

CAUTION
WET
FLOOR

וְאֵלֶּיךָ יָשׁוּב
כִּי כָל עֲבֹדָה
לֹא יִשְׂמַח בְּכִי
כִּי לֹא יִשְׂמַח
בְּחֵן וְעֵצָם לֹא
יִשְׂמַח וְכִי יִגֹּר
אֶתְךָ גֵּר וְעַם
רֵוָה וְאַתָּה יִקְרַב
לְעַשְׂתָּו וְהָיָה
כִּי יֵאָכַל בֹּרַח
אֶת־הָאֶרֶץ וְיִהְיֶה
לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה

God Confronts

God confronts His people about the consequences of their actions.

ISAIAH 1:10-20

MEMORY VERSE: ISAIAH 1:18

STUDY Isaiah 1:10-20, paying attention to the commands given by God. Use Explore the Text on pages 15–19 to gain insight into each command given in verses 16-18. Reflect on the role repentance plays in this passage.

CREATE a teaching plan for your group using the ideas on pages 20–22. Focus on helping the group identify and define the commands given in the passage. Look for ways of using the Key Doctrine to help the group understand God’s call to repentance.

GATHER the following items:

- Personal Study Guides (PSGs) for each group member

Prepare to display:

- Pack Item 2 (*Outline of Isaiah*)
- Pack Item 3 (*Poster: Themes of Isaiah*)

Make copies of:

- Pack Item 8 (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*)

CONSULT the weekly Explore the Bible Podcast to gain insights as we start this new study. Look for additional questions to use during the group time in *QuickSource* (available for purchase from LifeWay.com). Explore the Bible blog posts support each week’s study at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible.

REINFORCE the session by contacting group members who need to be encouraged, reminding them that a new study is beginning, making it a great time to get back into the habit of participating in the group time.

KEY DOCTRINE

Salvation

Repentance is a genuine turning from sin toward God (Isa 55:7).

FIRST THOUGHTS

Paying bills, going to the grocery store, getting the car serviced—our days are filled with mundane tasks that we carry out on autopilot. Sometimes, church and devotions fall into repetitive ruts. Even relationships can become stale and fade into the background. As a result, the failure of a relationship can catch us off guard.

(In PSG, p. 10) **When have you ever taken a relationship for granted? How did it affect the relationship? Were you able to do anything to get the relationship back on track?**

BIBLE SKILL

Compare related passages.

Compare Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15. What reasons are given for celebrating the Sabbath in these verses? How are the reasons different and how are they the same? What do these verses reveal about God's desires? How does this compare to what we find in Isaiah 1?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ISAIAH 1:1-4:6

Many prophetic books of the Old Testament start by introducing the prophet and his call to prophetic ministry. The Book of Isaiah, however, starts a little differently. While the first verse notes that what follows is a vision from God, verse 2 launches immediately into a condemnation of God's people. The call of Isaiah to prophetic ministry will not show up until chapter 6. This arrangement leads to a rather shocking start to the book. The reader is blasted with the heat of Isaiah's angry message against God's people.

Isaiah couches this condemnation in the form of a covenant lawsuit, a term that might need a little bit of explanation. The people of God had a formal relationship with God that was outlined by a covenant. On the one hand, this was like a contract. On the other hand, it was not an impersonal business arrangement; the covenant was very relational in nature. The closest comparison we have in our culture is the marriage covenant. The marriage ceremony outlines and formalizes a relationship that has already been established in love. Likewise, God first chose His people and established a relationship with them. Then that relationship was formalized through the covenant at Sinai (Ex. 20). When Israel and Judah broke this covenant repeatedly, God brought legal charges against His people through His prophets. Therefore, in a covenant lawsuit, the prophet acted as a prosecuting attorney, representing God in a court case.

While this role was a common one for God's prophets, it was not their only role. They also brought hope and comfort, represented the people's case to God, and sought to change the hearts of the people so that the covenant relationship could be restored and the legal case dropped (Isa. 1:16-20). In other words, Isaiah not only condemned the hearts and behavior of the people; he also promised them a hope for the future. Even if the nation did

not repent and faced the resulting judgment, the faithful among God’s people could find hope in the promise that God would one day restore His nation. They would be a beacon to the other nations of the world (2:1-4).

The immediate problem with the people in our passage is their complete lack of understanding. They did not know what God wanted and, in fact, did not really know God. According to Isaiah, animals had a better understanding of their relationship to their owners than God’s people did of their relationship with God (1:3). The people had come to view God as a kind of vending machine—an impersonal dispenser of favors in return for sacrifices and offerings. As a result, the Book of Isaiah swings back and forth between the themes of judgment and the promise of blessing after judgment. Even if judgment comes, a faithful remnant has hope for the future.

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

EMPTY RITUALS (ISA. 1:10-15)

Verses 10-11

The phrase **hear the word of the LORD** would bring two things to mind for Isaiah’s audience. First, it pointed to the prophet’s authority. Isaiah was not simply complaining about things he viewed as wrong in society; he was conveying the very word of God. Secondly, the word *hear* would bring to mind Deuteronomy 6:4 (“Listen, Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one”), a very important passage to the Israelites. It reflected that God was consistent in the way He had dealt with Israel. He had saved them from Egypt and brought them through the wilderness. God had a right to command them to love Him and obey Him.

The word **instruction** is another way to describe God’s Torah or “Law.” Thus, verse 10 told the audience that Isaiah was speaking God’s words. In Hebrew, the word translated *hear* implies obedience. We can relate to this by thinking of telling a child to clean his or her room. If the room remains in a state of chaos, we question whether or not the child actually heard us. In other words, hearing God’s commands is not enough. Obedience follows the command if the words are truly heard.

The rulers of the people are compared to the **rulers of Sodom** and the Israelites are compared to the **people of Gomorrah**. (See Gen. 19:4-13.) The sins of these cities were many and their citizens were interested only in their own pleasure and needs. It was no doubt shocking to Isaiah’s audience to hear they were as bad as these cities that were destroyed by fire from heaven. The people of God had become prideful and had rejected God in just about every way possible. The rulers had led the people astray, but the people had willingly cooperated in choosing sin and in rejecting a loving God.

God asked the people, **What are all your sacrifices to me?** They had not stopped worshiping God in the most literal sense; they continued to bring sacrifices to the temple. These sacrifices and offerings would have been the ones outlined in Leviticus 1–7. Not all of these sacrifices were for

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Isaiah’s Messianic Prophecies,” an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided via digital download in the Fall 2020 Explore the Bible Leader Pack.

VERSES 10-11

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

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.”

sin or guilt. Some were meant to express thankfulness, while others were meant to be a sort of meal shared in the presence of God. The problem was that the people had lost sight of the purpose behind the sacrifices—a relationship with God. Rather than loving God and bringing sacrifices and offerings to show Him that love, the people were engaging in empty rituals, or worse, viewing their offerings as a means to get what they wanted.

Verse 11 hints at the emptiness of their rituals: ***I have had enough of burnt offerings and rams ... I have no desire for the blood of bulls.*** This statement would have shocked the audience just as much as the earlier comparison to Sodom and Gomorrah. With our modern ideas and life on this side of the cross, such a rejection of sacrificial ritual makes sense. For Isaiah's readers, though, this statement would have been confusing, at the very least. Hadn't God commanded these offerings and sacrifices? If so, why would He no longer want them? After all, the types of sacrifices described in these verses are the best of the best—good and costly gifts. How, then, could God be disappointed in the quality of the gifts and sacrifices?

VERSES 12-14

¹² When you come to appear before me, who requires this from you—this trampling of my courts? 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. ¹⁴ I hate your New Moons and prescribed festivals. They have become a burden to me; I am tired of putting up with them.

Verses 12-14

Who requires this from you—this trampling of my courts? In other words, who commanded that the people constantly offer sacrifices in the temple in the first place? A quick glance at Leviticus gives us the answer: it was God Himself. Why, then, was God saying He no longer wanted these sacrifices? The quality of the gifts was not in question but the motivation behind the giving was. The key is in verse 10 and the word *hear*. The people were to obey and to love God. Going through the motions was not enough. Repetitive sacrificial activity (*trampling*) without love for God was an empty affair. In God's eyes, it was meaningless; therefore, the people might as well not offer sacrifices at all. Offering sacrifices while not really loving God is an insult to Him.

Just in case the listeners had missed the message of how unwelcome their sacrifices were, the Lord made it clear with the phrase ***stop bringing useless offerings.*** The offerings were useless because, in and of themselves, they did not accomplish anything. The Israelites thought that the offerings appeased God and earned them His blessings. This idea of trading offerings and sacrifices for a deity's blessing and protection was prevalent among the cultures around Israel, and God's people had adopted the same view. In fact, the Mesopotamian religions assumed that if a worshiper did not get the desired result from his or her gods, it was likely because he or she did not have the correct formula—a ritual had not been followed correctly or a phrase of a prayer had been overlooked. While it is an oversimplification, interacting with these pagan gods was similar to dealing with a vending machine. If you put your money in but didn't get the desired product, you must have put in the wrong amount or pressed the wrong button. The people of Israel and Judah had come to expect their offerings to be an exchange for continued favor from God. Through Isaiah, God made it clear that this is not the way the offerings worked.

The Lord stated, ***I hate your New Moons and prescribed festivals.*** The New Moon festivals were celebrated at the beginning of each month. Judah operated on a lunar calendar instead of a solar one, so the new moon marked

the beginning of the month. Numbers 28:11-15 explains what offerings were to be brought in celebration of the new moon. The festival marked God's lordship over time and was intended to remind the Israelites of God's gift of life to them. Yet their celebrations were worthless because the people only did them for the blessings they thought they would get.

Likewise, **Sabbaths** are mentioned. The celebration of the Sabbath was a favorite test case for many of the prophets. This is because observing the Sabbath demonstrated trust in God. The story of God's provision of manna for the Israelites is found in Exodus 16:22-28. In that episode, the people were told not to gather more manna than they needed for each day. Still, some took more and tried to save it, and the manna rotted. On the sixth day, the people took a double portion, and the extra portion of manna for the Sabbath did not rot. Yet, some people still went out to try to collect more manna on the seventh day. God chastised the people and asked how long it would take them to truly trust Him. In Isaiah, the people were keeping the Sabbath festivals but were not really trusting God. Instead, they hoped that keeping the Sabbath would get them more blessing. They were missing the point of the Sabbath.

Verse 15

The phrase **spread out your hands in prayer** indicates supplication. This posture was used when the one praying wanted or needed something from God. Isaiah's audience undoubtedly expected their requests to be granted, given how many offerings and sacrifices they were bringing to the temple. What a surprise they must have gotten, then, when God stated, **I will refuse to look at you!** Looking at someone implies he or she has your attention. In Hebrew thought, to be in someone's presence and good graces was expressed as having him face you. As part of the blessing on Aaron and his sons in Numbers 6:25-26, for example, God stated twice that He would look on them and make His face to shine upon them. In Isaiah 1, by contrast, God was turning His countenance away from the people. The offerings they made had the opposite of the people's intended effect because their hearts were not turned toward God. Indeed, the people could **offer countless prayers**, but much like the many meaningless offerings they had made, God would not accept them.

The ultimate reason for this rejection is that the peoples' **hands** were **covered with blood**. This language represents violence toward each other and toward the innocent. Shades of Sodom and Gomorrah once again appear as the injustice of the people toward others comes into view. As evident in 1:21-23, the people were acting much like the citizens of those two cities. The Israelites did not expect this to matter to God as long as they made the appropriate sacrifices. Isaiah showed them just how wrong they were.

In what ways might you be guilty of going through the motions in your worship of God? In what practical way can you make sure your heart is set on God in your worship and daily actions?

VERSE 15

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.

TRUE FOLLOWERS (ISA. 1:16-17)

Verses 16-17

VERSES 16-17

¹⁶ “Wash yourselves.
Cleanse yourselves.
Remove your evil deeds
from my sight. Stop
doing evil. ¹⁷ Learn to
do what is good. Pursue
justice. Correct the
oppressor. Defend the
rights of the fatherless.
Plead the widow’s cause.

Verse 16 gives four commands: **wash, cleanse, remove, and stop**. For Isaiah’s audience, washing was more than physically bathing. Rather, in the context of worship, the word implies a ritual bath done as part of preparation to enter into the Lord’s presence. Similarly, cleansing oneself meant putting away all sources of ritual impurity. Given the context of the passage, washing and cleansing implied not just becoming ritually clean, but an internal cleansing.

This internal aspect is confirmed by the commands to remove **evil deeds** and to stop **doing evil**. But it was not enough for the people to stop behaving in evil ways. They were to replace the evil they were doing with positive behavior. Verse 17 carries the commands of the previous verse forward with a set of positive commands: **learn, pursue, correct, defend, and plead**. The first command, **learn to do what is good**, might raise the question of how the Israelites were to learn what is good. The next commands answer that potential question by pulling forward the commands of the Torah. The pursuit of justice, the correction or blocking of oppression, and the defense of and advocacy for the less fortunate in society are all elements pulled directly from the law. (See Ex. 22:22-23; Deut. 16:20.) These positive behaviors all reflect the character of God and flow from a love for Him.

In what ways does your love for God motivate you to practice care for others in the church? Have you felt convicted because you put your own needs over helping another? Explain.

VERSES 18-19

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.
¹⁹ If you are willing and
obedient, you will eat the
good things of the land.

REPENTANCE REQUIRED (ISA. 1:18-20)

Verses 18-19

Come, let us settle this. The verb translated *settle* carries the idea of setting things right and bringing an end to a quarrel. Isaiah let the people know they could avoid the fate that befell Sodom and Gomorrah. They had a chance to repent. Yet, there was much more here. The two major issues Isaiah presented to God’s people were their lack of obedience and the connected theme of their lack of awareness of who God is and what He desires. Rather than let the Israelites continue in their ignorance of Him, the Lord wanted to communicate with His people. He wanted to have fellowship with them. He wanted more than empty ritual.

While God was rejecting ritual without relationship, He was not rejecting ritual and sacrifice altogether. This is evident in the next two phrases. Even though their **sins** were **scarlet** and **crimson red**, they could become **white as snow** and **wool**. Such a transformation involved sacrifice and the spilling

of blood. Ironically, the blood of the sin sacrifice would change the crimson red of sin to the white that represents purity. In a play on the theme of red, Isaiah implied that the blood on the hands of his listeners could be washed away by God Himself. In the context of the whole of Scripture, we know that animal sacrifices cannot solve the long-term problem of the sinful nature. Isaiah reminded the people that there had to be a change in their hearts if they wished to settle things with God. If the people were willing to truly settle things with God and have their scarlet sins transformed to white, then they would be obedient to God and His commands. Doing so would move them from being sued for breaking the covenant to a state in which they would **eat the good things of the land**. This is a reference to covenantal blessings that come from obedience. (See Deut. 30:15-20.)

Verse 20

The only other option for the Israelites was continued disobedience, which would ultimately result in death. The Bible gives only two choices for our lives. The first is to submit to God, which leads to life. The second is to **refuse and rebel**, which leads to death. There was no middle ground for Israel, Judah, or us in terms of our response to God. (See Deut. 30:19.) For Isaiah's audience, the punishment of death would come **by the sword**. By using this word, Isaiah forecast the nature of God's judgment. Both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah were destroyed by invading nations. Israel fell to the Assyrians and Judah fell to the Babylonians. In both cases, these foreign nations were the sword in God's hand as He brought His punishment on His people.

Isaiah closed the section with the phrase, **the mouth of the LORD has spoken**. These words demonstrate that what Isaiah had said was by the authority of God. They also closed the debate. There was no more negotiation at this point; all that was left was for the people of God either to listen and obey or to continue in their rebellion. The choice was theirs and ours.

Think of a decision in which you justified doing something you knew is not right in the eyes of God. How do the verses above motivate you to avoid this situation in the future?

VERSE 20

²⁰ But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.”
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

LEAD **GROUP BIBLE STUDY**

FOCUS ATTENTION

BEGIN: As the group arrives, invite them to share about times they felt that someone took their relationship with them for granted. Allow them to express how they felt on the “taken for granted” side of the relationship and how they realized what was going on.

RESPOND: After most have arrived, call attention to the first paragraph on page 10 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG) and the questions included. Direct them to respond silently. Ask: ***When have you ever taken a relationship for granted? How did it affect the relationship? Were you able to do anything to get the relationship back on track?*** (PSG, p. 10) Point out that one relationship we may need to consider when answering these questions is our relationship with God.

TRANSITION: Explain that the Israelites took their relationship with God for granted, and God confronted them about it. Challenge the group to consider during today’s study if they are taking God for granted and the actions they may need to take as a result.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INTRODUCE: Explain that the group is beginning a new study of Isaiah. Share a summary of the Introduction to Isaiah on pages 10–11 of this leader guide. Call attention to **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Themes of Isaiah*), encouraging the group to look for these themes as they go through the study. Lead the group to locate the Outline of Isaiah on page 9 of the Personal Study Guide and point to **Pack Item 2** (*Outline of Isaiah*) that is displayed on the wall. Highlight the first point of the outline to transition into today’s study.

SUMMARIZE: Briefly summarize Isaiah 1:1-9, pointing out that God confronted Israel about them being so far away from Him that they no longer recognized Him. God told Israel His intent to bring them back to Him as a loving Father would bring back a wayward child.

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Isaiah 1:10-15, while the rest of the group looks for ways the people of Israel offended God.

IDENTIFY: Lead the group to identify the different ways the worship of the Israelites offended God. Allow them to include why the action was offensive. Lead the group to explore possible reasons that their worship practices had become unacceptable.

DISCUSS: *What attitudes might have made these practices unacceptable?*

STUDY: Focus on verses 13-15. Place the group into pairs, designating one person as the Exodus person and the other as the Deuteronomy person. Call attention to the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 14), directing each person to locate the passage from their assigned book. Allow partners to complete

the Bible Skill, directing them to the Personal Study Guide for additional insight. Invite volunteers to share their findings.

DISCUSS: *What are causes and ways believers today may fall into a pattern of unacceptable worship of the Lord? What warnings should we draw from Judah's mistakes?* (PSG, p. 15) *How should we approach God when we worship Him?*

TRANSITION: *Isaiah delivered God's remedy for their unacceptable worship.*

READ: Direct the group to silently read Isaiah 1:16-17 and circle the commands given.

CHART: On a writing surface, list the nine commands found in Isaiah 1:16-17. Lead the group to compare various Bible translations, looking for different ways the commands are worded. Record any variances next to the corresponding command. Guide the group to suggest synonyms for each word. Use information from Explore the Text (p. 18 of this book) and the Personal Study Guide (p. 16) as needed.

ASK: *How does following these commands fix the problems identified in verses 10-15? How is following these commands an expression of faith in God?*

DISCUSS: *If being devoted to God in faithful obedience does not earn our salvation, then why is it necessary for believers to be faithfully obedient to God?* (PSG, p. 16)

READ: Encourage the group to listen for the choice given as someone reads aloud Isaiah 1:18-20.

DISCUSS: Highlight verse 18, characterizing God as taking the initiative.

ASK: *How does God take the initiative today to bring people into a relationship with Him?*

How does His approach today compare with the approach found in Isaiah 1? (PSG, p. 17)

HIGHLIGHT: Explain that verse 18 is the memory verse for this week. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Memory Verses Bookmark*), challenging the group to memorize verse 18 this week.

CLARIFY: Call attention to the Key Doctrine (Salvation; PSG, p. 16). Emphasize that God was calling the people to repent and turn to Him. Note that God continues to make that offer today.

ASK: *How important is the message of repentance to the message of the gospel? How important is its message to believers?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

REVIEW: Direct the group to review Isaiah 1:10-20, looking for what God seeks in those who worship Him.

ASK: *What do these actions reveal about the nature of worship?* (PSG, p. 11)

SUMMARIZE: Reintroduce **Pack Item 3** (*Poster: Themes of Isaiah*). Lead the group to identify any of the themes that were in today's passage. Refer them to Apply the Text (PSG, p. 18) for assistance.

RESPOND: Prior to the group time, select one of the question sets under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 18). Lead the group to respond to the selected questions. You may choose to lead them to respond silently, challenging them to revisit this section later in the day.

PRAY: Conclude the group time with prayer, thanking God for taking the initiative to call us back to Him. Ask for courage to repent and return to Him when He confronts us about our own sin.

OPTIONS

Consider these options to customize your group time. For additional questions, consult *QuickSource*. To use a current event to introduce or conclude the group time, go to Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible (click on Weekly Adult Extra under the Resources drop-down menu).

MUSIC

Secure a copy of “Come, Let Us Reason,” by Ken Medema. Play the song as a tool for memorizing Isaiah 1:18. (The song is based on the words of the verse.)

REFLECTIVE

Prior to the group time, develop a case study that portrays a person being taken for granted in a friendship, possibly one friend who always calls on the other friend for assistance, but is never available when the other friend needs help or wants to visit. When the group arrives, provide copies of the case study and direct them to discuss how they might advise the friend who is being taken for granted.

DRAMA

Pre-enlist a person to create a dramatic reading of Isaiah 1:10-20. Coach them to do so as if a loving father was confronting a wayward child. Instead of reading the passage throughout the session, invite the volunteer to present each passage section at that time. After each presentation, lead the group to discuss the emotions felt as if they were the child or the father.

ART

Gather paper and acrylic paints.

After the first passage is read, call attention to the paper and paints. Invite a volunteer to select a paint color and add images to the painting to express the mood reflected in that passage. Encourage others to add to the painting after each passage section is read. At the conclusion, note the different colors

and images included. Lead the group to discuss how the final art expresses the point of today’s session (God confronts His people about the consequences of their actions).

VISUAL

Print images of street signs (Yield, Stop, U-Turn, Falling Rocks, etc.).

As each passage is read, call attention to the images of various street signs which have been placed on a table. Review the meaning of each sign. Lead the group to select the one sign they believe best illustrates the point of that passage section. Attach the agreed upon sign to a display wall. At the conclusion of the group time, guide the group to review the selected signs and the summary statements under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 18). Look for ways the selected signs support the summary statements. Challenge the group to remember the summary statements as they see each sign in the coming week.

RESEARCH

Collect Bible concordances or study Bibles with a concordance.

Call attention to the nine commands in Isaiah 1:16-17. Create teams (two people can be a team) and assign a command to each team. Distribute Bible concordances, directing teams to look for other passages where their assigned command is given. Encourage them to review some of the passages and determine how the uses of the command in other passages clarifies what Isaiah was calling the people to do. Invite volunteers to share insights gained.