

Lesson 1

Needed: A Messiah

God's grace is greater than sin.

Isaiah 1

“Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be a white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18).

Our lives are filled with fakes. We have fake leather, fake plants, fake jewelry, fake furs, fake suntans, fake hair, fake food, and even fake teeth. In fact, it is quite plausible to say that no one can get through a day without using something fake. For the most part, we don't care if something is not real. Without thinking twice, we guzzle down “orange juice” for breakfast that actually is mostly water and a smorgasbord of chemicals.

While we are okay eating fake food with our fake teeth, we are usually not okay with insincere people. We want our relationships to be real. God is no different. He wants us to be real with Him, too.

Getting Started

1. Approximately how many different fake items do you own?
2. Why do most people want their relationships to be real?

Searching the Scriptures

At the time of Isaiah, Judah was in need of getting real. Their lives were fake and God challenged them about it. God's challenge also translates to our need to be real with God.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell (722 BC) to the Assyrians during the reign of Ahaz, the third king mentioned in Isaiah 1:1. The Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians about a century after Isaiah's time. (The final destruction of Jerusalem occurred in 586 BC.) Isaiah witnessed Israel's fall as well as the Lord's threats against Judah. Isaiah warned Judah of her need to turn to God to avoid a fate similar to Israel's. He predicted that Judah would be taken captive by Babylon; but he also prophesied of Judah's return from captivity and of the ultimate deliverance God would bring through the Messiah's ministry. Today's study reveals Judah's need for a Messiah and anticipates God's provision of one.

You could call the opening chapter of Isaiah "The Great Arraignment." God set forth His grievances against Judah, illustrated the evidences, exhorted the people to change their ways, and challenged them to a trial.

Ignorance of Their Relationship to God

God was the speaker in this chapter. He called upon Heaven and earth as witnesses of the relationship between His people and Him: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken" (v. 2). Israel's ignorance shown in her rebellion, stupidity, and sin.

3. Read Isaiah 1:2. What do we learn about the people of Judah by God's comparison of them to rebellious children?

Isaiah compared Israel to a rebellious child who, despite his good upbringing, ignorantly rebels against his parents, who gave him life.

Most people consider the ox a stupid animal, and they know that the donkey is stubborn, but both the ox and the donkey manifest more sense than Israel did. Even an animal knows its owner, who feeds it (v. 3). But Israel was ignorant of the God Who created and sustained her.

Note the words of verse 4, which depict the people's sin. The people of Israel spurned God and turned from Him, showing their ignorance. How different from what God intended for His people!

Indifference to Chastisement

God had disciplined Israel's sin, but the nation was indifferent to it. He asked, "Why should ye be stricken any more?" (v. 5). Their continuing rebellion brought repeated punishment; however, it was without effect.

Isaiah compared the nation to a bruised and bloody body. Outside (the head) and inside (the heart), from bottom (the sole of the foot) to top (the head), the body was afflicted. The various words Isaiah used to describe the body's injuries reflect different sources for the hurt. "Wounds" are from a sword; "bruises" the result of a blow; "putrefying sores" from a whipping. Although God had tried to get Israel's attention through discipline, she did not respond and made no attempt to correct her problems. The nation remained indifferent to God's chastening hand.

4. What might be some reasons a person would ignore God's chastening hand?

The Assyrians did not conquer Judah, but they did attack, even threatening the city of Jerusalem (see Isaiah 36 and 37). Only the hand of God kept the whole nation from being conquered.

Insincerity in Their Worship

The Jews of Isaiah's day probably felt they didn't deserve God's punishment. After all, they were still quite religious. Even though they still held to God's prescribed sacrificial system, they had abandoned

Him in their hearts. In verses 10–15, God addressed the matter of Judah's worship.

5. Read Isaiah 1:10–15. What three words would you use to describe Judah's worship of God?

The people offered unacceptable sacrifices. Why were they unacceptable? In short, it was because Judah's worship had become a matter of form; their relationship had decayed into superficial religion. They were guilty going through the motions with no sincerity of heart in their worship. The people had shown as little respect for God as an animal who tramples something underfoot (v. 12). Their worship was an "abomination" (v. 13), a word usually used of pagan worship.

Judah even observed the appointed holy days, but God had tired of the people's observances since they did not observe those days with a sincere heart. God rejected their empty formality so much, that He would not even hear their prayers. They were as guilty as murderers were; their hands were "full of blood" (v. 15).

6. What questions could you ask yourself as you examined your sinfulness and sincerity before God?

Change Your Path

Having demonstrated that His people were sinful, both in act and in attitude, God presented them with a challenge. He wanted them to stop their wicked ways (v. 16).

7. Read Isaiah 1:16. Why are the words "before mine eyes" so important in God's instructions to Judah?

Judah needed to do more than just stop sinning; they also needed to begin doing good (v. 17).

8. Read Isaiah 1:17. In His instructions to Judah, why would God mention doing good to rather insignificant orphans and widows?

Orphans and widows were a downtrodden class of people, usually destitute and preyed upon by the unscrupulous and without anyone to champion their cause. God would see justice for them.

Consider His Pardon

Isaiah 1:18 is actually a challenge to go to trial. In view of the case that God had against His people, there was little hope for them. Their sins were as brilliantly red as scarlet, as bright as crimson, and God had to judge them as such. Only when the offender acknowledges his guilt can the offended pardon him or her. Hence, God proposed a trial in which He could find Israel only guilty. Then He would offer pardon and cleansing. Their blood-colored sins could become as white as snow.

How can God offer pardon to sinful man? We find the answers to these questions in the redemptive work of Christ. At this point in Israel's history, Messiah had not yet come. The pardon God offered was based on the belief that the Messiah would come. Later in the book, Isaiah prophesied of the coming Messiah and His pardon.

An individual's response to the challenge of verse 18 determined whether he or she would experience blessing or judgment; it was either eat or be eaten. Respond and eat (v. 19): The obedient would enjoy the bountiful harvest God had promised in Deuteronomy 28:3–6. Or, refuse and be eaten (v. 20): The disobedient rebels would be eaten (“devoured”) by the enemy (“sword”) as promised in Deuteronomy 28:45–52. The seriousness of these promises and warnings is underscored by the words “for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” (v. 20).

9. Based on God's warnings and promises in Isaiah 1:18–20, what would you expect Judah's response to be?

Ultimately, Judah doesn't repent and do good works. Looking back at their choices, it is easy to be critical of them. However, we as believers today can be just as stubborn and ignorant of our sin.

In the final section of chapter 1, God continued to point out the sins of His people and warned that judgment would come. This judgment had the goal of getting His people to turn from their sins.

Corruption

The decline of the nation was evident. In the past, Jerusalem had been faithful to God, but in Isaiah's day, she had broken her covenant vows like a harlot (v. 21).

Silver and wine were valuable commodities in the ancient Middle East. But the Israelites were no longer valuable; instead they were as worthless as the residue left after silver had been smelted ("dross") or as worthless as diluted, watered-down wine.

The corrupt leaders who ignored the plight of orphans and widows were also evidence of the nation's decline (v. 23). Furthermore, bribery was rampant; justice was only for those who could afford to pay the bribe.

Correction

In verse 24 God promised that sin would not continue indefinitely. Judgment was sure to occur, and He would rid Himself ("ease me") of the wicked, even if those people were supposedly His followers.

God didn't intend His chastisement to be vindictive but rather to accomplish a purpose.

10. Isaiah 1:25. Why is purging dross a good analogy for what God wanted to do to Judah?

In the Millennium, Jerusalem will once again be a faithful city. During that time, God will reinstitute the ancient system of judges to rule the kingdom, as He did before the kings.

Conversion

The purpose of chastisement is to bring man to repentance. Unfortunately, not all people respond the way God would want. Some repent (v. 27), but others rebel (v. 28).

God will purge rebels from the kingdom, leaving only the faithful remnant. Sadly, the majority of Judah rejected the pardon God provided. The final verses of Isaiah 1 describe the fate.

11. Read Isaiah 1:29–31. These verses give a bleak outlook for those in Judah who refused to repent. How do you see God's grace even in these bleak verses?

Making It Personal

12. Write a statement of praise about God's grace.

13. Review the self-examination questions you listed under question 6. Take time this week to make sure you are living a genuine life before God.

14. Memorize Isaiah 1:18.