

The Vineyard and the Lawsuit

Isaiah 1-5 • Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

DISCOVERY AIM

Participants discover that Isaiah opens not with prediction but with a covenant lawsuit: God summons heaven and earth as witnesses, exactly as Moses did in Deuteronomy, and puts his own people on trial. They then find that the trial ends in the strangest verdict in literature, an invitation: *“though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow”* (1:18). Finally, they discover for themselves that Jesus rebuilds Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard, detail by detail, in Matthew 21, and that the Church reads herself into that vineyard.

CATHOLIC TOUCHSTONE

The Sacrament of Reconciliation. Isaiah 1:18 is the logic of the confessional: God does not merely overlook scarlet, he makes it white. And Isaiah 1:10-20 is the standing answer to the charge that Catholics reduce faith to ritual: the same chapter that condemns empty worship never condemns worship, and the Catechism itself cites this passage when it teaches that outward sacrifice must express the heart (CCC 2100).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Isaiah son of Amoz prophesied in Jerusalem for roughly forty years, from the death of King Uzziah around 740 BC through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, as the Assyrian empire rose like a flood tide over the ancient Near East. He is a prophet of the capital: educated, at home in the royal court, married to a prophetess, father of sons with sign-names. Jewish tradition holds that he was martyred under the wicked King Manasseh by being sawn in two, an ancient tradition often associated with Hebrews 11:37.

The book that bears his name is the longest prophetic book in Scripture and the prophetic book the New Testament quotes most. It falls into three great movements: chapters 1-39, dominated by judgment and the Assyrian crisis; chapters 40-55, the Book of Consolation, addressed to exiles in Babylon; and chapters 56-66, a vision of the renewed Zion. Be honest with your group about authorship: the Church has never defined whether one prophet or a school of his disciples produced the finished book, and faithful Catholic scholars hold different positions. What the Church does give us is the canonical book itself, one unified scroll that our Lord and the apostles quote simply as *Isaiah*. Its unity of theme, above all the title *the Holy One of Israel*, which spans all sixty-six chapters, is not in dispute.

Chapter 1 is a covenant lawsuit, what Hebrew scholars call a *rib*. The form matters: God does not open his book by predicting the future. He opens it by suing his own people for breach of covenant, calling the same witnesses Moses called in Deuteronomy 30-32, heaven and earth. Chapters 2-4 alternate between Zion’s glorious destiny (2:2-5) and her present corruption. Chapter 5 closes the unit with the Song of the Vineyard, a love song that turns into an indictment, followed by six woes.

One small treasure to have in your pocket: the ox and the donkey of Isaiah 1:3 are why nativity scenes have an ox and a donkey. No Gospel mentions them at the manger. Christian tradition and art put them there, reading Isaiah: the animals know their owner and their master's crib, while Israel does not know. When St. Francis staged the first live nativity at Greccio in 1223, the ox and the ass were already fixtures of the scene.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Roots. Isaiah 1:2, “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth,” deliberately reopens the Song of Moses: “Give ear, O heavens... let the earth hear” (Deuteronomy 32:1), and Moses' covenant summons, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day” (Deuteronomy 30:19). Isaiah is Moses' prosecuting attorney, serving papers seven centuries later. The vineyard of chapter 5 grows from Psalm 80:8-16, the vine God brought out of Egypt, planted, and watched over.

Fulfillment. Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants (Matthew 21:33-46) rebuilds Isaiah 5:1-2 piece by piece: the planting, the hedge, the wine press, the tower. His hearers knew the Song of the Vineyard, and Matthew tells us the chief priests “perceived that he was speaking about them.” John 15:1 completes the arc: where Israel the vine failed, Jesus declares “I am the true vine.” The faithful city of Isaiah 1:26 and the mountain of 2:2-4, to which all nations stream, open out, in the Church's reading, into the Church and finally the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Jerome • *Commentary on Isaiah, Prologue*

St. Jerome says Isaiah should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet, because he sets out the mysteries of Christ and the Church with such clarity that he seems to be composing a history of what has already happened rather than foretelling what is to come. This is why the tradition calls Isaiah *the Fifth Gospel*.

St. Augustine • *Confessions, Book 9*

Preparing for baptism, St. Augustine asked St. Ambrose which book of Scripture he should read. Ambrose told him: Isaiah. Augustine explains that this was because Isaiah is the clearest foreteller of the Gospel and of the calling of the Gentiles. The greatest convert in the Church's history was pointed first to the book you are opening tonight.

St. John Chrysostom • *Commentary on Isaiah (In Isaiam)*

Commenting on the opening chapters, St. John Chrysostom marvels at Isaiah 1:18: the Judge of the whole earth, whose case against his people is airtight, stops the proceedings and invites the guilty to reason with him, offering to make scarlet white. For Chrysostom this is the measure of God's love of mankind: he argues not to condemn but to win the sinner back.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 755.** The Church is God's vineyard and cultivated field. The Catechism cites Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-43 side by side, exactly the connection your group will discover tonight, and adds that the true vine is Christ.

- **CCC 1430-1431.** Interior repentance: conversion of the heart, without which outward penances remain sterile. This is Isaiah 1:16-17 in the Church's own voice: cease to do evil, learn to do good.
- **CCC 2100.** Outward sacrifice, to be genuine, must express spiritual sacrifice. The Catechism here cites the prophets' denunciation of empty ritual, including Isaiah 1:10-20 by name. Keep this reference ready for the steelman discussion.
- **CCC 2001.** The preparation of man for grace is already a work of grace. Quoting St. Augustine, the Catechism guards the reading of 1:16-18 against any hint that we cleanse ourselves first and God rewards us after: God speaks first, even in our repenting.
- **CCC 839-840.** The Church's relationship to the Jewish people: to them belong the covenants and the promises, and the gifts and call of God are irrevocable. Keep this at hand for the Matthew 21 discovery, so fulfillment is never heard as replacement.

THREAD WATCH

THREADS PLANTED TONIGHT

The Holy One of Israel (1:4). Isaiah's signature title for God, used about twenty-five times in this book and almost nowhere else in Scripture. Tonight it appears for the first time, and in an accusation: they have despised the Holy One of Israel. Do not explain where the title comes from. Session 2 will show them.

Zion, the faithful city (1:21-26; 2:2-4). The harlot city will be smelted and become the faithful city again, and the nations will stream uphill to her. Let the group wonder aloud what this city is becoming. The thread resolves in Sessions 13 and 14.

Walk in the light (2:5). A single line tonight. It returns at 9:2, 42:6, 49:6, and 60:1-3.

The sealed guess. Take-Home 1 carries the My Guess box: who or what is *the arm of the LORD*? Distribute the sheets at the very end, have everyone write and fold, and collect nothing. They keep their own guess until Session 11.

SESSION GOALS

1. Recognize the covenant lawsuit form of Isaiah 1 and find its roots in Deuteronomy 30-32 by live discovery.
2. Articulate precisely what God rejects in Isaiah 1:11-15, and why it is not liturgy itself, using the steelman chain and CCC 2100.
3. Connect Isaiah 1:18 to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
4. Trace the Song of the Vineyard (5:1-7) into Matthew 21:33-46 by live discovery, and into CCC 755.
5. Plant the three threads and the sealed guess without resolving any of them.

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

SUGGESTED CLOCK

Gather and opening prayer, 5 min. Win, 10 min. Build, 55 min. Send, 10 min. Live It This Week, memory verse, Take-Home distribution and sealed guess, closing prayer, 10 min.

Pre-chosen cuts if running long: cut Question 10 (the six woes) first; cut Question 6 (the smelting of Zion) second. Never cut the steelman chain (Questions 4-5) or the two live discoveries (Questions 1 and 9); they are the spine of the night.

The Vineyard and the Lawsuit

Isaiah 1-5 • Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, before we ever open this book, you open your mouth to call us. You have summoned heaven and earth, and you have summoned us.

Send your Holy Spirit upon this table, upon these pages, upon each heart here. Give us honest eyes for what is scarlet in us, and unshakable trust in your promise to make it white.

We ask this through Christ our Lord, the true vine, in whom we abide. Amen.

WIN • OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Think of a time someone gave you criticism that was hard to hear but turned out to be a gift. What made it possible to receive it?
2. When you hear the name *Isaiah*, what comes to mind? Anything at all: a verse, a Christmas reading, a total blank. All answers welcome.

BUILD • INDUCTIVE STUDY

The Courtroom (Isaiah 1:2-9)

1. Read Isaiah 1:2-4 aloud. Before God says a word to Israel, whom does he address? What kind of scene is Isaiah staging here?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

God addresses the heavens and the earth. This is a courtroom: witnesses are called, charges are read (rebellion, v. 2; not knowing their owner, v. 3; forsaking the LORD, v. 4). Isaiah opens his book not with a prediction but with a lawsuit. Israel is the defendant, God is the plaintiff, and creation itself sits in the witness box.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Heaven and earth have been summoned as witnesses before, at the most solemn moment in Israel's story. Split into pairs and hunt it down: it is in the last chapters of Deuteronomy, in Moses' farewell. Give the pairs 3-4 minutes. Do not give the reference.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Deuteronomy 32:1: "Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth." Also Deuteronomy 30:19: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day." Moses named heaven and earth as the standing witnesses to the covenant. Seven centuries later, Isaiah recalls exactly those witnesses to the stand. The message could not be sharper: the covenant Moses sealed is now the covenant Israel has broken, and the trial Moses warned about has begun.

If your group finds Deuteronomy 4:26 or 31:28 instead, celebrate it; those are the same summons.

2. Look again at verse 3: “*The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib.*” What is the sting in this comparison?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The dumbest animals in the barnyard know two things: who owns them, and where they get fed. God's own children know neither. It is not that Israel lacks intelligence; it is that knowledge of God is not intelligence but relationship, and they have walked away from it.

DIG DEEPER • Why Your Nativity Scene Has an Ox and a Donkey

No Gospel puts an ox or a donkey at the manger. Christian tradition and art put them there, reading Isaiah 1:3: the animals know “*their master's crib.*” From the earliest Christian art onward, the ox and the ass kneel at Bethlehem as a silent homily: creation recognizes its Owner lying in the feeding trough, and Isaiah's accusation is finally reversed. When St. Francis staged the first live nativity at Greccio in 1223, the two animals were already essential cast members.

3. Verse 4 calls God “*the Holy One of Israel.*” Mark this title in your Bible, tonight is its first appearance in the book. What is strange about the context in which it first appears?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

It first appears in an accusation: “*they have despised the Holy One of Israel.*” Isaiah's favorite name for God, which he will use about twenty-five times, is introduced as the name of the One who has been spurned. Keep your eye on this title as the study goes on. Where Isaiah got it is a story this book will tell us soon. Say no more than that.

The Case Against Worship? (Isaiah 1:10-20)

4. Read Isaiah 1:10-15. Make a list together: what exactly does God say he cannot stand? Be exhaustive.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Sacrifices, burnt offerings, the blood of bulls and lambs and goats (v. 11); appearing in the temple courts (v. 12); offerings, incense, new moons, sabbaths, solemn assemblies (v. 13); appointed feasts (v. 14); even outspread hands and many prayers (v. 15). Every single item on the list is something God himself commanded in the Torah. Let that tension stand for a moment before the next question.

STEELMAN • BUILD IT AT FULL STRENGTH

Before answering, make the strongest possible case for this reading: **God is against ritual worship as such.** Assign someone to argue it with conviction, using the whole canon:

Psalms 51:16-17: “*For you take no delight in sacrifice... The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit.*” Amos 5:21-24: “*I hate, I despise your feasts... let justice roll down like waters.*” Hosea 6:6: “*I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,*” a verse Jesus quotes twice in its familiar form, *I desire mercy, and not sacrifice* (Matthew 9:13; 12:7). On this reading, the prophets discovered that God wants ethics, not liturgy, and organized ritual religion, including incense, vestments, and sacrifice, is precisely what God rejects. A Catholic Mass, with its altar and its offerings, would be the very

thing Isaiah 1 condemns.

Let the case land. Then press the text with the next question.

5. Now read Isaiah 1:15-17 to the end of the sentence, and verse 13 again, slowly. On the evidence of this passage itself, what is God actually rejecting?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Verse 15 gives the verdict's grounds: "*your hands are full of blood.*" Verse 13 names the fatal combination: "*I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.*" Not solemn assembly; iniquity *and* solemn assembly. The remedy in verses 16-17 is not to cancel the liturgy but to wash, cease evil, learn good, seek justice, defend the orphan and the widow, and then come (v. 18). God rejects worship divorced from life, hands lifted in prayer while dripping with blood.

Test the steelman against the rest of the book: Isaiah's own vision of the future is nations streaming to the temple (2:2-3), and his own call comes in a temple vision filled with heavenly worship (chapter 6, next week). The same God who spoke Psalm 51:16 also spoke Psalm 51:19, two verses later: "*then will you delight in right sacrifices.*" The prophetic target is hypocrisy, not liturgy. This is exactly how the Catechism reads the passage: outward sacrifice, to be genuine, must express the sacrifice of the heart (CCC 2100, which cites Isaiah 1:10-20). The Mass does not escape Isaiah's scrutiny; it stands under it. Bring your life to the altar or you bring an empty ritual.

6. Read Isaiah 1:18. After an airtight prosecution, what does the plaintiff do? What do the two colors mean?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The plaintiff offers settlement talks: "*Come now, let us reason together.*" Scarlet was a fast dye, prized precisely because it held; the image is a stain no washing can lift. God is promising the impossible: stains that cannot be removed will be made white as snow. Notice the sequence of 1:16-18: wash yourselves, cease evil, learn good, then come and be made white. But notice also who speaks first: the whole exchange opens with God's own invitation, "*Come now.*" Even our repentance is a response to grace that goes ahead of us; as the Catechism puts it, the preparation of man for grace is already a work of grace (CCC 2001). We respond through contrition and confession; God accomplishes the cleansing no human effort can. This is the logic of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and it is why our study's colors are scarlet and pearl white. The whole book is in this verse.

7. Read Isaiah 1:21-26. The faithful city has become a harlot, and God announces judgment. Look carefully at verses 25-26: is this judgment destruction, or something else?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

It is smelting: "*I will smelt away your dross.*" Fire, but refiner's fire; the point is not to consume the metal but to purify it. And verse 26 gives the goal: "*afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.*" God's judgment on his own people, in these opening oracles, aims at restoration. File the question this raises: what will this purified, faithful city turn out to be? The book will keep circling back to her.

8. Read Isaiah 2:2-5. In the latter days, what happens to the mountain of the house of the LORD, and who comes to it?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The temple mount is raised above every mountain, and *all the nations* flow to it, uphill, like a river running the wrong way. They come to be taught God's ways; the word of the LORD goes out from Jerusalem; swords become plowshares. Two verses after condemning Israel's worship, Isaiah shows the nations begging to join it. Whatever God is doing with Zion, it was never meant for one nation only. Verse 5 hands us a thread: *"let us walk in the light of the LORD."* Watch where light shows up in this book.

The Song of the Vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7)

9. Read Isaiah 5:1-7 aloud, and read it as what verse 1 says it is: a love song. List everything the owner did for his vineyard. What did he look for, and what did he get?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He chose a very fertile hill, dug it, cleared the stones, planted choice vines, built a watchtower in the middle, hewed out a wine vat: everything, in advance, at his own expense. He looked for grapes; it yielded wild grapes. Verse 7 decodes the song: the vineyard is the house of Israel. And in Hebrew the last line is a devastating pun: he looked for *mishpat* (justice) and found *mispach* (bloodshed); for *tsedaqah* (righteousness) and heard *tse'aqah* (a cry). The rhyme of what God wanted and what he got is one consonant apart, and a whole world apart.

LIVE DISCOVERY

Centuries later, Jesus stood in the temple courts and told a story that rebuilds this vineyard piece by piece, and his audience knew exactly what he was doing. Find it in Matthew 21. Pairs again, 3-4 minutes.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Matthew 21:33-46, the parable of the wicked tenants: a householder *"planted a vineyard, and set a hedge around it, and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower."* Those details are lifted straight from Isaiah 5:1-2; Jesus is quoting the Song of the Vineyard, and the leaders recognized it (v. 45: the chief priests *"perceived that he was speaking about them"*).

But notice what Jesus changes. In Isaiah, the vineyard itself is the problem: bad grapes. In Jesus' telling, the vineyard is fine; the *tenants* are the problem, beating the servants (the prophets) and finally killing the son, and we know who the Son is. The vineyard is not destroyed; rather, *"the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it"* (v. 43): the vineyard stands, and its tenancy changes. The Church has always read herself here, and the Catechism makes it explicit: the Church is the vineyard of Isaiah 5 and Matthew 21, and the true vine is Christ (CCC 755; John 15:1). Read this the way the Church does: fulfillment and enlargement, not replacement. The Gentiles are wild branches grafted into Israel's own olive tree, drawing life from its root (Romans 11:17-18), and *"the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable"* (Romans 11:29; CCC 839-840). The love song God sang over Israel he now sings over us, which means the demand for fruit lands on us too.

10. (Optional, first cut for time.) Skim Isaiah 5:8-23: six woes against land-grabbers, drunkards, cynics, moral relativists (v. 20: “*woe to those who call evil good and good evil*”), the self-wise, and corrupt judges. Where does Jesus deliver his own series of woes, and to whom?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Matthew 23, the seven woes against the scribes and Pharisees, delivered in the same temple, in the same week as the vineyard parable. Jesus is not softer than Isaiah; he is Isaiah's fulfillment even in the prophetic woe. And Isaiah 5:20 may be the most contemporary verse in the chapter: a culture that renames evil as good has been sued before.

SEND • TAKING IT OUT

1. Isaiah 1:17 names the orphan and the widow: the people with no leverage, whom it costs something to defend. Who are the orphan and the widow within your actual reach this month? Name someone specific to yourself, even if you do not say it aloud.
2. If God's complaint is worship with unwashed hands, what is one concrete thing in your life you have been carrying into Sunday Mass and leaving carefully untouched? What would it mean to bring it to Confession before you next bring it to the altar?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Make an examination of conscience using Isaiah 1:16-17 as the mirror: cease evil, learn good, seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. Then go to Confession, this week if you can, and hear 1:18 happen to you.
- Pray Isaiah 1:18 aloud each morning, once, slowly.
- Do one act of justice or mercy for someone who cannot repay you, and tell no one.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.”

Isaiah 1:18 (RSV2CE)

BEFORE YOU CLOSE

Distribute Take-Home 1 now. Walk the group through the My Guess box on the back: Isaiah will keep returning to a mysterious figure through whom God saves, and late in the book he will ask, “*to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*” Everyone writes their guess, who or what is the arm of the LORD, folds the sheet, and keeps it. No sharing, no changing. We open them together in Session 11.

Closing Prayer

Lord God, Holy One of Israel, you planted us, you cleared the stones, you built the tower, and you have every right to look for fruit.

What is scarlet in us, make white. What is dross in us, smelt away. And teach us this week to defend those who cannot repay us, so that when we lift our hands to you on Sunday, they are clean.

Through Christ our Lord, the true vine. Amen.

Before next session: read Isaiah 6. It is thirteen verses. Read it twice.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used tonight, in order

Primary Text

- Isaiah 1:2-4 (the lawsuit opens; heaven and earth summoned; first *Holy One of Israel*)
- Isaiah 1:3 (the ox and the donkey)
- Isaiah 1:10-15 (the worship God cannot stand)
- Isaiah 1:16-18 (wash, cease, learn, seek; scarlet to snow)
- Isaiah 1:21-26 (harlot city smelted into the faithful city)
- Isaiah 2:2-5 (the mountain raised; nations stream; walk in the light)
- Isaiah 5:1-7 (the Song of the Vineyard; *mishpat/mispach, tsedaqah/tse'aqah*)
- Isaiah 5:8-23 (the six woes; optional)

Live Discovery Targets

- Deuteronomy 32:1 and 30:19 (Moses summons heaven and earth; accept 4:26 or 31:28)
- Matthew 21:33-46 (the wicked tenants rebuild Isaiah's vineyard)

Supporting Passages

- Psalm 80:8-16 (the vine out of Egypt)
- Psalm 51:16-19; Amos 5:21-24; Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:13; 12:7 (steelman texts)
- John 15:1 (the true vine)
- Romans 11:17-18, 29 (grafted branches; the irrevocable call; continuity guardrail)
- Matthew 23:13-36 (Jesus' woes; optional)
- Hebrews 12:22-24; Revelation 21:2 (the faithful city's destiny; background)

Catechism

- CCC 755 (the Church as vineyard: Isaiah 5:1-7 and Matthew 21:33-43)
- CCC 1430-1431 (interior repentance)
- CCC 2100 (outward sacrifice must express the heart; cites Isaiah 1:10-20)
- CCC 2001 (prevenient grace; the preparation for grace is itself grace)
- CCC 839-840 (the Church and the Jewish people; the irrevocable call)

Memory Verse

- Isaiah 1:18 (RSV2CE)