

GOD PROMISES LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Lesson Scripture: Isaiah 58:1-14

Focus Scripture: Isaiah 58:6-10

Key Verse: If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. Isaiah 58:10 (NRSV)

ISAIAH 58:6-10 (NRSV)

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

ISAIAH 58:6-10 (KJV)

6 Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

7 Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

8 Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.

9 Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity;

10 And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon day:...

KEY TERMS

- **Transgression** – Hebrew *pesa*, rebellion against God.
- **Trumpet**—Hebrew *sopar* (pronounced *shofar*), ram's horn used to summon Israel.
- **Ordinance** – Hebrew *mišpāt*, justice, act of deciding a case.

INTRODUCTION

Fasting, a spiritual discipline, usually takes on many outward signs designed to pacify God and let others know one is fasting. Instead of coming from a worshipful heart, fasting became a meaningless ritual marked by abstaining from food and/or drink, wearing sackcloth, and head bowing. Israel wondered, why wasn't God paying attention to their fasting? Isaiah

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let them know they had it all wrong. Self-focused and self-serving and self-imposed denials were far removed from what God wanted. God desired

a community where they honored the Sabbath and gave equitable treatment to everyone. Instead, Israel created a society designed to manipulate God.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Isaiah 58:1-4

God directs Isaiah to sound his voice like the *sopar* (trumpet). The *sopar*, ram's horn, when sounded called Israel's soldiers to battle or worship. He is to lift up

his voice like a trumpet (*so·par'*) (2 Chronicles 5:12; 7:6; Ezra 3:10; Nehemiah 12:35, 41). Its loudness was meant to get Israel's attention. God's repetition of the words *disobedience* and *sin* demonstrated great displeasure with Israel. Pretenders, Israel seemly sought God daily when in actuality their faithfulness was unreal. Unable to see their hypocrisy, Israel

wanted God's justice while they practiced injustices. Their fasting was based on a false perception, tit for tat. In other words, if they did certain things no matter how

insincere, they expected God to do what they asked. Seriously flawed thinking. Israel believed God was obligated to do their bidding. So, they fasted in a manner beneath God's expectation in an attempt to manipulate God's response. And despite their unacceptable fast, they challenged God and complained about God's inaction.

1. Has there been a time when you told God if you did a certain thing that you expected God to respond a certain way? (If so, what happened?)

Isaiah 58:5-8

God responds to Israel's complaint by giving them explicit instructions about proper fasting. From God's vantage point, fasts do not self-serve. Instead of outward showy symbols, i.e., covering in sack cloth and ashes, they are to practice social justice, freeing those in bondage and redressing wrongs against the oppressed. But God did not stop there. God expected Israel to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked,

God expected Israel to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, and assist those in need (Jesus said the same (Mt. 25:1-30)).

and assist those in need (Jesus said the same (Mt. 25:1-30)). In doing these things, Israel's darkness would become light. Healing would happen, and just like during the Exodus journey, God would go before and behind them (Exodus 13:21-22; 14:19-20). And when they called out, God would answer "Here I Am." *I Am That I Am*, the name God gave Moses when he asked *who shall go? I say send me* (Exodus 3:14). Isaiah's words remind Israel of God's intervention in their history. Although they are exiled in Babylonia, God will bring them out.

Isaiah 58:9-12

When Israel acts righteously -- stop oppressing people -- stop blaming others -- stop demeaning individuals – start feeding the hungry – start aiding the afflicted – only then will God burst light into their darkness. Light accompanies various blessings. For Israel, this light includes God's guidance, provision, healthy bodies, and, eventually, freedom from Babylon as they return to their homeland. Under Cyrus, a Persian

ruler, a decree allowed Israel's return to their country which had been destroyed. Upon their return, this prophecy given by Isaiah was fulfilled. As repairers of the breach, they restored the temple and rebuilt.

Isaiah 58:13-14

Next, Isaiah turns Israel's attention to Sabbath worship. Instead of rest and keeping the day holy, Israel did whatever pleased them. Once again Isaiah reminds Israel that God should be the center of their worship. Ironically, the very things that Israel wanted from God, God was willing to give them if they honored and delighted in God. God would give them all Jacob's promises, both the birthright (spiritual leadership) and the blessing (a double portion of Isaac's material inheritance).

1. How do you honor the Sabbath?

SANKOFA

Dick Gregory, a well-known comedian, was committed to fasting. He devoted his

life to healthy lifestyles as well as social justice issues. One time Gregory fasted for 70 days, and he lived only on water. At a time when people seemed to be unconcerned about one another, Gregory thought to bring awareness to health disparities. Those years of severe famine greatly impacted his health. Gregory was ahead of his time in terms of fasting as more and more people are committed to intermittent fasting and fasting for several days in order to bring social justice issues to the world at large. Gregory wanted to heal the whole world, and he was not concerned about his own personal health. Like the commandment that God gave in the book of Isaiah, Gregory used his fasting time to help others. Gregory envisioned fasting as a

means to a loving society that included civil rights for all people. He brought awareness to the importance of loving one another, and he left a legacy by authoring a prayer book.

CASE STUDY

The Hartford Foundation and Black Giving Circle Fund partner with black philanthropists. One of the partners, Joseph Dickerson, Jr., M. ED, LPC, attributes his giving back commitment to many sources. First, he shares that Jesus Christ is the role model for expanding a loving community on earth. Dickerson cites many others who inspired him to give ranging from Shirley Chisholm to George Floyd. In Dickerson's view, giving back is essential, reflected in his motto, "We don't have a second chance at . . . NOW." Another donor, Beth Gibbs, views giving as a responsibility. She notes that historically the black community through various avenues such as businesses, churches, banking, and schools did everything possible to sustain and improve itself. Gibbs believes that this historic foundation needs to continue, especially for black children and youth. In these lessons we learn the importance of knowing that sacrificial giving and sharing financial resources

are an integral part of fasting.

LIFE APPLICATION

We are approaching February 22, 2023, Ash Wednesday, which begins our Lenten season. Many Christians will fast. How many will add care for the poor and needy? Will Christians think about how their fasting can please God? Too often, Christians share the same thinking

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as the Israelites. They believe that God should be pleased with their fasting and bless them because they fasted. Fasting to be seen by others and to get God's attention is self-serving. Now may be a good time to contemplate how you can rethink fasting. Now is the time to forge a plan to make provision for those in need, and then

incorporate that plan into your time of fasting.

QUESTIONS

1. How do you include sacrifice and service to others during periods of fasting?

2. What makes putting others' needs in front of your own challenging?
3. How does the church need to revise its teaching on fasting?

SUMMARY

Israel continued to observe periods of fasting with their bodily abstinence of food, but their hearts and motives were far removed from what God wanted. They disregarded the needs of orphans and widows, which was contrary to God's expectations of a loving community.

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

1. Pray that Christians will remember to fast in a manner that pleases God.
2. Share the name of someone whose basic needs for food, housing, and clothing are not met; then pray for all of the people mentioned by the class.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to remember the true reason we should fast. Forgive us for all of the times we fasted without serving others. May we revise our view of fasting, and may we become your servants meeting the needs of others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

January 23-January 29

Monday	1 John 4:1-8 (Christ Has Come in the Flesh)
Tuesday	1 John 4:9-21 (God's Love Revealed Among Us)
Wednesday	1 John 5:10-21 (The Testimony in Our Hearts)
Thursday	Exodus 33:12-23 (God Will Go with You)
Friday	Exodus 34:5-17 (The Lord, Merciful and Gracious)
Saturday	Joel 1:1-4, 14-20 (God Is Near Despite Adversity)
Sunday	Joel 2:18-31 (God Will Pour Out the Spirit)