

ISAIAH 1 | God's Indictment against Israel

Historical Prologue

1 The vision (הִנֵּן) of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Sin and Its Consequences

2 Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for Yahweh has spoken:

Children have I reared and brought up, but they have broken away (פָשׁׂוּךְ) from me. 3 The ox knows (עַד) its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand (בַּין).

4 Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, seed (זַרְעָה) of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have abandoned (עֹזֶב) Yahweh. They have despised (נָאֵץ) the Holy One of Israel. They are utterly estranged.

5 Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. 6 From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no health (מְתֻחָה) in it, but bruises, sores, and raw wounds. They are not pressed out, bound up, or softened with oil. 7 Your country lies desolate. Your cities are burned with fire. In your very presence, foreigners devour your land. It is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. 8 And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. 9 If Yahweh of hosts had not left us a few survivors (שְׁרִידָה; refugees, escapees), we should have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.

False and True Worship

10 Hear the word (דְּבָרָה) of Yahweh, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the law (תֹּורַה) of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says Yahweh. I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. 12 When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? 13 Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me. New moon, Sabbath, and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. 14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. 16 Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. 17 Learn (לִמְדָה) to do good. Seek justice (טָבַדְמָה). Correct oppression. Bring justice (טָפְשָׁה) to the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause.

God's Grace Argument

18 Come now, let us argue (יִכֹּחַ) together, says Yahweh. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. 19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land. 20 But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword, for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.

Unfaithful City to Faithful City

21 How the faithful city (קְרֵינָה נָאמָנָה) has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. 22 Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water. 23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them.

24 Therefore Yahweh declares, Yahweh of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:

Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and take revenge on my foes. 25 I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your [silver] dross as with potash/lye and remove all your slag. 26 And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness (עִיר הָצָקָה), the faithful city (קְרֵינָה נָאמָנָה).

Destinies of the Righteous and the Wicked

27 Zion will be redeemed (פָּדָא) by justice (טָבַדָּה), and those in her who turn back (בָּשָׁבֶר), by righteousness (הָצָקָה). 28 But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who abandoned Yahweh shall be consumed. 29 For they shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired, and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. 30 For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers and like a garden without water. 31 And the strong (סָבָר) shall become tinder and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them.

Commentary

1. Isaiah at a Glance.

- a. Is 1 sets the stage for the entire book of Isaiah.
- b. Is 1-5 identifies the problem (Israel is sinful yet called), and Is 6 shows the solution (the Holy One must act). The rest of Isaiah works out the implications.¹
- c. The theological context of Is 1 is the Mosaic covenant between Yahweh and Israel.
- d. Because of the Abrahamic covenant, Israel's rebellion is bad news for the Gentiles.
(1) **Ge 12:3** 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

2. Historical Preface (Is 1:1).

- a. **Is 1:1** 1 The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.
- b. This introductory formula follows the pattern of all prophetic books except Ezekiel, Jonah, Haggai, and Zechariah: "The word of Yahweh/oracle/vision which came to the prophet/the prophet saw at such and such a time" (John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:81).
- c. Jewish tradition suggests Amoz was the uncle of Uzziah, making Isaiah of royal blood. However, the name Amoz appears on an ancient seal found in Jerusalem, where he is identified as a scribe (John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:82).
- d. Isaiah prophesied in Judah, but his prophecies extend to Israel and the nations.

3. Rebellious Children Who Don't Understand (Is 1:2-3).

- a. **Is 1:2-3** 2 Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for Yahweh has spoken: Children have I reared and brought up, but they have broken away (**עָזַב**) from me. 3 The ox knows (**עָדָה**) its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand (**גִּבְעָה**).
b. As prosecutor, Isaiah calls all creation to hear God's charge against Israel.
 - (1) **Dt 4:26** 26 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it but will be utterly destroyed.
 - (2) **Dt 30:19** 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your seed may live.
 - (3) **Dt 32:1** 1 Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.
 - (4) **Ps 50:4** 4 [Yahweh] calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people [Israel].
 - (5) **Mic 1:2** 2 Hear, you peoples, all of you. Pay attention, O earth, and all that is in it, and let Lord Yahweh be a witness against you, Yahweh from his holy temple.

¹ John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:21-22.

- (6) **Mic 6:2** 2 Hear, you mountains, the indictment of Yahweh, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for Yahweh has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel.
- c. We are dealing with a God who speaks. He is not silent.
 - d. God is like a father dealing with a rebellious son.
- (1) **Hos 11:1** 1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
- (2) **Dt 32:6** 6 Do you thus repay Yahweh, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?
- e. The stupidest animals know and understand their place more than Israel does.
- (1) In Bible times a donkey was known for its stupidity (J. Martin, *BKC*, 1:1034).
- (2) **Jer 8:7** 7 Even the stork in the heavens knows her times, and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of Yahweh.
- (3) If we go against the grain of the universe, we're going to get splinters.
- (4) "The Lord's dealings with his people are designed to develop true spiritual instincts, a mind-set of attachment to the Lord as automatic and spontaneous as that seen in the animal creation."²
- (5) Israel's failure to understand God is a theme of Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul.
- f. Yahweh has not failed to keep his responsibilities under the Mosaic covenant.

4. The Holy One amidst a Sinful Nation (Is 1:4).

- a. **Is 1:4** 4 Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, seed (**עֵדָה**) of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have abandoned (**עֹזֶב**) Yahweh. They have despised (**גָּנָן**) the Holy One of Israel. They are utterly estranged.
- b. The sinners of Isaiah's day have learned their sinful ways from their parents.
 - (1) **Ge 3:15** 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed.
 - (2) **Mt 3:7** 7 When [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
- c. "Holy One of Israel" is Isaiah's special name for Yahweh. We will see it often.
- d. As the Holy One amidst such sinfulness, what is God expected to do?
- e. Sin loads us down, causes us to do evil, makes us deal corruptly, and estranges us from God and one another.

5. Israel Sick from Head to Foot (Is 1:5-6).

- a. **Is 1:5-6** 5 Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. 6 From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no health (**מְחֻנָּה**) in it, but bruises, sores, and raw wounds. They are not pressed out, bound up, or softened with oil.
- b. It is senseless to keep sinning, yet we do it anyway. We are caught in a downward spiral of destruction.

² Alec C. Motyer, 43.

- c. Israel's sin has made her sick emotionally, intellectually, morally, psychologically, and relationally.
 - (1) **Hos 5:13** 13 When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound, then Ephraim went to Assyria, and sent to the great king. But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound. See *The Depravity of Man*.
- d. There is only one who can heal Israel.
 - (1) **Ex 15:26** 26 If you [Israel] will diligently listen to the voice of Yahweh your God, do that which is right in his eyes, give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am Yahweh your healer (*רַפְאָךְ יְהוָה*).
 - (2) **Is 30:26** 26 The light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when Yahweh binds up the brokenness of his people [Israel], and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.
 - (3) **Is 53:5** 5 [The Servant] was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.
 - (4) **Mt 4:23-24** 23 [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. 24 So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them.
 - (5) **Mt 9:12** 12 Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

6. Like a Shack in a Cucumber Patch (Is 1:7-8).

- a. **Is 1:7-8** 7 Your country lies desolate. Your cities are burned with fire. In your very presence, foreigners devour your land. It is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. 8 And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.
- b. Isaiah must have written this during the invasion of Syria and Israel in 735 bc or the Assyrian invasion in 701 bc.
- c. Divine discipline has come upon Israel, just as predicted in Deuteronomy. See *Mosaic Covenant*.
- d. The daughter of Zion is intimate title for Jerusalem.
 - (1) **Zec 9:9** 9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you. Righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey....
- e. Because time was precious during harvest, families built temporary lean-tos in the fields and camped there until harvest was over (John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 91).
- f. Sin has made Israel pathetic. She has become a shadow of her former self.
 - (1) Nations decline because of their spiritual condition. Sin destroys national well-being and security.

7. Almost Like Sodom and Gomorrah (Is 1:9).

- a. **Is 1:9** 9 If Yahweh of hosts had not left us a few survivors (שִׁירֵי; refugees, escapees), we should have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.
- b. This is the first mention of the remnant of Israel, a crucial concept in Isaiah.
- c. Paul quotes this verse in Romans 9 in his discussion of the Jewish remnant.
- (1) **Ro 9:29** 29 As Isaia predicted, If the Lord of hosts had not left us seed, we would have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah.
- d. To be compared to Sodom and Gomorrah is the worst imaginable insult for Judah.

8. False Worship and True Worship (1:10-17).

- a. **Is 1:10-17** 10 Hear the word (דְּבָרֶךָ) of Yahweh, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the law (תֹּורַתְךָ) of our God, you people of Gomorrah! 11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says Yahweh. I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. 12 When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? 13 Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me. New moon, Sabbath, and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. 14 Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. 15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. 16 Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. 17 Learn (לִמְדָה) to do good. Seek justice (צִדְקָה). Correct oppression. Bring justice (צִדְקָה) to the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause.
- b. If Israel wants to return to God, she must first of all listen to his word.
- c. False worship.
 - (1) Israel rebelled against God while continuing her religious activity. Her religious rituals have become just “the noise of feet on the pavement.”
 - (2) Man often look religious when he’s really a rebel.
 - (3) God is not impressed with our outward show of religion.
 - (a) **Pr 21:27** 27 The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. How much more when he brings it with evil intent.
 - (b) **Ro 2:1-29** 28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.
 - (4) If we cherish sin in our heart, God is within his rights to ignore us.
 - (a) **Ps 66:18** 18 If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, Yahweh would not have listened.
 - (5) We are to closely examine our hearts and ask whether our interior life is really pleasing to God.

- (6) “Even doing that which God has commanded becomes wrong when the heart is not in it and when it does not affect the believer’s conduct.”³
- (7) “Because religious ceremony tends to put God in the past, to become magical, to be man-centered and man-pleasing, to make God familiar, and to blur his moral demands, it is a positive threat to the kind of present relationship with God that Isaiah and the other prophets knew was possible.”⁴
- d. True worship.
 - (1) True worshippers worship the Father in spirit and truth.
 - (a) **Jn 4:23-24** 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.
 - (2) Seeking justice for the poor and oppressed, widows and orphans, is true worship.
 - (a) **Mic 6:8** 8 He has told you, O man, what is good. And what does Yahweh require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
 - (b) **Jas 1:27** 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.
 - (c) **1 Jn 3:17** 17 If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?

9. God’ Grace Argument (1:18-20).

- a. **Is 1:18-20** 18 Come now, let us argue [as in a lawsuit] (חִכָּה) together, says Yahweh. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. 19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land. 20 But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword, for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.
- b. The word “reason” is a law term used of arguing, convincing, or deciding a court case. The people are to be convinced that God is in the right and they are in the wrong (J. Martin, *BKC*, 1:1036).
- c. The logic behind God’s argument is the cross of Christ.
- d. Blessing comes to those who are obedient to the cross of Christ.
- e. Cursing comes to those who refuse and rebel agains the cross of Christ.

10. Unfaithful City to Faithful City (1:21-26).

- a. **Is 1:21-26** 21 How the faithful city (קְרֵית וְאַמְנוֹת) has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. 22 Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water. 23 Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow’s cause does not come to them. 24 Therefore

³ J. Vernon McGee.

⁴ J. P. Hyatt, quoted in John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:99.

Yahweh declares, Yahweh of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and take revenge on my foes. 25 I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your [silver] dross as with potash/lye and remove all your slag. 26 And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness (**עִירַת־צְדָקָה** קָדוֹשָׁה), the faithful city (**קָרְבָּנָה** קָרְבָּנָה).

- b. “Faithful city” in vv. 21 and 26 form an inclusio. The question is, how will the unfaithful city become faithful again, so that Yahweh may bless the nations through her?
 - (1) **Zec 8:3** 3 I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city....
- c. See *Spiritual Adultery*.
 - (1) **Hos 3:1** 1 Yahweh said to me [Hosea], Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as Yahweh loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.
 - d. An ungodly people deserves ungodly leadership.
 - e. When a people turns from God, injustice becomes common.
 - f. For Israel’s purity to be restored, God himself must act.
 - g. For Israel, discipline is inevitable, but restoration and return are equally inevitable.
 - h. God’s final purpose is not destruction but blessing achieved through purification.
 - (1) “God does not contend with us as though he wished to pursue our sins to the utmost.”⁵
 - (2) “There is hope, but in God’s way, not ours.”⁶
 - (3) “The Lord does not destroy the forest of human pride to leave us a field of stumps (6:13). Rather, the destruction is in order that the true glory of humanity, that which it derives from its Lord, may appear (66:9, 13, 21, 22).”⁷

11. Differing Destinies of the Redeemed and the Rebellious (1:28-31).

- a. **Is 1:27-30** 27 Zion will be redeemed (**פָּדוֹת**) by justice (**מִשְׁפָּט**), and those in her who turn back (**בָּשָׁבֵעַ**) by righteousness (**צְדָקָה**). 28 But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who abandoned Yahweh shall be consumed. 29 For they shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired, and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. 30 For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers and like a garden without water. 31 And the strong (**זָהָר**) shall become tinder and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them.
- b. The redemption of Zion will take place. But what will be the price, and how will that price be paid? To redeem means to “pay the ransom price.”
 - (1) **Ex 13:13** 13 Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.

⁵ J. Calvin.

⁶ John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:101.

⁷ John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:111.

- (2) **Is 35:10** 10 The ransomed of Yahweh shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
- c. Some will repent/turn back. Others won't. It will be up to each individual to decide.
 - (1) The Messianic kingdom will happen. It's up to us whether we want to be part of it.
 - (2) God loves all human beings, but human beings can choose to remain his enemies.
- d. In Isaiah's day, oaks and gardens were places of idolatrous sex practices.
 - (1) **Is 57:5** 5 ... You who burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree....
 - (2) **Is 65:3** 3 ... A people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks....
 - (3) **Is 66:17** 17 Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating pig's flesh, the abomination, and mice, shall come to an end together, declares Yahweh.
 - (4) **Hos 4:13** 13 They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery.
- e. God created us for fruitfulness.
 - (1) **Ps 1:3-4** 3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. 4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
 - (2) **Jer 17:8** 8 He is like a tree planted by water that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.
- f. But the wicked end up producing nothing.
 - (1) **Dt 29:23** 23 ... The whole land burned out with brimstone and salt, nothing sown and nothing growing, where no plant can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, which Yahweh overthrew in his anger and wrath....
 - (2) **Am 2:9** 9 It was I who destroyed the Amorite before [Israel], whose height was like the height of the cedars and who was as strong (**יָדָן**) as the oaks. I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath.
- g. The destiny of the unbelieving wicked is unquenchable fire.
 - (1) **Is 66:24** 24 They shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.
 - (2) Is 1 ends just as the book of *Isaiah* ends, with unquenchable fire.
 - (3) "A striking feature of the section is this interchange between judgment and hope. The prophet moves back and forth between these two themes and although he concludes the section on a note of impending doom, it is still clear that doom is not to be the final outcome."⁸
- h. One's response to the redemption hinted at in Isaiah 1 makes all the difference. We will learn more about how this redemption will work as we proceed through *Isaiah*. This is only the first chapter!

⁸ John N. Oswalt, *NICOT*, 1:80.