

## Isaiah Lesson 1 Article

This chapter describes a courtroom scene. God convenes the court and states the charges (vv. 2–4). He presents His case and pronounces the nation guilty (vv. 5–15), but He gives the accused opportunity to repent and be forgiven (vv. 16–31). How did God describe His sinful people?

They were *rebellious children* (vv. 2–4), who did not have as much devotion to God as animals do for their masters! The word “rebel” carries with it the idea of breaking a contract. At Sinai, Israel had entered into a solemn covenant with Jehovah (Ex. 19–20); but they had broken the contract by their unbelief and idolatry. They did not appreciate what God had done for them and were taking their blessings for granted. They had forsaken the Lord, gone backward, and grown corrupt; and therefore, they were guilty and deserved judgment.

From the human point of view, the nation was prospering; but from God’s point of view, the nation was like *a wretched victim* that had been beaten from head to foot and left to die (Isa. 1:5–6). The wounds had become infected, the whole body was diseased, and nobody was doing anything to help. The false prophets and hypocritical priests of that day would have challenged Isaiah’s autopsy of “the body politic,” but the prophet knew that his diagnosis was true. In spite of the optimism of Judah’s leaders, the nation was morally and spiritually sick; and judgment was inevitable.

What a humiliating shock the people must have had when they heard Isaiah compare the holy city of Jerusalem to the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah! (Isa. 3:9; Gen. 18–19) And what did the leaders think when Isaiah said only “a very small remnant” would survive? After all, God had promised Abraham that the nation would multiply like the dust of the earth and the stars of the heavens (13:16; 15:5). The doctrine of “the remnant” is important in the message of the prophets. Paul also referred to it (Rom. 9:27; 11:5). In spite of the apostasy of the nation, a remnant of true believers would be spared so that God’s work could be accomplished through the Jewish nation.

The disgusting thing about this rebellious people is that they were also a *religious people* (Isa. 1:10–15). They attended the temple services and brought a multitude of sacrifices to the Lord; but their hearts were far from God, and their worship was hypocritical. Sacrifices alone can never please God; for along with the outward observance, God wants inward obedience (1 Sam. 15:22), a broken heart (Ps. 51:17), and a godly walk (Micah 6:6–8). Judah’s worship of Jehovah was iniquity, not piety; and God was sick of it! Instead of lifting up “holy hands” in prayer (1 Tim. 2:8), their hands were stained with blood because of their many sins.

But before passing judgment on worshipers in a bygone era, perhaps we should confess the sins of the “worshipping church” today. According to researcher George Barna, 93 percent of the households in the United States contain a Bible and more than 60 percent of the people surveyed claim to be religious; but we would never know this from the way people act. One Protestant church exists for every 550 adults in America, but does all this “religion” make much of a difference in our sinful society? Organized religion hasn’t affected the nation’s crime rate, the divorce rate, or the kind of “entertainment” seen in movies and on TV.

The average church allocates about 5 percent of its budget for reaching others with the Gospel, but 30 percent for buildings and maintenance. At a time when the poor and the aged are pleading for help, churches in America are spending approximately 3 billion dollars a year on new construction. Where churches have life and growth, such construction may be needed; but too often the building becomes “a millstone instead of a milestone,” to quote Vance Havner. At least 62 percent of the people Barna surveyed said that the church was not relevant to today’s world and is losing its influence on society. It may be that, like the worshipers in the ancient Jewish temple, we are only going through the motions. (See *The Frog in the Kettle* by George Barna, published by Regal Books.)

Isaiah didn’t stop with the diagnosis but also gave the prescription, because he wanted Judah to be a *righteous people* (Isa. 1:16–31). The word translated “reason” in verse 18 means “to decide a case in court”; but instead of pronouncing judgment, the Judge offered pardon! If they would cleanse themselves by repenting and turning from sin (vv. 16–17; see 2 Cor. 7:1), then God would wipe the record clean in response to their faith (Isa. 1:18). God had every reason to punish His people for their sins; but in His grace and mercy, He offered them His pardon.

What would God do if the people did not repent? He would send a fiery judgment that would purge the dross and burn up those whose rebellion had made them His enemies (vv. 24–31). Isaiah closed this first message with a promise of hope that one day Jerusalem would be a “city of righteousness.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Comforted* (pp. 18–23). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.