



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

Quick prep

This passage tells the story of a broken relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel—a relationship marked by grief, betrayal, and estrangement. The God who once delighted in God's children now feels forgotten and forsaken, abandoned both in worship and in the practice of justice. It is a text that holds anger and sorrow together, revealing heartbreak beneath the fierce accusations. The pain of the relationship is described through vivid imagery: rebellious children, a sick and wounded body, forgotten memories, desolate countrysides, and cities reduced to ruin.

At the heart of the problem lies hypocrisy in worship. The people's sacrifices, prayers, and rituals have become hollow, stripped of meaning because they no longer flow from lives of justice and mercy. To neglect the oppressed, the orphan, and the widow is to betray YHWH. Worship and justice are inseparable expressions of a single covenantal faithfulness.

Ironically, divine anger is the beginning of hope. Restoration remains possible if the people are willing to turn away from wickedness, cleanse themselves, learn goodness, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow.

✦ Throughout the facilitator and participant guides, you will see the word *YHWH*. This is the personal name of God, which God first shares with Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Typically, this four-letter Hebrew name is translated into English as LORD, drawing from the tradition of our Jewish neighbors who so revere God's holy name that they do not speak it.

✦ It is easy to focus on the ferocity of the accusations in this scripture text and on its courtroom context. But relational dynamics are also key to understanding this text. The Israelites are YHWH's children, and this chapter is fundamentally about fractured family relationships—something many people can easily relate to.

✦ The topic of anger—especially divine anger!—can be very complicated, especially for those whose experiences of anger are tied to past or present abuse. Be mindful of how our complicated human histories can cause us to respond to biblical texts in complicated ways. Hold space for a variety of responses.

SUPPLIES

- ♦ Pens or pencils
- ♦ Paper or journals for reflections
- ♦ A candle and matches
- ♦ Bibles (NRSV or NRSVue recommended)
- ♦ Copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*

✦ Complicated family dynamics and/or painful stories may arise from participants during this session. If this happens, resist the urge to “fix” situations beyond your control. Simply hold space for participants to share and remind the group to keep conversations confidential. If a participant has shared something vulnerable, consider checking in with them afterward to make sure they have the support they need.

✦ Some of the prayers in this Bible Conversation do not name God as the direct subject of every action. This is intentional. Drawing on Martin Luther’s understanding of God’s “hiddenness” (*Deus absconditus*), these prayers root us in the ways divine action interweaves with human action, natural processes, and ordinary life. The prayers use open, invitational language to leave room for mystery and shared participation in God’s grace. This way of praying assumes help is needed, trusts God’s nearness, and proclaims that transformation emerges through both divine presence and human response.

Gather (15 to 30 minutes)

CHECK IN

Invite participants to share about a time when communication broke down in their life or in a relationship, and what helped repair it. Of course, it is also important to make space for stories in which repair was not possible.

Encourage honesty but avoid mandating deep disclosure. People should get to choose their level of vulnerability. For online or hybrid groups, invite online participants to unmute and share one at a time or to type their responses in the chat. Keep the tone lighthearted; this is just a way to connect Isaiah’s themes to real life.

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

Begin by reminding the group that this scripture text describes a strained family relationship in which YHWH’s people are like rebellious children spurning a loving parent. Invite participants to share (in pairs or triads) a short story about a person who taught them something important about forgiveness, accountability, or grace. After a few minutes, gather everyone together and ask: What do these experiences reveal about what we need from one another when trust is broken? How do we repair relationships?

Conclude by reviewing the group covenant (p. 8 in this guide, p. 9 in the participant guide): Listening carefully, respecting differences, and maintaining confidentiality are essential to a trusting community. Remind the group that everyone’s voice matters, and that questions and doubts are welcome in this space. Hold space for any questions, concerns, or additions that may arise from the group.

Dwell (20 to 40 minutes)

DWELLING IN THE WORD

Dwelling in the word is a prayerful way of slowing down with scripture so the text can speak in fresh ways. Ask for three volunteers to read the scripture text and invite them to emphasize words or phrases that carry weight or significance for them. Remind the group that every reading is itself a form of interpretation.

After each reading, allow generous silence so participants can reflect on what they noticed or felt. Encourage the group to listen not only for meaning but also for images, emotions, and invitations for deeper conversation.

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;

✦ Remember that emotion and vulnerability are key to understanding this text. Encourage participants to approach Isaiah 1 not only as a prophetic indictment but as a lament from a wounded parent—a relational text rather than a purely judicial one.

✦ The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is referenced in verses 9-10. The story itself is told in Genesis 18:16–19:29. Keep in mind that this story is deeply controversial in the modern day and has been used for centuries as a “clobber passage” against LGBTQIA+ people. Remind the group that this story is ultimately about abuse of power, not human sexuality.

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. Invite participants to paraphrase the scripture text in their own words. What are some different ways to express its tone? Gentle? Disappointed? Fierce? Sorrowful? Alternatively, invite participants to imagine Isaiah's words being spoken directly to us today. How does that make them feel?
2. In linking worship and justice together, this scripture text emphasizes our action and our response to God's call. To nuance and deepen conversation, consider God's role and action in this passage. What is God up to in this scripture text? What's the relationship between God's work and ours?
3. Balance theological reflection with personal insight. Alternate between "What does the text say about God?" and "What might this reveal about our own hearts or communities?"
4. This scripture text holds together tensions that resist resolution. Fierce accusations intertwine with God's eternal love; grief intermingles with hope; law and gospel go hand in hand. What questions, resistance, or unease does it stir in participants? Encourage them to let these tensions remain unresolved; they are the heart of faith, not problems to solve.

Engage (10 to 20 minutes)

WORD AND SERVICE

Invite each participant to name one phrase or image from Isaiah 1:2-17 that will stay with them this week. Encourage them to consider one concrete way to "seek justice" in their daily life through an act of kindness, advocacy, or listening. Point out the Session Recap, Suggestions for Going Deeper, and Looking Ahead sections in the participant guide as opportunities to deepen reflection after the session.

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Begin worship and prayer by lighting a candle to represent God's compassion and steadfast love even in the midst of estrangement. If your group is hybrid or online, invite online participants to light a candle wherever they are.

Invite the group to sing ELW 717, "Let justice flow like streams."

Ask for prayer requests connected to the scripture text's themes—struggling relationships, healing, reconciliation, and renewal.

- ✦ Invite participants to draw from a variety of Bible translations alongside the recommended NRSV and NRSVue. Translational choices often raise important theological and literary questions that ultimately lead to a deeper understanding of the text.
- ✦ Don't fear silence in discussion or during meditative and prayerful parts of the session. In silence, God is often working in our hearts in mysterious and profound ways.

- ✦ Participants may come from varied theological backgrounds. Keep worship elements simple and open. Focus on gratitude, compassion, and shared hope.
- ✦ For ongoing connection, consider starting a group text thread where participants can share prayers, hopes, or concerns between and beyond sessions.

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.

LOOKING AHEAD

Be sure to review the Looking Ahead section of the participant guide and share any relevant details about the time and location of the next session.

