

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 Judaeans, 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.