

Crisis of Identity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Isa. 1:1–9, Isa. 1:10–17, Isa. 1:18, Isa. 1:19–31, Isa. 5:1–7.*

Memory Text: “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, ‘though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’” (*Isaiah 1:18, NKJV*).

Lost in the land of forgetfulness. If you drive in Ireland along a narrow country lane lined with hedgerows, you may find the way blocked by a herd of cows ambling home after a crunchy meal. Even if no herdsman is with them, they will go to their owner’s barn. They will know where, and to whom, they belong.

If a small boy in a store gets separated from his mother and yells, “I’ve lost my mommy!” he may not know exactly where he is, or where his mother is, but amid a sea of mothers walking through the store, he will know the one mother who, alone, is his own.

Sad to say, unlike even those Irish cows (much less the little lost boy), the Judaeans forgot that they belonged to the Lord, their heavenly Lord, and thus lost their true identity as the covenant people. “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (*Isa. 1:2, 3, NRSV*).

This week we’ll take a look at God’s work to restore His people to Himself.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 2.

“Hear, O Heavens!” (Isa. 1:1–9)

The book of Isaiah briefly introduces itself by identifying the author (“son of Amoz”), the source of his message (a “vision”), and his topic (Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, during the reign of four kings). The topic also identifies Isaiah’s primary audience as the people of his own country during the time in which he lived. The prophet spoke to them concerning their own condition and destiny.

By mentioning the kings during whose reigns he was active, Isaiah narrows down the audience and ties the book to the historical, political events of a certain period. This time frame directs us to the accounts of 2 Kings 15–20 and 2 Chronicles 26–32.

Read Isaiah 1:2. What is the essence of the message here? What is the Lord saying? How has this same idea been seen all through sacred history? Could it be said of the Christian church today, as well? Explain your answer.

Notice how Isaiah’s message begins with the words “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth” (*NRSV*; compare *Deut. 30:19, Deut. 31:28*). The Lord isn’t implying that heaven and earth, themselves, can hear and understand. Instead, He does it for emphasis.

When an ancient Near Eastern king, such as a Hittite emperor, made a political treaty with a lesser ruler, he invoked his gods as witnesses to emphasize that any violation of the agreement would surely be noticed and punished. However, when the divine King of kings made a covenant with the Israelites in the days of Moses, He did not refer to other gods as witnesses. As the only true God, He called, instead, for the heavens and earth to fulfill this role (*see also Deut. 4:26*).

Read carefully Isaiah 1:1–9. Summarize on the lines below what the sins of Judah were. Take special note, also, of the results of those sins. What was Judah guilty of, and what happened because of her guilt? At the same time, what hope is presented in Isaiah 1:9?

Rotten Ritualism *(Isa. 1:10–17)*

Read Isaiah 1:10. Why do you think he was using the imagery of Sodom and Gomorrah? What point was the Lord making?

Read Isaiah 1:11–15. What is the Lord telling the people there? Why did the Lord reject the worship that His people were offering Him?

The same hands that offered sacrifices and were lifted up in prayer were “full of blood”; that is, guilty of violence and oppression of others (*Isa. 1:15; Isa. 58:3, 4*). By mistreating other members of the covenant community, they were showing contempt for the Protector of all Israelites. Sins against other people were sins against the Lord.

Of course, God Himself had instituted the ritual worship system (*Leviticus 1–16*) and designated the Jerusalem temple as the appropriate place for it (*1 Kings 8:10, 11*). But the rituals were intended to function within the context of the covenant God had made with these people. It was God’s covenant with Israel that made it possible for Him to dwell among them at the sanctuary/temple. So, rituals and prayers performed there were valid only if they expressed faithfulness to Him and His covenant. People who offered sacrifices without repenting from unjust actions toward other members of the covenant community were performing ritual lies. Thus, their sacrifices were not only invalid—but they also were sins! Their ritual actions said they were loyal, but their behavior proved they had broken the covenant.

Read Isaiah 1:16, 17. What is the Lord commanding that His people do? How do these verses, in this context, parallel what Jesus said in Matthew 23:23–28? What message can we find for ourselves today in these texts and in the context in which they are given?

The Argument of Forgiveness (*Isa. 1:18*)

Read Isaiah 1:18. After going over it numerous times, write what you believe the Lord is saying here (read a few verses beyond it to get the whole context).

God has provided powerful evidence that the Judeans, the accused, are guilty of breach of contract (*Isa. 1:2–15*), and He has appealed to them to reform (*Isa. 1:16, 17*). This appeal suggests there is hope. After all, why urge a criminal deserving execution to change his ways? How could a prisoner on death row “rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (*NRSV*)? But when God says “Come now, let us argue it out” (*Isa. 1:18, NRSV*), we can see the Lord still seeking to reason with His people, still seeking to get them to repent and turn from their evil ways, no matter how degenerate they have become.

The Lord says to them that “*Your red sins shall become white.*” Why are sins red? Because red is the color of the “blood” (blood guilt) that covers the hands of the people (*Isa. 1:15*). White, by contrast, is the color of purity, the absence of blood guilt. Here, God is offering to change them. This is the kind of language King David used when he cried out to God for forgiveness for his sin of taking Bathsheba and destroying her husband (*read Ps. 51:7, 14*). In Isaiah 1:18, God’s argument is an offer to forgive His people!

How does God’s offer of forgiveness serve as an argument for them to change their ways? (*Compare Isaiah 1:18 to Isaiah 44:22.*)

Now we see the purpose of God’s sharp words of warning against His people. They are not to reject His people but to bring them back to Him. His offer of forgiveness is the mighty argument supporting His appeal for the people to purify themselves morally (*Isa. 1:16, 17*). His forgiveness makes it possible for them to be transformed by His power. Here we see the seeds of the “new covenant,” prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31–34, in which forgiveness is the basis of a new-heart relationship with God. We start off “in the red,” owing a debt we can never repay. From the humble position of acknowledging our need for forgiveness, we are ready to accept everything God has to give.

To Eat or Be Eaten (Isa. 1:19–31)

Read Isaiah 1:19–31. What theme appears here that is seen all through the Bible?

Notice the logical structure in Isaiah 1:19, 20: *If* the people choose to be willing and obedient to God, they will *eat* the good of the land (Isa. 1:19). By contrast, *if* they refuse His offer of forgiveness and restoration and rebel against Him, they will be *eaten* by the sword (Isa. 1:20). The choice is theirs. These verses, then, contain a conditional blessing and curse.

Isaiah 1 reiterates and applies the words of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 30:19, 20 at the time when the covenant with the nation of Israel was set up: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses” (NRSV).

Look at those words from Moses. Notice, there is no middle ground. It is either life or death, blessings or curses. Why do you think there is only one of two choices for us? Why can’t there be some sort of compromise?

These words of Moses summarize the series of warnings, blessings, and curses that conclude the formation of the covenant in Deuteronomy 27–30 (compare Leviticus 26). Elements of this covenant include (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.

Scholars have found that these elements appear in the same order in political treaties involving non-Israelite peoples, such as the Hittites. So, for establishing God’s covenant with the Israelites, He used a form they would understand and would impress upon them as forcefully as possible the nature and consequences of the mutually binding relationship into which they were choosing to enter. The potential benefits of the covenant were staggering, but if Israel broke their agreement, they would be worse off than ever.

In your own Christian walk, how have you experienced the *principle* of blessings and curses as seen above?

Ominous Love Song *(Isa. 5:1–7)*

Read the song in the above verses. What is the meaning of this parable?

God explains the meaning of the parable only at the end, in Isaiah 5:7. By using a parable, He helps the people to look at themselves objectively in order to admit their true condition. God effectively used this approach with King David (*see 2 Sam. 12:1–13*). By calling this a “love-song” (*NRSV*), God reveals at the outset His motive toward His people. His relationship with them originates from His character, which is love (*1 John 4:8*). He expects a response of love in return. But instead of “grapes,” He gets “wild grapes,” which means, in the Hebrew, “stinking things.”

What does the Lord mean when He says in Isaiah 5:4, “What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?” (*NRSV*).

God says in the next verses: “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste” (*Isa. 5:5, 6, NRSV*).

When we sin, God does not immediately cut us off from Himself by removing His protection and destroying us. He patiently gives us an opportunity to receive forgiveness (*see 2 Pet. 3:9*). He does not cut off anyone who responds to Him. He appeals as long as there is hope for a response. He does not immediately take no for an answer, because He knows we are ignorant and deceived by sin. But if He gets nowhere with us, He ultimately acknowledges our choice and lets us remain the way we have chosen to be (*see Rev. 22:11*).

If we persistently reject God’s appeals through His Spirit, we can eventually pass the point of no return (*Matt. 12:31, 32*). Turning away from Christ is dangerous (*Heb. 6:4–6*). There is only so much God can do, because He respects our free choice.

Take the concept found in Isaiah 5:4, about “What more could have been done to My vineyard” (*NKJV*), and look at that in light of the Cross, where God offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins, paying with His flesh for our violation of His law. What more could have been done for us than what He did there? How does dwelling on the Cross give us assurance of salvation and motivate us to repent and change our ways?

Further Thought: In the context of Isaiah 1:4, Ellen White wrote: “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.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1137.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How can you “wash yourselves”? What does that phrase mean? (See Phil. 2:12, 13.)
- 2 How did Jesus adapt, expand, and apply the love song of the vineyard? (Matt. 21:33–45, Mark 12:1–12, Luke 20:9–19.) What lessons are in the above story for us as Seventh-day Adventists?
- 3 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?
- 4 In the quotation above, Ellen G. White says people placed themselves in opposition to “the providences of God.” What does that mean?

Summary: When God’s people forget Him and take His blessings for granted, He reminds them they are accountable to their covenant with Him. Mercifully, He points out their condition, warns them about the destructive consequences of abandoning His protection, and urges them to allow Him to heal and cleanse them.

Duped in Ukraine

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

A Seventh-day Adventist deacon never expected to be duped by a mother and her teenage son whom he invited into his home after they fled conflict in eastern Ukraine. But he has no regrets. “We acted with sincere hearts for God, and we will let God act as the judge between her and us,” Valentin Zaitsev said.

The story began in 2015 when Valentin learned that a first wave of internally displaced people had reached his Black Sea city, Mykolaiv. The plight of the internally displaced people touched his heart. So Valentin, a construction foreman, set out with his wife to a government-run hostel, where they found 50 displaced people living in two buildings, six to eight people per room. Valentin introduced himself as a Christian and asked the displaced people what was needed. The immediate reply was diapers and wet wipes. “We went to the supermarket and bought both,” Valentin said. “We then asked what else we could provide, and they asked for underwear, women’s hygienic items, and potatoes. The authorities had given them a place to stay but not much else.”

As a friendship grew, Valentin invited his new friends to Bible studies. Eleven agreed, and an Adventist pastor began to study with them every evening. Then violence erupted at the hostel, and a 19-year-old man, Valery, was hospitalized with stab wounds. When Valentin and his wife visited the hospital, the teen’s mother, Natasha, pleaded for a new place to stay. Valentin was renting a three-room apartment, and he offered a room to her and her son.

For a while, everything seemed fine. Natasha even attended the Adventist church. But then Valentin found out that she was not penniless as she claimed and that she was taking advantage of people’s kindness to con them out of money. “We fed her and her son and paid their cell phone bill,” he said. “But then we learned that they were not poor. We asked them to move out.” Natasha and her son had lived with the family for six months.

Looking back, Valentin said the experience was a blessing. Natasha proved a big help around the house, cooking, washing, and babysitting his three children. But the biggest blessing, he said, was the opportunity to love her. “We received joy and blessings because we were able to serve someone else,” he said. “Our family became better. I would not do anything differently.”

Valentin believes that it is important to help everyone whether or not they accept Jesus.



“Our duty is to live and serve, and the rest is up to God,” he said. “We water with goodness, and God collects the harvest.”

Part of this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help construct an elementary school and high school in Bucha, Ukraine.

Study Focus: *Isaiah 1, 5***Part I: Overview**

Isaiah 1 to 5 serves as an introductory unit to the book of Isaiah. It describes not only the vile condition of the Israelite society, in general, but also its spiritual condition. The focus on Israel's spiritual condition comprises the main focus of the book. The religion of God's people is corrupted.

Is there hope in the midst of such a situation? Yes, there is hope. That is the reason some call the book of Isaiah the Old Testament Gospel. Isaiah 1:2 testifies that the Lord has raised up His people: "I have nourished and brought up children." Through the figurative language of the vineyard, Isaiah 5 describes God's care for His children: "And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. . . . What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?" (*Isa. 5:2, 4*).

God, in His loving character, restrains Himself from destroying His people. Through the prophet Hosea, a contemporary of Isaiah, God describes His inner anguish and turmoil over His people's backslidden condition: "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together" (*Hos. 11:8*). God will make another effort to bring back His people to Himself. His message does not fail to declare to Israel their sinful condition. Thus, He notably keeps on appealing to them to return to Him. For this reason, God utters, "The LORD has spoken" (*Isa. 1:2, NKJV*). With this background in mind, three main topics are explored in this week's study: (1) the declaration "the LORD has spoken"; (2) the theme of the sinful nation; and (3) the invitation, "Come now, . . . if you are willing" (*Isa. 1:18, 19, NKJV*).

Part II: Commentary**"The LORD Has Spoken"**

Verse 1 of Isaiah 1 points out that the vision immediately concerns Judah/Jerusalem. But by using the expression, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth" (*Isa. 1:2*), Isaiah suggests that the message embraces a larger audience. As readers, we need to be attuned to the fact that the primary

audience of this prophetic book is the people living in Judah's time. At the same time, we also need to be conscious of the idea that the scope of Isaiah's message extends far beyond the time and place in which it was written and the audience for whom it was intended originally.

Many times, Isaiah uses expressions such as "the LORD has spoken" or other analogous phrases. The prophecies in the book of Isaiah are relevant because they are messages that "the LORD has spoken." This point is emphasized from the first chapter of the book in various forms: "the LORD hath spoken" (*Isa. 1:2*); "hear the word of the LORD" (*Isa. 1:10*); "says the LORD" (*Isa. 1:18, NKJV*); "the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (*Isa. 1:20, NKJV*); and "the Mighty One of Israel declares" (*Isa. 1:24, NIV*). The author wants to be clear that the visions are coming from the Lord. In other words, there is a vision because God has revealed it.

How is God presented in the book? The subject of the message is the Lord. The immediate object is His people at the time of Isaiah's writing, with a clear implication that the messages are inclusive of God's people throughout all time, extending to His remnant at the end of the time. The God of Isaiah is portrayed in many ways in this chapter. He is the Lord, the Holy One. Interestingly, in the first reference to God, the author uses the expression "YHWH," which is the most frequent expression used to refer to God in the entire book. YHWH is the immanent God. The name YHWH reveals not only the eternal existence of God but also His covenantal relationship to His people. In verse 10, Isaiah presents God as "Elohim," the transcendent God, and/or the Sovereign of the universe. Sometimes, Isaiah uses the combination "the Lord GOD" (*Isa. 61:1*). Another singular reference to God in this chapter is "the Holy One of Israel" (*Isa. 1:4*), a title that is characteristic of Isaianic writing (twenty-five times).

Sinful Nation

The book of Isaiah is explicit concerning the situation of God's people at that time. Isaiah recalls the loving care of the Lord in favoring His people: "I have nourished and brought up children" (*Isa. 1:2*). However, Judah forgets God's faithful love in that "they have rebelled against me" (*Isa. 1:2, second half*), according to the Lord. How is the experience of sin expressed in this section? There are several Hebrew terms that are related to the topic of sin. This study reviews briefly the major words for sin in the first chapter.

Isaiah 1:2 uses the Hebrew expression *p āšā'* for describing a sinful act. This expression is rendered as "have rebelled" in the sentence "they have rebelled against me." The word also has the connotation of "revolt." Other meanings are "to break with" or to be disloyal.—Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 3 (Leiden/New York/Koln: E. J. Brill, 1996), p. 981. In

other words, *p_āša'* describes a broken relationship. Even though, most of the time, *p_āša'* is rendered as a rebellious act, this act is considered criminal behavior in the Hebrew Bible.

Another word for sin is *hātā'* (*Isa. 1:4*), which, if joined to the word “people,” can be translated as “sinful nation,” as is the case here in the King James Version. In this case, the word is used as a verb, and the basic meaning is “miss a goal,” “be at fault, offend (in manners or morals),” “commit a sin,” and “be guilty.”—William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 100. Judah is a sinful nation because it has failed in the covenantal relationship with the Lord; it has done wrong. It has offended the Lord; so, its citizens are guilty before the Lord.

The sentence in parallel to “sinful nation,” which is the first sentence in Isaiah 1:4, is translated as “a people laden with iniquity.” The Hebrew word rendered as iniquity is *āwôn*. This noun 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 with the previous word, *hātā'*, *āwôn* describes an act that is not right.

The second part of Isaiah 1:4 describes the condition of the children of Israel: they acted “corruptly” (*NASB*); they “are corrupters.” The cause may be found in the next lines: “They have forsaken the LORD, . . . they are gone away backward.” Sin is described here as the act of abandoning the Lord, and it brings about rebellion, bad behavior, wrong acts, and guilt. Isaiah 1:3 employs an amazing description to synthesize this last point in relation to God’s people at that time: “An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master’s manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand” (*Isa. 1:3, NASB*). The situation of Israel is critical even in terms of logical reasoning. However, the Lord attempts again to pursue His children. That is the basis of His statement: “Come now, and let us reason together” (*Isa. 1:18*).

“Come Now, . . . if You Are Willing”

All provisions have been given to Israel in order for them to become a glorious nation. However, now they are only comparable to Sodom and Gomorrah (*see Isa. 1:10*). But the Lord can orchestrate the necessary miracle to rehabilitate them. He promises, “I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities” (*Isa. 1:25, NIV*).

The path for returning to God starts with an appeal to His people to see their present situation. First, their life is corrupted with sin. The Lord affirms, “The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it” (*Isa. 1:5, 6*).

The other great problem is false religion. Ritualism has replaced true worship (*Isa. 1:11–14*). These circumstances foster injustice among the people and bring desolation to the country (*Isa. 1:7, 17*).

After beseeching His people to recognize their condition, the Lord appeals to them as follows: “Come now, and let us reason together” (*Isa. 1:18*). The expression “reason together” comes from the Hebrew verb *niwāk'hâ*, and it implies the notion of a legal dispute; both litigants, YHWH and people, can argue out their grievances together. It also suggests the idea of being found to be right (Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, p. 134). In other words, God is calling His people to vindicate themselves. But how can that even be possible for such a sinful nation? The Lord proposes the solution: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (*Isa. 1:18*). That is, the God that Isaiah introduces in the first chapter of his book is the only One who can purify and vindicate His people. Micah, another contemporary prophet of Isaiah, wonders, “Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?” (*Micah 7:18, NASB*). However, this gift of forgiveness may be accepted or rejected. So, after the offer in Isaiah 1:18, the Lord clarifies that a new life is possible only “if you are willing,” or “if you consent” (*Isa. 1:19, NASB*). Thus, within this context, the message of the following parable in Isaiah 5 can now be better understood: “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between Me and My vineyard. What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?” (*Isa. 5:3, 4, NASB*).

Part III: Life Application

1. **The first topic we have addressed in this study is related to the revealed Word of God. We have in the Bible “a more sure word of prophecy” (2 Pet. 1:19). So, when we study the Bible, we are studying not a common book but the revealed Word of God—that which God has spoken.**
 - **Is what the Lord has spoken through His prophets still relevant to you? Explain.**

- How does the Bible determine your identity as God’s follower?

- According to your Bible reading, which features of God impress your life the most?

2. The second topic dealt with the sinful experience of Israel, God’s people. Sin is not exclusively a wrong action; it also can be a thought, such as resisting the authority of the Lord over our lives, or an act of inner rebellion. Israel faces a twofold threat from sin: (1) sin that plunges people into the worst acts of iniquity; (2) sin that moves people into a formal, religious experience that lacks any saving grace. Thus, their religion is a religion of show or appearances only—seemingly alive on the outside but dead within.

- How can we recognize that our religious experience is falling into formalism?

3. In relation to God’s forgiveness, Isaiah presents God as the One who is interested in the restoration of His people. God is willing to forgive and redeem us, and repentance is part of the process (*Isa. 1:27*). Moreover, we have only two options: to obey or to refuse His voice (*Isa. 1:19, 20*). His invitation has not changed throughout the ages: “Come now, and let us reason together” (*Isa. 1:18*).

- Are you willing to permit God to do His work of restoration in your life? If not, what can you do to be ready?
