

Rebellion, Repentance, and the Greatest Invitation (Isaiah 1)

Isaiah: Trusting the God Who Judges, Saves, and Restores
Zionsville Fellowship | September 13, 2026 | Drew Hunter

We're beginning a new series in Isaiah.

We often rotate between the Old and New Testaments for our sermon series. We were in the New Testament this summer, so now we're returning to the Old.

But why Isaiah? This is a challenging book to understand. But it's worth the effort. I encourage you to read it as much as you can over the course of this series. You can use the ESV scripture journal if you want to mark it up and take notes.

As we start, here are six reasons why we'll be in Isaiah.

1. *Isaiah helps us grasp the story of the Bible.* The more you understand Isaiah, the more you will understand the rest of the Bible. The New Testament quotes Isaiah more than any other book other than Psalms. The more time you spend in Isaiah, the more you see it in the New Testament.
2. *Isaiah shows us Jesus.* It is filled with promises and prophecies and predictions of him. It speaks of his birth, his ministry of healing, his teaching, his humility, his suffering, his substitutionary death, his victorious resurrection, his sending the church on mission as witnesses, his creating a people from both Jews and Gentiles, and his return to judge and renew all things. The New Testament draws on Isaiah in order to explain who Jesus is and why he came. If you want to understand Jesus, read Isaiah.
3. *Isaiah leads us to trust God—and to trust him in every kind of circumstance.* Isaiah wrote to Israel in the midst of key moments of national and political crisis. Over and over, he called them to trust God. And Isaiah did this not by just *telling them* to trust God, but by *showing* them God. Isaiah gives us a big vision of God and his grace, so we would trust him in all things.
4. *Isaiah shows us how to live as the church.* Isaiah shows how Israel failed to live up to their calling. They were to be a light to the nations. But they repeatedly failed. They were filled with idolatry, violence, and injustice. In Isaiah God promises to create a new people—from both Jews and Gentiles—who would reflect his character. They would be a light to the world. They would live with justice. And that's what he's doing through the church today.
5. *Isaiah shows us our mission as his people.* The New Testament repeatedly refers back to Isaiah to clarify our mission. Acts shows us how Isaiah's promises are fulfilled—that the messiah Jesus came to restore Israelites, and then bring in non-Israelites into the church as well. And that this gospel would spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. And it's still spreading today. So, Isaiah encourages us to participate in this global mission.

6. *Isaiah sets our hope on a new creation to come.* Isaiah ultimately points us not just to heaven, but to a new creation. It says God will create a new earth. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. We will live with him forever. The very last chapters of Revelation, the last chapters of the Bible, draw on Isaiah in order to paint the picture of our eternal future. Isaiah teaches us to set our hope on Christ and the renewed world to come.

Those are the six reasons to engage with this book: it helps us grasp the story of the Bible, it shows us Jesus, it leads us to trust God, it shows us how to live as the church, shows us our mission as the church, and it sets our hope on a new creation to come.

This book is for all of us.

1. *If you are not yet a Christian:* This teaches you who God is, who you are, and how God has grace for you in Jesus.
2. *If you're a new Christian:* Isaiah helps you understand Jesus and the whole Bible. The church Father Augustine asked his mentor Ambrose what a new Christian should read; Ambrose said Isaiah. Now, Augustine started it and gave up because it was too hard to understand. So we'll work through it together.
3. *If you are a long-time Christian:* This book will expand your understanding of God, Christ, the church, our hope, and our purpose in the world.
4. *And if you are a sufferer*—as we all are—this is a book of deep comfort.

So, we'll begin with the first chapter, which introduces the whole book.

Isaiah 1 shows us our deepest problem and our only solution. Our deepest problem is sin—and it's far worse than we know. And our only solution is cleansing from God—not our own moral effort, not mere religion or Christian activities—but cleansing from God.

The one thing repeated throughout this chapter is to *listen*. To *hear*. Stop everything else, and listen to God. Listen to God explain you to yourself. Listen to God correct your view of him. And listen to God surprise you with his grace.

Here's the message of this text: Listen to the God who tells us about rebellion, repentance, and renewal. Those are our three points—rebellion, repentance, and renewal.

1. Rebellion: God's People Have Forsaken Him (1:1–9)

First, rebellion.

The book opens in the first nine verses with a portrait of God's people, and it's not good.

Before that portrait, the first verse introduces the whole of the book: “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.”

- This shows us that this book is a vision of Isaiah. Isaiah is a prophet, and he is relaying what he has seen from God.
- It also shows the focus of Isaiah—it is a vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem. By the time Isaiah was writing, God’s people were split into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom is most often referred to as Israel; and the southern kingdom is Judah. Isaiah’s ministry is mainly with Judah in the south. We can still use the term “Israel” to refer to the whole of God’s people—but Isaiah is focused especially on the southern kingdom.
- And his ministry spanned the reign of these four kings mentioned. Isaiah’s ministry may have spanned something like 60 years. And he seemed to have close access with those kings. So imagine if America had a prophet who has been speaking from the mid 1960s until now. And he knew the presidents across this time—from JFK to George W to Trump. And imagine if God spoke to us directly through this man. That’s what it was like for Israel.
- But they didn’t love his message. It was honest, but it was heavy. Because Isaiah was showing God’s people who they really were, and they didn’t want to admit it.

The first section opens with a portrait of Judah’s rebellion.

The opening scene is a cosmic courtroom. God calls heaven and earth to witness his case against Judah. This is verse 2, “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken.”

Isaiah is pulling on an important text in Israel’s history here. He’s drawing on the very last chapters of the book of Deuteronomy—chapters 31 and 32. Moses wrote those as Israel was about to enter the land of Canaan. God had brought them out of Egypt, he made a covenant with them at Sinai, and now they are going to enter the land. But right before they enter the land, Moses says they’re eventually going to get kicked out. Did you know that? From the very beginning, God told Israel what their future history would be. They would enter the land, they would forsake God and break the covenant, and he would eventually send them out of the land—and then once again redeem them.

And listen to the language he uses back in Deuteronomy 32:1, “then when Moses did speak these words, he started by saying, “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.” So Moses in Deuteronomy calls heaven and earth to listen—and he is about to tell Israel how they are going to forsake him in the future.

Now Isaiah—centuries later—is saying this happened, just as God said. So he draws on Deuteronomy to tell Israel that they are now living this story out.

And Moses had said that Israel would forsake God like a rebellious child forsakes a father. Now listen to what God says here in Isaiah 1:2, “Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.”

That’s the story of Israel in one sentence. God adopted Israel by grace. He raised them as his children. He was endlessly patient with them. And, against all that grace, they rebelled against him.

Notice: it doesn’t just say they slipped up or they weren’t perfect. That’s not the problem. The problem is rebellion.

This is what our sin is like. It’s what all of us are inclined to do from birth. It’s in us.

But hardly anyone sees it this way. Hardly anyone sees their sin as a personal rebellion against God. Which is why Isaiah is here—to help us understand. Israel rebelled against God as their Father; and everyone rebels against God as their creator.

And sin isn’t just rebellious; it’s also foolish. God says his people are worse than an ox because at least the ox knows its owner. This is verse 3: “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” Oxen aren’t smart, but at least they know their owner. Donkeys at least know where to get food. It’s like our pet hamster—he doesn’t know us and doesn’t care about us. But he comes out when he hears the food container. At least he knows we feed him.

God is saying: My people aren’t even like that.

Now in verses 4–8, Isaiah expands on this.

Isaiah heard this word from the Lord about Israel. And now he helps them understand their situation. He uses striking imagery to tell them who they are and what they’ve become.

Verse 4 says who they are: “Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.”

They were to be a holy nation, but they are a sinful nation.
They were to be filled with faith, but they are laden with iniquity.
God was faithful to them; but they have forsaken him.
He honored them; but they despised him.

Isaiah now uses the image of sickness to describe them. And he says they are covered in sores and wounds from head to toe.

And what are the bruises from? From God's judgments against them. They have already had the Assyrians come against them and destroy their cities. This is what God said he would do to them if they broke the covenant—and now he's doing what he said. Verse 7 describes it: "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."

They aren't totally destroyed yet, though. God didn't just destroy Israel and send them into exile all at once. There were lots of mini-invasions. Lots of mini-exiles. It was to get their attention. To wake them up. To warn them of worse to come.

The people acknowledge that God left some survivors. We hear the people of Judah respond to this in verse 9: "If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah."

Do you know about Sodom and Gomorrah? These were two of the most violent, unjust, and perverse cities in the ancient world. I'm not sure why Guardians of the Galaxy chose to call one character "Gamora." I'd avoid that one.

Genesis describes how God completely destroyed these cities. Judah is saying, "we are now almost like them—we are almost completely destroyed. But God left a remnant. He left some survivors."

This is the heavy opening section of Isaiah.

It's a courtroom scene. God calls heaven and earth to witness his indictment against Israel. They have rebelled against him.

Now, they might say, "this is a bit much. *Forsaken? Despised?* And now we're *utterly estranged?* That's over-the-top."

This is why we need the Bible—we need God to tell us who we are. We need God to tell us what sin really is.

Cornelius Plantinga wrote a book on the doctrine of sin called, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*. He opens it like this: "In this book I am trying to retrieve an old awareness that has slipped and changed in recent decades. The awareness of sin used to be our shadow. Christians hated sin, feared it, fled from it, grieved over it. Some of our grandparents agonized over their sins... but the shadow has dimmed."ⁱ

In our modern world we don't think about sins as a personal affront to God. But our culture still does talk about sins, just in different ways. We talk about injustice and hate crimes and bigotry. Isaiah has these categories as well—but explains sin as an objective reality, a personal affront to God, and coming from our corrupt nature.

Now, why would we want to engage a book that starts with this kind of darkness? Because it's honest. It's helping us understand reality.

And because it is only through this darkness that we'll see the brightness of God's grace. The greatness of our sin magnifies the greater greatness of God's grace. So let's keep going.

2. Repentance: Mere Religion Makes Things Worse (1:10–20)

The second section moves from rebellion to repentance.

Now, at this point, if you aren't familiar with the Bible or Christianity—you may expect the next point to be about religion. What we need is to get some religious practices going—go to church and pray more. Then God will accept us.

That's a common superficial understanding of Christianity. But the reality is different. In fact, this is exactly what Isaiah says is the problem—the problem is thinking that you can make things right by adding some religious practices to your life. Isaiah says mere religion actually makes your situation *worse*.

He calls us to true repentance, not mere religion.

Remember verse 9 said Israel was almost like Sodom and Gomorrah because they were destroyed.

Now Isaiah calls Israel Sodom and Gomorrah because of their character. They are no different. He says in verse 10, “Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom!” He's talking to Israel.

And Israel might object to all of this and say: what are you talking about? Calling us rebellious. Saying we've forsaken God. Saying we're no better than Sodom and Gomorrah? We show up to the temple all the time. We give sacrifices and offerings. We pray.

In verses 10–15 Isaiah says that all those religious things don't make things better, but worse.

They are looking to their religious practices to give them some credit. Isaiah says it's part of their problem.

So God now speaks about all their religious, Bible, church practices. He says in verse 11, “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; 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, or of lambs, or of goats.” So the people are offering the sacrifices that God commanded them to offer—but God rejects them. He says he's had enough of them.

In verse 13 God says their incense is an abomination to him. They were to burn incense as a pleasing aroma to God—the picture is of the smoke of the incense rising to heaven, representing their prayers. And God says, “I don’t even want one whiff of your incense.”

The real problem is at the end of verse 13, “I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.” They are gathering together for something like a church service. They are very solemn. They are very religious. They are doing everything just right. But their hearts and lives are not right. They don’t trust and love God; they aren’t forsaking sin; their culture is corrupt. And so God says he can’t endure their religious gatherings.

Their worship is worthless. Because religion without repentance is rotten.

Jesus said the same thing when he came—because Israel had not changed after all these years. He especially went after the religious leaders.

This is why mere religion is never the answer. This is why mere religion can even make things worse.

Who is worse: The person who ignores God and lives a life of injustice all week... or the person who does that all week, but then shows up on Sunday and goes through all the motions? The first one is better—because at least they aren’t adding the hypocrisy on Sundays.

Israel was using their religion in order to cover up their lack of sincerity and rebellion.

This is a scathing rebuke to all hypocritical versions of Christianity. And really, to anyone who adds any religion to their lives in order to make themselves right with God.

Religion will not cleanse you. Showing up to church will not cleanse you. Only God can do this; and you have to come to him with humble acknowledgment of your need.

So, verses 16–17 get very practical.

This is what God calls his people to do: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.”

What is their problem? It is an issue at both the personal and the societal level. They are not caring for the most vulnerable people among them. That was the orphans and widows of their time. Any society is judged based on how they treat the most vulnerable among them.

James addresses this same issue in James 1:26–27, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. 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.” Religion is worthless if it doesn’t lead you to care for the vulnerable.

So, today:

A Christianity that does not care for the vulnerable, is worthless.

A Christianity that was fine with the slave trade and mistreatment of slaves was worthless.

A Christianity today that overlooks the plight of the unborn with abortion, is worthless.

A Christianity that does not care for the disabled—is inconsistent.

A professing Christian who oppresses his spouse or children; his Christianity is worthless.

Religion without repentance is worthless.

And now God makes an appeal in verses 18–20.

If you’ve read the book of Isaiah before, you no doubt remember these verses. They shine in the darkness of this chapter. Over and over again in Isaiah, we’ll see this pattern: a strong condemnation of sin, a warning of judgment—and then a surprising promise of grace.

Listen to this gracious invitation from God here in verse 18: “Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.”

What a promise of forgiveness and cleansing. Mere religion cannot cleanse us; it only makes things worse. Only the gospel, only God’s grace, only Jesus, can bring us this cleansing. From blood-stained scarlet to pure white.

This is what we need. This is what Jesus came to bring us.

So, God appeals to his people to make a decision.

This is verses 19–20: “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 the LORD has spoken.”

To be willing and obedient here does not mean perfectly obedient. Not at all actually. The word for obedient here means to listen—to hear—to be open. This is a heart of repentance: A turning from sin, to God, and an openness to him. An openness to receive his grace. And openness to turn from sin.

The opposite is to continue to rebel. And the outcome is either forgiveness and restoration, or destruction.

3. Restoration: The Future God Alone Can Bring (1:21–31)

This leads to the last section, which is restoration.

This is about the future that God alone can bring.

This last section—verses 21–31—tell the story of Israel as the story of a city. The city is Jerusalem, the very heart of their society.

Isaiah first laments Jerusalem’s fall into corruption. Verse 21 says, “How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers.” God established Jerusalem with David and then Solomon. There was a period when it was faithful. But it quickly declined. And it is now a place of violence and injustice. They’ve kept up the religious stuff—sacrifices, prayers, temple worship. But they’ve forsaken God in their hearts, and they’ve become corrupt in their lives.

So God says he will respond to this in two ways.

1. First, he will judge. Verse 24 is sobering. God says, “I will get relief from my enemies.” And who are his enemies? The people of Israel! His children have become his enemies.
2. But he will not only judge; he will restore. Verse 26 gives this surprising future for all who trust him: “And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.”

Jerusalem will go from faithful, to unfaithful, to faithful again. God will create a people who are washed whiter than snow, and transformed from the inside out. And they will be a people who care for the vulnerable and pursue justice. That’s what Jesus is doing through the church today, and he will finish it in the new creation.

The rest of the chapter makes it clear: The rebellious will be destroyed; the repentant will be saved.

Response: Listen

So, how do we respond to this today?

There is one thing we all need to do, and then there are other responses depending on our situation.

The one thing we all can do is this: Listen.

That's how this book starts: A call in verse 2 for heaven and earth to hear the words of the Lord. Then a call in verse 10 for Israel to hear the words of the Lord. And then in verse 19—that great invitation—is a call to listen. It says, “if you are willing and obedient—and that word for “obedient” is literally, “hearing.” It is a call to open ourselves up and listen. Be open to God's assessment of yourself.

So, this is what we are all invited to do. Listen. Open yourself up to God's perspective.

Do you see your sin as God does? Do you see how it's not just that “mistakes were made,” but that you've rebelled against God as your maker? Do you see that when you sin as a Christian, it's even worse, because you're sinning against so much grace? Do you see that when you play religion here on Sundays, but it doesn't change your life—it's worse then if you didn't?

And are you listening to God when he offers this grace? Do you hear this invitation? Or is your own sense of guilt, and shame, and fear blocking this from getting in?

This invitation is for everyone. You can't get much worse than Israel was at the time of this invitation of grace. And yet God gave it. And he said, it simply starts here: Open up and listen. Receive this truth. Agree with me that you need grace. And then receive it. Receive the cleansing only he can give.

Religion can't do it. Bible reading can't do it. Showing up on Sundays can't do it. All those things are supposed to be channels of grace from God—they don't work if you're not open to him.

That's what we all must do, and what we all can do: listen.

But there are some other responses that we each need to have, depending on our situation.

1. First, maybe you are like Israel was—you are playing religion, but you are not repentant.

You are actually rebelling against him. You come on Sundays, but those closest to you feel oppressed by you. You come Sundays, but your heart isn't in it; you go through the motions because you think it adds up points with God. But you have not opened yourself up to him. This text is a call to listen to God, repent of your rebellion, and receive his cleansing grace through Jesus.

It's painful to see your sin how God sees it. But this is the path to true freedom and joy. The Puritan Thomas Watson put it like this: He said, “Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.”ⁱⁱ

2. Second, maybe you have been living a life of true repentance.

You have received his cleansing grace. You have received his Spirit and your life is being transformed. You still sin, but you are not forsaking God—because he is keeping you and sustaining your faith.

If that's you—thank him for his grace. Thank him for rescuing you from your own rebellion and its consequences. The truth is, you are either in rebellion like Israel was; or you have been given the new birth. God has caused you to be born again; to be regenerated; given a new heart.

So, don't take credit for your transformation. God did it. And God is doing it by continuing to transform you.

So, keep fighting sin—because this chapter helps you see its rebellious nature. As Plantinga said—we need to retrieve the old awareness that sin is our shadow. We need to once again hate it, fear it, flee from it, and grieve over it.

And as we see that sin is bitter; Christ will become sweeter.

3. Third, many in our culture need to hear the message of this text.

You know, when Israel received this message, they were largely unsaved. Most of them were not born again, or regenerated; they were not given new hearts by grace yet. They were lost. And what Isaiah is doing is preaching the gospel to them: he is helping them understand God's holiness, their sinfulness, the judgment they deserve, and the provision of cleansing through Jesus. He is calling them to hear this message.

Isaiah is a model for you, Christian. There are people in your life who need to hear this message just like Israel did. They need you to tell them, on behalf of God, who they are. Help them understand their sin from God's perspective. And to see the danger they are in. And then to hear the invitation that though their sins are like scarlet, God can wash them whiter than snow.

And they need to hear about Jesus.

You know, Isaiah seems to be setting us up in this chapter to understand the cross. Do you remember how he described Israel's sinful condition? They were sick and covered with wounds. Isaiah will use those same words to describe one person later on in this book—in chapter 53. He'll describe someone whom he calls the Servant of the Lord. He is a perfect person, who never sinned, who was open to the Father. He was the only one who was not sick with sin. And yet Isaiah describes him in chapter 53 as being wounded for our transgressions. And carrying our sickness.

Why? Because on the cross, Jesus would come and take our sickness and wounds. He would take our place in God's judgment. And he did that so that we could receive the cleansing this chapter promises.

So, let's open ourselves up to him.

ⁱ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed To Be* (Eerdmans, 1995), ix.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 63.