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A Relationship on the Rocks

ISAIAH 1:2-17

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth,
for the LORD has spoken:
I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner
and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know;
my people do not understand.

Isaiah 1:2-3

Gather

CHECK IN

Have you ever followed the wrong directions on a road trip? Added sugar to a recipe instead of salt? Miscommunicated with a friend, family member, or colleague? Share about a time, large or small, when communication broke down in your life. What, if anything, helped repair it?

OPENING PRAYER

You call us to listen—not only with our ears, but with our hearts. Open us to our neighbors and our world. Where we are distant, draw us near; where we are hardened, make us tender. Renew in us the desire to seek justice and mercy. Amen.

COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Isaiah 1 paints a vivid picture of a strained family relationship between God's people and YHWH—this is the personal name of God, which God first shares with Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). YHWH's people are like rebellious children who have forgotten their parent's love.

Take a moment to share in pairs or triads about someone who has taught you about forgiveness, accountability, or grace.

Finally, take some time to review the group covenant (p. 9). Questions and doubts are welcome here; this is a space for honest learning and shared growth.



Dwell

DWELLING IN THE WORD

Isaiah 1:2-17

² Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth,
for the LORD has spoken:

I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.

³ The ox knows its owner
and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know;
my people do not understand.

⁴ Woe, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who act corruptly,
who have forsaken the LORD,
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
who are utterly estranged!

⁵ Why do you seek further beatings?
Why do you continue to rebel?

The whole head is injured,
and the whole heart faint.

⁶ From the sole of the foot to the head,
there is no soundness in it,
only bruises and sores
and bleeding wounds;
they have not been drained or bound up
or softened with oil.

⁷ Your country lies desolate;
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
aliens devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.

⁸ And daughter Zion is left
like a booth in a vineyard,

like a shelter in a cucumber field,
like a besieged city.

⁹ If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we would have been like Sodom
and become like Gomorrah.

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls
or of lambs or of goats.

¹² When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more!

¹³ Bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove your evil deeds
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil;

¹⁷ learn to do good;



seek justice;
rescue the oppressed;
defend the orphan;
plead for the widow.

CONVERSATION

1. This text ascribes strong emotions to YHWH. The relationship between God and Israel is intimate and long-standing, but also under significant strain. Things seem to be at or near a breaking point.

- ◆ What emotions do you encounter in the prophet's words?

- ◆ How does it make you feel to encounter YHWH having these emotions? Does this excite you? Comfort you? Confuse you? Trouble you?

2. This scripture text links worship and justice. This is true of the Bible more broadly but especially of the prophets, whose role was often to name and speak into leaders' abuse of power. For Isaiah, one cannot worship at the altar of a just God while also treating others in unjust ways. The two are incompatible.
- ♦ Where are worship and justice interlinked in your life? In your faith community? Are there any places where they feel disconnected?
 - ♦ Isaiah concludes with a call to action: "Learn to do good; seek justice" (v. 17). Do you hear this as a threat? An invitation? A warning? An opportunity?
3. When the prophet Isaiah originally proclaimed these words, the united kingdom of Israel had split into two kingdoms: Judah in the south and Israel in the north. The kingdom of Judah (where Isaiah lived) was locked in perpetual conflict with the surrounding nations, including Israel, Syria, and Assyria, culminating in the Syro-Ephraimite War (734–732 BCE), which destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. Judah remained independent but came under the control of the mighty Assyrian Empire.
- ♦ How does this historical context shape your understanding of Isaiah 1:2-17? Of the prophet's point of view?
 - ♦ What are some of the repeated words, phrases, and images in this scripture text? How do those connect with this historical backdrop?



- ◆ How does this scripture text fit within the broader story of the Bible?

4. In Isaiah 1:2-17, despair and hope intertwine. As Martin Luther famously put it, this is a scripture text that contains both *law* and *gospel*. Mary Jane Haemig and Walter Sundberg explain: “God gives us the law to teach us to fear (revere), love, and trust in God above all. . . . The gospel is the gracious promise of God in Christ. It grants forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation to the fallen and unworthy sinner.”¹

- ◆ Where in this scripture text do you encounter the law, which convicts God’s people, lays bare our sin, and reminds us of our constant need for God’s grace?

¹ Mary Jane Haemig and Walter Sundberg, “Martin Luther on the Bible,” in *Lutheran Study Bible, Second Edition* (Augsburg Fortress, 2025), p. 1975.

- ♦ Where do you encounter the gospel, which proclaims God’s eternal promise, roots us in God’s forgiveness and grace, and invites us into new life in Christ?

Engage

WORD AND SERVICE

Name one phrase or image from Isaiah 1 that will stay with you this week. What about it speaks to you—or challenges you?

Consider one concrete way you might seek justice in your life: an act of kindness, a moment of advocacy, or listening to someone who feels unseen.

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Sing ELW 717, “Let justice flow like streams.”

Think about the relationships in your life that are strained or in need of healing and renewal. Feel free to share prayer requests with the group, keeping in mind the group covenant’s call to confidentiality.

CLOSING PRAYER

Help us to transform our anger into loving service. Empower us to grow in compassion as we hear the cries of the oppressed. Renew in us the courage to do good, seek justice, rescue the downtrodden, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow. Send us forth as people of mercy and truth. Amen.

SESSION RECAP

In this session, we explored Isaiah 1, a vivid portrait of YHWH’s strained relationship with God’s people, who, in neglecting their call to justice, have forgotten what it means to live in covenant with God and with one another. To mistreat our neighbor is to reject God, and vice versa. Love of God and love of neighbor go hand in hand.

God’s words of anger, grief, and longing are not signs of rejection but the cries of a parent yearning for reconnection and reconciliation. Embedded in God’s grief and anger is the pathway to reconciliation and repair. Hope and despair are intertwining realities.

Worship and justice are inseparable; genuine repentance opens the door to relational renewal.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GOING DEEPER

- ✦ Isaiah describes disconnection, injustice, and the call to repair. In the coming days, gently observe and note the “Isaiah moments” you encounter. Where do you encounter fractures in relationships? Where do you discover quiet acts of justice or mercy?
- ✦ Read *The Prophetic Imagination* by Walter Brueggemann (Augsburg Fortress, 2018), and explore how prophetic grief and hope in Isaiah and throughout our scriptures challenge complacency and invite us into God’s work of justice and peace.
- ✦ Meditate on *Prophet Isaiah* by Marc Chagall (1968). Where do you notice lament and hope in the colors and figures? How does Chagall’s painting capture the tension between divine anger and divine mercy?
- ✦ Read more of Isaiah. Feel free to pick and choose from this list or read one passage a day.
 - ◆ Isaiah 3:13-15
 - ◆ Isaiah 5:18-23
 - ◆ Isaiah 9:8—10:4
 - ◆ Isaiah 30:8-14
 - ◆ Isaiah 32:1-8
 - ◆ Isaiah 55:1-9
 - ◆ Isaiah 58:1-12
- ✦ Take a few moments to think and wonder about what you experienced in this session. Here are a few prompts you might use to reflect or journal.
 - ◆ What injustice weighs most heavily on your heart right now? Where are relationships in your life strained or broken? How and what do you need to lament?

 - ◆ What’s the relationship between anger and love in your life? In your relationships with friends and family members? In your relationship with God?

- ♦ How might worship and action reinforce each other in your faith practice?

LOOKING AHEAD

In our next session, we will explore Isaiah 5:1-7, another scripture text that explores YHWH's troubled relationship with God's people. In God's holy vineyard, we'll encounter the story of how this tender and caring relationship has been disrupted by disappointment and destruction. God calls God's people to bear the fruits of justice and righteousness.

