

LESSON 1

Rebellious Children

I have raised children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.

— Isaiah 1:2

Judah was devastated, and Judah was devout, and Isaiah puts those two facts in the same chapter on purpose.

WHERE WE ARE

Isaiah preached in Jerusalem from about 740 BC to about 700, under four kings. Chapter 1 is not his first sermon. It is the preface he set at the front of the collection, and the land it describes is already stripped: cities burned, fields eaten by foreigners, Jerusalem standing alone. That fits the years after Assyria's invasion of 701 BC, when Sennacherib took forty-six walled towns of Judah and stopped at the capital. The question it answers: what does God think of a people who kept up the worship through all of it?

Introduction

The book opens with God taking His own people to court.

That isn't how a reader expects a prophet to start. We expect a prediction, or a vision. Instead the heavens and the earth are summoned as witnesses, an indictment is read out, and the defendant is the nation God raised. Isaiah didn't preach this sermon first. He put it first.¹ After a lifetime of preaching he reached back, chose this message, and set it at the front of the scroll so nobody could read the sixty-five chapters that follow without first hearing the charge.

The charge will surprise a reader who has been told that the prophets were angry about idolatry. Idolatry is there at the end. But the loudest paragraph in the chapter is about worship that was going on, in the right place, at the right times, with the right animals. God says He couldn't stand it.

That's the problem chapter 1 poses, and it doesn't go away for sixty-five more. A people can be ruined and religious at the same time. They can keep every appointment on the calendar and still be, in God's own words, rebellious children.

The Court Is Called (1:1–4)

The heading names four kings and one audience, *the vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem*, 1:1. Then the courtroom opens.

Listen, heavens, and pay attention, earth, for the LORD has spoken, 1:2. Isaiah does not stop to explain why creation gets called. Moses did the same when he laid the covenant before Israel and told the people that

heaven and earth were standing as witnesses (Deut 30:19; 31:28). Creation was there when the terms were given. This testifies that the terms were known.²

The charge follows. *I have raised children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.* God doesn't say His subjects revolted. He says His children did. This is a Father who fed them and got them on their feet, and the ingratitude is the whole weight of the sentence.

Verse 3 makes it worse by comparison. *The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's feeding trough, but Israel does not know; my people do not understand.* Nobody in the ancient world kept an ox for its brains. That is exactly what gives the line its sting.³ The dullest animal on the place can find its way home to the man who feeds it. Judah couldn't.

Verse 4 stacks the words up. Four names for what they were: *nation, people, brood, children.* Four names for what they had become: *sinful, weighed down with iniquity, evildoers, depraved.* Three verbs finish the paragraph. *They have abandoned the LORD; they have despised the Holy One of Israel; they have turned their backs on him.*⁴

Mark that title as it goes by. *The Holy One of Israel* is Isaiah's own name for God, and this is the first of its twenty-five appearances in the book. He uses it here, inside an indictment, long before he ever uses it inside a promise.

Beaten and Still Rebelling (1:5–9)

Why do you want more beatings? Why do you keep on rebelling? 1:5.

That's a father's question and a physician's at once. God had already disciplined this nation, and the discipline hadn't taken. So Isaiah draws the country as a body somebody has worked over: *the whole head is hurt, and the whole heart is sick. From the sole of the foot even to the head, no spot is uninjured—wounds, welts, and festering sores not cleansed, bandaged, or soothed with oil,* 5–6.

He drops the figure and gives the facts. *Your land is desolate, your cities burned down; foreigners devour your fields right in front of you,* 7. That last phrase is the humiliation. They had to stand there and watch.

One city was left. *Daughter Zion is abandoned like a shelter in a vineyard, like a shack in a cucumber field, like a besieged city,* 8. A shelter in a vineyard was a lean-to of branches thrown together for the man who guarded the harvest, and it came down when the harvest was over. That's what Jerusalem looked like from a distance. A temporary thing, standing by itself in a stripped field.

Commentators divide over which invasion Isaiah has in view, and honest readers can too.⁵ The wreckage fits Sennacherib's campaign of 701 BC, when the Assyrian annals boast of forty-six walled towns taken and Hezekiah shut up in his capital. Others put it in the Aramean and Israelite attack of about 735. Isaiah never says, and the silence is deliberate. His interest is in who sent the army.

Verse 9 turns. *If the LORD of Armies had not left us a few survivors, we would be like Sodom, we would resemble Gomorrah.* Notice the pronoun. *Us.* Isaiah stands inside the guilty nation and doesn't step out of it. And notice what he says the difference was between Jerusalem and Sodom. It wasn't that Jerusalem had behaved better. God left survivors, and Sodom had none.

Hold on to that word. *Survivors*. It grows into one of the largest ideas in the book, and Paul will pick it up and build an argument on it.

The Worship God Could Not Stand (1:10–17)

Verse 9 says Judah was not destroyed like Sodom. Verse 10 says Judah is behaving like her. *Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah!* In destruction the comparison was near. In wickedness it's exact.

What follows is the paragraph most readers never see coming.⁶

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, 11. The temple was busy. The offerings were expensive. The calendar was kept: New Moons and Sabbaths, and the calling of solemn assemblies, 13. And God's answer to all of it is stop. Your incense is detestable to me, 13. I hate your New Moons and prescribed festivals. They have become a burden to me; I am tired of putting up with them, 14.

He isn't abolishing the sacrificial system. He commanded it, and the same paragraph names the Sabbath and prayer alongside the offerings, so a reader who takes this as a rejection of ritual has to throw out those two as well.⁷ Read the end of verse 13 again. *I cannot stand iniquity with a festival.* The trouble is in the pairing. Judah had taken the two halves of what God gave through Moses, the sacrifice that covered sin and the obedient life the sacrifice was meant to sustain, and had kept one and quietly dropped the other.

Verse 12 is the sharpest line in the paragraph. *When you come to appear before me, who requires this from you—this trampling of my courts?* Trampling. All that traffic in and out of the temple, and what God heard was feet.⁸

He gets to prayer, and prayer is the last thing a religious man expects to be told is unwelcome. *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.* Why? The verse finishes its own sentence. *Your hands are covered with blood, 15.*

And then, with no transition at all, nine commands. *Wash yourselves. Cleanse yourselves. Remove your evil deeds from my sight. Stop doing evil. Learn to do what is good. Pursue justice. Correct the oppressor. Defend the rights of the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause, 16–17.* Three groups of three. Get clean. Change your mind. Change your city.

Look at where the list lands. It lands on a widow with nobody to take her case and a fatherless child whose rights nobody is defending. God measures a nation's worship by what happens to the people in it who can't pay anyone back.

Come, Let's Settle This (1:18–31)

The chapter could have ended at verse 17 and been perfectly fair. It doesn't.

Come, let's 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, 18.

Scarlet was the color on their hands back in verse 15. Snow and wool are white without being bleached; they are white by nature. That's the promise. The stain comes out, and what's underneath is clean.

It comes with terms. *If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land. But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword*, 19–20.⁹ Two verbs on each side. Willing and obedient. Refuse and rebel. The Hebrew leaves a grim pun sitting in the middle of it: eat, or be eaten.

Now a lament. *The faithful town—what an adulteress she has become!*, 21. Isaiah is grieving over a city, and he gives two pictures of what's happened to her. *Your silver has become dross to be discarded, your beer is diluted with water*, 22. Both say the same thing. Something valuable is still in the mixture and can't be got at, because the whole batch is ruined. The rulers show it plainest. *They all love graft and chase after bribes. They do not defend the rights of the fatherless, and the widow's case never comes before them*, 23.

So God says He will do to the city what a smelter does to bad silver. *I will turn my hand against you and will burn away your dross completely*, 25. Everywhere else in the Old Testament, God turning His hand against a people is bad news. Here it opens into a purging and a restoration, and the punishment and the mercy turn out to be one act.¹⁰ *I will restore your judges to what they were at first*, 26. *Afterward you will be called the Righteous City, a Faithful Town*.

The chapter closes by splitting the city in two. *Zion will be redeemed by justice, those who repent, by righteousness*, 27. *At the same time both rebels and sinners will be broken, and those who abandon the LORD will perish*, 28. The last verses name what the rebels had actually been choosing all along: sacred trees and garden shrines, the fertility religion of the neighbors, which promised life straight out of the ground. Isaiah tells them they will get what they worshiped. *You will become like an oak whose leaves are withered, and like a garden without water*, 30.

The last word of Isaiah's first chapter is *flames*, and nobody to put them out.

Looking to Christ

Verse 9 said God left *a few survivors*. Paul quotes that verse.

In Romans 9 he is arguing that God's word to Israel has not failed, even though most of Israel has not believed. His evidence is Isaiah. *And just as Isaiah predicted: If the Lord of Armies had not left us offspring, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been made like Gomorrah*, Rom 9:29. Two verses earlier he had quoted Isaiah on the same theme, 10:22–23 in Rom 9:27–28. The argument runs like this. God has always dealt with this nation by keeping a remnant, and the remnant survives on mercy rather than merit. That is precisely what Isaiah said in 1:9.

So the survivors of chapter 1 are not a footnote to an old invasion. They're the first sighting of the people God is gathering in His Son out of Israel and out of the nations, and they exist for the reason Isaiah gave. The LORD of Armies left them.

Applying the Text

Ask what your religion has changed lately. Judah's problem was never attendance. They were at the temple on the right days with the right offerings, and God called the traffic noise. A schedule you keep

faithfully and a life you never alter is the exact arrangement this chapter is describing. What has your worship changed in the last year in the way you spend, speak, or forgive?

Let a hard season do its work. *Why do you want more beatings? Why do you keep on rebelling?* God's discipline had come down on Judah and left no mark that mattered. Trouble by itself makes nobody better. It only makes plain what was already there. When the last difficult stretch of your life was over, what had changed? That it hurt is not the useful part.

Measure your congregation by who it defends. The nine commands of 16–17 end on the fatherless and the widow, the two people in Judah with no legal standing and nobody to take their case. Every congregation has their equivalent, and everybody knows who they are. Find one this month and take his case.

Take the offer of verse 18 on the terms it comes with. *Come, let's settle this* is one of the kindest sentences in the Old Testament, and people quote it by itself constantly. The next two verses supply the terms: *willing and obedient*. God will deal with the scarlet, and He will change what you are while He does it.

For Discussion

1. Why does God summon the heavens and the earth in 1:2? What does that say about how far the nation could plead ignorance?
2. List the four things Judah is called in 1:4 and the four things Judah had become. What is Isaiah doing by setting the two lists side by side?
3. In 1:11–14 God says He is tired of worship He Himself commanded. How does something good become detestable? Can you name the point where that happens?

4. Verse 9 says the only difference between Jerusalem and Sodom was the survivors God chose to leave. What does that do to your sense of why your own life has gone as well as it has?

5. The nine commands of 1:16–17 end with the fatherless and the widow. Who fills those two roles where you worship, and could you name them right now without looking?

6. Name one religious habit of your own that has been running on schedule and doing nothing. What would it take to close the gap between the habit and the life?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 2: Two Mountains (Isaiah 2:1–4:6)

Isaiah lifts his eyes off the wreckage and sees a mountain with the nations climbing it and swords being beaten into plows. Then he looks back down at the city in front of him and finds silver, horses, idols, and a proud people about to be flattened. The whole section runs between those two pictures of the same place.

Before you come: read Isaiah 2 through 4 in one sitting, and mark every time something is called high, exalted, or lifted up. Notice carefully who is being raised and who is being brought down.

¹ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 97. On 1:1 he argues that this chapter was written late in Isaiah's ministry and set at the front of the collection as an introduction to the whole book rather than a title for chapters 1–12, which would account for how much of its vocabulary it shares with chapters 65–66.

² Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 101. On 1:2 he traces the summons of heaven and earth to the covenant witnesses of Deuteronomy and prefers to call the chapter an arraignment rather than a full covenant lawsuit, since the charges are laid and terms offered before any verdict is reached.

³ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3 vols., NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965–72), 1:40. On 1:3 he points out that neither the ox nor the donkey was regarded as a clever animal, and that this is the force of the comparison rather than an accident of it.

⁴ J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 50. On 1:4 he sets four nouns of privilege against four descriptions of the lost ideal and reads *turned their backs* as turning themselves back into the aliens they had been before God redeemed them.

⁵ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 51. On 1:5–8 he holds that the choice lies between the Aramean and Israelite incursion of about 735 BC and the Assyrian attack of 701, and that the identification matters far less than Isaiah's view of history, in which enemy armies serve God's moral government.

⁶ James E. Smith, *The Major Prophets*, Old Testament Survey Series (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1992), 30–31. He divides the chapter into accusation (1:2–15), invitation (1:16–20), lamentation (1:21–23), and purgation (1:24–31), and cites Leupold calling the paragraph on worship the most scathing indictment of formalism in Scripture.

⁷ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 52. On 1:11–15 he denies that Isaiah is calling for morality without ritual, since on that reading the passage would repudiate the Sabbath and prayer along with the sacrifices; the charge is that Judah had separated the means of grace from the obedient life they were given to sustain.

⁸ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 53. On 1:12 he catches the sense of *trampling* in a sentence worth keeping: a religion of ritual is only the noise of feet on a pavement.

⁹ Smith, Gary, *Isaiah 1–39*, 110. On 1:18 he prefers a modal rendering, "they may become as white as snow," on the ground that the promise is governed by the conditions stated in 1:19–20 rather than standing free of them.

¹⁰ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 56. On 1:25 he notes that turning the hand against someone is elsewhere always a hostile act, and that here it opens into purging and restoration, binding God's punitive and restorative work into a single act.