

God Confronts

God confronts His people about the consequences of their actions.

Actions have consequences. Isaac Newton's third law of motion states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. The reactions to our actions can be helpful or hurtful, good or bad; but they are consequences just the same. Some people might think their bad actions will have no real consequences or at most will impact them alone. In reality, our actions always have consequences, and the consequences can impact many others, not just us.

Sin always brings destructive consequences. Genesis 2:16-17 states, "And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree of the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die.'" The apostle Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) and "the wages of sin is death" (6:23). The Scriptures are unequivocal: Sin always destroys our lives by separating us from the One who gave us life in the beginning.

Thankfully, God has provided for the forgiveness of sin through His Son, Jesus Christ. Through faith in Christ, our guilt as sinners is forgiven forever and the power of sin over us is broken. Nevertheless, when we as believers fall into disobedience, temporal consequences result from our sinful actions.

This session begins our study in the Book of Isaiah, a message of both judgment and salvation. The prophet Isaiah lived in Jerusalem during the latter half of the eighth century BC. These were tumultuous years of social upheaval, uncertain leadership, international threats, and spiritual decay for God's people in the land of Judah. The Lord sent Isaiah to confront the people of God with a message of warning and an invitation to believe. The people's spiritual rebellion and sinful actions would have severe consequences. If they repented, they could experience the joy of God's cleansing and forgiveness. But if they continued in their disobedience, they would face God's judgment.

As we study Isaiah 1:10-20 in this session, may we also take heed to the prophet's opening message. What was true then is still true today. God confronts His people about the consequences of their actions.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ISAIAH 1:1–4:6

Isaiah 1:1 identifies the sixty-six chapters of the book as a prophetic “vision” about “Judah and Jerusalem” that was revealed to and proclaimed by “Isaiah, son of Amoz” in the latter half of the eighth century BC. The prophet’s public ministry commenced with the death of Judah’s long-reigning King Uzziah (see Isa. 6:1-13) around 740 BC and continued throughout the sixteen-year reign of Jotham (see 2 Kings 15:32-33), the subsequent sixteen-year reign of Ahaz (see 2 Kings 16:1-2), and the twenty-nine year reign of Hezekiah (see 2 Kings 18:1-2).

Isaiah’s opening message (Isa. 1:2-31) effectively put the citizens of Judah on trial for their spiritual rebellion and sinful practices. They had abandoned the Lord their God (1:4). He had tried to turn them back to Him through various types of judgments, but they had not heeded (1:5-9). The prophet compared the leaders of God’s people to the rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah (1:10), two wicked cities God had destroyed in Abraham’s day (see Gen. 19).

Isaiah further declared that all of the people’s attempts to satisfy God through empty worship meant nothing; they were useless. The Lord hated His people’s hypocritical worship and would refuse to answer their prayers (1:10-15). Nonetheless, God had a solution: repentance and a return to faithfulness. The people could turn back to God with all their hearts, cease doing evil, and learn to do what was good. If they did, they would enjoy God’s blessing; if they did not, they would receive God’s judgment (1:16-31).

In chapter 2, the prophet foresaw a future time in which a restored Jerusalem would be exalted and would know God’s peace (2:1-4). In light of this vision, Isaiah challenged God’s people to walk in God’s light rather than pursue the pagan practices of the surrounding idol-worshipping peoples (2:5-11). Isaiah warned of a coming day in which God would judge those who put their confidence in idols or human pride (2:12-22).

The Lord placed much blame for Judah’s situation on its disastrous leaders (3:1-15). God would bring such a terrible judgment that the leaders would be gone and the least qualified would suddenly find themselves in leadership positions (3:6). In fact, the Lord accused the leaders of His people of grinding the faces of the poor into the dust (3:15)!

In 3:16–4:1, the prophet called out the sinful, elite women of Jerusalem as symbols of the nation’s sick pride. They dressed in gaudy attire and pranced around wearing jingling ankle bracelets. On the day of the Lord’s judgment, however, these same women would lose all their finery and would suddenly realize that many of the city’s men had been killed in battle.

In 4:2-6, however, the prophet again described what God would do in a future time to restore the glory of Zion (Jerusalem). Verses 2-6 are generally understood to be a messianic reference foreshadowing the coming of Christ to purify the city and call forth a holy remnant. The Lord would lead His people again as faithfully as He led the Israelites in the wilderness, with “a cloud of smoke by day and a glowing flame of fire by night” (4:5).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

EMPTY RITUALS (Isa. 1:10-15)

In Isaiah 1:6-9, the prophet described the measures God had taken to try to turn His people back to Him. Had it not been for God’s patience and grace, the holy city of Jerusalem would have faced the same destruction as the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (1:9).

VERSE 10

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

Isaiah challenged his people to **hear the word of the LORD**. The Hebrew word translated *hear* essentially means “hear and obey.” It is the same word translated “listen” in Deuteronomy 6:4—“Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” The phrase *the word of the LORD* was a distinctive marker of prophetic messages. Isaiah did not announce a personal opinion or a word of popular affirmation. He brought a revealed message from the Lord God of Israel. Thus, it was vital that the people of Judah take heed to the prophet’s teaching.

Isaiah’s characterizing Jerusalem’s leaders as **rulers of Sodom** and the citizens as **people of Gomorrah** implied that the Lord’s message to them would be a warning of judgment. These two ancient cities first appear in Scripture in Genesis 13:10-13, where the Bible records that Lot, Abraham’s nephew, decided to move in the direction of Sodom, probably located in the Jordan plains near the Dead Sea. Lot later moved inside the city of Sodom—a city known for its wickedness. The Lord eventually destroyed both Sodom and Gomorrah after sending angelic messengers to rescue Lot and his family out of Sodom (Gen. 19:12-13,24-25).

Isaiah’s hearers must have been shocked to hear the prophet label the holy city of Jerusalem and them with such derogatory names. However, the

prophet's point was clear: the leaders and people of Judah had fallen into extreme corruption comparable to the wickedest cities in biblical memory.

Isaiah challenged the people to **listen to the instruction of their God**. The Hebrew word rendered *instruction* (“law,” KJV; “teaching,” ESV) is *torah* [TOH rah]. Eventually this term became applied as a title for the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Thus, the term was broad enough to include not only law (Ex. 20–23) but also history (Genesis), songs (Ex. 15; Deut. 32:1-43), worship procedures (Lev. 1–6), and censuses (Num. 1:1-46; 26:1-65). All of these types of Scripture served as vital *instruction* for the people of God. God’s Word gave His people (then and now) all the guidance they needed to live faithfully as His holy people. The problem was, however, that the people had stopped obeying God’s Word. They had turned their backs on the Lord and had become comparable to the ungodly people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

VERSE 11

“What are all your sacrifices to me?” asks the LORD. “I have had enough of burnt offerings and rams and the fat of well-fed cattle; I have no desire for the blood of bulls, lambs, or male goats.

The Lord questioned the motives of His people’s worship. The phrase rendered **all your sacrifices** refers to a multitude of offerings being made. In other words, the people of Judah had not stopped going to the Lord’s temple and offering sacrifices. To the contrary, they gave more sacrifices. They kept the altar of burnt offering busy with sacrifices of **rams and the fat of well-fed cattle**. According to Leviticus 1:3-17, **burnt offerings** were voluntary sacrifices that signified a worshiper’s complete surrender, devotion, and commitment to God. The expression *fat of well-fed cattle* suggests an expensive offering, in this case made purely for show rather than out of sincere devotion (see Mark 12:41-44).

The Lord declared through Isaiah that He **had enough** (“am full,” KJV; “more than enough,” NIV) of the people’s sacrifices. Further, the Lord had **no desire for the blood of bulls, lambs, or male goats**. Such a declaration likely would have been a shock to the rulers and people of Judah. Had not the Lord approved the building of the tabernacle and later the temple (Ex. 25:8; 2 Sam. 7:12-13)? Had He not given the people detailed regulations for sacrifices and offerings in the law (Lev. 1–7)?

Why would the Lord now declare that He had *no desire* for further offerings? A clue to the answer can be found in 1 Kings 6:12-13. As King Solomon began to build the temple, the Lord came to him and declared, “As for this temple you are building—if you walk in my statutes, observe my

ordinances, and keep all my commands by walking in them, I will fulfill my promise to you, which I made to your father David. I will dwell among the Israelites and not abandon my people Israel.” God’s people in Isaiah’s day might have increased their worship rituals, but they had abandoned obedience to the Lord’s commands for holy living. They were, in effect, trying to buy God’s favor and protection through insincere worship. In the space of two verses, Isaiah had likened the people’s spiritual condition to the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah—two cities God had destroyed—and then told the people God desired no more of their hypocritical worship.

VERSE 12

When you come to appear before me, who requires this from you—this trampling of my courts?

The words **come to appear before me** describe the people’s frequent appearances at the temple for the purpose of offering sacrifices. The words **who requires this from you** were not intended to suppress worship attendance. Rather, they were an accusation that the people had substituted empty rituals for genuine worship. The Hebrew word rendered **trampling** (“tread,” KJV) denotes the irreverent manner in which the people approached God.

Isaiah’s words challenge us as believers today in regard to our motives for church attendance and worship practices. We too can be tempted to substitute rituals for genuine worship. Going through the motions—attending worship, giving offerings, singing songs, and voicing prayers—without sincerity changes nothing. God considers these activities worthless if they are not demonstrations of true devotion. Genuine worship changes the heart and results in Christlike living not only in church but also in our homes, workplaces, and recreational locations.

VERSE 13

Stop bringing useless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons and Sabbaths, and the calling of solemn assemblies—I cannot stand iniquity with a festival.

The Lord continued the indictment of His people’s worship. He challenged the people to **stop bringing useless offerings**. The Hebrew word translated *offerings* may be a reference either to offerings in general or, more specifically, to the grain offering described in Leviticus 2. The grain offering was a voluntary gift that expressed gratitude to God for a good crop. In either case, if the worshiper was insincere or was trying to buy God’s favor with the offering, it was *useless* (“vain,” KJV; ESV; “meaningless,” NIV). This is the

same Hebrew word found in the third commandment to condemn the sinful misuse of God's name (Ex. 20:7).

The altar of **incense** in the tabernacle (and later in the temple) was situated in front of the holy of holies or most holy place, where the ark of the covenant resided (Ex. 30:6; see 1 Kings 6:20-22). The burning of incense came to be associated with the prayers of God's people (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 5:8). Yet, if prayers are insincere or are comprised of rote repetition of words (Matt. 6:5,7), they are **detestable** ("an abomination," KJV; ESV) to the Lord.

New Moons and Sabbaths were occasions for God's people to celebrate His work in their lives. As indicated by the name, the new moon festival was a monthly celebration; special offerings and trumpet blasts characterized the festivities (see Num. 10:10; 28:11-15; Ps. 81:3). *Sabbaths* were weekly festivals in obedience to the Lord's command to commemorate His work of creation (Ex. 20:8-11). Worshipers ceased from their normal daily labor and came together in a sacred assembly before God (Lev. 23:2-3). **Solemn assemblies** ("convocations," ESV; NIV) might be organized for a variety of reasons. Often they were reactions to times of national crisis during which the people and their leaders fasted and prayed for God's help (see 2 Chron. 20:3-5; Joel 2:15-17). Yet, the idea that God's people kept on living wickedly (**iniquity**) even as they celebrated **a festival** or conducted a solemn assembly was deeply offensive to God. The words **I cannot stand** can also mean "I cannot endure." God, who was (and is) full of patience, was wearied by His people's hypocrisy.

VERSE 14

I hate your New Moons and prescribed festivals. They have become a burden to me; I am tired of putting up with them.

The phrase **prescribed festivals** ("appointed feasts," KJV; ESV) likely refers to the annual festivals—Passover and the accompanying Festival of Unleavened Bread, Festival of Weeks, and Festival of Shelters or Booths—at which all Israelite males were expected to appear before the Lord at His sanctuary (Deut. 16:16-17). The people were to gather at these times to celebrate what God had done in their lives. These were high holy days, yet in Isaiah's time the Lord declared the festivals had become **a burden** ("a trouble," KJV) to Him. He had grown **tired of putting up with them**. The people's persistent hypocrisy would bring severe consequences.

VERSE 15

When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will refuse to look at you; even if you offer countless prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood.

Isaiah 1:15 begins to outline the consequences God’s people would face if they did not recognize their sinfulness and repent. The Lord would no longer hear their prayers! God’s people should tremble at the thought of His turning from them and leaving them to their own sinful ways (see Rom. 1:24,26,28).

The meaning behind the phrase **spread out your hands in prayer** can denote either praise or dependence on God—perhaps even both. Done insincerely, however, such a gesture will not get God’s attention. The words rendered **I will refuse to look at you** literally are “I will hide my eyes from you.” When the eyes of the Lord are hidden from people, they are in danger of sin’s consequences (Ps. 34:15-16; 1 Pet. 3:12). Offering **countless prayers** without sincerity accomplishes nothing. God will **not listen**. The Hebrew word rendered *listen* implies both hearing and responding. God will not respond favorably to people’s insincere prayers.

The people’s hypocrisy was evidenced by the fact that their **hands** were **covered with blood**. Then, as now, bloodstained hands are a symbol of wickedness and injustice. The picture presented in verse 15 is utterly ironic: People were stretching out bloodstained hands toward heaven in an effort to garner God’s favor so they could keep on living wickedly! God expects His people to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Christian faith is not a show we perform as actors. It is a way of life—a transformed way of life. We demonstrate the reality of our faith in Christ by the way that we live (Jas. 2:18). What a great challenge for believers today!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Sacrifice and Offering” on pages 1398–1401 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How do faith and obedience go hand in hand? What lessons does God want us to learn today through keeping His commands?

TRUE FOLLOWERS (Isa. 1:16-17)

In verses 10-15, Isaiah brought God’s indictment against His people, exposed their hypocrisy, and warned of sin’s consequences. In these verses, the prophet Isaiah presented a remedy to the people’s sinful state.

VERSE 16

“Wash yourselves. Cleanse yourselves. Remove your evil deeds from my sight. Stop doing evil.

The commands to **wash yourselves** and **cleansed yourselves** could describe ritual cleansing. In light of verses 10-15, however, the Lord was not suggesting that His people merely needed to perform a different or additional empty ritual. They needed a cleansing of the heart! External words and actions can be significant if they evidence genuine faith. Rituals without faith, however, are meaningless (see Rom. 2:28-29).

God challenged His people to **remove their evil deeds from His sight** (“from before mine eyes,” KJV). As long as the people of God persisted in acting corruptly and treating one another unjustly, their attempts to worship the Lord were not only empty but also offensive. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20a). The Lord did not want to see His people’s *evil deeds* continue. He further commanded them to **stop doing evil**. God wanted the people to rid their lives of all that opposed Him and His law.

Isaiah was talking about genuine repentance in this verse, not turning over a new leaf or adopting the latest self-help strategy. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot defeat sin in our own strength. The New Testament makes explicit that repentance is a surrender of our hearts to the transforming work of God’s Spirit (Acts 5:30-33; Rom. 12:1-2).

VERSE 17

Learn to do what is good. Pursue justice. Correct the oppressor. Defend the rights of the fatherless. Plead the widow’s cause.

Genuine spiritual transformation goes beyond simply not doing evil. God’s people are to **learn to do what is good**. What does that look like in real life? For the people in Isaiah’s day, it meant doing an about face in the way they had been treating others. Instead of mistreating their neighbors, they were to act with integrity (**pursue justice**). Instead of supporting or shielding bullies, they were to **correct the oppressor** (“relieve the oppressed,” KJV; “correct oppression,” ESV; “defend the oppressed,” NIV). (Some English Bible translations render this Hebrew expression in terms of helping the ones who are oppressed so that it is parallel with the other actions.) Instead of ignoring or taking advantage of vulnerable members of the population, they are to **defend the rights** of orphans and widows. Godly living is far more than adhering to a list of “do nots.” It boldly takes the initiative to *do what is good*.

The apostle Paul instructed Timothy to flee immoral ways (1 Tim. 6:11). Sometimes people think a mark of spiritual maturity is seeing how close to evil they can wander without actually giving in to it. Such an attitude does not demonstrate spiritual maturity; rather, it demonstrates spiritual foolishness. The Lord desires us to stay away from sin and to fully embrace all

He has for us in His Word. As we submit ourselves to God, ceasing to do evil and learning God’s good ways, we become the people God intends us to be.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Forgiveness” on pages 589–590 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you explain the relationship between God’s forgiveness of you and your forgiveness of others? What are some specific ways you as a believer can put into practice the Christlike actions listed in Isaiah 1:17?

REPENTANCE REQUIRED (Isa. 1:18-20)

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord had brought His rebellious, disobedient people into court. The evidence of their guilt was both clear and convincing (Isa. 1:10-15). Yet, there was still a remedy available. The question was whether God’s people were willing to repent and confess their sins.

VERSE 18

“Come, let us settle this,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are crimson red, they will be like wool.

The words **come, let us settle this** (“let us reason together,” KJV; ESV) comprise one of the great divine invitations in Scripture (see also Isa. 55:1-3; Matt. 11:28-30; Rev. 22:17). What Isaiah knew in his day about God’s merciful nature is also what the apostle Peter learned through personal experience: “The Lord ... is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

God’s statement **though your sins are scarlet** reflected reality. The people’s wickedness had stained their lives through and through. Yet, God had the power and grace to forgive His repentant people and make their hearts clean—as **white as snow**. In an example of poetic parallelism, the Lord reiterated that He could transform His people’s hearts from the **crimson red** stain of sin to the white **wool** purity of godliness (see Rev. 1:14).

VERSE 19

If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land.

Isaiah presented a positive alternative for God’s people. He wanted them to be **willing and obedient** to turn back to God’s ways. A *willing* heart could lead to an *obedient* life, and that was what God wanted. Obedience to God’s commands begins with a willingness to submit to Him. Our obedience flows from our love for Him. Jesus told His disciples that if they truly loved Him, they would keep His commands (John 14:15).

Isaiah then described the blessing that would come if the people turned to God in willing obedience—they would once again **eat the good things of the land**. This was one of the covenant blessings for faithfulness about which Moses had instructed the people of Israel before their entry into the promised land (Deut. 28:4-5). Then and now, God’s blessings on His faithful people can take many forms. Moreover, many of His blessings are not material and temporal; they are spiritual and eternal.

VERSE 20

**But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.”
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.**

If the people turned back to the Lord and confessed their sins, they would experience good consequences. But if they rejected the Lord’s gracious invitation and continued in their spiritual rebellion, they would be **devoured by the sword**. Here the prophet was using the word *sword* figuratively—it represented invading armies that would wield weapons against the helpless people of Judah and Jerusalem.

Isaiah concluded his opening message to the people and leaders of Judah by reminding them of its source: **for the mouth of the LORD has spoken**. The people must not imagine that Isaiah was simply giving his opinions on the state of the nation. He was delivering an authorized, authoritative message straight from God. The Lord never gives empty promises or makes idle threats. His powerful word always accomplishes what He wishes to do—whether in judgment or blessing (Isa. 55:11).

The Lord is a holy God. He loves His people, but He hates our rebellion and disobedience. May we hear and heed Isaiah’s call to repentance!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Repentance” on pages 1344–1345 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What role does repentance play in a person’s salvation? How does repentance play a role in the believer’s ongoing relationship with Christ?