

# URBAN FAITH



## **Stay This Way Forever**

Why do we grow out of good gifts from God? In this interview with Emmy Award-winning journalist Linsey Davis, we explore how we can learn from and grow with children in her book *Stay This Way Forever*.

## **Why Is Revelation Scary?**

*(It Shouldn't Be For Believers)*

It is important for believers, so why are we so afraid to read it?

A photograph of a man with a beard, wearing a blue and white plaid shirt and a dark vest, sitting on a wooden bench. He is looking off to the side with his hands clasped in prayer. The background features a large, rugged mountain range under a bright sky. In the foreground, there is a small stove and a red gas canister on the ground.

## **HE SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD**

In the midst of our fractured reality, how can we hear and follow God in ways that are faithful and life-giving? Activist and Creative Sho Baraka talks about it in his new book.



# Lesson 1





## Where We're Going

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Today, we will: understand why God would destroy Babylon; grapple with the destructiveness of delighting in power and pleasure; and repent from thoughts, actions, and feelings that separate believers from God.



## Get Them Going

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Participants will discuss questions and thoughts around the idea of being alone versus being connected. They will offer real-world examples of the impact of both in their lives or in life in general.



## God Foretells Destruction

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**P**aul was cruel. He was great at his job. He had a beautiful house, an amazing car, he wore luxury clothes, and ate at the finest restaurants. Everything about him and his life was on point. But his family and closest friends were miserable around him. See, Paul managed to make everything about himself, and he thought he knew it all.

One Saturday, the family gathered at the park for a BBQ and his grandma decided to try to convince him to be kinder and to listen to the folks who loved him. “Pauli, we all love you, and you know everybody is proud of all you’ve done. But, Pauli, I raised you better than this. I raised you to be kind to folk. I raised you to listen to folk, ‘cause you can always learn from somebody. It seem like you done got all this stuff an’ think the sun and moon revolve around you now.”

“Grandma,” Paul said angrily, “I don’t really care. I am who I am. And I’m not changing. For what? Look at how far it’s gotten me! Look at what I have. Look at what I’ve been able to accomplish. No one helped me do this. I did this on my own. No, I don’t need to change. I’m gonna keep grindin’ and keep doin’ me—doin’ me my way is what’s always gonna work for me in the end.”

Years passed by, and those years brought market crashes, bad business ventures, and a recession that forced Paul to sell his home. Paul found himself ill and in need of people to help care for him. Although he managed to push a lot of folks away over the years, there were some who still showed up to help nurse him back to life.

One Sunday, as he drove his grandma to church with him, he remarked, “You know, Grandma, God has been so good! And I am just so grateful for you everyone who’s stood by me over the years. And I’m just so grateful to be back in good health again. I’ve been mean and only focused on myself and thinking I was the only one who mattered. I lost a lot, but I didn’t lose it all, and I didn’t lose myself. I wouldn’t be here, and I wouldn’t be who I am today without y’all.”

“Pauli,” Grandma said as she chuckled, “I am so proud of you, son! Look at the man you are becoming!”



## Real Talk

1. How does “grind” culture, or the intense individualism in our culture, influence how we view God and others in relation to ourselves?
2. Why was Paul willing to learn a new way of relating to others?
3. To whom did Paul give credit for what he accomplished?
4. How can we be conscious of looking beyond the polished outside view of our lives to care about deeper issues?



## The Big Picture

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Today’s passage provides an account of God’s capacity to see our actions and hear our deepest thoughts about our power and position in relation not only to God, but to those with whom we are in community. The Babylonians were particularly cruel in how they treated God’s people, and they regarded themselves with a self-centered arrogance that displeased God. God reminded them that when crushing challenges arise, their accomplishments, arrogance, and strategies for success would not save them.



## The Players

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**Isaiah.** Isaiah was a prophet during the eighth century. His prophetic ministry spanned the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Manasseh. Scholars have argued that Isaiah was more than likely connected to the king’s court in



## Make It Stick

“And all your friends, those with whom you’ve done business since childhood, will go their own ways, turning a deaf ear to your cries” (Isaiah 47:15, NLT).



## The Word (NLT)

**Isaiah 47:10** You felt secure in your wickedness. “No one sees me,” you said. But your “wisdom” and “knowledge” have led you astray, and you said, “I am the only one, and there is no other.”

**11** So disaster will overtake you, and you won’t be able to charm it away. Calamity will fall upon you, and you won’t be able to buy your way out. A catastrophe will strike you suddenly, one for which you are not prepared.

**12** Now use your magical charms! Use the spells you have worked at all these years! Maybe they will do you some good. Maybe they can make someone afraid of you.

**13** All the advice you receive has made you tired. Where are all your astrologers, those stargazers who make predictions each month? Let them stand up and save you from what the future holds.

**14** But they are like straw burning in a fire; they cannot save themselves from the flame. You will get no help from them at all; their hearth is no place to sit for warmth.

**15** And all your friends, those with whom you’ve done business since childhood, will go their own ways, turning a deaf ear to your cries.

some way based on his call narrative. Throughout his ministry, Isaiah’s prophecies are directed at Judah and its idolatry and oppression. Isaiah’s prophetic ministry can be summarized as judgment, renewal, and hope as he foretold Judah’s Babylonian captivity as well as its return from exile and the coming of the Messiah. Tradition tells us Isaiah was eventually sawn in half during the reign of Manasseh.

**Babylon.** Babylon is an ancient city, and the name Babylon can be translated as “the gate of gods.” It is mentioned in the Bible, along with Egypt, as the antithesis to God’s people. When Israel sinned against God through idolatry and injustice, God allowed the Babylonians to punish Israel by sending Nebuchadnezzar to conquer Judah and send the Jews into exile. Babylon remained a superpower until the Medes and Persians conquered Babylonia in 539 BC.



## Backstage

Isaiah prophesies the demise of Babylon (Isaiah 45). Isaiah announces the conquest of Babylon by King Cyrus of the Medo-Persian Empire. This prophecy is linked to the salvation and restoration of Israel as they return from exile under Cyrus’ reign. Babylon is condemned for its idolatry and its reign ended (Isaiah 46). The idols of Babylon are deemed powerless. They are made from created things and cannot save their worshipers or protect their people.

God calls the Babylonian sorcerers and astrologers to account (Isaiah 47). Their knowledge is world-renowned, but it is powerless against the sovereign judgment of the Lord. None of their astrological understanding or spells of witchcraft can prevent the disaster coming upon them. The once proud city will be humbled through the divine arrangement of its conquest by a foreign power.

What is bad news for the Babylonians is good news for the Jews. Because of Babylon’s conquest, they will gain an ally in Cyrus who will give them freedom to return to their homeland and rebuild their capital Jerusalem as well as their Temple. God assures them no idol could have foretold these things and establishes His superiority over the gods and idols of other nations (Isaiah 48). He is God and He is in control of the destiny of not only Israel but all the nations of the globe.



## Combing Through

### 1. The Pride of Babylon and Its Consequences (Isaiah 47:10–11)

God through Isaiah calls out Babylon’s prideful attitude. They have committed wickedness brazenly as if they were accountable to no one. The Babylonians were renowned for their knowledge, and this knowledge was the source of Babylon’s pride. Because of this they put themselves in the place of God by saying, “I am the only one, and there is no other” (from v. 10, NIV). These are proud, blasphemous words which display the inward attitude of the heart.

God would not allow Babylon to remain unpunished for this sin of pride. Calamity and disaster would come upon the city in the form of the Medo-Persian Empire and King Cyrus. None of Babylon’s sorcery and knowledge could conjure an escape from the Medes and Persians. Their kingdom would be taken over, and they could do nothing about it. As believers we have no reason to despair when proud and wicked rulers or leaders are in power. Eventually all of us will come before the judgment seat of God. There, none of our knowledge, wealth, or social standing will be of any use—only whether we were righteous and humble before Him.

*What is your response when you see wicked and proud people in power?*

### 2. False Trust in Babylon’s Expertise (vv. 12–13)

Isaiah mocks the knowledge and abilities of Babylon’s sorcerers and astrologers. No matter what they do, they could not stop the judgment of God. Isaiah taunts them by pointing out that although they are experienced in enchantments and sorceries, they still will not withstand God’s disaster. Astrology and sorcery were ways to control destiny. Babylon would soon face the truth that it was not in control of its destiny.

With all of their counselors, they weary themselves. They cannot figure a way out of their situation. Their astrologers try to predict an overturning of their fate, but it will not make a difference. Babylon’s wisdom and knowledge will not be able to help it. Nothing they take pride in will pull them out of the ditch they dug for themselves through blasphemous pride and wickedness.

This same understanding of reality needs to be imprinted on our own hearts and minds. We are not in control, and any attempt to control our destiny is empty and vain. God is sovereign over our lives, and we need to look to Him for help. He controls our future and our destiny.

*How do you respond to the fact that God controls your future and your destiny?*



### 3. The Ultimate Demise of Babylon (vv. 14–15)

The astrologers and sorcerers of Babylon are compared to straw (v. 14) burning in the fire. They will not be able to save Babylon. Their fate was with the city and its empire. Looking to them for help would be fruitless. Sitting by their fire would bring no warmth. They can't save Babylon because they can't save themselves.

The nations who have dealt with Babylon since its origin will turn their backs on it. They will not help Babylon when calamity strikes. The pride of Babylon will be broken by the sovereign will of God. Babylon will have no way to escape it, no one to turn to, and no resources to meet this disaster.

*Where do you turn when you are in a seemingly impossible situation?*



## Diving Deeper Quiz

Have the participants read Isaiah 47:10–15, BACKSTAGE, and COMBING THROUGH from the BIBLE STUDY GUIDE. Then, have them answer the following:

1. What does “wickedness” mean (Isaiah 47:10)?
2. In the text, God encourages Babylon to “...use your magical charms! Use the spells you have worked at all these years! Maybe they will do you some good. Maybe they can make someone afraid of you” (v. 12). We are inundated with 3-step articles, and 4-step plans for success, wellness, and growth. How do you balance strategies for success with your reliance on God?
3. In a society that places significant value in marketing ourselves, whether it's on social media, in starting our own business, or in making ourselves the ideal candidate for positions and titles, how do you balance growing your “wisdom and knowledge” and “charm” with a healthy awareness of others and of God? (vv. 10–11)
4. How do you center God in the story of your life's attainment, achievement, and growth?



## Next Steps

No nation is beyond the pride we read about in Isaiah's description of Babylon. As individuals we are equally in danger of exhibiting this kind of pride. In the coming week take some time to pray for our na-

tion and its leaders. Also make a plan to serve others. This is a surefire way to root out pride in your life.



## Put It Out There

### A. Group Application

Take a few minutes to briefly write about a challenge you or someone else faced, and how you or they overcame that challenge with God's help. Write a social media post or record a video talking about how God has helped you overcome a challenge in your life. It can be as brief or as long as you like. Hashtag it with the hashtag #BlessUp to signify your blessing God for what God has done!

### B. Personal Application

Encourage participants to set aside some time to reflect on and write about how they treat others when they think no one will see. Ask them to think about ways they could grow in how they treat others. Challenge them to set aside time to pray and ask God to help them to remain open to growing and learning how to connect with people in more healthy, loving, and kind ways.



## Wrap It Up

### A. God Gratitude Journal

This week, take the time to notice all the ways God's presence and God's power enable you to go about your day. Write about it and read it over at week's end to see the beauty of God's hand in your life. Talk to God about how grateful you are.

### B. God Success Strategies

Take some time this week to reflect on all the ways you've incorporated God into your goals and accomplishments. Write them down. Have a conversation with a friend or family member about them. Talk to God. Let God know you notice how God is there in the midst of whatever it is that you do.



## Say Word?

Jotham. JAW-thum.  
Ahaz. AYE-hazz.  
Manasseh. Mah-NAH-suh.  
Antithesis. an-TIH-thuh-siss.

# SWAG

(Spiritual Wisdom and Guidance)

“Lying, thinking  
Last night  
How to find my soul a home  
Where water is not thirsty  
And bread loaf is not stone  
I came up with one thing  
And I don't believe I'm wrong

That nobody,  
But nobody  
Can make it out here alone.  
Alone, all alone  
Nobody, but nobody  
Can make it out here alone.”  
—Maya Angelou

# Lesson 2





## Where We're Going

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By the end of the lesson, we will: understand God's mission for the people of Israel to show all people the way to God; appreciate the inclusion of all servants in God's promises; and tell others about God's never-ending love and salvation for all people.



## Get Them Going

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Ask the participants to describe the characteristics, mission, and accomplishments of a servant. Then ask them to name contemporary and historical figures who exemplify servitude. What makes this person an exemplary servant?



## God Foretells of Redemption

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**Y***ou have been chosen* is the message I continue to realize.

I received a call from the Mayor's Office to tell me I have been chosen to serve on the Make A Difference Youth Task Force for the city of Montgomery, Alabama. In shock, I called my mom to process this invitation from the local government.

"Ma, I just got a call from the Mayor's Office inviting me to serve on a task force for the youth! They said they want my help creating new summer programs for the youth and they want my guidance on how to decrease the school dropout rate. They say they need my help to increase the morale of the community because it has been down ever since the school bus accident involving the football team and cheerleaders. They think I can help turn things around! Who told them to call me?!" I asked.

My mother responded in her reassuring voice, "Why *wouldn't* they call you, Trey?"

"I'm not qualified to work with the Mayor's Office on anything. I barely finished my second year at Georgia State. I haven't even gone back to finish my degree. I'm sure there are more qualified people."

"Trey, it doesn't matter that you have not finished college. College is not a requirement to care about the youth in this community and to create change. You have been serving in this community since you were five years old. Yes, you left college and returned to your old job, but you have gone above and beyond the call of a shoe store manager. You've organized the school supply drives, shoe donations, toy drives, and you founded and facilitate the trade school scholarship through your store. All you've done is a testament to the reason you were called by God to serve on this task force for the community," said Mama.

I guess she is right because even when I pray asking God what my purpose is, the Spirit confirms I am chosen as well. Growing up in Montgomery, I have seen our community at its best. At one time, the recreation department was thriving, youth had more opportunities to work in the summer, and the high school graduating class was always above 500 students. Now, the recreation department facilities need an update, there is a gap between youth and the workforce, and on average 350 students are finishing school. I know we can do better! Our youth deserve better. Maybe I am chosen to help the community in this way. I want to restore hope among Montgomery's citizens, especially the youth. I want to lift up the needs of the folks who get left behind. I want to see youth freed from the limiting idea that there is no life beyond Montgomery. I believe the youth in this city have the potential to make a difference in this world. They need advocates. I guess I am their advocate. I have been chosen!



## Real Talk

1. Why do you think it was difficult for Trey to embrace being chosen?
2. How do the call from the Mayor's Office and the conversation with his mom help Trey embrace this opportunity to serve young people?
3. Tell about a time you were asked to serve in your church, community, etc. How did you respond to this call and why?
4. Should Christians feel a sense of moral or ethical responsibility to be a servant? Why or why not?



## The Big Picture

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In today's lesson, we encounter one of Isaiah's four servant songs. This Scripture refers to the nation of Israel as the servant, who was chosen by God to act in this world as a light or example to other nations. As servants, the people of Israel are still viewed as leaders. God assures Israel they will be delivered and restored back to the





## Make It Stick

“This is what the LORD says: ‘At just the right time, I will respond to you. On the day of salvation I will help you. I will protect you and give you to the people as my covenant with them. Through you I will reestablish the land of Israel and assign it to its own people again’” (Isaiah 49:8, NLT).



## The Word (NLT)

**Isaiah 49:1** Listen to me, all you in distant lands! Pay attention, you who are far away! The LORD called me before my birth; from within the womb he called me by name.

**2** He made my words of judgment as sharp as a sword. He has hidden me in the shadow of his hand. I am like a sharp arrow in his quiver.

**3** He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, and you will bring me glory.”

**4** I replied, “But my work seems so useless! I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose. Yet I leave it all in the LORD’s hand; I will trust God for my reward.”

**5** And now the LORD speaks—the one who formed me in my mother’s womb to be his servant, who commissioned me to bring Israel back to him. The LORD has honored me, and my God has given me strength.

**6** He says, “You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me. I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

**7** The LORD, the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel, says to the one who is despised and rejected by the nations, to the one who is the servant of rulers: “Kings will stand at attention when you pass by. Princes will also bow low because of the LORD, the faithful one, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

**8** This is what the LORD says: “At just the right time, I will respond to you. On the day of salvation I will help you. I will protect you and give you to the people as my covenant with them. Through you I will reestablish the land of Israel and assign it to its own people again.

**9** I will say to the prisoners, ‘Come out in freedom,’ and to those in darkness, ‘Come into the light.’ They will be my sheep, grazing in green pastures and on hills that were previously bare.

**10** They will neither hunger nor thirst. The searing sun will not reach them anymore. For the LORD in his mercy will lead them; he will lead them beside cool waters.

**11** And I will make my mountains into level paths for them. The highways will be raised above the valleys.

position in which they can inherit their promises, even as they experience the dire conditions of being a downtrodden enslaved nation. God promises to send divine aid to reverse the power dynamic and transform the circumstances in Israel’s favor.



## The Players

**The Suffering Servant.** Arising out of the complex prophecies of Isaiah, this enigmatic figure serves God and will suffer for others (see Isaiah 42:1–4; 49:1–7; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12). In their original context, these passages attempt to explain the harsh suffering the Israelites would pass through during their exile.

One song explicitly identifies the servant and Israel (Isaiah 49:3). But the servant was also said to be God’s perfect Servant, which can only be Jesus. This paradigm makes sense of the most difficult aspect of the Jesus tradition—His suffering. Equally important, it pointed to the Gentiles as the object of God’s healing and forgiveness alongside the Jews.



## Backstage

God instructed His prophet, Isaiah, to write concerning Israel’s captivity in Babylon. For 70 years, the nation suffered under this oppression. Then the Lord allowed them to return to Jerusalem. He gave them the resources to rebuild the Temple and establish themselves once again as God’s representative.

But the Israelites got comfortable in Babylon. They became accustomed to the Babylonian ways and their gods. Most of the Israelites refused to move. Only a small remnant traveled back to Judah. God speaks through Isaiah about these upcoming problems (Isaiah 48). In the first part of the chapter, he rebukes their negative attitudes and behaviors. However, God changes His tone in the last half of the chapter. In several of the later chapters of Isaiah, the Lord offers hope and help with the promise of the Messiah’s coming. Like a loving mother attempting to get her cranky toddler to take a nap, the Father begins to speak softly. He highlighted promises about a coming Savior, Jesus, to save Israel and the entire world.

*Are you willing to move forward on God’s promises? Or are you staying behind, enjoying Babylonian, worldly comforts?*



## Combing Through

### 1. The Servant’s Call and Mission (Isaiah 49:1–7)

In the Book of Isaiah, four passages are called “the Servant Songs” (Isaiah 42–50). The second song found here outlines the coming Messiah’s mission on Earth. Jesus, God’s redeemer, brings light, healing, and restoration. He offers His salvation promises to the Jewish people and the entire world.

God speaks through the Messiah in the first person. He asks for listening ears. His calling started in the womb of His mother. Before the Holy Spirit placed Jesus’ embryo in Mary’s body, the angel told her that His name is Jesus, the Savior of all humanity (Luke 1:31).

Isaiah compared Jesus’ mouth, His words, to instruments of war (Isaiah 49:2). The well-polished sword and the shaft pierce the intended target. God kept Jesus out of the main limelight until a particular time in history. At the appointed time, He introduced the Savior and His penetrating message (Galatians 4:4–5).

Isaiah calls the Servant, whom we now understand to be the Messiah, by the name “Israel” (Isaiah 49:3). This nation originally carried God’s salvation message. When the Jewish people rebelled, the Messiah picked up the baton, committed to completing God’s assignment.

God called Jesus to draw back the Israelites to Jehovah. God raised Him and gave Him the might and power to carry out the task. The first Christian missionary and the authors of the Bible were Jewish people, God’s instruments to introduce salvation to the world. The Servant fulfilled the covenant God made with the Israelites, and He is the actual covenant. Some of the Jewish people pushed Jesus aside, denying His claim as Messiah. They looked down on Him, calling Him unclean, a liar. However, God viewed Him as valuable and worthy of praise (1 Peter 2:4).

Jesus respected those in positions of authority in the secular government and within the Jewish religion. But both plotted against Him. When Jesus returns to the Earth for the second time, He will be honored and worshiped. Rulers and every human being will prostrate before Him (Philippians 2:10–11).

*How did Jesus complete the work that Israel was supposed to do?*



## 2. The Servant Saves and Restores (vv. 8–11)

Jehovah heard the prayer of the Servant and helped Him fulfill a fruitful ministry. God is committed to lifting this universe out of its critical condition, placing His Spirit in desolate, godless places. His desire is for the entire human race to know the truth through His Son Jesus.

God frees captives. God freed the captives in Babylon, and He offers freedom to all humanity bound in sin. It is now possible to bask in the presence of a Holy God—no sin hinders or divides (Isaiah 61:1).

Messiah bids everyone come openly to the light. Christ found the Jews enslaved to the law, covered in the darkness, and separated from

God. Christ lifted their burdens. The Compassionate Shepherd is always leading to greener pastures. Jesus keeps His sheep away from the scorching sun, leads them to lush feeding grounds and fresh water. Even in places that are downtrodden and barren—God provides for His sheep.

These promises are not only for the Jewish nation or people in biblical days. Jesus still saves and restores anyone willing to come to Him.

*In a letter to the Corinthians, Paul references these verses and explains that “today is the day of salvation” (from 2 Corinthians 6:2). How does this affect our reading of Isaiah?*



## Diving Deeper Quiz

Have the participants read Isaiah 49:1–11, BACKSTAGE, and COMBING THROUGH from the BIBLE STUDY GUIDE. Then, have them answer the following:

1. What do you think it means to be called by God before you were in your mother’s womb (Isaiah 49:1)?
2. What was God calling Israel to do (v. 6)?
3. What are lessons we can learn from Israel regarding servanthood?
4. How does Isaiah’s message about God’s deliverance, restoration, and salvation inform your daily faith walk with the Lord?



## Next Steps

Many individuals today continuously wonder, “What about me? What about me?” God saw the need for salvation. He sent Jesus to meet that need in our world, and Jesus completed God’s assignment. As Christians, we are to answer the same call. Pray for more sensitiv-

ity to the Holy Spirit as we go through our daily activities. Ask: How can I help those around me foster the same attitude and be less selfish and self-centered?



## Put It Out There

### A. Group Application

Invite the group to brainstorm ways the collective can serve the local community. Who can you partner with to meet the needs of the underserved, less fortunate, or marginalized? What is a realistic act of service the group can accomplish?

### B. Personal Application

Encourage the participants to engage in a moment of self-reflection. Ask them to write down a list of their leadership and servanthood qualities. Challenge participants to think of ways they can use these qualities to help others and bring glory to God.



## Wrap It Up

### A. Act of Service

Ask participants to commit to doing one act of service this week.

### B. Close in Prayer

Thank You, God, for Your deliverance, restoration, and salvation power. Mold us into more faithful servants, so that we may bring You glory and Your people good.



## Say Word?

Enigmatic. eh-nig-MAH-tik.  
Eunuch. YOU-nik.

# SWAG

(Spiritual Wisdom and Guidance)

“Serving others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth.”—  
Muhammed Ali