

Day 1

Isaiah 1:1–9

Isaiah's 'preface'

Like books today, Isaiah starts his book with (a) its title (1:1) and (b) an 'Author's preface' (1:2–5;30), in this case outlining the situation in which he ministered.

Title

1:1. The vision¹ of Isaiah, son of Amoz, which he perceived concerning Judah and Jerusalem, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, kings of Judah.²

Backdrop to Isaiah's ministry (1): You are not what you ought to be (1:2–31)

Isaiah starts by looking at the evidence before his eyes. A devastated land (vv. 2–9), a failing church (vv. 10–20), and a corrupt society (vv. 21–26), this last merging into a surprising view of the future (vv. 27–31).

The state of the nation

2. Hear, O Heavens,
listen, O Earth,
for Yahweh has himself spoken:
Sons I have nurtured and reared
and they – they! – have rebelled³ against me!
3. An ox knows its owner,
and a donkey its master's trough;
it is Israel who does not know!
My people who have no discernment!
4. Ah, sinning nation,
a people heavy with iniquity,

1 'Vision...perceived'. The verb *chazah*, can mean actually to 'see' a vision but it is usually broader – 'to see truth', 'to perceive meaning' – in this case by revelation from the Lord.

2 Respectively 790–740, 750–732, 744–715, 729–686 BC. The overlapping years were coregencies by which the 'old' king secured the succession for the son he chose. The years 745–701 BC were ones of constant threat from the imperialistic expansion of Assyria.

3 The three great words in the 'sin'-vocabulary are 'sin' (*chat'a*, v. 4), the actual item of wrongdoing; 'iniquity' (v. 4, from *'awab*, to be bent), the 'warp' in the fallen human nature; and 'rebellion' (*pash'a*), wilful, deliberate disobedience.



seed of evil-doers,
 sons acting corruptly.
 They have forsaken Yahweh,
 spurned the Holy One of Israel,
 turned themselves back into foreigners.⁴

5. What use is it to continue stubborn? –
 you will only be beaten again!

6. The whole head is disease-ridden⁵;
 from the sole of the foot to the head
 there is no soundness in it –
 bruise and scar and fresh wound;
 untreated, and unbandaged, and unsoothed with ointment.

7. Your land a desolation,⁶
 your cities burnt with fire,
 your country –
 in front of you foreigners are eating it up,
 a desolation,
 like something overturned by foreigners.⁷

8. And the daughter of Zion is left over
 like a shed in a vineyard,
 like a hut in a cucumber patch,
 like a blockaded city.⁸

9. Were it not that Yahweh of Hosts⁹ himself
 had left over for us a tiny remainder,
 we would have matched Sodom,
 we would have resembled Gomorrah.

4 Lit., 'have estranged
 themselves backwards'.

5 Lit., 'for sickness', 'given
 over to/ the property of'.

6 Very often in Isaiah illustration
 (v. 6) is followed by explanation
 (v. 7), cf., v. 26 following v. 25; or
 again, 8:7b explains v. 7a, etc.

7 'Overturned' (*mahpekah*) is
 virtually a technical term
 for what God did to Sodom,
 e.g. Deut 29:23; Isa. 13:19. 'By
 foreigners', i.e., with such
 thoughtless callousness as
 only foreigners could show.

8 Images in turn of the flimsy, the
 temporary, and the threatened.

9 Isaiah uses this title of Yahweh
 over sixty times. Yahweh is
 not a bare unit but is, within
 his own nature, a 'host', with
 every possible potentiality and
 power. The title is part of the
 Old Testament preparation for
 the New Testament revelation
 of the complex nature of
 God as the holy Trinity.

Thought for the day: Isaiah 1:2–9

‘I don’t seem to be able to help it. It’s in my nature.’ Well, yes, that is certainly one way of looking at our sinful ways: it’s doing what ‘comes naturally’, and different weaknesses and flaws in different people come out in different ways. But as an excuse, it goes nowhere! What ‘nature’ are we talking about? Our ‘old nature’ before we knew Jesus, or the new nature that is God’s gift to us in Christ? It is still possible to find old school buildings with ‘Boys’ carved in the stonework over one door, ‘Girls’ over another, and over a third ‘Mixed Infants’. This side of heaven, we are all ‘mixed infants’, the Spirit fighting the flesh, and the flesh the Spirit (Gal. 5:17), the mind serving the law of God and the flesh the law of sin (Rom. 7:25). It is all there in Isaiah 1:4. On the one hand the four nouns of privilege: we are his people and nation – the redeemed (Exod. 6:6; 12:13); the chosen ‘seed’ (Gal. 3:9, 16); his sons (Gal. 4:4–7). On the other hand, the four descriptions of shame: sinning, iniquity, evildoers, acting corruptly. There’s a war on, but, says Isaiah, in this war it is strictly unnatural for the Christian to choose the way of sin and leave the path of privilege. Look at the beasts. The ox naturally turns to its owner, and the donkey naturally eats its owner’s food. It is living according to its true nature. So what about us? Which nature do we choose to make dominant? Which master do we love to be with? What food are we nourishing ourselves on? Where are we turning for shelter and vitality? One further thought: Proverbs 14:34 relates righteousness and national prosperity, sin and public shame. How does Isaiah see this working out in his people? Is it relevant today?