

The Book of Isaiah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: A Rebellious Nation Called to Reason

Isaiah 1:1–31

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Your aim in this lesson is to help the class feel the weight of two truths at once: God genuinely grieves over sin, and God genuinely longs to forgive. Many students arrive carrying one without the other. Some hear only the lawsuit and live under a low hum of guilt and fear, unsure God could ever be pleased with them. Others hear only the mercy and have quietly concluded that since God forgives, sin is no big deal. Isaiah 1 refuses to let us split these apart. The chapter is a courtroom and an open door, a charge of treason and a Father's outstretched arms, all in one breath. Help your class hold both.

Be ready to make the empty-worship section (1:11–17) personal rather than merely historical. The danger is that students will hear it as a critique of ancient ritualism that no longer applies. Press gently into the truth that we, too, can sing, give, attend, and partake while our hearts are far away and our relationships are full of unaddressed sin. The cure Isaiah prescribes is not less worship but repentance that reaches into how we treat people, especially the weak (1:16–17).

Finally, handle 1:18 with care and confidence. This is the hinge of the lesson and the heaviest doctrinal moment. Affirm that the cleansing pictured here finds its full reality in the blood of Christ, while being careful not to read New Testament baptism back into the lips of pre-Christian Judah. The principle is timeless: God offers cleansing freely, but it is received by those who are 'willing and obedient' (1:19), never by mere words, feelings, or ritual divorced from a surrendered heart. Let the class leave knowing both that they are loved and that love calls for a response.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read 1:2–3. God says even the ox and the donkey know their owner, but His people 'do not understand.' What does this comparison teach us about the nature of sin as a failure to know and acknowledge God, and why is willful spiritual ignorance treated as such a serious offense?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The book opens by anchoring Isaiah's ministry in real history: a vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem 'in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah' (1:1). This is not myth or general religious sentiment. God spoke into a specific century, to a specific people, through a specific man. That historical rootedness matters; the same God who acted in real time then acts in real time now.

Then comes the summons: 'Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth' (1:2). This is courtroom language drawn from the covenant. When Israel entered into covenant with God, heaven and

earth were called as witnesses (Deuteronomy 30:19). Now God calls those same witnesses to hear His case against a people who broke their vows. The whole created order is the gallery for this trial.

But notice how God states the charge. Not 'they violated statute X' but 'I reared children and brought them up, and they have rebelled against me' (1:2). The offense is relational before it is legal. Sin here is not first the breaking of a rule but the betrayal of a relationship by children who owe everything to a Father who gave them everything.

The animal comparison in 1:3 is meant to sting. An ox knows the hand that feeds it; a donkey knows its master's trough. But God's people 'do not know, my people do not consider.' The dumbest beast on the farm shows more sense than covenant Israel. This is not innocent ignorance. It is the willful refusal to acknowledge the obvious God who sustains every breath.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin is fundamentally relational, the betrayal of a Father, not merely the breaking of abstract rules.
- God grounds His dealings in real history; biblical faith is rooted in events, not vague spirituality.
- Heaven and earth as witnesses underscores that covenant breaking is a public, cosmic matter, not a private affair.
- Willful spiritual ignorance is culpable; we are accountable for refusing to know the God who sustains us.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between thinking of sin as breaking a rule versus wounding a relationship, and how does each view change the way we feel about our own sin?
- Why does God use the image of farm animals to shame His people, and what does it say that even an ox 'knows' its owner better than they knew Him?
- How does anchoring Isaiah in real kings and real history strengthen our confidence that God still speaks and acts in our world?

Question 2

Student Question:

Isaiah pictures Judah as a body 'full of wounds and bruises and putrefying sores' (1:6). When you honestly survey your own spiritual condition, what 'sores' have you been tempted to bandage over rather than bring to God for real healing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 4–6 pile up the diagnosis. They are a 'sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers' who 'have forsaken the LORD' and turned away. The verbs are deliberate: forsaken, provoked, gone backward. This is not drifting by accident; it is a steady, chosen movement away from God.

Then Isaiah shifts to a startling medical image (1:5–6). The nation is a body beaten so thoroughly that ‘from the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores.’ And these wounds ‘have not been closed or bound up or soothed with ointment.’ The sickness is everywhere, and worse, no one is treating it.

This is one of Scripture’s most honest pictures of what sin does. It does not merely incur a penalty; it produces real damage, real rot, real pain in the life that practices it. Judah was sick and pretending to be healthy. The teacher should help students feel how exhausting it is to keep bandaging over what only God can heal.

Importantly, this passage describes the present condition and choices of a people who ‘have forsaken’ God, not a guilt inherited at birth. Each generation, each person, is being held to account for the wounds they themselves have refused to bring to the Healer.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin causes genuine harm and decay in a person’s life, not only legal guilt.
- The danger of pretending to be spiritually healthy while quietly rotting inside.
- Wounds ‘not bound up’ picture the misery of unconfessed, untreated sin.
- Accountability is for present rebellion, consistent with Ezekiel 18:20, not for inherited guilt.
- Honest self-examination is the first step toward healing.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it so tempting to bandage over our spiritual ‘sores’ rather than expose them to God for real healing?
- What are some signs that a person, or a congregation, is sicker spiritually than they appear on the surface?
- How does seeing sin as something that genuinely wounds us, and not just angers God, motivate us to repent?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read 1:11–15. God says He is ‘full’ of their sacrifices and that their feasts have become a burden to Him. How can acts of worship that God Himself once commanded become offensive to Him, and what does this teach us about the relationship between outward worship and the heart behind it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 7–9 describe the consequences already unfolding: a land laid waste, cities burned, fields devoured by strangers, with Zion left ‘as a cottage in a vineyard,’ a lonely lean-to in a stripped field. The judgment Isaiah warns about is not entirely future; the bitter fruit of rebellion is already ripening.

Yet even here mercy peeks through. 'Unless the LORD of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom' (1:9). They deserved total destruction like Sodom and Gomorrah, but God preserved a remnant. The teacher should highlight this remnant theme, which runs through all of Isaiah and finds its fulfillment in the faithful people of God gathered in Christ.

This is grace in the rubble. Even when a people has earned ruin, God keeps a seed alive. Paul quotes this very verse in Romans 9:29 to show that God has always worked through a believing remnant, not a nation saved automatically by birth or blood. Belonging to God's people is, and always has been, a matter of faith and obedience, not mere heritage.

Help the class see the sobering realism here. Sin really does carry consequences in this life, and pretending otherwise is dangerous. But the remnant reminds us that God's mercy is always running underneath His judgment, preserving a way home for any who will take it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin carries real, often visible consequences in this life, not only at the final judgment.
- The remnant theme: God always preserves a faithful people, even in the worst seasons.
- Belonging to God is by faith and response, not automatic by birth or nation (Romans 9:6-8).
- Mercy runs beneath judgment; God leaves a door open even amid deserved ruin.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the 'remnant' tell us about how God has always defined His true people?
- How do you hold together the reality that sin brings real consequences with the reality that God is merciful?
- Where do you see God's grace 'in the rubble' of a hard season in your own life or someone else's?

Question 4

Student Question:

Verse 15 says God hides His eyes and will not hear their prayers because 'your hands are full of blood.' Is there anything in your own life right now that you sense is putting distance between your prayers and God, and what is He asking you to do about it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now the chapter turns to its most surprising charge. God addresses His worshiping people as 'rulers of Sodom' and 'people of Gomorrah' (1:10), then asks, 'To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to me?' (1:11). He says He is 'full' of burnt offerings and delights not in the blood of bulls. These were the very sacrifices He had commanded in the Law.

The problem is not the sacrifices themselves but the disconnect between altar and life. Their hands, lifted in prayer, were 'full of blood' (1:15). They were trampling His courts (1:12), bringing

'vain' offerings, keeping feasts His soul hated (1:14). The machinery of worship was running at full speed while justice and mercy lay dead in the streets.

This is one of the most important teaching moments in the chapter. God is not anti-worship; He designed worship. He is against worship that becomes a substitute for surrender, a way of managing God rather than knowing Him. When our singing, giving, and partaking are unhooked from how we actually live and treat people, they do not please God; they offend Him.

The warning lands directly on us. We can attend faithfully, partake of the Lord's Supper weekly, give regularly, and still be far from God if our hearts and relationships are full of unrepented sin. The teacher should press this gently but clearly. God wants worshipers whose lives match their lips (compare John 4:24, worship in spirit and in truth).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Outward worship, however correct in form, is rejected when divorced from a surrendered heart.
- God designed worship; the sin is using it as a substitute for obedience, not the worship itself.
- Worship and ethics are inseparable; how we treat people validates or invalidates our worship.
- We today can keep every form of worship and still be far from God (John 4:24).
- God is never impressed by religious activity that masks an unrepentant life.

Discussion Prompts

- How can acts of worship God Himself commanded become offensive to Him? What changed?
- What are practical signs that our worship has become routine machinery rather than heartfelt surrender?
- If a stranger watched your week, would your daily life confirm or contradict your Sunday worship?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read 1:16–17. God lists specific commands: wash, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. What does this list reveal about what genuine repentance actually looks like, and why is true religion always shown in how we treat the vulnerable (compare James 1:27)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 16–17 give God's prescription, and it is striking how concrete it is. 'Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.' Repentance here is not a vague feeling of regret. It has hands and feet.

Notice the movement: first cease (stop the evil), then learn (start the good). Repentance is both a turning from and a turning toward. And the 'good' God names is not abstract piety but the active defense of the vulnerable, those least able to repay or protect themselves: the orphan, the widow, the oppressed.

This is the heartbeat of true religion throughout Scripture. James 1:27 defines pure and undefiled religion as visiting orphans and widows in their affliction and keeping oneself unspotted from the world, almost a direct echo of Isaiah. How we treat the powerless is one of the surest tests of whether our faith is real.

The teacher should help students translate this from ancient categories into present ones. Who are the 'fatherless and widows' in our world, the people with no advocate, no leverage, no one in their corner? Genuine repentance will always show up in changed treatment of real people, not merely in private religious feeling.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True repentance is concrete: it stops specific evils and starts specific good deeds.
- Repentance involves both turning from sin and actively learning to do good.
- Care for the vulnerable (orphans, widows, the oppressed) is a central test of genuine faith (James 1:27).
- Faith that does not change how we treat people is not yet biblical faith.
- God measures repentance by changed life, not merely changed feelings.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God point to the treatment of orphans, widows, and the oppressed as the proof of real repentance?
- What is the difference between 'feeling sorry' and the repentance Isaiah describes, which both ceases evil and learns good?
- Who are the people in your life or community with 'no advocate,' and how could you 'learn to do good' toward them?

Question 6

Student Question:

Of the commands in 1:16–17, which one lands closest to home for you, and what is one concrete step you could take this week to 'learn to do good' in that specific area?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

We arrive now at the golden center of the chapter, and one of the most beautiful invitations in all of Scripture. 'Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool' (1:18). After the lawsuit, after the charges, the Judge offers to settle the matter, and the settlement is total cleansing.

Pause on the courtroom drama of this. A rebellious people stands convicted, their guilt established beyond dispute. And the offended Judge, the very One they have wronged, leans across the bench and invites them to reason with Him about how they might be made clean. No human court works this way. This is the heart of God breaking into His own courtroom.

The imagery is vivid: scarlet and crimson were among the most permanent, deeply set dyes in the ancient world, nearly impossible to remove. Sin stains like that, soaked deep into the fibers of a life. Yet God promises to make such stains 'white as snow,' 'like wool.' This is not God overlooking sin or pretending it is small. It is God offering to remove what no human effort could ever scrub out.

This verse must be handled with both warmth and doctrinal care. The cleansing pictured here finds its full and final reality in the blood of Jesus Christ, for it is His sacrifice that actually takes sin away (compare 1 John 1:7; Isaiah 53). We rightly point the class forward to that cross. At the same time, we must not read New Testament baptism back onto the lips of pre-Christian Judah; for them the call was to genuine repentance and obedient trust. The unchanging principle across both eras is this: God offers cleansing freely, by His mercy, to all who will turn to Him.

And crucially, the offer is conditional in its reception, never in God's willingness. Verses 19–20 make this unmistakable: 'If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword.' God's mercy is free, but it is received by the willing and the obedient. Cleansing is not granted by a feeling, a formula, or a one-time prayer apart from a surrendered, obedient heart. The blood is freely given; it is received by faith that obeys. This guards the class against both the lie that we earn forgiveness and the lie that forgiveness requires nothing of us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God freely offers complete cleansing; no sin is too deeply stained for His mercy.
- The cleansing pictured here is fully realized in the blood of Christ (1 John 1:7), to which we point forward.
- Do not read NT baptism anachronistically into pre-Christian Judah; their call was repentance and obedient trust.
- The same principle spans both eras: forgiveness is by God's mercy, received through willing, obedient faith.
- Forgiveness is conditional in its reception (willing and obedient), never in God's willingness to give it.
- This refutes both earning salvation and faith-only or mere-prayer notions that bypass obedience.
- God's mercy and His justice meet here; sin is taken seriously and fully cleansed.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it tell you about God's heart that the offended Judge is the one who offers to make the guilty clean?

- How does this verse hold together the seriousness of sin (scarlet, crimson) and the depth of God's mercy (white as snow)?
- Why is it important that cleansing is offered freely yet received only by those who are 'willing and obedient' (1:19)?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read 1:18. God says, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.' What does this verse reveal about God's heart toward sinners who will turn to Him, and how does it hold together both the seriousness of sin and the depth of His mercy?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 19–20 spell out the two roads with stark clarity. 'If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword.' God closes the offer with 'for the mouth of the LORD has spoken it.' The choice is real, and the outcomes are real.

This is one of the clearest places to teach that the gospel call, in every age, is a genuine call requiring a genuine response. God does not coerce. He does not save people against their will or apart from their will. He sets life and death before His people and pleads with them to choose life (compare Deuteronomy 30:19).

The two verbs are worth dwelling on: 'willing' and 'obedient.' Not one or the other, but both. A willing heart that never obeys is mere sentiment. Obedience without a willing heart is mere external compliance, which is exactly the empty worship God just rejected. God wants the whole person, the heart that wants to obey and the will that actually does.

The teacher should use this to gently dismantle two errors at once. Against the idea that God irresistibly saves a chosen few apart from their response, this text shows a real choice with real consequences offered to all. Against the idea that 'willingness' is enough without obedience, this text yokes the two together. The call is universal, the choice is genuine, and the response God seeks engages both heart and life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel call is genuine and universal; people can really respond or really refuse.
- God does not save apart from a willing response; this refutes irresistible grace and unconditional election.
- 'Willing and obedient' together: heart and action, neither one alone.
- Consequences are real for both roads; choices matter eternally.
- God pleads and invites but never coerces the will.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God yoke 'willing' and 'obedient' together? What goes wrong when we keep one without the other?
- How does this passage show that God genuinely lets people choose, rather than forcing salvation on a select few?
- What does it mean for you, today, to respond to God as both willing and obedient?

Question 8

Student Question:

Think of a sin or failure from your past that still feels 'scarlet' to you. How does the promise that God can make it 'white as snow' change the way you carry that memory?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The mood darkens again in 1:21–23 with a grieved lament: 'How is the faithful city become a harlot!' Jerusalem, once 'full of judgment' and where 'righteousness lodged,' is now full of murderers. Her silver has become dross, her wine watered down. Something pure has been corrupted, something valuable has been adulterated.

The specifics are pointed (1:23): the leaders are rebels and companions of thieves; everyone 'loves bribes and follows after rewards.' They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause never reaches them. This is the direct opposite of the good God called for in 1:17. The corruption has reached the top, into the very leaders who should protect the weak.

Notice the heartbreak in God's tone. This is not cold prosecution; it is the grief of a betrayed lover and a wounded Father. 'How is the faithful city become a harlot!' is the cry of someone remembering what the relationship once was and mourning what it has become. Sin is tragic precisely because of what it ruins.

The teacher can help the class feel the weight of leadership here. When leaders are corrupt, when those entrusted with protecting the vulnerable instead exploit them, the damage multiplies. This is a sober word for anyone in any position of influence: God holds leaders especially accountable for how they use their power on behalf of, or against, the weak.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin corrupts what was once pure; God grieves the loss of faithfulness.
- Corrupt leadership multiplies harm, especially to the vulnerable.
- Loving bribes and rewards over justice is a direct reversal of God's call in 1:17.
- God holds those in positions of influence to special account.
- Sin is tragic for what it ruins, not just for the penalty it incurs.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is the corruption of leaders especially damaging, both in a nation and in a church?
- What does God's grieving tone ('How is the faithful city become a harlot!') reveal about how He feels when His people fall?

- Where might 'loving rewards' quietly pull any of us away from doing what is right?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 1:18–20 carefully. God offers cleansing, but He frames it as a choice: 'If you are willing and obedient... but if you refuse and rebel.' How does this passage point us toward the cleansing God ultimately provides in Christ, and why is it important to see that forgiveness, both then and now, is offered freely yet received only through a willing, obedient response rather than mere words or feelings?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 24–26 reveal God's purpose even in judgment. 'I will turn my hand upon you, and purely purge away your dross, and take away all your tin.' The fire that is coming is not merely punitive; it is refining. God means to burn away the impurity so that what remains is pure again.

The goal is restoration: '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' (1:26). God does not aim merely to destroy the harlot city; He aims to make her faithful again. Even His severity serves His redemptive purpose.

This is a crucial truth about how God works with His people. He disciplines those He loves, and His discipline has a goal: not our ruin but our refinement (compare Hebrews 12:10–11, He disciplines us for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness). The painful 'fire' in a believer's life is often God burning off the dross.

Verses 27–28 add the moral hinge: 'Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and her converts with righteousness. And the destruction of the transgressors and of the sinners shall be together, and they that forsake the LORD shall be consumed.' Redemption for the penitent, ruin for the persistently rebellious. The same fire that refines the willing consumes the obstinate. Help the class see that God's refining work is good news for the one who submits to it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's judgment on His people often aims at refining, not merely punishing.
- Discipline is an expression of love with a redemptive goal (Hebrews 12:10–11).
- God's purpose is restoration: to make the unfaithful faithful again.
- The same fire refines the penitent and consumes the persistently rebellious.
- Submitting to God's refining 'fire' is the path back to faithfulness.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between punishment that only destroys and discipline that refines?
- How does seeing a hard season as God 'purging away dross' change the way you walk through it?

- Why does the same divine fire refine some and consume others? What makes the difference?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over the whole chapter, God moves from lawsuit to invitation, from 'wounds and bruises' to 'white as snow.' Name one specific way this passage is calling you to stop bandaging your own sores and instead let Jesus do the real cleansing only He can do. What is the very next step of 'willing and obedient' response He is asking of you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends with a vivid warning against the false objects of trust that Judah had embraced (1:29–31). They will be 'ashamed of the oaks' they desired and 'confounded for the gardens' they had chosen, references to idolatrous worship practiced under trees and in sacred gardens. The things they ran to instead of God will betray them.

The images are unforgettable. They will become 'as an oak whose leaf fades, and as a garden that has no water' (1:30), withered and dry, exactly the fate of those who draw life from anything but the living God. Then the final picture: 'the strong shall be as tow, and the maker of it as a spark, and they shall both burn together, and none shall quench them' (1:31). What seemed strong becomes mere kindling, and the idol and the idolater burn together.

This is a fitting close to a chapter about misplaced trust. Judah's deepest problem was not that they lacked religion but that their hearts had attached to substitutes, idols, alliances, wealth, ritual, anything other than full surrender to God. And every substitute, however appealing, eventually fails and takes its worshipers down with it.

The teacher should bring this home. We may not bow under literal oak trees, but we all face the pull to root our security in something other than God: career, money, relationships, reputation, even our own religious performance. Isaiah 1 ends by warning that these will wither and burn. The only safe place to put the full weight of our trust is the God who, even now in His courtroom, is pleading, 'Come now, let us reason together.' The whole chapter, from lawsuit to invitation to this final warning, drives us to one decision: will we keep clinging to what fades, or come home to the Father who can make us white as snow?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Every false object of trust (idols, wealth, status, even religion) eventually fails and withers.
- Idolatry is ultimately self-destructive; the idol and the idolater 'burn together.'
- The human heart's deepest problem is misplaced trust, not mere lack of religion.
- Modern 'oaks and gardens' include career, money, reputation, and self-reliance.
- Only God can bear the full weight of our trust; the chapter drives us to that decision.

Discussion Prompts

- What are the modern 'oaks and gardens,' the substitutes we run to for security instead of God?
- Why is it that the things we trust instead of God eventually betray and 'wither' us?
- After walking through this whole chapter, what is the one thing God is asking you to stop clinging to and surrender to Him?