the end of this study.

Too often we go through our days without a sense of God’s presence, because we have neglected to do the foundational work of staying connected to him through prayer. Prayer must be accompanied with the attitude of humility, which is based on a proper recognition of our status in relation to God. Isaiah provides a stellar example of this type of humility when he answers the question, “Where is God?” The prophet’s answer, in Isaiah 57:15, is that God can be found in two specific places at the same time. First, God is in an exalted place far above that of humans. But he is also present with people who are truly humble. Humble prayer is one of the holy habits we can use to practice the presence of God.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Describe a time when you felt that God was far away from you.

[Q] Describe a time when God has revived your heart or spirit.

[Q] How would you define humility?

[Q] Read the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2–4 or Matt. 6:9–13). What evidence of humility do you see in this prayer?

PART 2
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: The key to prayer is humility.

Robert Morneau says in CHRISTIANITY TODAY (8-21-00):

Humble prayer stands in stark contrast to the popular, easy solutions the world offers to everything, but it is the key to accessing the presence of God. Remember the two places Isaiah has mentioned where God can be found. Of those two, one is a constant: God will always be high and holy. The second location is up to us. If we want a sense of God’s presence during the week, we need to be humble toward God and toward one another.

What is humility? It is that habitual quality whereby we live in the truth of things: the truth that we are creatures and not the Creator; the truth that our life is a composite of good and evil, light and darkness; the truth that in our littleness we have been given extravagant dignity…. Humility is saying a radical yes to the human condition.

[Q] What evidence can people show to prove that their humility toward God is real?

[Q] Do you know anyone who is truly humble? How do they show it?
Why do you think humble prayer is the “key to accessing the presence of God”?

**Teaching point two: Humble prayer includes confession.**

Bill White shares this story about confession:

My accountability partner and I meet each week to encourage each other in certain areas of our lives. On Wednesday I sinned in one area, and I knew exactly what I had to do. It flashed through my mind: *You need to go talk to Eric right now.* But immediately after that thought came a rush of other ones. You know which ones I’m talking about: *It really isn’t that bad… I don’t need to confess that… I’m sure he’s busy… He lives so far away (yeah, like three houses down).* I will be honest with you. I don’t like to confess. It’s the ruin of me. But humility rarely comes without humiliation. And confession is so humiliating.

Mother Teresa said, “Confession is humility in action.” She learned this principle from Jesus, who gave us the example of how to pray this humble prayer in Luke 18:10–14.

Read this passage. Note in particular verse 13, when the downcast tax collector said, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” This is the baseline humble prayer. Jesus contrasted the attitude of this tax collector with the other character in the story, a Pharisee. The Pharisee was proud—he compared himself to others. But the tax collector was humble—he compared himself to God.

What is the difference between humility and humiliation?

How difficult is it for you to admit you are a sinner?

Under what circumstances should you make this admission? And to whom?

Can you remember a time when you have confessed a sin? Compare how you felt before and after the confession.

**Teaching point three: Getting practical about ways to pray.**

When we pray, we must be specific about the nature of our prayers. We could pray that God would attend to sinners in general, or sinners in our immediate community. We often feel like asking God to deal harshly with those who have sinned against us.

But the key to humble, confessional prayer is to admit our own, not someone else’s. Honest self-examination is the starting point of this prayer. This kind of self-examination and prayer can take place at any time or place. It is often done while at a still place—a good time to do this is at the end of the day—and by contemplating what has happened to us, how it felt, and how it affected other people. The second step is to confess to God any sins committed. A third step is to seek the assistance of the Holy Spirit in finding ways to repent of the sin and, if possible, apologize or make restitution.

What obstacles keep us from owning our sins?

Read Psalm 51 as an example of confessional prayer.
Invite the group to kneel and pray silently for a few moments on the theme “God have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Leader’s note: If anyone in the group has physical limitations, let them know kneeling is not necessary to the exercise.
Model the exercise by kneeling, confessing your sin, and praying over the group after the time of silence.

PART 3
Apply Your Findings

John Bunyan and Andrew Murray were both known as men of prayer. John Bunyan says in the Pilgrim’s Prayer Book, “Real prayer is a serious concern, for we are speaking to the sovereign Lord of the entire universe, who is willing to move heaven and earth in answer to sincere and reasonable prayer. Prayer is not a mechanical duty, but a wonderful opportunity to develop a loving and caring relationship with the most important Person in our lives.”

Andrew Murray says in Humility, “May God teach us to believe that to be humble, to be nothing in his presence, is the highest attainment and the fullest blessing of the Christian life. He speaks to us: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place and with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit’ (Isaiah 57:15). Be that our destiny!”

[Q] Invite everyone in the group to commit to praying, “God have mercy on me, a sinner” three times a day for the next seven days.

[Q] Is there anyone you need to confess a sin to?

[Q] In a future study, we will talk about the practice of journaling. You are encouraged to begin now by recording your feelings and impressions when praying “God have mercy on me, a sinner.”

—Study by Bill White, with Lee Dean
Isaiah: How to Stay Close to God - Study 1

PARTICIPANT’S GUIDE
Standing Small
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Too often we go through our days without a sense of God’s presence, because we have neglected to do the foundational work of staying connected to him through prayer. Prayer must be accompanied with the attitude of humility, which is based on a proper recognition of our status in relation to God. Isaiah provides a stellar example of this type of humility when he answers the question, “Where is God?” The prophet’s answer, in Isaiah 57:15, is that God can be found in two specific places at the same time. First, God is in an exalted place far above that of humans. But he is also present with people who are truly humble. Humble prayer is one of the holy habits we can use to practice the presence of God.

PART 2
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: The key to prayer is humility.

Teaching point two: Humble prayer includes confession.

Teaching point three: Getting practical about ways to pray.

PART 3
Apply Your Findings

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—Study by Bill White, with Lee Dean
LEADER’S GUIDE

Reading with Your Ears
How to listen to God in the reading of Scripture.

We yearn for guidance in our lives, but, like the people in Isaiah’s day, we often don’t consult the best sources to answer our questions. Sometimes we go through our days complaining that we don’t hear from God—and yet when he speaks we may listen to him seldom and poorly. This study will help you seek guidance at an infallible source: God’s Word.

Scripture:
Isaiah 8:19–22; Luke 10:30–37

Based on:
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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

Isaiah warned his people against false guides in Isaiah 8:19–22. In verse 19, he lamented that some of his people were using the services of spiritists and mediums. The prophet of old would recognize the same tendencies in people today who offer to connect you with dead family members, conduct séances for you, read Tarot cards, or read your palm. Many other people daily read their horoscopes.

While few of us seek guidance from the occult, we often go other places, seeking advice from talk shows, self-help books, friends, or family. Verse 20 says, “If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.” The bottom line is this: There’s plenty of good and bad counsel out there. God says: If it’s contrary to Scripture, it’s going to get you in trouble.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] Looking back on your life, what sources have you relied on for guidance?
- [Q] If you have changed your source of guidance, what was the cause of that change and what resulted?
- [Q] Is the Bible the only source of truth for all matters? Why or why not?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: We must read the Word for the guidance we seek.

Read Isaiah 8:19–22. In this text, God dramatically calls us to the Word for our guidance. We must answer this specific call. So the first key to hearing from God is reading the Bible on a regular basis. Christians, at least in America, are not doing a good job of this. Even though 93 percent of American households have a Bible, less than a quarter of those read it daily.

That’s why Isaiah calls out to the people, “Should not a people inquire of their God?... To the law and to the testimony!” The testimony Isaiah refers to is the actions of God in history, recorded in this book so we could see evidence—like a testimony in court—that he yearns to hold us, guide us, and touch us.

- [Q] What most helps you focus your attention on God:
  - Prayer
  - Silence
  - Bible reading
  - Music
  - Guided meditation
  - Other
How often do you read your Bible?

What is the best time of day for you to spend time alone with God?

Teaching point two: We must not only read but listen.

Too often we just go to Scripture to have our devotions—to get the job done, so to speak. And then we are finished with it. We settle for reading the Word, but we don’t listen to God. Jesus says, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (John 6:63). Come to Jesus in the Scriptures, and you’ll find life. But we must do more than simply scan our eyes across a block of words—we must adopt an attitude of listening while we read.

Bill White shares this story:

Some time ago I was following a reading guide with others in our church that took us through the whole Bible in a year. On Good Friday the reading guide said to read the account of the crucifixion in Mark 14 and 15. As I read, I didn’t even stop to think about what I was reading. I checked it off the list, got it done, went on with my day. I was on a date with my wife later that day, and Katy said how humbled she’d been that morning as she read the Bible because of the cross, that she was grateful for the time to connect with God and for Good Friday. That was the first time it struck me that it was Good Friday. I had read the very Scripture about the crucifixion that morning but hadn’t even thought about it. Right there on the date we stopped and I prayed, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner. I’ve missed you again. I read the words but didn’t even listen to you.”

What are the obstacles you face in establishing a daily practice of reading the Word? Can anyone else in the group offer help in overcoming these obstacles?

What happens to people and nations who do not “inquire of their God”?

What experience have you had in listening to God while reading Scripture?

Teaching point three: One method for listening to God in Scripture is called *lectio divina*.

There are many helpful ways to listen to God in Scripture. One practical method is called spiritual reading, or *lectio divina*. In this method, you read a passage and listen for words, phrases, or sentences that speak to you. Then you turn that word, phrase, or sentence over in your mind and ask God to speak to you through that word. Then read through the whole passage again, asking God to clarify what he would say to you and reflecting on the passage so you may hear.

It can be helpful to write down both the phrase that God seems to be emphasizing to you and what you sense God is saying to you in it. The key is the relationship. It’s staying in touch with God. It’s connecting.

Activity:

Guide the group through a *lectio divina* experience:
1. With everyone else’s Bible closed, only the leader should read Luke 10:30–37 out loud at a normal pace.

2. The leader should read the same passage again, only at a slower pace. Ask the group to listen for individual words or phrases that strike a chord in them and to meditate on it for one minute.

3. Ask each member of the group to state the word or phrase they meditated on, without further explanation.

4. Ask another person (not the leader) to read the passage again. The group should listen with this question in mind: “What does this passage mean to my life today?”

5. Ask the group to meditate on this question silently for two to three minutes. Then ask each person to briefly (just a few sentences) share his or her findings.

6. Ask a different person to read the passage again. Ask the group to think about what specific action the passage is urging them to take in the week ahead.

7. Ask each person to silently meditate for two to three minutes. Then ask them to share what action they are contemplating. This sharing time will be longer than the other ones.

PART 3
Apply Your Findings

Hearing from God is not reserved for the spiritual elite—it’s for all believers who will read and listen. Here is an example from Time magazine (6-18-01) of someone who listened well:

Eric Weihenmayer is blind, yet he scaled Mt. Everest (he summited May 24, 2001). Suffering from a degenerative eye disease, he lost his sight when he was 13, but that hasn’t stopped him. On a mountain where 90 percent of climbers never make it to the top (and 165 have died trying since 1953), Eric succeeded, in large measure because he listened well. He listened to the little bell tied to the back of the climber in front of him—so he would know what direction to go. He listened to the voice of teammates who would shout back to him “death fall two feet to your right!”—so he would know what direction not to go. He listened in the tent at night to his friends, enjoying their stories and thriving on their companionship.

Are you leaning into the mountain of God’s Word, keenly listening for his guidance?

♦ Pray as a group, asking God to empower the members of the group to take the actions they have discussed.

♦ Practice lectio divina at least three times during the week.

♦ Record your experiences, especially the action God suggested to you during the reading.

— Study by Bill White, with Lee Dean
We yearn for guidance in our lives, but, like the people in Isaiah’s day, we often don’t consult the best sources to answer our questions. Sometimes we go through our days complaining that we don’t hear from God—and yet when he speaks we may listen to him seldom and poorly. This study will help you seek guidance at an infallible source: God’s Word.

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Teaching point one: We must read the Word for the guidance we seek.

Teaching point two: We must not only read but listen.

Teaching point three: One method for listening to God in Scripture is called lectio divina.

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LEADER’S GUIDE

Looking Back into the Future
How the daily practice of reflection can help you walk more closely with God.

To stay connected to God, we need to take note of what he’s doing in our lives and learn from it. With the spiritual discipline of journaling and the accompanying attribute of learning, we can stay in touch with God. This study looks into these disciplines more closely.

Scripture:
Isaiah 46:9–10

Based on:
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PART 1
Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

Leader’s note: Sometime during this section, have someone dressed in a very loud shirt enter the room, stay long enough so everyone can see him or her, and leave.

Our days are often full of pressures that pull us relentlessly in one direction—forward. Achievement, goals, and progress are the ways we measure this forward movement. Thus far in our study, we have been concentrating on practicing the presence of God in the here and now. We have been learning how to seek his presence in the present and his guidance for the future. Now we add another direction in time—looking back in reflection to the discipline of being in communion with God.

Scripture often asks us to remember, and that is the primary directive found in Isaiah 46:9–10. Isaiah urges us to remember who God is, what he has taught us, and where he has brought us. We should take time to enter into the practice of reflection with an attitude of learning where God has made an impact on our days.

Discussion starters:

[Q] Which do you think more about—the past or the future?

[Q] What are some reasons you have heard that we should not think much about the past? What are some common phrases used to express this opinion?

[Q] How can thinking about the past help us in the present and future?

PART 2
Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: We are often oblivious to God’s activity in our lives.

Often we don’t pay close attention to what God is doing around us. In the book Did You Spot the Gorilla? psychologist Richard Wiseman describes an experiment. Volunteers watched a 30-second video of two teams playing basketball and were asked to count the number of times one of the teams passed the ball. What they weren’t told was that halfway through the video, a man dressed in a gorilla suit would run onto the court, stand in front of the camera, and beat his chest. Amazingly, only a few of the volunteers spotted the man in the gorilla suit. Most of the volunteers were so intent on counting passes that they completely missed the gorilla.

Wiseman concluded that most people go through life so focused on the task at hand that they completely miss “gorilla” opportunities. He gives the example of a team of 3M researchers who were trying to develop a high-strength adhesive. One of their attempts produced a product that was actually the opposite—a very low-strength adhesive. Most of the team thought the result was a failure, but one saw it as an opportunity. That adhesive failure went on to became the invention that made 3M Post-It notes a reality.
If we aren’t careful, we can be so fixated on the mundane that we miss God-given opportunities of significance.

[Q] What do you remember about the person who walked into the room earlier?

*Leader’s note: Bring the person back in to see how accurate the group’s memories are.*

[Q] Can you recall a time when you were so fixated on the tasks of your life that you missed something God had for you? Explain.

**Teaching point two: We need to remember what God has done.**

Verse 9 says, “Remember the former things, those of long ago…” God yearns for us to stay close to him, for us to see his hand in our history. Remembering means recognizing God’s hand in history. Through the centuries this has been called the spiritual discipline of reflection. It means taking time to reflect on what God has been doing in your life. It means taking hold of those moments and etching them in your mind and heart, so you both know and feel them.

There is a reason for reflection. We remember the past to see God in the present. Verse 9 says we remember and fix these memories in our minds and hearts in order to know that: “I am God, and there is no other,” and, “I am God, and there is none like me.” Notice that God says, “I am,” not “I was.” We reflect on God’s presence in our past to recognize his participation in our present.

[Q] Tell a story about how God has worked in your past to affect your life.

[Q] How have you seen God work in the past to affect the life of someone close to you?

[Q] What is the difference between this kind of reflection and nostalgia?

**Teaching point three: God is still moving.**

In verse 10, God says, “My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” The reason we need to be ready is that God is on the move, and he wants us to move with him. God has no plans to stop being involved in our lives. The question is, will you be watching? Will you be ready? Will you go with him?

Jesus models for us the kind of day-in, day-out connection with the Father that we all long for—and it comes from seeing what God is up to in our lives. Jesus says, “My Father is always at his work…the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing” (John 5:17,19). Jesus is talking here about seeing God’s hand at work. That is the art of reflection. We want to stay connected to God day-in and day-out so, like Jesus, we can join him in what he’s doing.

[Q] How does thinking about what God has done help you see what he is doing now?

[Q] Where do you see God working at this time in your life?
PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Journaling is when you get a notebook or a computer and write about what God’s been up to in your life. There are two crucial questions to ask: Where did I meet God today? Where did I miss God today?

In this way you build over time a clearer sense of how God is working in your life. You start to notice God’s tendencies, so you can anticipate and join in, because your Father is always working. Then you do what you see him doing.

[Q] Have you ever kept a journal or diary? What has it meant to you?

[Q] Are there any parts of the Bible that could be thought of as entries in a journal? Which ones?

[Q] Briefly reflect over your day so far and write down where you’ve met or missed God.

—Study by Bill White, with Lee Dean
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Teaching point one: We are often oblivious to God’s activity in our lives.

Teaching point two: We need to remember what God has done.

Teaching point three: God is still moving.

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