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Isaiah:
“Comfort My [God’s] People”

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Introduction

Isaiah: “Comfort My [God’s] People”

Ever since Isaiah, the prophet, first preached, his words have been “carved” into our minds. They are unforgettable words. They are words full of meaning, hope, and promise. “God with us,” “For unto us a child [Jesus] is born,” “Every valley shall be exalted [glorified],” and “he [Jesus] was wounded for our transgressions [sins], he was bruised for our iniquities [sins]: the chastisement [punishment] of our peace was upon him; and with his [Jesus’] stripes [wounds] we are healed.” Isaiah’s words speak so loudly, so clearly to us—even after 2,700 years.

Take Isaiah’s Suffering Servant Poem, for example (Isaiah 52:13–53:12). Isaiah brings a picture of the Messiah (Savior) into sharper focus than anywhere else in the Old Testament. These verses alone explain why Isaiah is called, “the gospel¹ prophet.”

Plus, Isaiah made a prophecy about Cyrus by name 150 years before Cyrus conquered Babylon (Isaiah 44:28–45:6). The prophecy is so detailed that some Bible scholars² have said falsely that a “second Isaiah” wrote the last part of the book of Isaiah.

The book of Isaiah shows a beautiful combination of language with word-pictures and poetry. This makes Isaiah’s writing a good book for inspirational reading. Isaiah’s thoughts are higher than worldly thoughts in the same way the heavens are higher than the earth (Isaiah 55:9). When the book of Isaiah was translated into English, some of the beauty of the Hebrew language was lost. But the book of Isaiah still has only a few equals in the history of all literature.

We know Isaiah’s clear, poetic, emotional, and powerful words. But do we know the man Isaiah and the world in which he wrote, prayed, and prophesied? As the cruel Assyrian Empire³ rose to its greatest power, it was a time of terrible danger. Even worse, God’s chosen people were sinking deeper and deeper into sin. Selfish people and poor people fought in the streets. Rich people fought to get richer, and poor people struggled to survive. Isaiah was trying to protect his people’s identity⁴ by encouraging a small group of them to remain faithful to God. He called upon his people to look up to their God as the Holy One of Israel. He pictured God as the Creator of heavens and earth, the God who knew them by name and who promised to save them from fire, if they would listen and obey.

¹gospel—the good news of salvation.

²scholars—people who earn a living by studying one particular subject.

³Assyrian Empire—the country of Assyria which became the most powerful nation in Isaiah’s time.

⁴identity—being known as a certain group of people. For example, the Jews were known to be God’s people.

Isaiah was a counselor to kings. At one time, God's remnant⁵ was limited to one city surrounded by armies from Assyria. But Isaiah's prophetic words gave King Hezekiah⁶ strength to look for the miracle that was Jerusalem's only hope (Isaiah 36; Isaiah 37). If Jerusalem had fallen to the Assyrians, instead of to the Babylonians 100 years later, the Assyrians could have wiped out God's people. Then there would have been no Jewish people and the Savior of the world would not have arisen from them.

Isaiah's God said: " 'Comfort my People' " (Isaiah 40:1, TEV). This comfort broke through a gloomy valley of darkening shadows into a brighter, gentler world. It held a hope that kept the people of faith alive through some painful trouble that tested their faith.

This quarter, we take a look at Isaiah, at his words, and at his times. We also look at his prophecies and at his God, the God who cried to His people and to us, " 'Do not be afraid—I [God] will save you. I have called you by name—you are mine [God's]' " (Isaiah 43:1, TEV).

What is Isaiah's message? What did he write that speaks so powerfully to us today? What warnings does he offer? What promises does he make? And what does he tell us about our God that we need to know?

This quarter's lesson was written by Dr. Roy Gane, a Hebrew scholar and a teacher of Old Testament at Andrews University Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Roy brings to these lessons his knowledge of language and history and his great love for the Bible and for God. We pray that as you study these lessons, Dr. Gane's great love for God will re-spark your love for Him, too.

⁵remnant—a small group of God's faithful people.

⁶Hezekiah—one of the good kings of Judah.

A Problem of Identity¹



SABBATH—MARCH 27

LOST IN THE LAND OF FORGETFULNESS. Suppose you drive in Ireland along a narrow country road with rows of bushes along the way. You may find the way blocked by cows wandering home after a meal of hay. No herdsman is with them, but they will still go to their owner's barn. They know where, and to whom, they belong.

A small boy in a store gets separated from his mother and yells, "I've lost my mommy!" He may not know exactly where he is, or where his mother is. But among many mothers walking through the store, he will know which one is *his* mother.

Sadly, the Judeans² were not the same as those Irish cows and the little lost boy. The Judeans forgot they belonged to God, their heavenly Parent. They, too, lost their true identity as God's covenant³ people. "I [God] reared [raised] children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me [God]. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib [feedbox]; but Israel does not know, my [God's] people do not understand" (Isaiah 1:2, 3).

This week, we will learn about God's work to bring His people back to Himself.

A LOOK AT THIS WEEK'S LESSON: What was Judah's spiritual condition when the book of Isaiah was written? Can we truly worship God if our hearts are not right with Him? How were the Judeans' choices the same as the choices we have to make?

MEMORY VERSE: "The Lord says, 'now, let's [let us] settle the matter. You are stained red with sin, but I will wash you as clean as snow. Although your sins are deep red, you will be as white as wool' " (Isaiah 1:18, TEV).

¹identity—being known as a certain group of people. The problem with identity the Jewish people of Judah had was that they were forgetting they belonged to God.

²Judeans—the people of Judah. The nation of Israel was divided into two smaller kingdoms. The northern kingdom was Israel and the southern kingdom was Judah.

³covenant—an agreement between God and His people.

SUNDAY—MARCH 28

“HEAR, O HEAVENS!” (Isaiah 1:2).

The book of Isaiah starts by introducing (1) the author (“son of Amoz”), (2) the reason for his message (a “vision”), and (3) his topic (Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, during the rule of four kings). The topic also names Isaiah’s original hearers as the people of his country. Isaiah spoke to the people about their condition and future.

By naming the kings of his time, Isaiah limits the number of his hearers and ties the book to the historical and political events⁴ during his time (2 Kings 15–20 and 1 Chronicles 26–32).

What is the message of Isaiah 1:2? How does the whole Bible show the same message? How does this message apply to the Christian church today?

Isaiah’s message begins with the words, “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth” (read Deuteronomy 30:19; Deuteronomy 31:28). God does not mean that heaven and earth can hear and understand. He is just making His point strong and clear.

When an ancient⁵ Near Eastern (Asian) king made a political treaty (agreement) with a weaker ruler, he used his gods as witnesses.⁶ This was to make

sure that any law-breaking would be noticed and punished. But when God made a covenant with the Israelites in the days of Moses, He did not use other gods as witnesses. As the only true God, He asked the heavens and earth to be witnesses.

Judah was guilty of rebellion against God. But what hope was there? Isaiah 1:9.

MONDAY—MARCH 29

WRONG WORSHIP (Isaiah 1:10-17).

Why do you think Isaiah used Sodom and Gomorrah as an example (Isaiah 1:9, 10)?

What is God telling the people in Isaiah 1:11-15? Why did God refuse to accept the worship His people were offering?

The hands of the people who offered sacrifices and prayed were “full of blood.” This means they were guilty of violence and the oppression⁷ of other people (Isaiah 58:3, 4). They wrongly treated other members of the covenant. Their violence and oppression was rebellion against God. Sins against other people are sins against God.

⁴events—things that happen.

⁵ancient—very old.

⁶witnesses—people, or in this case false gods, who “saw” the king sign the treaty.

⁷oppression—when people are not treated fairly.

God Himself had established the worship system of sacrifices (Leviticus 1–16). He chose the Jerusalem temple as the place for this worship system (1 Kings 8:10, 11). But this worship was supposed to follow the rules of the covenant God had made with the people. God's covenant made it possible for Him to live among the people at the sanctuary/temple. So sacrifices and prayers done in the sanctuary/temple were good only when the people remained faithful to God and His covenant. If people offered sacrifices without being truly sorry for their sins against other people, they were not really worshiping God. Their sacrifices and prayers said they were loyal. But their oppression of other people proved they had broken the covenant.



Are your hands dripping with blood? Or do you help people who need help?

What does God command that His people do? Isaiah 1:16, 17. How is Isaiah 1:16, 17 the same as Jesus' words in Matthew 23:23-28? How might we oppress⁸ people while we say we obey God?

TUESDAY—MARCH 30

**A REASON FOR FORGIVENESS
(Isaiah 1:18).**

What is God saying in Isaiah 1:16-20?

God has shown strong proof that the Judeans are guilty of breaking the covenant (Isaiah 1:2-15). God has begged them to reform⁹ (Isaiah 1:16, 17). This begging suggests there is hope for the Judeans. After all, why bother asking criminals who will die for their crimes to change their ways? How could prisoners on death row “save the wicked, defend the orphan, plead for the widow”? But God says, “Come, let us talk” (Isaiah 1:18). He is trying to reason with His people. He is trying to get them to turn from their evil ways, no matter how wicked they had become.

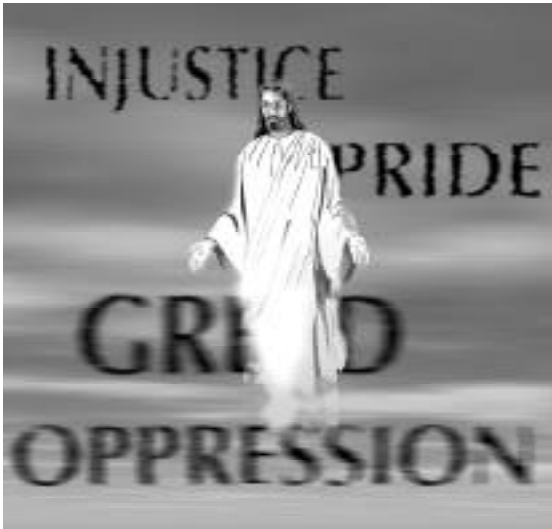
God says to them, “Your red sins shall become white.” Why are sins red? Because red is the color of the “blood” that covers the hands of the people (Isaiah 1:15). White is the color of purity (cleanness). God is offering to change

⁸oppress—not treating people fairly.

⁹reform—to change for the better; to improve your relationship with God.

them. This is the same type of language King David used when He cried out to God for forgiveness for committing adultery with Bathsheba and killing her husband (read Psalm 51:7, 14). In Isaiah 1:18, God is offering to forgive His people!

How does God's offer of forgiveness serve as an argument for them to change their ways? Compare¹⁰ Isaiah 1:18 with Isaiah 44:22.



“ ‘Come back to me, I am the one who saves you’ ” (Isaiah 44:22, TEV).

Now we see the purpose of God's warning to His people. He wants to bring them back to Him. God's forgiveness makes it possible for the people to be changed by His power. Here we see the seeds of the “new covenant” in Jeremiah 31:31-34. In the “new cov-

enant” is the basis of a new heart relationship with God. We start off “in the red.” This means we owe a debt we can never pay. From the humble position of needing forgiveness, we are ready to accept everything God has to give.

WEDNESDAY—MARCH 31

TO EAT OR TO BE EATEN (Isaiah 1:19-31).

What theme (main idea) appears in Isaiah 1:19-31 that we see all through the Bible?

If the people choose to be obedient, they will eat the good of the land (Isaiah 1:19). But if they refuse God's forgiveness and rebel against Him, they will be eaten by the sword (Isaiah 1:20). The choice is theirs. Isaiah 1:19-31 holds a conditional¹¹ blessing and curse.



Obey God and be blessed.

¹⁰compare—show how things are the same.

¹¹conditional—receiving God's blessings depends on the choices we make.

Isaiah 1 uses the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 30:19, 20. Those words were recorded at the time when the covenant with Israel was set up.

Read Deuteronomy 30:19, 20. Notice that there was no middle ground.¹² It was either life or death, blessings or curses. Why do you think there is only one of two choices for us when it comes to God?

These words of Moses summarize warnings, blessings, and curses that close the making of the covenant in Deuteronomy 27–30. (Compare Leviticus 26.) Parts of this covenant include (1) the list of what God had done for Israel, (2) conditions/rules (commandments) for Israel to obey in order to keep the covenant, (3) witnesses, and (4) blessings and curses to warn Israel of what would happen if they did not follow the covenant commandments.

These parts of the covenant appeared in the same order in political treaties (agreements) among non-Israelite peoples. So when God established the covenant with the Israelites, He used something that would help them understand the type of relationship He wanted to have with them. The blessings of the covenant were great. But if Israel broke the covenant, they would be worse off than ever.

In your own Christian walk (life), how have you been blessed when you obeyed God? How have you been cursed when you did not obey?

THURSDAY—APRIL 1

A FRIGHTENING LOVE SONG (Isaiah 5:1-7).

What is the meaning of the love song in Isaiah 5:1-7?

This love song is a parable.¹³ God explains the meaning of the parable in Isaiah 5:7. By using a parable, God helps Israel look at themselves without emotion to help them see how sinful they really are. God also used a parable with King David to help him see how sinful he had been. By calling Isaiah 5:1-7 a “love song,” God shows how He feels about His people. His relationship with them comes from His character. His character is love (1 John 4:8). God expects the people to answer Him with love. But instead of “grapes,” He gets “wild grapes.” In the Hebrew, “wild grapes” mean “stinking things.”

What does God mean when He said, “Is there anything I [God] failed to do for it [the vineyard]? Then why did it produce [grow] sour grapes and not the good grapes I expected?” (Isaiah 5:4, TEV).

¹²no middle ground—no “grayness” between white and black. There is only a right choice and a wrong choice. There is no such thing as a half-right choice or a half-wrong choice.

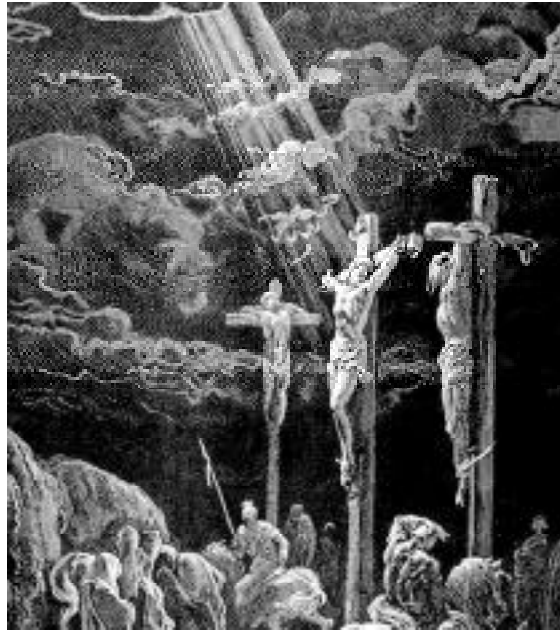
¹³parable—a simple story that teaches a moral or spiritual lesson.

God says in the next verses: “Here is what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge [fence] around it, break down the wall that protects it, and let wild animals eat it and trample [crush] it down. I will let it be overgrown with weeds. . . .” (Isaiah 5:5, 6, TEV).

When we sin, God does not quickly cut us off from Himself by removing His protection and destroying us. He patiently gives us opportunities to receive forgiveness (2 Peter 3:9). He does not cut off anyone who shows an interest in following Him. God continues to beg when there is hope for a positive answer. He does not quickly take “No” for an answer, because He knows we are ignorant and deceived (tricked) by sin. But when we do not accept Him. He fully accepts our choice and lets us stay the way we have chosen to be (Revelation 22:11).

If we always refuse to accept God’s forgiveness, we will be lost. Turning away from Jesus is dangerous (Hebrews 6:4-6). God will not force us to accept His forgiveness, because He respects our freedom to choose.

Read Isaiah 5:4. God Himself died on the cross for our sins. What more could He have done for us? Nothing! How does thinking about the Cross give us hope of salvation and encourage us to repent¹⁴ and change our ways?



What more could God have done for us?

FRIDAY—APRIL 2

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Isaiah 1:4. Ellen G. White wrote: “The people who claimed to be God’s children had separated themselves from Him. They had lost their wisdom. They had twisted their understanding of His love. They could not see their sins, because they had forgotten that God had forgiven their old sins. They moved restlessly and uncertainly under darkness. They tried to remove from their minds the memory of the freedom, hope, and happiness they once had with God. So they did all kinds of sins and foolishness. They took themselves out of God’s protection. They sank deeper into the guilt that was already upon them. They listened to

¹⁴repent—to say you are sorry for your sins and that you want to stop sinning.

Satan's charges (accusations) against God's character. They blamed God for not having mercy¹⁵ and forgiveness." —Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, volume 4, p. 1137.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How can we "wash ourselves" (Isaiah 1:16)?
2. How did Jesus use the love song of the vineyard? Matthew 21:33-45; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19. What lessons do Jesus' words have for us as Adventists?
3. God offers to forgive us and to change us completely. Which comes

first, change and then forgiveness? Or forgiveness and then change? Explain your answer. Why is it important to know which comes first?

4. In the Ellen G. White quote from *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, we read that God's people had taken "themselves out of God's protection." What does that mean?

SUMMARY: God's people sometimes forgot Him. But He reminded them that they were responsible for their covenant with Him. Mercifully,¹⁶ God pointed out the bad results of leaving His protection. He also urged them to let Him heal and cleanse them.

¹⁵mercy—kindness we do not deserve.

¹⁶mercifully—with kindness we do not deserve.