

LESSON 1

*March 27–April 2

Crisis of Identity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

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.

Sadly, unlike those Irish cows (much less the little lost boy), the Judeans forgot that they belonged to the Lord, their heavenly Parent, 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.

The Week at a Glance: What was the spiritual state of Judah at the time Isaiah was written? Can we truly worship the Lord if our hearts are not right with Him? How did the choices the Judeans faced parallel the choices we face today?

Memory Text: "Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool" (*Isaiah 1:18, NRSV*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 3.

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 whose reigns span the period of his prophetic activity, 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, 31:28*). The Lord isn’t implying that heaven and earth, themselves, can hear and understand. Instead, He uses this imagery 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 verse 9?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: *Isaiah 1.*

Teachers Aim:

1. To illustrate the relationship between forgiveness and transformation.
2. To stress God's mercy while underscoring the importance of our choices, both individually and corporately.

Lesson Outline:

I. Rebellion (*Isa. 1:1-17*).

- A. How much more guilty are God's people than those of Sodom and Gomorrah—a people who did not know God?
- B. God cannot delight in the worship of a rebellious people (church/denomination and individuals) (*vss. 11-17*).
 1. Piety is useless without justice.
 2. In our guilt, we stress *religion*, not transformation.

II. God's Invitation—Our Choice (*Isa. 1:18-31*).

- A. In the midst of our sins, God invites us to restore our relationship with Him—to become transformed.
- B. Forgiveness and restoration can take place only through God's love and mercy.
- C. In His mercy, God continues to contend with us. Ultimately, however, He will accept our choice (*vss. 19, 20*). There is no middle ground.

Summary: Even in this picture of rebellion and God's displeasure, hope runs throughout. Isaiah's very name means "the Lord is salvation." God will be victorious. It is for us to choose whether we will live with Him or perish opposing Him.

COMMENTARY

Introduction: Crisis of Identity.

God wants His people to remember that their identity is rooted in Him, their Creator, Sustainer, and Ordainer of purpose. When they forget their spiritual roots, their affections are transplanted into unhealthy soil and bring forth corrupt fruit. But God does not abandon His wayward people. He offers complete restoration to all who are willing to return and be *rerooted* in Him.

I. The Heavenly Parent.

God introduces Himself in Isaiah's prophecy as an anguished parent grieving over His children, who have become estranged from Him. He calls heaven and earth to witness His people's failure, not to shame them but to demonstrate how His grace works in

MONDAY *March 29*

Rotten Ritualism *(Isa. 1:10-17).*

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

Read Isaiah 1:11-15. What is the Lord telling the people there? Why did He 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; 58:3, 4*). By mistreating other members of the covenant community, the people 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 His 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—they were sins! Their ritual actions said they were loyal, but their behavior proved that they had broken the covenant.

Read Isaiah 1:16, 17. What is the Lord commanding that His people do? How do these texts, 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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

behalf of sinners. This drama of redemption conveys lessons of eternal value for the entire universe. In this context, consider the similarities between Isaiah 1 and Romans 1.

Restoration and renewal are God's aim for His erring children. He associates spiritual regeneration and renewal with an intimate union with Himself. In the prologue to Isaiah's prophecy, God diagnoses His people's basic problem so that they may recognize their need for a cure. But Israel's spiritual disorders were so deep and long-standing that they had no concept of spiritual health and their need for healing. God loved them too much, however, not to declare their morally diseased condition that pervaded every fiber of their being (*Isa. 1:5, 6*). Except for the few faithful believers in Judah, God's elect nation would have been as degenerate and doomed as Sodom and Gomorrah. (*See Isa. 1:10.*) Modern-day relevance of this point is underscored by Jesus' words in Luke 17:26-30. Some professed Christians in these last days are similar in their spiritual condition to the Judeans of Isaiah's time. Overlook this, and the book of Isaiah will have very little to say to us. It is well to remember that the divine records of the past are preserved "for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (*1 Cor. 10:11; compare Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17*).

II. Religion in Ruins.

Why the severe indictment of God's people, whose religious lives, in many respects, outwardly conformed to His requirements? They kept the Sabbath, after a fashion; they performed the required sacrifices in the temple; they celebrated the feast days, and did "many wonderful works" in God's name. But their hearts were far from Him, and they exercised little compassion and kindness toward one another. In fact, cruelty, exploitation, violence, immorality, and oppression were rampant among them. They had a form of godliness, but denied the power thereof (*see Isa. 29:13; compare 2 Tim. 3:1, 5*).

In proportion to their relational distance from God, a people's religious life easily can assume haughty display and ritual complexity to disguise inner emptiness. (See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 566–568.) But God takes no delight in a religion of externals. He looks on our inner being and wishes to fill our hearts with His holy presence, so that our worship of Him may be genuine, steadfast, and free.

III. Indictment and Plea.

Unworthy though they were, God did not cast off His people lightly. His indictment of their evils was valid, but He preferred to restore rather than prosecute His nation. Consequently, He pleaded with them to accept the spiritual benefit that their daily sacrifices pointed to—the saving merits of His atoning blood. He stood before

TUESDAY *March 30*

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

Read Isaiah 1:18 (in various translations, if possible). 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 stated powerful evidence that the Judeans, the accused, are guilty of breach of contract (*vss. 2-15*), and He has appealed to them to reform (*vss. 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” (*vs. 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 had 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” (bloodguilt) that covers the hands of the people (*vs. 15*). White obviously is the color of purity, the absence of bloodguilt. 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 morally purify themselves (*vss. 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.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

them as the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world (*see Isa. 1:18; compare Isaiah 53*). How He looked forward to the day when they would allow Him to “purely purge away” their dross and be fully restored by His grace. Then His judgment and righteousness would be their guiding light instead of a probe light to expose their iniquity (*see Isa. 1:17-28, 32:15-18*). Once truly converted, they would tenderly care for the destitute and afflicted and use all their talents to His glory (*see Isa. 1:17, James 1:27*).

But God will not be trifled with. If His mercy and redemption are despised and His authority flouted in the face of His revealed goodness, then He must eventually apply justice (*see Isa. 1:19, 20; compare Rom. 11:22, James 2:13*).

IV. Love’s Irrepressible Song.

God has the soul of a poet. His royal love, whether returned or rejected, demands expression in song (*see Deut. 32:1-44; Psalm 117*;

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: *Zechariah 1:2, 3, 6; Titus 3:3-7; James 1:6-8.*

❶ How does it make parents feel when their children continue to disobey, even though specific behavior is required of them? When should parents reserve their anger and show mercy? When should they immediately deliver punishment? The words of Isaiah 1:19 are clear and familiar: Do as I say, and you will be blessed. How often, though, do we act as the rebellious child by deliberately disobeying God’s instruction? How does our heavenly Father respond to us when we are rebellious? Why does He seem to respond to us differently in various situations? *See Isa. 13:11; Zech. 1:2, 3, 6; Eph. 2:2-6; and Titus 3:3-7.*

❷ When we have done wrong, God offers us incentives to come back to Him. Two of these incentives are forgiveness and a new start. What other blessings does He offer us? *See Ps. 86:5 and Col. 2:13.* Invite the class to share personal examples of blessings they received after accepting God’s forgiveness.

❸ God says, “I am the Lord, I change not” (*Mal. 3:6*). His stability is necessary for establishing trust. Trust is the foundation of any relationship. It is important that God is consistent in character, so we can more easily identify Him and the prompting of His Holy Spirit. It is important that we also be consistent in our character, so other people will recognize us as children of God, and God will see us as His own. *See Matt. 7:20-23 and James 1:6-8.*

WEDNESDAY *March 31*

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 (*vs. 19*). By contrast, if they refuse His offer of forgiveness and restoration and rebel against Him, they will be eaten by the sword (*vs. 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 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 concludes 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 His people, (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 the people what would happen if they violated the covenant conditions.

It has been shown that these elements appear in the same order in political treaties involving non-Israelite peoples, such as the Hittites. So, for establishing His covenant with the Israelites, God used a form they would understand and that would impress upon them as forcibly 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.

How, in your own Christian walk, have you experienced the principle of blessings and curses as seen above?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Zeph. 3:17; Matt. 26:29, 30). Deep calls unto deep. In the vaulted chambers of divine sentiment, the echoes of love's call ring melodious. Even from the most cavernous and unresponsive of hearts, the echoes of His wooing fade away slowly and reluctantly. Never does the dove of mercy take its final flight from the stony hearted without tears, however despised those tears may be (*see Jer. 13:15-17*).

Divine love, however, is not a sponge cake, all sweetness but no substance. In God's economy, love and moral uprightness stand united. He will not slur over His moral requirements any more than He will spare the outpouring of His care for us (*see Eccles. 8:11-13; Rom. 1:18-25; 2:1-11; Gal. 6:7, 8*).

Witnessing

As citizens, we are expected to know, understand, and adhere to the laws of the land. We are taught, and believe, that these laws are meant to protect us against harm, to ensure the safety of others, and to improve the overall quality of life for each citizen. In return for faithfully following these requirements, we enjoy the benefits of a safer, cleaner, and more beautiful environment.

Willfully disregarding the laws of *the land* often leads to chaos, unrest, and, ultimately, punishment for the offender. Sadly, sometimes those who come in contact with the offender also are negatively affected. Therefore, many citizens choose to obey, thus acknowledging that the advantages of obedience far outweigh the disadvantages. Ultimately, however, the choice is ours.

In our lesson this week, we learned that God called Isaiah to remind the children of Israel to follow faithfully God's covenant and that by doing so, they would receive great blessings. How appropriate this counsel is to each of us. Just as being good citizens will reap positive benefits on earth, accepting Jesus as our personal Savior and following His Word will assure our heavenly citizenship.

Do not resist telling others about the positive outcomes of accepting and following our Lord's invitation to participate in, and enjoy, a better life. Pray for God to send you at least one person this week who needs to hear about the benefits of free choice and its effect on eternal life. Let this person know how liberating it is to be bound to Jesus!

THURSDAY April 1

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 verse 7. By using a parable, He helps the people to look at themselves objectively in order to admit their true condition. God effectively uses this approach with King David (*compare 2 Sam. 12:1-13*). By calling this a “love song,” 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 immediately does not cut us off from Himself by removing His protection and destroying us. He patiently gives us an opportunity to receive forgiveness (*compare 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 immediately does not 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 (*compare Rev. 22:11*).

If persistently we 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 may do, because He respects our free choice.

Take the concept found in Isaiah 5:4, “What more could have been done to my vineyard . . . ?” 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 was done there? How does dwelling on the Cross give us assurance of salvation and motivate us to repent and change our ways?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: Sometimes, we might feel totally disconnected from life. This type of situation is often called an identity crisis. Finding out who we really are and what is most important to us are part of the Christian growth process. If you have experienced such a crisis, do you think it helped you in a positive or negative way?

Thought Questions:

❶ Israel had reached a point where they had minimalized what should have been the focus of their worship—God Himself. What religious rituals do we have? Explain how these can keep us from focusing on God. Why should form never take priority over substance? Is this to say that form is not important? Explain.

❷ Keeping young people in the church is one of the greatest challenges facing our denomination. How might young people be expecting too much from the church? Share suggestions on how to improve the church atmosphere on Sabbath morning in order to enhance their experience.

❸ God tells us we must accept His forgiveness in order to receive His blessings and eternal life. Yet, forgiveness can be difficult both to give and to receive. A compelling example of giving and receiving forgiveness is in the story of Mary Magdalene's bathing Jesus' feet with her hair and tears. Share some examples of your extending and/or receiving forgiveness.

Application Questions:

❶ Is there someone in your life whom you have been unable to forgive? Perhaps this someone is a former friend. If so, contemplate the following: "A good friend is a fortune. A friend is worth forgiving."—Marjorie Holmes, "Hold Me Up a Little Longer, Lord," *Guideposts* (Carmel, New York: 1977), p. 57. Call this person today to mend the breach; both of you will receive a blessing!

❷ Do you believe your relationship with Jesus is what it should be? If you think He deserves more of your time and resources, then make arrangements to spend a portion of each day with Him. Speak with Him about renewing your covenant with Him; ask Him for His forgiveness and be prepared to receive it with an open heart.

Further Study: 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:

- ❶ **How can we wash ourselves? What does that phrase mean?** (see Phil. 2:12, 13).
- ❷ **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 there for us as Seventh-day Adventists?**
- ❸ **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?**
- ❹ **In the Ellen White quote above, she 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.