Isaiah 1-2 — Lesson 1

Isaiah's Style

Before we begin Isaiah, I think it is important for us to understand how Isaiah writes.

Isaiah is not simply telling a story the way Esther does, and he is not writing a letter the way Paul does. Much of Isaiah is written as Hebrew poetry and prophecy. That means Isaiah often speaks through pictures, symbols, comparisons, repetition, and dramatic language.

So when we read about a vineyard, a mountain, fire, darkness, a remnant, or nations being shaken, we have to stop and ask: Is Isaiah describing something literally, or is he using an image to communicate a deeper truth?

That is part of what makes Isaiah challenging.

He can also move very quickly from one subject to another. In one passage he may be speaking about Judah in his own lifetime, then about a coming judgment, and then suddenly give us a glimpse of something much farther into the future.

In other words, Isaiah sometimes gives us several horizons at once.

As we study this book, we should keep asking a few simple questions:

Who is Isaiah speaking to?

What was happening historically at that time?

Is this poetry, history, warning, symbolism, or prophecy?

And is Isaiah speaking only about his own time, or is there also a future fulfillment?

We should not expect to understand every image the first time we read it. Isaiah was written to make us stop, think, compare Scripture with Scripture, and look closely at what God was saying to His people.

Our goal is not to rush through Isaiah. Our goal is to understand what Isaiah meant to the people who first heard him, and then to see what God is saying to us through those same words today.

Where We Are in History

Before we read Isaiah's warnings, it is also helpful to understand what had happened to God's people.

Around 1000 BC — David rules a united Israel.
Jerusalem becomes the political and spiritual center of the nation.

Around 970 BC — Solomon becomes king.
The Temple is built in Jerusalem, and Israel reaches a period of great wealth and influence.

Around 930 BC — The kingdom divides.
After Solomon's death, the nation splits into two kingdoms:

- **Israel** in the north, with Samaria eventually becoming its capital.
- **Judah** in the south, with Jerusalem as its capital.

The northern kingdom moves increasingly into idolatry and political instability.

Judah remains connected to the Temple and the line of David, but it also experiences repeated periods of spiritual decline.

By the 700s BC — Assyria is rising.
The Assyrian Empire becomes the dominant military power of the region. Its expansion threatens the smaller nations around it, including Israel and Judah.

Around 740 BC — Isaiah begins his ministry.
Isaiah begins near the end of the long reign of **King Uzziah**.

Uzziah had brought Judah military strength, building projects, agricultural growth, and a period of relative prosperity. Outwardly, Judah appeared secure.

But Uzziah's own life also reflected one of Judah's deeper problems: **pride**. Near the end of his reign, he entered the Temple unlawfully to burn incense, and he was struck with leprosy.

So Isaiah begins preaching at a time when Judah appears strong on the outside but is weakening spiritually on the inside.

When Uzziah dies, his son **Jotham** takes the throne, and the nation enters a period of increasing uncertainty.

This is the world into which Isaiah is called.

Background & History

Isaiah began his ministry around **740 BC**, during one of the most important turning points in Israel's history.

The people of God were no longer one united nation.

The **northern kingdom, Israel**, was centered in Samaria and had moved deeply into idolatry and spiritual compromise.

The **southern kingdom, Judah**, was centered in Jerusalem and still had the Temple, the priesthood, and the descendants of David on the throne.

Outwardly, Judah still looked like God's covenant nation.

But beneath the surface, it was drifting.

There was pride, greed, injustice, corruption, empty religious ritual, and growing spiritual indifference.

At the same time, the **Assyrian Empire** was expanding and becoming the dominant military power of the ancient Near East.

So when Isaiah begins his ministry, the people of God are living in a dangerous combination of:

political division, spiritual decline, moral corruption, false security, and growing foreign threat.

That helps explain why Isaiah's opening message is so strong.

Judah still had the Temple.

The people still offered sacrifices.

Religious festivals were still being observed.

But God saw something very different from what appeared on the surface.

When God's People Stop Listening

Text: Isaiah 1–2

Main Message in Plain English

Isaiah begins by confronting Judah with a hard truth: they still look religious on the outside, but their hearts have drifted far from God.

They worship, pray, and bring sacrifices, yet injustice, rebellion, and spiritual indifference remain.

God is not simply asking them for more religion. He is calling them back to Himself.

Yet even in the opening chapters, judgment is not the final word. Isaiah also gives a glimpse of a future day when people from every nation will seek God, learn His ways, and live in peace.

Chapter 1 — A Nation That Has Forgotten God

Isaiah opens almost like a courtroom.

God brings a case against His own people.

Isaiah 1:2–4 — Rebellion

God describes Israel as children He raised who have rebelled against Him.

Isaiah even compares them to animals.

An ox recognizes its owner.

A donkey knows where it is fed.

But God's people no longer recognize the One who has cared for them.

Plain English

The problem was not ignorance.

The people knew God.

They simply stopped paying attention to Him.

Takeaway

It is possible to know about God and still slowly drift away from Him.

Isaiah 1:5–9 — A Sick Nation

Isaiah describes the nation like a badly injured body.

From head to foot there is sickness and injury.

This is poetic imagery.

Isaiah is not saying every person was physically injured.

He is saying the nation was **spiritually sick from top to bottom**.

Plain English

Something was deeply wrong inside Judah.

The outward appearance of stability hid serious spiritual decay.

Takeaway

Spiritual problems often begin long before the outward consequences become visible.

Isaiah 1:10–17 — Religion Without Relationship

This may be one of the most surprising sections of the chapter.

The people were still:

- Bringing sacrifices
- Observing religious festivals
- Attending worship
- Praying

Yet God says He is tired of their religious activity.

Why?

Because their worship was not changing the way they lived.

Isaiah tells them:

> Learn to do good; seek justice.

God was not rejecting worship itself.

He was rejecting worship that had become empty.

Plain English

God does not want religious activity disconnected from a transformed life.

Takeaway

God is interested not only in what happens during worship, but also in how we live afterward.

Isaiah 1:18 — An Invitation

Then comes one of the great invitations in Isaiah:

“Come now, let us reason together.”

Though their sins are described as scarlet, God says they can become white as snow.

After all the warnings, God still offers forgiveness.

Takeaway

God confronts sin not simply to condemn people, but to bring them back to Himself.

Isaiah 1:19–20 — A Choice

Isaiah presents two paths.

If the people are willing and obedient, there is blessing.

If they continue resisting God, judgment will follow.

The message is simple:

Their future depends on how they respond to God.

Isaiah 1:21–31 — Jerusalem Has Changed

Jerusalem had once been known for faithfulness and justice.

Now Isaiah describes corruption, dishonesty, and injustice.

But even here God promises purification.

Judgment will remove what is corrupt so that restoration can eventually take place.

Takeaway

God’s discipline is sometimes part of His work of restoration.

Chapter 2 — A Glimpse of the Future

Chapter 2 suddenly changes tone.

After describing Judah's spiritual condition, Isaiah looks toward a future day when something very different will happen.

Isaiah 2:1–4 — The Mountain of the Lord

Isaiah sees a future when people from many nations will come to Jerusalem seeking God.

They say:

"Teach us His ways."

This is a remarkable picture.

Instead of Israel copying the nations around them, the nations come seeking the God of Israel.

Then comes one of Isaiah's most famous images:

People will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Weapons of war will become tools of cultivation.

Plain English

Isaiah is describing a future kingdom characterized by God's rule, justice, and peace.

Prophecy: Near or Far?

This passage looks beyond Isaiah's immediate time.

Christians have traditionally seen this as pointing toward the future reign of God and ultimately the kingdom established through the Messiah.

Isaiah often does this.

He may begin with the problems of his own generation and suddenly look far beyond them.

Isaiah 2:5 — The Invitation

After describing that future hope, Isaiah says:

“Come...let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

That is the practical response.

If God’s future kingdom will be characterized by His ways, His people should begin walking in those ways now.

Isaiah 2:6–22 — Pride and False Security

Isaiah then returns to Judah’s present condition.

The people had placed their confidence in:

- Wealth
- Military strength
- Horses and chariots
- Idols
- Human achievement

Isaiah warns that human pride will eventually be humbled.

Plain English

Judah had begun trusting the things God had given them more than they trusted God Himself.

Takeaway

Anything we trust more than God can quietly become an idol.

Images and Symbols

The Sick Body

Represents the spiritual condition of Judah.

Scarlet and Snow

Scarlet represents the stain of sin.

Snow represents cleansing and forgiveness.

The Mountain of the Lord

Represents God's rule and the place where people seek Him.

Swords Into Plowshares

Represents the transformation from war to peace.

Light

Represents living according to God's truth and direction.

Near, Far, or Both?

Isaiah frequently speaks on more than one level.

In these chapters:

Near:
Judah must repent or face judgment.

Far:
Isaiah looks forward to a future time when God will rule in righteousness and nations will seek Him.

This movement between the present and future will appear repeatedly throughout Isaiah.

Key Takeaways

1. Religious activity does not automatically mean a person is close to God.
2. God cares deeply about justice and how His people treat others.
3. God confronts sin because He desires repentance and restoration.
4. Human wealth, power, and achievement can become substitutes for trusting God.
5. Even in a message of judgment, Isaiah introduces hope.
6. Isaiah frequently moves from present problems to future promises.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Isaiah begins by comparing God's people to rebellious children?

2. What does Isaiah mean when he describes Judah as a wounded or diseased body?

3. Why was God unhappy with their sacrifices and worship?

4. What does Isaiah 1:18 tell us about God's attitude toward sinners?

5. What kinds of things were the people trusting instead of God?

6. What does the picture of swords becoming plowshares communicate?

7. Why do you think Isaiah moves so quickly between judgment and hope?

8. What things today can become substitutes for trusting God?

9. What do you think it means personally to “walk in the light of the Lord”?

Application

Isaiah forces us to ask a difficult question:

Is my faith merely something I practice, or is it shaping the way I live?

Judah had religion.

They had worship.

They had tradition.

But God wanted their hearts.

That same question remains relevant today.

Closing Thought

Isaiah begins with uncomfortable truth.

God's people had wandered away from Him even while continuing to practice their religion.

Yet God's first message is not simply judgment.

It is an invitation.

“Come now…”

Before Isaiah tells us about the Messiah, the suffering servant, or the coming kingdom, he begins with the heart.

The journey through Isaiah begins with a simple question:

Will we listen when God calls us back to Him?