

# Israel Forgets They Are God's People



## SABBATH—DECEMBER 26

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Isaiah 1; Isaiah 5:1–7.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “The Lord says, ‘Come, we will talk these things over. Your sins are red like [the same as] deep red cloth. But they can be as white as snow. Your sins are bright red. But you can be white like wool’ ” (Isaiah 1:18, ICB).



**The Jews did not remember that they belonged to God. They forgot they were the people of God.**

**IF YOU DRIVE IN IRELAND** on a small road in the country, you may see cows. The cows often block the road when they walk home. These cows know where to go even if no one leads them. They will go to their owner's barn. The cows know where they belong. They know who their owner is.

If a little boy gets lost in a store, he will yell, “I lost my mommy!” The boy may not know where his mother is. There may be several other mothers in the store. But the little boy knows exactly which mother is his own.

The Jews did not remember who they belonged to. They forgot they were God's people. They forgot their special agreement with God. So, they lost the knowledge of who they were. “Heaven and earth, listen! This is what the LORD says: ‘I raised my children and helped them grow up, but they have turned against me. A bull [ox] knows its master, and a donkey knows where its owner feeds it. But Israel does not know me. My people do not understand’ ” (Isaiah 1:2, 3, ERV).

This week, we will look at God's work to help His people remember that they belong to Him.

## HEAVEN AND EARTH, LISTEN! (Isaiah 1:1–9)

The book of Isaiah starts by telling us that the writer is “Isaiah the son of Amoz” (Isaiah 1:1, NLV). God gives Isaiah a message in a “special dream” (Isaiah 1:1, NLV). Isaiah’s dream is about what will happen to “Judah and Jerusalem” during the time of “Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah,” the “kings of Judah” (Isaiah 1:1, NLV). The book also tells us that Isaiah’s message is for the people of his own country during the time that he lived. Isaiah talks to his people about their spiritual life and what will happen to them in the future.

Isaiah is a prophet. A prophet is a special messenger that God sends to His people. Isaiah works during the time of the four kings named in Isaiah 1:1. The names of these four kings show us that Isaiah talks to the people who lived during the time of these kings. We can read more about what happened during this time in 2 Kings 15–20 and 2 Chronicles 26–32.

**Read Isaiah 1:2. What is the message in this verse? What does the Lord say? How do we see this same idea from the beginning to the end of Bible history? Is the same thing also true about the Christian church today? Explain.**

Do you see how Isaiah’s message starts with the words “Heaven and earth, listen!” (Isaiah 1:2, ERV; compare Deuteronomy 30:19 and Deuteronomy 31:28)? Is the Lord really saying that heaven and earth can hear and understand? Of course not! God uses these words to get our attention. He wants us to listen carefully to what He says.

During Bible times, powerful kings from the Near East often make agreements with leaders who are less powerful. The more powerful king asks his gods to be his witnesses. Why does the king do this? Because he wants to show that the gods will punish anyone who breaks the agreement. In the same way, God makes an agreement with Israel in Moses’ time. But God does not ask other gods to be witnesses. God is the only true God. He made everything in heaven and earth. So, He asks for the heavens and earth to be the witnesses (also read Deuteronomy 4:26).

**Read carefully Isaiah 1:1–9. What are the sins of Judah in these verses? What happens because of her sins? At the same time, what hope do we see in Isaiah 1:9?**



God gives Isaiah a message in a “special dream” (Isaiah 1:1, NLV).

## EMPTY WORSHIP (Isaiah 1:10–17)

Read Isaiah 1:10. Why do you think Isaiah uses Sodom and Gomorrah as word pictures in these verses? What is the Lord saying to His people?

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Read Isaiah 1:11–15. In these verses, what does the Lord tell the people? Why does the Lord turn away from the worship that His people offer Him?

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Sins against other people are sins against the Lord.

The people of God are guilty of crimes. Their hands are “ ‘covered with blood’ ” (Isaiah 1:15, ERV). What does that mean? God is saying that His people beat each other and hurt their servants (Isaiah 1:15; Isaiah 58:3, 4). Worse, the people of God use these same hands to pray to God and offer Him gifts! When God’s people hurt each other, they show that they do not respect God Himself. Sins against other people are sins against the Lord.

Of course, God Himself teaches Israel how to worship Him (Leviticus 1–16). He chooses the temple in Jerusalem as the place where He wants His people to worship Him (1 Kings 8:10, 11). But God wants worship to help His people remember their agreement with Him. God’s agreement, or covenant, with His people makes it possible for Him to live with His people at His temple. So, the people’s prayers and religious acts have meaning only if they have faith in their hearts. They must show that they believe in God and His covenant. People who offer God gifts must confess their sins against other people. If they do not, their worship is a lie. God will not accept their gifts. Worse, those gifts are sins! Their empty worship shows on the outside that they are loyal to God. But their behavior shows that they break the covenant.

Read Isaiah 1:16, 17. As we see in these verses, what does the Lord tell His people to do? How is the message in these verses the same as Jesus’ words in Matthew 23:23–28? What message can we find for ourselves today in both sets of verses?

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## FORGIVENESS (Isaiah 1:18)

**Read Isaiah 1:18. What do you feel the Lord is saying in this verse? (Read the next few verses to get a better understanding of Isaiah 1:18.)**

God says that the people of Judea are guilty. God accuses the people of breaking His agreement with them (Isaiah 1:2–15). God asks them to change (Isaiah 1:16, 17). This shows that there is hope for God’s people. Why ask a criminal to change his behavior? Can a prisoner who is going to die for his crimes “ ‘punish those [people] who hurt others [persons]. Speak up for the widows and orphans. Argue their cases for them in court’ ” (Isaiah 1:17, ERV)? Of course not! But when God says, “ ‘Come, we will talk these things over’ ” (Isaiah 1:18, ICB), we see that the Lord keeps trying to work things out with His people. He wants them to turn away from sin and their evil ways.

The Lord tells His people that their sins will be “ ‘white as snow’ ” (Isaiah 1:18, ERV). Why are sins red? Because red is the color of the “blood” (Isaiah 1:15, ERV) that covers the hands of God’s people. White is the color of a clean heart and no guilt. So, these word pictures show us that God wants to change His people. King David uses similar word pictures when he cries to God for forgiveness for his sin (read Psalm 51:7, 14). David sins by stealing Bathsheba from her husband, Uriah. Then David tells his general to destroy Uriah. In Isaiah 1:18, God offers to forgive His people.

**How does God’s offer of forgiveness also show that He wants His people to change their ways? (Compare Isaiah 1:18 to Isaiah 44:22 to help answer the question.)**

Now we see why God warns His people with very strong words. God is not turning away from His people. He wants to bring them back to Himself. God wants to forgive them so that they will let Him clean their hearts and minds (Isaiah 1:16, 17). God’s forgiveness makes it possible for Him to change His people. Jeremiah 31:31–34 shows us more about this idea. God’s forgiveness makes it possible for us to be close to God in our hearts. We owe God so much. We cannot pay Him for everything He gives us. But we can confess our need for God’s forgiveness. Then we will be ready to accept everything God has to give.



**The Lord tells His people that their sins will be “ ‘white as snow’ ” (Isaiah 1:18, ERV).**

## TO EAT OR BE EATEN (Isaiah 1:19–31)

**Read Isaiah 1:19–31. What idea do you see in these verses that we also can see in the whole Bible?**

Do you see the connection in Isaiah 1:19–31 between doing good and getting a reward? If the people choose to obey God, they will eat the good things from the land (Isaiah 1:19). But if God's people refuse God's offer to forgive them and make them new, then they will be " 'eaten [killed] by the swords' " (Isaiah 1:20, EXB) of their enemies. The choice is theirs.

In Isaiah 1, we read words that are almost the same as the ones Moses says in Deuteronomy 30:19, 20. Moses writes these words at the time when God sets up His covenant, or special agreement, with His people. He says " 'Today I am giving you a choice of [between] two ways. And I ask heaven and earth to be witnesses of your choice. You can choose life or death. The first choice will bring a blessing. The other choice will bring a curse' " (Deuteronomy 30:19, ERV).



**If God's people refuse God's offer to forgive them and make them new, then they will be " 'eaten [killed] by the swords' " (Isaiah 1:20, EXB) of their enemies.**

**Look at Moses' words in Deuteronomy 30:19, 20. Do you see that there are only two choices? Life or death, blessings or curses. Why do you think we have only two choices? Why can there not be more?**

Moses' words come after a long list of warnings, blessings, and curses that are part of God's special agreement with His people in Deuteronomy 27–30 (compare these chapters to Leviticus 26). God's agreement has several parts: (1) the things that God has done for His people; (2) the commandments that God's people must obey; (3) witnesses; and (4) blessings and curses to warn the people about what will happen if they break God's agreement.

These same parts are included in agreements between non-Jews during Bible times. So, we see that God uses a form for His agreement that His people already know about. This helps His people understand more fully what will happen if they break the agreement. The blessings of the special agreement are wonderful! But if Israel fails to do their part, they will be worse off than before.

**In your Christian experience, have you ever known the blessings or curses that Moses talks about in Deuteronomy?**

## A LOVE SONG FILLS THE HEART WITH FEAR (Isaiah 5:1–7)

**Read the song in Isaiah 5:1–7. This song also is a picture story. What does this picture story mean?**

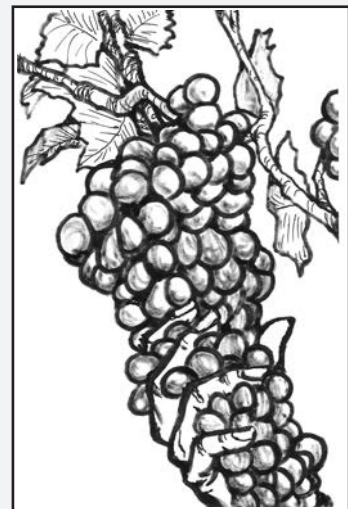
God explains the meaning of the picture story at the end, in Isaiah 5:7. God uses a picture story to help His people to see what is in their hearts. God does the same thing with King David (read 2 Samuel 12:1–13). God names this picture story a “love song” (Isaiah 5:1, ERV). This name shows what God wants from His people and what is in His heart. God is love (1 John 4:8). God expects His people to love Him back. God compares this love to “good grapes” (Isaiah 5:2, ERV). But God does not get “grapes” from His people. He gets only “bad grapes” (Isaiah 5:2, ICB) or “rotten ones” (Isaiah 5:2, ERV). In Hebrew, “rotten grapes” mean “stinking things.”

**What does the Lord mean when He says in Isaiah 5:4, ERV, “ ‘What more could I do for my vineyard [grape garden]? I did everything I could’ ”?**

Next, God says, “ ‘Now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard [grape garden]: I will pull up the thornbushes that protect it, and I will burn them. I will break down the stone wall and use the stones for a walkway. I will turn my vineyard into useless land’ ” (Isaiah 5:5, 6, ERV).

When we sin, God does not cut us off at that time. He does not stop protecting us right away. He does not destroy us. He gives us time to accept His forgiveness (read 2 Peter 3:9). God does not cut off anyone who turns to Him. God continues to try to win us back to Him as long as there is hope that we will accept Him. God does not take no for an answer very easily. He knows that we are tricked by sin. But if God cannot change our minds, He accepts our choice. He lets us stay the way we choose to be (read Revelation 22:11).

The Holy Spirit continues to invite us to come to God. If we keep saying no to God’s invitation, He will stop asking us to come back. God knows we will not change our minds (Matthew 12:31, 32). Our turning away from Jesus puts us in danger (Hebrews 6:4–6). God will not force us to come back to Him. If we do not go back to God, then He has to let us go. Why? Because He respects our free choice.



**God expects His people to love Him back. God compares this love to “good grapes” (Isaiah 5:2, ERV).**

**ADDITIONAL THOUGHT:** Read this quote from Ellen G. White about Isaiah 1:4: “God’s people separate from Him. They lose their wisdom and understanding. They lose sight of what is important. They forget that God made them clean from their old sins. They feel no peace in their spirits. They live in spiritual darkness. They try to erase from their minds the memory of the freedom, safety, and happiness they had in the past. They do things that are foolish and make no sense. God cannot bless the people because of their behavior. They show their guilt. They pay attention to Satan’s words against God. They show everyone a false picture of God. Their behavior says that God has no mercy or forgiveness.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 4, page 1137, adapted.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① How can you “wash yourselves and make yourselves clean” (Isaiah 1:16, ERV)? What does this verse mean? (Read Philippians 2:12, 13 to help you answer the questions.)
- ② Read Matthew 21:33–45; Mark 12:1–12; and Luke 20:9–19. As these verses show, how does Jesus take the idea of the love song of the grape garden and use it in His day? What changes does He make to the idea? How does He add to it too? What lessons does this story teach us as Seventh-day Adventists?
- ③ What connection is there between God’s forgiveness and His promise to change our lives? Which one comes first? Is it a total life change and then forgiveness? Or is it forgiveness and then a total life change? Why is it important to know which one comes first?
- ④ In the quote above, Ellen G. White says, “God cannot bless the people because of their behavior.” What does that mean?



The people live in spiritual darkness.

**Summary:** God’s people turn away from Him and forget Him. They do not thank Him for His blessings. God shows His people that they must keep their agreement with Him. In mercy, God shows them their danger. He warns them about what will happen if they turn from Him. Then God asks them to come to Him so that He can heal them and make them clean.

## TRICKED IN UKRAINE

Valentin Zaitsev is a deacon in his local Seventh-day Adventist church in the Ukraine. A deacon is someone who is chosen by church leaders to serve in worship and help the pastor. Valentin helped a mother and her teenage son after they ran away from the war in eastern Ukraine. The mother and the son lied to Valentin. But Valentin is not sorry he helped the woman and her son. Valentin says, “We wanted to help them just as Jesus helped people when He was on the earth. We will let God act as the judge between the woman and us.”

The story starts in 2015. Valentin hears about a group of people who lost their homes because of war. They come to the city of Mykolaiv where Valentin lives. The sad story of these people touches the heart of Valentin. He wants to help them. Valentin and his wife visit the two buildings where they live. Valentin learns that 50 people live in the two buildings. Six to eight people live in each room in the building. Valentin tells the people that he is a Christian. Then he asks the people what they need. They need diapers and wet wipes. Valentin and his wife go to the store and buy these things. Then they ask the people what else they need. The people ask Valentin for underwear, soap, and potatoes. Sure, the leaders in the city where Valentin lived gave the people a place to live. But they did not give the people much more than that.

Valentin becomes friends with some of the people. He invites his new friends to Bible studies. 11 people agree to come. An Adventist pastor studies with them every evening. Then some of the people in the two buildings fight each other. A young man named Valery gets hurt. He is 19 years old. During the fight, someone stabs Valery with a knife. Valery goes to the hospital. Valentin and his wife visit Valery there. The mother of Valery is there. Her name is Natasha. Natasha asks Valentin if he can help her and Valery find a new place to stay. Valentin says that Natasha and her son can stay with his family.

For about six months, everything is fine. Natasha cooks, cleans, and takes care of Valentin’s kids. Natasha also goes to the Adventist church. But then Valentin learns that Natasha has lied to him. Natasha tells people she is poor so they will feel sorry for her and give her money. Valentin says, “My wife and I fed her and her son. We paid their cell phone bill. But then we learned that they were not poor. We asked them to move out.”

Valentin is not sorry he helped Natasha. Valentin believes that it is important to help everyone, even if they do not accept Jesus. He says, “We must live and serve the Lord. The rest is up to Him. We show people the love of God. God works on their hearts.”

## INSIDE *Story*

by ANDREW MCCHESENEY



**Valentin and his wife visit the two buildings where the people live. Valentin tells the people that he is a Christian.**

