

Discussion Guide for Reading Groups

Mystic
TREATISES
Ascetical Homilies (Selected)

Isaac of Nineveh

Resurrection Publishing



DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR READING GROUPS

MYSTIC TREATISES

ISAAC OF NINEVEH

One Orthodox voice on putting sin to death

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Mystic Treatises — Discussion Guide

Isaac of Nineveh

Discussion Guide for Reading Groups

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This voice among four

How does the believer put sin to death? Christians have answered that hard question with shared seriousness and with real differences in emphasis. This guide begins with Isaac of Nineveh because it is made to help a group read his selected *Ascetical Homilies* — printed here as *Mystic Treatises* — carefully, together, and all the way through.

Isaac of Nineveh · one Orthodox voice on that question.

Isaac is one of four voices gathered around this question. Owen's *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, Cassian's *Institutes*, and Scupoli's *The Spiritual Combat* belong in conversation with Isaac's homilies: they share a concern for repentance, watchfulness, and life in Christ, yet they do not flatten their traditions into one answer. Owen builds a single concentrated argument toward a single duty; Isaac hands on counsel gathered homily by homily from a life spent alone with God, warning and mercy always close together. Let their kinship be a help, and their honest difference an occasion for patient attention.

This guide is for Isaac's homilies. For a reading group, the Isaac hardcover is available in a facilitator pack of 8, so each reader may have the work in hand.

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Facilitator norms

This is a conversation that may touch sensitive ground, but it need not become a place where anyone is pressed to disclose what they have not chosen to share. Invite candor; do not require it. A participant may speak from the text, from prayer, or from a question still taking shape. Silence is not failure, and no one is asked to prove seriousness by telling more than is wise.

Read the author with care before judging him quickly. Let people finish a thought. Ask what a passage says before asking how it applies. Where the group disagrees, name the disagreement plainly and return to the words on the page. The aim is neither to win an argument nor to make a display of self-knowledge, but to hear a Christian teacher faithfully and to seek the Lord together.

Keep Christ at the center. The counsel in these pages is not a set of religious techniques by which we repair ourselves. Faith looks to Christ, depends upon his Spirit, and receives the ordinary means of grace with humility. Pray at the beginning and end; make room for repentance and hope; leave one another with encouragement that is truthful, particular, and free of pressure.

Isaac — argument map

Isaac does not build a single argument toward a single command, as Owen does. He hands on the fruit of a life spent alone with God, homily after homily, and the arc that emerges reads like an ascent: watchfulness sharpened by mercy, warfare answered by trust, repentance deepened until it is swallowed up in humility. Read the six movements in this order.

1. Entry: the path of excellence (Homilies 1–6). Isaac opens with what came down as one unit, “the six treatises on the behavior of excellence.” The fear of God is the foundation; a heart divided by the world cannot rest in it. Excellence is not talk but long labor — solitude, fasting, chastity of gaze, mercy poured out toward others — aimed at a single end: a heart free enough to hear what follows.

2. Trust, examined honestly (Homilies 7–10). Real trust in God is preceded by real labor; a trust that excuses laziness or presumes on mercy is folly wearing faith’s name. A man cannot come near God with his heart until he has truly perceived his own weakness — and perceiving it is the door to help, not only a humiliation. Not all sin carries equal weight: what is committed through weakness while still contending differs from what is embraced by a will that has stopped fighting. Yet mercy’s confidence must never be used to blunt the seriousness of God’s own warnings.

3. Sin’s hold on the heart, and love’s answer (Homilies 30–33). Sin is not defeated until its cause is hated from the heart, not merely resisted in the act — Isaac calls this contest against besetting sin an unseen martyrdom. Small, unwatched things become large masters. The heart is guarded by contemplation and discernment; and beneath the discipline lies something larger than discipline itself: a burning, dislocating love of God that Isaac says has intoxicated martyrs and apostles alike.

4. Warfare and discernment (Homilies 36–38) — the heaviest movement. Satan tailors his attack to a soul’s particular weakness: he presses

the fainthearted hard from the outset, but withdraws from the zealous at first, waiting for their fervor to cool. Isaac names two guards above all others as the foundation beneath everything else — abiding in one place, and a governed stomach — because most serious falls begin at one of these two doors. He closes with a spare taxonomy of the heart's own impulses: which fears come from unbelief, which courage from humility, which stirrings are nature's own and which are added by consent.

5. Advanced repentance, tested and refined (Homilies 45, 50, 62–63, 66, 72). Grace is preceded by humility, chastisement by presumption; correction of a brother's fault belongs in secret, not before a crowd. Zeal against another's sin is itself a sickness — compassion and blunt justice cannot share one soul, for God answers our sin the way an ocean answers a handful of sand. Temptation, rightly borne, is not evidence of God's absence but the very means by which love, courage, and knowledge grow. By what a person fears — death, judgment, or neither, because love has replaced fear — Isaac reads what degree a soul occupies before God. True repentance restores what lax living let fall since baptism; and the discerning reader learns to read the changing weather of his own soul as the ordinary way grace shows its progress.

6. The seal: mercy and humility (Homilies 74, 76, 79, 83–84). Even a mature soul passes through storms it did not choose; Isaac warns against despair at the trial and against pride at the calm that follows in the same breath. He sums the whole course in three words — repentance, purity, perfection — and roots purity in nothing less than a heart that burns with mercy for the whole of creation. He calls one chapter simply “full of life,” and in it commends a childlike sincerity before God over anxious, calculating knowledge. Mercy, he insists, is not a virtue alongside solitude but solitude's own fruit. And the last homily in this selection names humility as the very garment God put on in Christ — the summit not added to love, but love's own shape.

Session 1

Reading: Homilies 1–6 (the six treatises on the behavior of excellence)

Where we are: Isaac opens not with sin directly but with the shape of a life ordered toward God — solitude, fasting, mercy, chastity of heart — because a heart occupied by the world cannot rest in the fear of God that everything else depends on.

Understand: What does Isaac mean when he says that “excellence consists therein that a man in his mind be a void as regards the world” — and why does he treat withdrawal from the world’s grip as the foundation, rather than as one practice alongside others?

Discern: Isaac warns that “he who is master of possessions is the slave of passions.” How does this square with the ordinary demands of a settled life, and where might a reading group draw the line between his counsel and his own vocation as a solitary?

Trust: Homily 1 traces every good thing back to baptism and faith in Jesus Christ. Where does Isaac locate the ground of a person’s hope, before any of the labors he goes on to describe have borne any fruit at all?

Tip: These six homilies were handed down as one unit. Read them as an entrance hall, not the whole house — the rooms that follow will return again and again to the door opened here.

Session 2

Reading: Homilies 7–10

Where we are: Having described the path, Isaac now guards it against two opposite errors: presuming on grace without labor, and despairing of grace because of unequal sin.

Understand: What difference does Isaac draw between the man whose trust in God is “true trust and a trust of wisdom” and the man who invokes God’s care as cover for his own laziness (Homily 7)?

Discern: Homily 8 says a man cannot come near God with his heart until he has truly perceived his own weakness. Why would Isaac treat the discovery of weakness as the beginning of help rather than only as a humiliation to get past?

Trust: Isaac distinguishes sins that arise from struggle within a serious life from sins embraced by a will that has stopped fighting altogether (Homily 9). How might that distinction shape the way a small group responds when a member confesses a failure?

Tip: Homily 10’s roll call of biblical falls — Samson, David, the sons of Eli — is severe. Let the group sit with that severity before returning to Homily 8’s tenderness. Isaac holds both without contradiction.

Session 3

Reading: Homilies 30–33

Where we are: Isaac now names the specific power sin holds over the heart, and the corresponding power that answers it: a love for God that outgrows ordinary discipline altogether.

Understand: Isaac calls the struggle against a besetting sin “the time of the unseen martyrdom.” What does this description ask of a person that willpower by itself does not?

Discern: “There is no abstaining from customary sins without acquiring hate [of them], nor receiving of forgiveness without confession of faults” (Homily 30). How does Isaac’s account of shame and confession differ from either denial or despair?

Trust: In Homily 33 Isaac describes a love of God that unsettles and even “enebriates” — the same passion, he says, that drove martyrs and apostles. Where has this group, if anywhere, glimpsed that kind of love, and how does Isaac guard it from mere emotion?

Tip: Homily 32’s counsel on guarding the heart through spiritual songs and constant recollection is easy to read past quickly. Give it a moment — it is Isaac’s version of ordinary means, not a shortcut around them.

Session 4

Reading: Homilies 36–38

Where we are: This is the session to slow down for. Isaac maps how the enemy tailors his attack to a person’s particular weakness, then names the two disciplines that guard everything else.

Understand: Isaac says Satan attacks the fainthearted early and hard, but withdraws from the zealous at first, waiting for their fervor to cool (Homily 36). What does this suggest about the real danger point in a long spiritual commitment — not the beginning, but the middle?

Discern: Homily 37 treats an undisciplined stomach and restless movement from place to place as the two doors through which most serious falls begin. Why would Isaac give such ordinary, almost unglamorous disciplines this much weight?

Trust: Homily 38 distinguishes courage that comes from hardness of heart and courage that comes from “a deep belief in God” — the first proud, the second humble. How would a person honestly tell, in their own case, which kind of courage they are actually relying on?

Tip: Give this session real time. Isaac’s own experience stands behind it — “having been tested many times... I have learnt by experience” — and the group will return to its categories in every session that follows.

Session 5

Reading: Homilies 45, 50

Where we are: Isaac turns from warfare to correction — how God disciplines, how one believer should correct another, and why compassion and blunt justice cannot occupy the same heart.

Understand: “Grace is preceded by humility; chastisement is preceded by presumption” (Homily 45). What does Isaac mean when he says God’s chastisement always aims at guidance, and never at retribution?

Discern: Isaac insists that a friend who corrects in secret is a wise physician, but the one who exposes a fault before others “is really a derider” (Homily 45). What would it mean for this reading group to practice correction on Isaac’s terms?

Trust: In Homily 50 Isaac says compassion and strict justice cannot dwell in one soul, and that God’s mercy toward sin answers it the way an ocean answers a handful of sand thrown into it. How does that claim sit next to Isaac’s own severe warnings in earlier homilies?

Tip: Homily 50 reads almost like a book of proverbs. Let the group choose two or three lines that struck them most and sit with those, rather than trying to cover the whole chapter.

Session 6

Reading: Homilies 62–63, 66, 72

Where we are: Isaac explains why God permits temptation at all, how the shape of a person’s fears reveals where they stand before God, and what genuine repentance actually restores.

Understand: Isaac lists several reasons God allows His friends to be tested — among them, that “there is even no taste in the good” for one who has not first been tried by evil (Homily 62). How does this reframe temptation without minimizing its real danger?

Discern: In Homily 63, Isaac says a person’s degree before God can be read from what they fear most — death, judgment, or neither, because love has replaced fear. Where would this group’s members honestly place themselves, and is that placement fixed or something still in motion?

Trust: “Repentance is the mother of life... the grace which we have lost, after baptism, by a lax behavior, is restored in us by repentance” (Homily 66). How does Isaac’s picture of repentance as restoration compare with a view of repentance as mere regret?

Tip: Homily 72 offers a kind of self-examination in question form. Consider reading a few of its questions aloud slowly, letting silence follow each one, rather than discussing every line.

Session 7

Reading: Homilies 74, 76, 79

Where we are: Isaac now describes the whole course in miniature — repentance, purity, perfection — and warns against two opposite errors that meet even mature souls: despair at trial, and pride at ease.

Understand: Isaac defines purity as “a heart full of mercy unto the whole created nature” (Homily 76). Why does he root purity in mercy rather than simply in the avoidance of sin?

Discern: Homily 74 warns against both dejection when temptation returns after a season of peace, and self-exaltation when the peace itself arrives. What makes these two opposite errors, in Isaac’s account, so closely related to each other?

Trust: Homily 79, which Isaac titles simply “This Chapter Is Full of Life,” commends a childlike sincerity before God over anxious, calculating knowledge. What might it cost a careful, well-read group to actually practice this kind of simplicity?

Tip: Read Homily 76’s chain of definitions aloud in sequence — repentance, purity, perfection, humility, mercy — as a short catechism before opening discussion.

Session 8

Reading: Homilies 83–84

Where we are: Isaac closes this selection where the whole course was always heading: mercy as the likeness of the Father, and humility as the very garment God wore in Christ.

Understand: Isaac insists that solitude without mercy is not solitude rightly kept — “we, the solitaires, do not honor solitude without mercy” (Homily 83). How does this correct any reading of the earlier sessions as counsel toward mere withdrawal from other people?

Discern: In Homily 84, Isaac says humility is not one virtue among others but “all-comprehending excellence” — the shape every other virtue finally takes. What changes if a group treats humility as the goal itself, rather than as a means toward some other spiritual achievement?

Trust: Isaac writes that Christ put on humility as a garment so that the creation could bear to see Him. Where does this claim finally locate the source of a believer’s own capacity to put sin to death — in effort, or in gift?

Tip: Give this closing session room to be quiet as well as to discuss. Isaac’s last homilies are doxology as much as instruction.

Also on this question

If another voice would serve the group's next conversation, these editions take up the same question from different places in the tradition.

The Institutes — John Cassian

Patristic (West)

Cassian follows the desert tradition into the passions and their remedies: a slower, more formative account of the vices and their cure than Isaac's homilies of mercy-shaped ascent. Find the hardcover or facilitator pack on the title page, and read the Cassian discussion guide for a full eight-session arc through his *Institutes*.

Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers — John Owen

Protestant

Owen builds a single concentrated argument from Romans 8:13 toward one duty: mortify sin by the Spirit through faith in Christ crucified — a doctrinal case where Isaac instead hands on counsel gathered homily by homily from years of solitude. Find the hardcover or facilitator pack on the title page, and read the Owen discussion guide for a full eight-session arc through his treatise.

The Spiritual Combat — Lorenzo Scupoli

Catholic

Scupoli offers a practical manual of daily counsels for resisting self-reliance and temptation, closer to Isaac's attention to the ordinary disciplines of a day than to Owen's doctrinal argument. Find the hardcover or facilitator pack on the title page, and read the Scupoli discussion guide for a full eight-session arc through his manual.

Letters from Resurrection Publishing

If this question is yours, Resurrection Publishing sends personal notes from Harvey, our founder — on reading these voices for real groups.

Sign up for the letters: <https://resurrectionpublishing.com/l/g>

Close

Thank you for giving these demanding homilies the time they ask of you. Keep Isaac near enough to return to: not as a substitute for Scripture, prayer, or the Church's ordinary life, but as a serious companion in the work of learning to hate sin and hope in Christ.

If this question remains with your group, the other voices on it are in the Resurrection Publishing catalog as hardcovers and ebooks, each with its own free discussion guide. They are invitations for another season of reading, not requirements for completing this one.

This edition is for readers who want the work itself, not a summary.