

# **Isaiah**

## **Crisis of Identity**

Lesson #1 for January 2, 2021

Scriptures: Isaiah 1; 5:1-7.

1. Isaiah lived in a very tumultuous time in Bible history. During his ministry in the southern kingdom of Judah, their northern brothers of the kingdom of Israel were invaded, conquered, and scattered by the Assyrians (723/722 B.C.), never to be heard from again. The Assyrians also invaded Judah (701 B.C.), and it seemed there was no possibility that the same fate would not overcome Judah until Hezekiah and Isaiah led the people to turn to God. After the Assyrians blasphemed the name of God, (Isaiah 36; 2 Kings 18) God destroyed 185,000 men of their army without the people of Judah fighting at all. (2 Kings 19:35; Isaiah 37:36) This completely changed the course of human history as the Assyrians, with their capital of Nineveh, at that point were the most powerful nation in the world.
2. Isaiah was a member of the royal household and was called as a prophet while still quite young, (5T 749) somewhere between the years 750 and 739 B.C. His work extended for 60 years during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Isaiah was put into a hollow log and sawn in two by King Manasseh very early in Manasseh's reign (ca. 686 B.C.). (2 Kings 21:16; Hebrews 11:37) The story is in the pseudepigrapha.
3. If you were a new prophet and were given a commission by God to carry a message to the people of Jerusalem, would you start out by telling them that they were more dumb than cows or even donkeys?

**Isaiah 1:1-9:** <sup>1</sup> This book contains the messages about Judah and Jerusalem which God revealed to Isaiah son of Amoz during the time when Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah were kings of Judah.

<sup>2</sup> The LORD said, "Earth and sky, listen to what I am saying! **The children I brought up have rebelled against me.** <sup>3</sup>Cattle know who owns them, and donkeys know where their master feeds them. **But that is more than my people Israel know. They don't understand at all.**"

<sup>4</sup> You are doomed, you sinful nation, you corrupt and evil people! **Your sins drag you down!** You have rejected the LORD, the holy God of Israel, and have **turned your backs on him.** <sup>5</sup>Why do **you keep on rebelling?** Do you want to be punished even more? Israel, **your head is already covered with wounds, and your heart and mind are sick.** <sup>6</sup>**From head to foot there is not a healthy spot on your body. You are covered with bruises and sores and open wounds.** Your wounds have not been cleaned or bandaged. No ointment has been put on them.

<sup>7</sup> **Your country has been devastated, and your cities have been burnt to the ground. While you look on, foreigners take over your land and bring everything to ruin.** <sup>8</sup>Jerusalem alone is left, a city under siege—as **defenceless as a guard's hut in a vineyard or a shed in a cucumber field.**

<sup>9</sup>If the LORD Almighty had not let some of the people survive, Jerusalem would have been totally destroyed, just as Sodom and Gomorrah were.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation*\* (2nd ed., Isaiah 1:1-9). New York: American Bible Society.†

4. So, what was the context in which Isaiah was making these statements on behalf of God?

**2 Kings 17:7-20:** <sup>7</sup> Samaria fell because the Israelites sinned against the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the king of Egypt and had led them out of Egypt. **They worshipped other gods, <sup>8</sup>followed the customs of the people whom the LORD had driven out as his people advanced, and adopted customs introduced by the kings of Israel.** <sup>9</sup>The Israelites did things that the LORD their God disapproved of. **They built pagan places of worship in all their towns, from the smallest village to the largest city.** <sup>10</sup>**On all the hills and under every shady tree they put up stone pillars and images of the goddess Asherah, <sup>11</sup>and they burnt incense on all the pagan altars, following the practice of the people whom the LORD had driven out of the land. They aroused the LORD's anger with all their wicked deeds <sup>12</sup>and disobeyed the LORD's command not to worship idols.**

<sup>13</sup> **The LORD had sent his messengers and prophets to warn Israel and Judah: "Abandon your evil ways and obey my commands, which are contained in the Law I gave to your ancestors and which I handed on to you through my servants the prophets."** <sup>14</sup>**But they would not obey; they were stubborn like their ancestors, who had not trusted in the LORD their God. <sup>15</sup>They refused to obey his instructions, they did not keep the covenant he had made with their ancestors, and they disregarded his warnings. They worshipped worthless idols and became worthless themselves, and they followed the customs of the surrounding nations, disobeying the LORD's command not to imitate them. <sup>16</sup>They broke all the laws of the LORD their God and made two metal bull calves to worship; they also made an image of the goddess Asherah, worshipped the stars, and served the god Baal. <sup>17</sup>They sacrificed their sons and daughters as burnt offerings to pagan gods; they consulted mediums and fortune tellers, and they devoted themselves completely to doing what is wrong in the LORD's sight, and so aroused his anger. <sup>18</sup>The LORD was angry with the Israelites and banished them from his sight, leaving only the kingdom of Judah.**

<sup>19</sup> **But even the people of Judah did not obey the laws of the LORD their God; they imitated the customs adopted by the people of Israel. <sup>20</sup>The LORD rejected all the Israelites, punishing them and handing them over to cruel enemies until at last he had banished them from his sight.—Good News Bible.\*†**

5. Isaiah started by reminding the people that they had rebelled against God; they had shown their ignorance of God. Foreigners had taken over their territory. They ignored God's instructions and did what they pleased, following the customs of the nations that God told them to drive out when they arrived from Egypt.
6. It is clear that Isaiah was addressing the people of Jerusalem—that was all that was left of Judah at that point! So, why did he start out with: "Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth." (Isaiah 1:2, *NRSV*.\* Compare Deuteronomy 30:19; 31:28.)
7. When they made political agreements with a lesser ruler, ancient near eastern kings such as Hittite emperors would invoke their gods as witnesses to emphasize that any violation

of the agreement they were making would surely be noticed and punished.

8. By contrast, the true God, the only real God, cannot call on lesser gods as witnesses. So, He called on heaven and earth. (Compare Deuteronomy 4:26.) Having suggested that His people were less intelligent than oxen and donkeys, He then moved on to comparing them to the rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah!

**Isaiah 1:10-17:** <sup>10</sup> Jerusalem, your rulers and your people are like those of Sodom and Gomorrah. Listen to what the LORD is saying to you. Pay attention to what our God is teaching you. <sup>11</sup>He says, “**Do you think I want all these sacrifices you keep offering to me? I have had more than enough of the sheep you burn as sacrifices and of the fat of your fine animals. I am tired of the blood of bulls and sheep and goats. <sup>12</sup>Who asked you to bring me all this when you come to worship me? Who asked you to do all this tramping about in my Temple? <sup>13</sup>It’s useless to bring your offerings. I am disgusted with the smell of the incense you burn. I cannot stand your New Moon Festivals, your Sabbaths, and your religious gatherings; **they are all corrupted by your sins.** <sup>14</sup>I hate your New Moon Festivals and holy days; they are a burden that I am tired of bearing.**

<sup>15</sup> “When you lift your hands in prayer, I will not look at you. No matter how much you pray, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with blood. <sup>16</sup>Wash yourselves clean. **Stop all this evil that I see you doing.** Yes, stop doing evil <sup>17</sup>and learn to do right. **See that justice is done—help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows.**”—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*†</sup>

9. God was trying to get them to understand that if their religion did not affect the way they lived each day during the week, it was useless. They were actually abusing orphans and widows and, thus, showing contempt for God Himself.
10. What were the children of Israel supposed to learn from the sacrificial system? While it is true that God had instituted the ritual worship system to teach them that sin leads to death (Remember that the first lambs were sacrificed outside the gate of the Garden of Eden, which, as far as we know, were the first deaths in the universe. See also Leviticus 1-16.), God had chosen the temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem as the only place where they were to go to offer their sacrifices.

**1 Kings 8:10-11:** <sup>10</sup> As the priests were leaving the Temple, it was suddenly filled with a cloud <sup>11</sup>shining with the dazzling light of the LORD’s presence, and they could not go back in to perform their duties.—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*</sup>

11. Imagine having God recognize the dedication of a new church with such an appearance!
12. And so, repeating from above, God said:

**Isaiah 1:16-17:** <sup>16</sup> “Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil <sup>17</sup>and learn to do right. See that justice is done—help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows.”—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*</sup>

13. So, what did God suggest as the answer to all of those problems?

**Isaiah 1:18:** The LORD says, “Now, let’s settle the matter. You are stained red with sin, but I will wash you as clean as snow. Although your stains are deep red,

you will be as white as wool.”—*Good News Bible*.\*

14. The northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and overrun; the people who lived there were “scattered to the winds” in the middle of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry. Shouldn’t that have been adequate warning to the people of Judah? Yet, God offered to work things out with them. Their enemies had come to within about 5 miles of Jerusalem.
15. Why would God say, “Come and let’s discuss this”? (See Isaiah 1:18.) Why didn’t God just say, “Do what you are told”? Or, did He?
16. Would it be correct to say: “If you are not thinking, you are not worshiping”?
17. When Christians in our day decide to sin, intentionally, what do they think the penalty will be? Going to confessional? Getting caught? Risking some extra time in purgatory? Or, just “accepting the blood”? Are there any risks in “sinning under the blood”?
18. If you believe in predestination, what do you say to yourself if you choose to sin? They do not need to struggle with the question: “Am I doing what is right because it is right?”
19. Did the people living in Israel and Judah in Isaiah’s day really believe that it was all right to engage in fertility cult worship so long as they returned to the temple and offered their offerings to God or asked for His forgiveness?
20. Is this a result of having a perceived contractual covenant with God? Do we sometimes say to God: “If you will do this for me, I will do that for you”?
21. Is it all right to sin if you are willing to go through the necessary steps to return to God? Do we ever think to ourselves: “I have been very faithful in church attendance so far this year, and my tithes and offerings are paid up; I am even contributing to the church building fund; give me a little slack here, God”? Is our relationship with God based on keeping score?
22. Thinking and reasoning provide the building blocks for a “new heart.” Without them, no progress is made. Is this rationalism? Are we placing our own thoughts and minds above the revelation of God? Not at all! It is just that our minds are the only instrument we have for understanding and knowing God. More than that, when we enter into dialogue with God, He gives us thoughts that we have never thought before! This is no mere human effort. Contrast what happened in the French Revolution when they deified human reason.
23. Why does God describe sins as *red*? Probably because red is the color of the blood or “blood guilt” that covered the hands of the people. (Isaiah 1:15) By contrast, *white* has always been regarded by people as being pure and clean. (See Psalm 51:7,14.)
24. God offers to sweep away our sins if we will just come back and live according to His plan of blessing for our lives. God was/is yearning for them/us to come back. Compare Hosea’s appeal to the northern kingdom of Israel during Isaiah’s ministry.

**Hosea 11:8:** “How can I give you up, Israel?

How can I abandon you?

Could I ever destroy you as I did Admah,  
or treat you as I did Zeboiim?

My heart will not let me do it!

My love for you is too strong.”—*Good News Bible*.\*

25. And what is it that God ultimately wants of us?

**Jeremiah 31:33-34:** <sup>33</sup>“The **new covenant** that I will make with the people of Israel

will be this: **I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts.** I will be their God, and they will be my people. <sup>34</sup>None of them will have to teach his fellow-citizen to know the LORD, because all will know me, from the least to the greatest. I will forgive their sins and **I will no longer remember their wrongs.** I, the LORD, have spoken.”—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*†</sup>

26. So, what are our options?

**Isaiah 1:19-20:** <sup>19</sup> If you are willing and obedient,

**you shall eat** the good of the land;

<sup>20</sup> but if you refuse and rebel,

**you shall be devoured** by the sword;

for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.—*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*.<sup>\*</sup> (1989). (Isaiah 1:19-20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.<sup>†</sup>

27. Was God suggesting that they either eat or be eaten? Are we willing to obey God? Or, will we allow sin to destroy us? This was a conditional promise to the children of Israel—did they want blessings? Or, curses? God is speaking to each one of us!

28. In essence, this is a repetition of the words of God (through Moses) as recorded in Deuteronomy 30:19-20.

**Deuteronomy 30:19-20:** <sup>19</sup> “I am now giving you the choice between life and death, between God’s blessing and God’s curse, and I call heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Choose life. <sup>20</sup>Love the LORD your God, obey him and be faithful to him, and then you and your descendants will live long in the land that he promised to give your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*</sup>

29. Is it really true that there is no middle ground? No compromise between God and sin? Are there really only those two extremes? Is serving God an extreme?

30. It is interesting to notice that the original covenant given by God to Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy 27-30 follows the exact elements of covenant agreements used by other nations in Moses’s day:

(1) the recounting of what God had done for them, (2) conditions/stipulations (commandments) to be observed in order for the covenant to be maintained, (3) reference to witnesses, and (4) blessings and curses to warn people what would happen if they violated the covenant conditions.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*<sup>\*</sup> for Wednesday, December 30.

31. Read Isaiah 5:1-7.

**Isaiah 5:1-7:** <sup>1</sup> Listen while I sing you this song,

a song of my friend and his vineyard:

My friend had a vineyard

on a very fertile hill.

<sup>2</sup> He dug the soil and cleared it of stones;

he planted the finest vines.

He built a tower to guard them,  
dug a pit for treading the grapes.  
He waited for the grapes to ripen,  
**but every grape was sour.**

<sup>3</sup> So now my friend says, “You people who live in Jerusalem and Judah, **judge between my vineyard and me.** <sup>4</sup>Is there anything I failed to do for it? Then why did it produce sour grapes and not the good grapes I expected?

<sup>5</sup> “This is what I am going to do to my vineyard; I will take away the hedge round it, break down the wall that protects it, and let wild animals eat it and trample it down. <sup>6</sup>I will let it be overgrown with weeds. I will not prune the vines or hoe the ground; instead I will let briars and thorns cover it. I will even forbid the clouds to let rain fall on it.”

<sup>7</sup> **Israel is the vineyard of the LORD Almighty;  
the people of Judah are the vines he planted.  
He expected them to do what was good,  
but instead they committed murder.  
He expected them to do what was right,  
but their victims cried out for justice.**—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*†</sup>

32. God used a parable to get the people to see themselves as they really were. It is analogous to His approach to King David when He sent the prophet Nathan to him. (See 2 Samuel 12:1-13.) Didn't the people of Judah learn anything from the experience of Israel?

33. So, why did God call this a love song? As we know from the history of the Old Testament, God appealed to the children of Israel again and again; but, they would wander away from Him and get into all sorts of trouble. Then, they would ask, “But where is God?” And they would go back to Him, and He would bless them again until they started wandering away again. (See, for example, Judges 2-3.) And why was God so patient with His chosen people? Think of a person like Daniel, coming out of that terrible environment!

**2 Peter 3:9:** The Lord is not slow to do what he has promised, as some think. Instead, he is patient with you, because he does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins.—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*</sup>

34. **What do you do with a rebellious child?** But, God must finally recognize that those who are running away from Him as fast as they can go must be allowed their freedom and, unfortunately, they will reap the consequences of what they have chosen for themselves.

**Revelation 22:11:** “Whoever is evil must go on doing evil, and whoever is filthy must go on being filthy; whoever is good must go on doing good, and whoever is holy must go on being holy.” —*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*</sup>

35. God has chosen to work with us through the Holy Spirit. Since Jesus is no longer present on this earth as a Human Being, He chooses to work through the Holy Spirit who because of His omnipresence can work with each one of us no matter where we are. But, what happens if we reject God's only means of reaching out to us?

**Matthew 12:31-32:** <sup>31</sup> [Jesus said:] “And so I tell you that people can be forgiven any sin and any evil thing they say; but whoever says evil things against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>32</sup>Anyone who says something against the Son of

Man can be forgiven; but whoever says something against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven—now or ever.”—*Good News Bible*.\*†

36. And what happens if we turn away from God and keep running away from Him?

**Hebrews 6:4-6:** <sup>4</sup>For how can those who abandon their faith be brought back to repent again? They were once in God’s light; they tasted heaven’s gift and received their share of the Holy Spirit; <sup>5</sup>they knew from experience that God’s word is good, and they had felt the powers of the coming age. <sup>6</sup>And then they abandoned their faith! It is impossible to bring them back to repent again, because they are again crucifying the Son of God and exposing him to public shame.—*Good News Bible*.\*

37. If we take a careful look at the cross and realize all Jesus did through His life and death, how could we ignore such an appeal from heaven? God lays out a very simple proposition: We can choose to follow the example of Jesus—as far as possible—and live eternally; or we choose to ignore His appeals, continuing our sins and die the death that Jesus died.

The professed people of God had separated from God, and had lost their wisdom and perverted their understanding. They could not see afar off; for they had forgotten that they had been purged from their old sins. They moved restlessly and uncertainly under darkness, seeking to obliterate from their minds the memory of the freedom, assurance, and happiness of their former estate. They plunged into all kinds of presumptuous, foolhardy madness, placed themselves in opposition to the providences of God, and deepened the guilt that was already upon them. **They listened to the charges of Satan against the divine character**, and represented God as devoid of mercy and forgiveness.—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,\* August 6, 1895, par. 11; Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*,\* vol. 4, 1137.4.†

38. God chooses to work with any one of us who is willing to listen to Him. We do not transform ourselves; we cannot do that. **We can only open our minds and our hearts to allow the Holy Spirit to come in and make the changes as we allow Him to do so.**

39. Think about the relationship between Isaiah’s **prophecy of the vineyard** in Isaiah 5:1-7 and the **expansion that Jesus made** of that story as recorded in Matthew 21:33-45; Mark 12:1-12; and Luke 20:9-19.

40. So, where are we in our relationship with God?

What is the relationship between the forgiveness God offers and the transformation He accomplishes in our lives? Which comes first, transformation and then forgiveness, or forgiveness and then transformation? And why is it important to know which comes first?—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* for Friday, January 1.

41. So, why do so many of God’s children choose to ignore His directions and follow their own selfish ways instead? What more could God do? **Without freedom, love is impossible!**

42. Scan over Isaiah 1-5. These five chapters serve as a kind of introduction to all of the book of Isaiah. They point out that Judah’s relationship with God had been corrupted. They had repeatedly turned away from God to their own ways. So, God appealed to them. What more could He possibly have done that He had not done? **He refuses to violate our freedom.** If God had simply stepped away from them and abandoned them, they all would have died.

43. So, we see in this lesson three main sections: (1) The word of God to Isaiah, “The Lord has spoken”; (2) A terrible picture of their sinful nation; and (3) God’s invitation to come back

and discuss issues and think about what they were doing. (Isaiah 1:18-19)

44. Isaiah is known for his repeatedly writing, “The Lord has spoken,” or similar words. As a young man, Isaiah wanted the people to understand that he was not speaking on his own behalf or from some other human perspective; he was giving them the Word of God.
45. Do these messages from Isaiah to the people of Judea about 700 years before the time of Jesus Christ have anything to do with us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Isaiah repeatedly appealed to them using the name *Yahweh*, the personal name of God, trying to get them to take God seriously.
46. In these first chapters of Isaiah, Isaiah used several words to describe the sins of the people of Judea. The first word was *pāšā'*, “describing a sinful act” of rebellion or “revolt.” “This act [*pāšā'*] is considered criminal behavior in the Hebrew Bible.” In Isaiah 1:4, he used another word, *hātā'*, which, when combined with a word describing people, can be translated as people who have missed the goal, who are at fault, or who offended others committing a sin and being guilty.—See William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 100.

[A third word for sins,] *āwôn* ... describes an “activity that is crooked or wrong,” an offense that could be conscious or intentional.—*A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 268.—[as quoted in *Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 15; see also page 14].<sup>†§</sup>
47. Isaiah went on to say that their behavior was corrupt and backward. They had abandoned the Lord and were living in rebellion, with bad behavior, wrong acts, and guilt. In fact, they were worse than oxen or donkeys. But, God did not say, “I am abandoning you forever.” Instead, He said: “Come now, let us reason together, let us present our cases to each other.” God appealed to His people to come back. He recognized: “The whole head is sick, And the whole heart faints. From the soul of the foot even to the head, There is no soundness in it.” (Isaiah 1:5-6, *NKJV*\*)
48. As we discussed at the beginning of our lesson, the people of Jerusalem were going back and forth from worshiping fertility cult gods to going on Sabbath to worship the true God. God challenged them to think of what they were doing. And how did the people respond? God called them to vindicate their behavior. Was God really willing to work with such a group? Micah commented at the same time: “Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?” (Micah 7:18, *NASB1995*\*)
49. So, how should we relate to the revealed Word of God? First, we should determine that, in fact, it is the true Word of God. Then, we should seek, as far as possible, to follow it.
50. We must recognize our own sinful condition, just as God appealed to the children of Israel. **No ritualistic, unthinking religion will do. Could our religion be falling into some kind of formalism?**
51. Do we recognize God’s willingness to forgive us, to work with us, to teach us, to guide us, and to welcome us back into His kingdom? Are we willing to allow God to do that with us today?

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