

## 1. A Crisis of Identity

**Texts:** Isaiah 1-5.

### Quotes:

- Isaiah the Gospel Prophet. (*Book by M. L. Andreasen*)
- Identity crisis: A psychosocial state or condition of disorientation and role confusion occurring esp. in adolescents as a result of conflicting pressures and expectations. 2. An analogous state of confusion occurring in a social structure, as an institution or a corporation. *American Heritage Dictionary*
- Always on Monday morning the press reports / God as revealed to His vicars in various guises— / Benevolent, stormy, patient, or out of sorts. / God knows which God is the God God recognizes. *Phyllis McGinley*

### Introductory questions

In these first chapters of Isaiah, the scene is set. Is it primarily about a people who don't know who they are, or their relationship to a God they really don't want to know? How does God respond to their patterns of worship and their concept of him? What is the fundamental problem here? Even though we do not sacrifice in the same way, can we have similar problems?

### Discussion ideas

The rejected God. Isaiah opens by describing a God who has been rejected by his people, a Being who is seen as being “paid off” by sacrifices and offerings, a ritualistic deity that needs to be placated. But God rejects such meaningless worship. He desires an intimate relationship, not some burdensome business contract.

“The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.” Isaiah 1:11 NIV. Does God take pleasure in any kind of sacrifice, in a heathen kind of way? Could the sacrifice of Christ also be viewed in this way? Has not even the cross been made a “meaningless sacrifice” (1:13)? [see “Extra material” below]

God's invitation is to “argue it out” with him (1:18)—he wants to reason with us. God does not seek to impose arbitrary rules; rather he seeks our agreement and understanding that his ways are true and right, and in our best interest. Also, he is not appealing to mystical thoughts or non-rational concepts. God wants us to use our reason—the mind he created works in ordered and logical processes to achieve a wise and considered result. This is not rationalism or humanism; however God does uplift as the essential methodology the only tool we really have to establish truth—our minds. In matters of religion like everything else, we can be very fervently and decidedly mistaken. God wants us to reason with him, to use our minds to examine the evidence so that we are not deceived.

Thoughtless rituals cannot save. God is not some kind of machine to be fixed or used. The reason he instituted the whole sacrificial system was not for his benefit, but for ours. The same with the cross—not some mechanism by which he can fix it for himself to save us, but designed for our benefit and appreciation. The problem with seeing religion as rules and requirements is that you do not come into the relationship that God most wants—one in which there is mutual understanding, love and acceptance of truth and right. You just do as you're told.

## Ellen White Comments

Against these evils the prophet Isaiah lifted his voice in stern rebuke: “Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me? saith the Lord. . . . When ye come to appear before Me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread My courts?” Isaiah 1:10-12.

...It is not because He is unwilling to forgive that He turns from the transgressor; it is because the sinner refuses to make use of the abundant provisions of grace, that God is unable to deliver from sin. {PK 322-3}

As Jesus came into the temple, He took in the whole scene. He saw the unfair transactions. He saw the distress of the poor, who thought that without shedding of blood there would be no forgiveness for their sins. He saw the outer court of His temple converted into a place of unholy traffic. The sacred enclosure had become one vast exchange.

Christ saw that something must be done....He had given directions in regard to the offerings. He understood their symbolical value, and He saw that they were now perverted and misunderstood. Spiritual worship was fast disappearing. No link bound the priests and rulers to their God. Christ’s work was to establish an altogether different worship. {DA 157.}

...the Jews had made these great convocations scenes of bloodshed and cruelty. In place of humble repentance of sin, they had multiplied the sacrifice of beasts, as if God could be honored by a heartless service. {DA 590}

## Extra material

The paganizing of Christianity in the great apostacy [sic] in the early ages of the church’s history brought in a heathen concept of the character of God and a heathen idea of sacrifice, applying it to the sacrifice on the cross. This corrupted and transformed the whole idea of atonement and of mediation...In this view, the blood of Christ means the death of Christ, a death made necessary by the demand of the Father for satisfaction for the sin of man. Man sinning deserved death. Before God could admit him to pardon and salvation, we are told, His wrath must be appeased, or His sense of justice must be satisfied. So Christ died, shed His blood, **in the place of man**. All who accept this death by faith as for them are admitted to pardon and then, by some divine casuistry, are accounted pure and free from sin, or let off from the damnation that was their due. Unhesitatingly, we pronounce this whole concept false, unscriptural, and unlike God. How could God show His justice by killing the innocent for the guilty? p.92

...when we localize the sacrifice, and therefore the action of the blood, we change the whole Bible thought of salvation by the blood of Christ into an arbitrary concept that is also heathen in its nature and origin.

If damnation is an arbitrary doom pronounced by an arbitrary God, because man transgressed an arbitrary law, and if salvation / means man’s escape from that arbitrary doom, because God’s wrath has been appeased by the flowing blood of a propitiatory victim, then it is clear how the blood, all at once, on Calvary, could accomplish this for the whole world. But this is neither the damnation nor the salvation that the Bible was given to reveal. pp. 97-8.

The blood of Christ, instead of representing a death paid once for all, as a price to the Father, when Jesus died on Calvary, represents the omnipresent spiritual presence and life of the Father and Son, a means by which God, through Christ, reaches out after men, bringing them to repentance and pardon, purging, washing, and cleansing them, and then changing them into the realization of God’s perfect ideal for them. p.119.

George E. Fifield, *The Water of Life* (Plainfield, NJ: Recorder Press ?date).

## 2. Crisis of Leadership

**Texts:** Isaiah 6

### **Quotes:**

- Ignorance is an evil weed, which dictators may cultivate among their dupes, but which no democracy can afford among its citizens. *William Henry Beveridge*
- I shall light a candle of understanding in thine heart, which shall not be put out. *2 Esdras 14:25*
- Don't criticize what you can't understand. *Bob Dylan*
- It is an equal failing to trust everybody, and to trust nobody. *18th-century English proverb*
- To trust people is a luxury in which only the wealthy can indulge; the poor cannot afford it. *E. M. Forster*

### **Introductory questions**

Is this about human leadership? Or is this lesson an example of what happens when we refuse to relate to God? How do we show our trust in God? Is God really wanting us to be ignorant of him so he doesn't have to heal us? Why does God speak this way? What are the consequences of God's threatening destruction before he will finally act to save?

### **Discussion ideas**

It's all a question of trust—confidence based on evidence... Do you trust the leadership; does the leadership trust God? In his vision, Isaiah is overwhelmed by the glory and holiness of God. Inevitably he believes he is doomed since he has “seen” God. While it may have reassured him of the all-powerful nature of God, his immediate response is terror. So God gives Isaiah a message—a message he is to take to his people.

What is the essence of God's message? That they hear but don't understand, see but don't perceive—and in the sense that this is deliberate. It's not that the people would like to understand. They prefer ignorance of God, and don't want his explanations. So in an effort to shock, God tells Isaiah that the people should have calloused hearts, dull ears, and closed eyes, for otherwise they might even respond and turn and be healed. As if God doesn't want to do that!

Puzzled, shocked, disturbed, Isaiah asks, “How long?” Until everything is destroyed, God replies. In other words, until the physical situation becomes so desperate that people realize there is no hope other than God and finally come back to him.

The tragedy of Isaiah's Israel is that though they think they know God, he is just a “God in the box” in the Temple. He is to be placated with offerings and dealt with mechanically. When God asks for a real relationship with his people, they refuse, because they prefer the system. They truly don't want to know God, and prefer to be left in “blissful ignorance.”

Why don't they want God, except as some ally to be used and manipulated? Because they prefer to trust in themselves, in their own power, in their human leaders. Like so many through the centuries, religion is just some kind of act, something that has to be done as part of life, but it has no real meaning or personal relevance. The problem with such an attitude is that it's so hard for God to get through—they see all religious activities as some requirement and devoid of real meaning. So God has to risk seeming vindictive and hostile just to get their attention.

But ultimately the promise is of a seed, a stump, that is left—the possibility of rebirth and renewal as those who wish return to God, the only one who can heal them.

## **Ellen White Comments**

In Isaiah's day the spiritual understanding of mankind was dark through misapprehension of God. Long had Satan sought to lead men to look upon their Creator as the author of sin and suffering and death. Those whom he had thus deceived, imagined that God was hard and exacting. They regarded Him as watching to denounce and condemn, unwilling to receive the sinner so long as there was a legal excuse for not helping him. The law of love by which heaven is ruled had been misrepresented by the archdeceiver as a restriction upon men's happiness, a burdensome yoke from which they should be glad to escape. He declared that its precepts could not be obeyed and that the penalties of transgression were bestowed arbitrarily.

In losing sight of the true character of Jehovah, the Israelites were without excuse. Often had God revealed Himself to them as one "full of compassion, and gracious, long-suffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth." Psalm 86:15. "When Israel was a child," He testified, "then I loved him, and called My son out of Egypt." Hosea 11:1.

Tenderly had the Lord dealt with Israel in their deliverance from Egyptian bondage and in their journey to the Promised Land. "In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them: in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bare them, and carried them all the days of old. Isaiah 63:9. {PK 311-2}

## **Extra Material**

"Come let us reason together," God invites (Isaiah 1:18), in context of His rejection of meaningless worship and faith. God dismisses faith without thought. "Let us argue the matter," He says, (Isaiah 43:26), wanting people to "know, believe, and understand." (Isaiah 43:10 NIV).

"Should a wise man utter vain knowledge? Should he reason with unprofitable talk?" asks Job (Job 15:2-3). "I desire to reason with God," he concludes (Job 13:3).

Similarly the wise man writes in Proverbs, "A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps.... The simple inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge." (Proverbs 14:15, 18 NIV).

In summarizing the commandments, Jesus himself pointed to the use of the mind as essential in commitment to God: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37 NIV).

And on the road to Emmaus, Jesus appealed to evidence and reason as he spoke with the disappointed disciples, choosing not to reveal himself so that truth would not be confirmed by his personal endorsement or by appeal to divine authority (see Luke 24:13ff.)

Jesus condemned the hypocrisy of those who demanded unthinking obedience to human traditions. He appealed to thought and investigation, saying, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this," (Mark 7:14 NIV), as he explained his reasoning.

The use of the mind is clearly encouraged by early Christians. Paul writes "I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind," (1 Corinthians 14:15 NIV), while Peter advises "Prepare your minds for action," (1 Peter 1:13).

The command is: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good," (1 Thessalonians 5:21), for "God is not the author of confusion." (1 Corinthians 14:33). Faith is defined (Hebrews 11:1) as "the substance of things not seen," not as denying the senses or the use of the mind, but based on higher principles and revelation. The requirement is to use the mind, to thoughtfully explain, to aim to understand: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." (1 Peter 3:15 NIV).

### 3. When Your World Is Falling Apart

**Texts:** Isaiah 7.

**Quotes:**

- More than any time in history, mankind now faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly. *Woody Allen*
- The rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam today. *Lewis Carroll*
- Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. *Jesus*

**Introductory questions**

What is significant here in all this political intrigue and shifting alliances? What do we know of Ahaz and his character? What role does God play in the life of the people at this time? What is the tempting alternative to trusting in God? Is there also not the danger of presumption? How does God come across in this very human catalogue of war, conspiracy, and mistrust?

**Discussion ideas**

The choice for Ahaz was between relying on human assistance (Assyria) or divine aid. For those who are used to the ways of the world, it is usually easier to place confidence in “realities,” in “practicalities,” and to see religious ideas as “unrealistic.” While you might “trust God,” you made sure to keep your powder dry! We all have a tendency to want to take matters into our own hands, to run our own lives, and only call on God when no alternatives are left.

Isaiah reminds Ahaz that there is no alternative to God—especially at this time of national crisis—and that he should look for a personal relationship with God immediately. Ahaz responds with pretentious piety that he will not ask for a test, even though God offers. In other words, he really doesn’t want to know! In his response, God gives assurance for the present crisis, but also points to the greater assurance of his presence and salvation—the coming of Immanuel. In the immediate context the participants would not see the promise of Jesus’ coming in much detail, but God blends the events so as to give hope beyond the pressing crisis.

As the lesson points out (Monday), Isaiah’s words to Ahaz could be taken in different ways. Were they a promise of redemption before or after slavery? What was the remnant? And so on. What would happen was contingent on Ahaz’ response, as is so often the case. God always wants to save and redeem, but he needs our right response.

What is the personal application here? Is this God saying “Do as I tell you, or else?” Or are these the words of a loving Father who seeks to help his rebellious children? Remember Ahaz was one of the worst kings, and the final crisis and exile of Judah is not far ahead. God waits patiently, and works for our best, but if we persistently refuse, he has no option but to let us go our own way to our destruction. Respecting our freewill and personal choice, God still does all he can to lead us, and to help us to make wise decisions that will lead to eternal life.

God wants to convince us—even being willing to stoop to our level and give us signs and proof. How should we respond? Like Ahaz, who claims very piously that he doesn’t want a sign? Why not? Because he doesn’t really want to have to deal with God anyway! So in the end God gives the signs, the proof, and the consequences anyway...

## Ellen White Comments

Had Ahaz and the chief men of his realm been true servants of the Most High, they would have had no fear of so unnatural an alliance as had been formed against them. But repeated transgression had shorn them of strength. Stricken with a nameless dread of the retributive judgments of an offended God, the heart of the king “was moved, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind.” Isaiah 7:2. In this crisis the word of the Lord came to Isaiah, bidding him meet the trembling king and say:

“Take heed, and be quiet; fear not, neither be fainthearted . . . [Isaiah 7:4-7, 9 quoted]

Well would it have been for the kingdom of Judah had Ahaz received this message as from heaven. But choosing to lean on the arm of flesh, he sought help from the heathen. In desperation he sent word to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria: “I am thy servant and thy son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, which rise up against me.” 2 Kings 16:7. The request was accompanied by a rich present from the king’s treasure and from the temple storehouse.

The help asked for was sent, and King Ahaz was given temporary relief, but at what a cost to Judah! The tribute offered aroused the cupidity of Assyria, and that treacherous nation soon threatened to overflow and spoil Judah. Ahaz and his unhappy subjects were now harassed by the fear of falling completely into the hands of the cruel Assyrians. {PK 328-9}

## Extra material

I’m dreaming. Images of people rushing everywhere and nowhere. Hordes of humanity, running, screaming. The earth in agony, worn out and groaning. Shaking and heaving, the world seems to be falling apart at the seams. In this massive spasm everything is destroyed by quake and tidal wave—all that remains is a pile of rubble and ruins, where nothing breathes. The last fading ripples wash on a lifeless shore. Scene fades to black.

Come more images. Images of the world as a vast leper colony, disease-ravaged and dying. Lying where they drop, all the world is one vast sick-bed, looking up with the vacant, staring eyes. What sickness is this that wipes out the world? Whimpering and pleading, humanity dies with a tremulous sigh that echoes through the empty spaces of eternity. The next image blinds with its brilliance, and as it fades the mushroom cloud of death spells out its message of doom. Weeping and wailing, those who remain curse each other as the clouds rain radioactive dust in the dawnless night of nuclear winter. Like a shroud over the world, the lethal brightness of war fades to the cold sterility of emptiness. The world remains, but no one remains.

Poisoned land, polluted seas, choked air, and each fights the other for breath and the scraps of life. Brother fights brother, mother fights daughter in an ever-increasing spiral of self-destruction. Not enough food. Not enough water. North fights south, east fights west in the killing fields of self-survival, and as one group wins they fight themselves on the dusty plains of Armageddon. The last picture is of an emaciated hand reaching out, pleading for food, for water, for air—but nothing remains, and all around the desert sands stretch far away.

Images of destruction, self-destruction. Not some science fiction fantasy of invasion from Mars, but what we can do to ourselves. So how *will* the world end? Does anybody know? Can we continue, thinking there will be no End? Or is this just scare-mongering, the nightmares of unbalanced minds? Will science provide the answers? A new Golden Age just around the corner?

Or maybe this is no dream, but a vision of possible futures that we cannot escape. Doom or hope, curse or blessing? When tomorrow comes, where will you be? Where will we *all* be?

## 4. The Hard Way

**Texts:** Isaiah 7:14-8:22.

### Quotes:

- I am not afraid of anything. If you fear God you do not fear anything else. Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, Libyan leader.
- The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else. Oswald Chambers
- Let us fear God and we shall cease to live. Mahatma Gandhi
- Fear God, yes, but don't be afraid of Him. J. A. Spender

### Introductory questions

There is much in this lesson about fearing God. What does this really mean? Is this God's preferred method of working? How can be love if we fear? Is it true that "we have nothing to fear if we fear God himself"? What of verse 17—waiting on and trusting in God? What of the occult/spiritualist alternative mentioned? What is really wrong with this approach?

### Discussion ideas

Much of this passage has to do with the circumstances of the time—Israel's choice to rely on political dependence through an alliance with Assyria. God points out how foolish such attitudes and actions really are, and their inevitable consequences. Isaiah is warned against conspiracy theories and political worries. Instead his message to his people is to "fear" and "dread" God (v. 13). Even though God seems to be hiding his face from Judah, Isaiah says he will wait on the Lord and put his trust in him (v.17).

To a fearful people—who were fearing the attack of the Northern Alliance, and then the Assyrians—it seems hardly helpful to tell them to fear and dread God! But what God is trying to tell them is that their preoccupation with living apart from him is of far worse consequence. In order to make them sit up and take notice, he wants at least their fear. Worse than being terrified of God is to pay him no attention and to ignore him. God refuses to be ignored! For his people prefer occult witchcraft to the truth and salvation of God.

But fear is not the best motivator, since the results last only as long as the fear—and there is little thinking done by fearful people. You can hardly build a relationship with someone who is terrified of you. Yet if God's people are shocked long enough to pay attention to what he says, at least that's a start.

God has to go the hard way with his people. They prefer to consult spiritualist mediums than talk to him. In fact, God says that even when trouble comes, they would rather curse God than come to him for his healing salvation. That's the depth of this situation.

By rejecting God, and trusting to his own power and philosophy, Ahaz brought destruction on his people. The sad truth is that actions have consequences. That's why God even prefers that people fear him rather than go their own way into self-destruction. Like a parent agonizing over a wayward child, he will do anything to try to win them back, to bring them to their senses. Yet his people prefer to believe the lies of the Devil, and deliberately follow Satanic practices. They are so sold on the diabolical picture of God that when God tries to get their attention, they believe that God is the hostile and evil being the Devil has portrayed. How tragic!

## **Ellen White Comments**

The Lord seeks to save, not to destroy. He delights in the rescue of sinners. "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Eze. 33:11). By warnings and entreaties He calls the wayward to cease from their evil-doing and to turn to Him and live. He gives His chosen messengers a holy boldness, that those who hear may fear and be brought to repentance...The messengers of the Lord are never to fear the face of man, but are to stand unflinchingly for the right. So long as they put their trust in God, they need not fear; for He who gives them their commission gives them also the assurance of His protecting care. {CC 202}

Jesus Himself never purchased peace by compromise. His heart overflowed with love for the whole human race, but He was never indulgent to their sins. He was too much their friend to remain silent while they were pursuing a course that would ruin their souls,--the souls He had purchased with His own blood. He labored that man should be true to himself, true to his higher and eternal interest. The servants of Christ are called to the same work, and they should beware lest, in seeking to prevent discord, they surrender the truth. They are to "follow after the things which make for peace" (Rom. 14:19); but real peace can never be secured by compromising principle. And no man can be true to principle without exciting opposition. A Christianity that is spiritual will be opposed by the children of disobedience. But Jesus bade His disciples, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul." Those who are true to God need not fear the power of men nor the enmity of Satan. In Christ their eternal life is secure. Their only fear should be lest they surrender the truth, and thus betray the trust with which God has honored them. {DA 356}

## **Extra material**

Heart speeds up...knees knock...body trembles.Blood pressure surges and arteries expand. Cold sweat shivers up and down the spine. Eyes widen and pupils dilate. In the bloodstream adrenalin pumps up a scarifying "high". Breathing grows faster, palms are clammy. Want to run away, want to hide, want to fight. Feel absolutely terrible and want it all to STOP! So what am I? No puzzling riddle this--quite obviously: I'M SCARED!

Fear. That terrible feeling. A universal emotion. A basic response to danger and threat. A way of reacting to outside attack. Everyone has known fear, felt its terror, dreaded its return.

Fear. An ever-present reality reflected in mental illness: the ever-increasing epidemic that mirrors these fear-filled times. A desperate anxiety about life and the future that leads to a constant reaching for the pill capsule or whisky bottle in a desperate search for peace of mind. But fear cannot be drowned in a sea of drugs and alcohol, and returns with the head-splitting hangover...

Fear. The terror of life that may even lead to the ending of life. Suicide. For some this is the only way to 'conquer' their fears. How many will find that their fears will conquer them this year?

So what about all those fears that afflict us? Do they really have to be there? Is this the best way of living? What happens when we are in a state of fear? How do we deal with the worries, anxieties and disturbing fears of life? Why are we scared, and what are we scared of? Questions, questions! Fear causes a broken life, a life without peace and trust and tranquillity, unsettled and ill-at-ease. More than this, fear can be a mind-paralyzing dread, a most horrible and horrifying experience. Fear: that truly terrible feeling. So what about God? How do we relate? How do we picture him? And above all, are we scared of him? That's the question!

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