

The Book of Isaiah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 23: True Worship, True Fasting, and the Redeemer of Zion

Isaiah 56:1–59:21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The aim of this lesson is to let four chapters dismantle every form of hollow religion in the room and rebuild genuine devotion on its proper foundation. Help the class feel both the wideness of God's welcome to the outsider and the sharpness of His demand for justice and mercy among the insiders. The two belong together: a God who opens His house to the foreigner and the eunuch will not tolerate a people who keep His feasts while crushing the poor. Keep the diagnosis of chapter 59 honest, that sin truly separates, so that the Redeemer who comes to Zion lands as genuine good news.

Doctrinally, guide the class to several careful conclusions. The house of prayer for all peoples is fulfilled in the gospel going to all nations and the church gathered from every people (Mark 11:17, Acts 8). The fasting passage must drive toward real mercy and justice, not ritual. Handle the Sabbath material as the heart of true devotion without binding the Sabbath on Christians, who worship on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2). And present the Redeemer of Zion as Christ (Romans 11:26–27), showing that salvation begins with God's initiative while still calling for the obedient response of faith.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Isaiah 56:3–8, God promises the foreigner and the eunuch a place in His house and “an everlasting name,” and says His house “shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Jesus quotes this verse in the temple (Mark 11:17), and Acts 8 shows an Ethiopian eunuch welcomed into Christ. What does this teach about the wideness of the gospel, and how does it correct any tendency to draw boundaries God has not drawn?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 56 opens with a call to keep justice and do righteousness because God's salvation is about to come and His righteousness to be revealed. Then it turns immediately to two people who would have felt excluded: the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD, and the eunuch who fears he is a dry tree with no future.

To the eunuch, God promises something better than sons and daughters: a monument and a name within His house and walls, an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. To the foreigners who keep covenant, God promises to bring them to His holy mountain and make them joyful in His house of prayer, “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

This is a remarkable widening of the welcome. Under the old order there were real restrictions, yet here God signals that His ultimate purpose reaches beyond Israel to all peoples. The New

Testament shows the fulfillment: Jesus quotes this verse cleansing the temple (Mark 11:17), and Acts 8 records an Ethiopian eunuch hearing the gospel and being baptized into Christ, the very kind of person chapter 56 names.

For the teacher, the pastoral thrust is to examine the fences we draw. God's heart is wider than our boundaries, and the gospel goes to all nations. This must humble any congregation tempted to think the door swings only for people like themselves, while never softening the call to covenant faithfulness that accompanies the welcome.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's welcome reaches the outsider, the foreigner, and the eunuch, anticipating the gospel to all nations (Isaiah 56:6–8).
- Jesus claims this text in cleansing the temple, calling God's house a house of prayer for all peoples (Mark 11:17).
- Acts 8 shows the fulfillment as an Ethiopian eunuch is baptized into Christ.
- The welcome comes with a call to covenant faithfulness; grace and obedience are not opposed.

Discussion Prompts

- What fences do we quietly draw that God has not drawn?
- How does the welcome of the eunuch in Acts 8 enlarge your view of the gospel?
- How do we hold together God's wide welcome and His call to covenant faithfulness?

Question 2

Student Question:

Isaiah 56:10–12 pictures leaders who are blind watchmen and shepherds who only look to their own gain. Without pointing fingers at others, where do you see in your own heart the pull toward comfort and self-interest over faithful watchfulness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The end of chapter 56 turns sharply to indict Israel's leaders. The watchmen are blind, the dogs cannot bark, the shepherds have no understanding, and they all turn to their own gain, each one to his own way. The leaders charged with guarding the people are asleep and self-serving.

Verse 12 captures their attitude in a chilling toast: "Come, let us get wine; let us fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow will be like this day, great beyond measure." It is the voice of leaders who assume the comfortable status quo will last forever and who feel no urgency about their charge.

The teacher should note that spiritual leadership carries weighty responsibility. Watchmen are accountable for what they fail to warn against, and shepherds for the flock they neglect. This anticipates the New Testament's sober qualifications for elders who must shepherd and watch over souls.

Rather than letting the class merely critique leaders elsewhere, turn the searchlight inward. The pull toward comfort, self-interest, and the assumption that tomorrow will be like today lives in every heart. The question is whether we are watchful or asleep at our own posts.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual leaders are accountable to watch and warn, not to pursue their own comfort and gain (Isaiah 56:10–11).
- Complacency assumes the good times will last forever and dulls all urgency (Isaiah 56:12).
- The neglect of watchmen and shepherds anticipates the New Testament's call for faithful elders.
- The self-interest condemned here is a temptation in every heart, not only in leaders.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you sense the pull toward comfort over watchfulness in your own walk?
- Why is the assumption that tomorrow will be like today so spiritually dangerous?
- How can we pray for and support those who watch over our souls?

Question 3

Student Question:

Isaiah 57:15 says God dwells “in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.” How can the same God be both utterly exalted and intimately near the broken, and why is this combination essential to the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 57 exposes Israel's idolatry in vivid, painful terms, including child sacrifice and worship under every green tree. The people had given themselves to false gods that demanded everything and gave nothing. Yet in the middle of this dark chapter shines one of the great verses of the book.

Isaiah 57:15 says, “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.” The transcendent God who inhabits eternity stoops to dwell with the broken.

This double dwelling is the gospel in miniature. A God who was only high and holy could not save us; a God who was only near and tender could not be worth saving us. The God of Isaiah is both, and He gives His presence to the contrite, not the proud. This same theme returns at the end of the book in 66:2, where God looks to the humble and contrite in spirit.

Teachers should help the class see that the entry into God's presence is not achievement but contrition. The broken-hearted are not disqualified; they are precisely the ones God revives. This both humbles the self-sufficient and comforts the crushed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God is both utterly exalted and intimately near to the contrite and lowly (Isaiah 57:15).
- Both God's holiness and His nearness are essential; neither alone could save us.
- Entry into God's presence comes through contrition, not self-sufficiency.
- The broken-hearted are exactly the ones God revives, a theme echoed in Isaiah 66:2.

Discussion Prompts

- Why do we need a God who is both high and holy and near to the broken?
- What in your life is keeping you from coming to God with a contrite and lowly spirit?
- How does it comfort you that God revives the lowly rather than the impressive?

Question 4

Student Question:

Isaiah 57:20–21 compares the wicked to a tossing sea that cannot rest, declaring, “There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.” Where in your life have you tried to find peace while holding on to something God has called sin, and what has that cost you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 57 ends with a striking image. “The wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked” (57:20–21). The restless, churning sea pictures a life that cannot find rest because it refuses to deal with its sin.

By contrast, just before this, God promises peace to the one who comes near, both far and near, and pledges to heal him. The peace of God is real and offered, but it cannot coexist with cherished sin. The wicked are not denied peace arbitrarily; the sin itself churns the water.

The teacher should help the class see that much of our restlessness is not circumstantial but moral. We try to build a quiet life on top of an unresolved sin and wonder why the waters never settle. Peace comes through dealing honestly with sin before God, not around it.

Pastorally this is an invitation to honesty. Where there is no peace, it is worth asking whether something is being tossed up from the depths that needs to be confessed and forsaken rather than managed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Unrepented sin produces a restlessness that cannot be quieted (Isaiah 57:20).
- God genuinely offers peace, but it cannot coexist with cherished sin (Isaiah 57:21).
- Much of our inner turmoil is moral rather than merely circumstantial.
- Peace comes through dealing honestly with sin before God, not around it.

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you tried to find peace while holding on to something God has called sin?

- How can we tell the difference between circumstantial stress and the restlessness of unaddressed sin?
- What would it look like to bring the churning thing to God this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Isaiah 58:1–5 describes people who fast and seek God daily yet wonder why He takes no notice. What does this reveal about the difference between religious activity and genuine devotion, and how can worship become a performance that God actually rejects?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 58 is the centerpiece of the lesson. God tells Isaiah to lift up his voice like a trumpet and declare to the people their transgression. The shock is that these are religiously active people. “They seek me daily and delight to know my ways... they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God.”

Their complaint in verse 3 is revealing: “Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?” They are keeping the forms and feel cheated that God is not responding. They treat worship as a transaction that should produce results.

God’s answer is devastating. On their fast day they seek their own pleasure, oppress their workers, quarrel, and fight, even striking with a wicked fist. Their fasting bows the head like a reed and spreads sackcloth and ashes, but it leaves their treatment of others untouched. This is religious activity that God actually rejects.

The teacher should let this passage do its convicting work. It exposes the gap between religious performance and genuine devotion. Worship that does not reshape how we treat the people around us, especially the vulnerable, is the very thing God refuses to notice. The forms are not the substance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Religious activity can mask a heart far from God and a life that mistreats others (Isaiah 58:2–4).
- God rejects worship that is mere performance disconnected from justice and mercy (Isaiah 58:5).
- Treating worship as a transaction that obligates God misunderstands devotion entirely.
- Genuine devotion must reshape how we treat the people around us, especially the vulnerable.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to substitute religious activity for genuine devotion?

- Have you ever treated worship as a transaction that should obligate God? What did that reveal?
- How would your week look different if your worship reshaped how you treat others?

Question 6

Student Question:

Isaiah 58:6–7 defines the fast God chooses as loosing bonds of wickedness, sharing bread with the hungry, and housing the homeless. Who is one specific person in need that God may be placing within your reach, and what is one concrete step of mercy you can take?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now comes God’s definition of true fasting. “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 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 him?” (58:6–7).

True fasting, in God’s mouth, is not first about an empty stomach but about a full life poured out for others. It looses bonds, frees the oppressed, feeds the hungry, houses the homeless, and clothes the naked. Devotion to God turns outward into mercy and justice toward people.

Then come the promises of verses 8 through 11: light breaking forth like the dawn, healing springing up, the LORD answering, “Here I am,” guidance continually, and a life like a watered garden. The one who pours himself out for the hungry finds his own light rising in the darkness. Mercy is not a drain; it is the channel of blessing.

Teachers should press this toward concrete action. The text does not let us stay in the abstract. It names specific deeds: bread, shelter, clothing, freedom. Each student should be helped to identify a real person in need within their reach and a real step of mercy to take.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fast God chooses is mercy and justice: freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless (Isaiah 58:6–7).
- True devotion to God turns outward into concrete care for people in need.
- Pouring ourselves out for others is the channel of God’s blessing, not a mere drain (Isaiah 58:8–11).
- The text demands concrete deeds, not abstract good intentions.
- Mercy toward the vulnerable is not optional charity but the heart of acceptable worship.

Discussion Prompts

- Who is one specific person in need within your reach, and what concrete step can you take?
- When have you found that giving yourself away for others filled rather than drained you?
- How does it change your view of worship to see mercy as its true expression?

Question 7

Student Question:

Isaiah 58:13–14 calls God’s people to honor the Sabbath, to call it a delight, and to delight themselves in the LORD. While Christians are not bound to keep the Sabbath but gather to worship on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2), what enduring principle about delighting in God rather than merely pleasing ourselves carries over for us today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 58 closes with the call to honor the Sabbath, not turning to one’s own pleasure on God’s holy day, but calling the Sabbath a delight and honoring it, “then you shall take delight in the LORD” (58:13–14). For Israel under the old covenant, the Sabbath was a covenant sign and a weekly call to delight in God rather than in self.

The teacher must handle this with doctrinal care. The Sabbath was given to Israel under the Law and is not bound on Christians. The New Testament shows the church gathering to worship on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, for the breaking of bread and giving (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2). We do not transfer Sabbath regulations onto Sunday or bind Sabbath-keeping on believers.

Yet there is an enduring principle that crosses over. The heart of the passage is the contrast between seeking our own pleasure and delighting ourselves in the LORD. The danger Isaiah names, of treating sacred time as just more time for self, is a danger for any worshiper in any age.

So the application is not, keep the Sabbath, but learn to delight in God rather than merely pleasing yourself, especially when we gather on the Lord’s Day. Worship that is shaped around our preferences and convenience drifts toward the very self-seeking Isaiah condemns. The cure is to find our joy in the Lord Himself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Sabbath was a covenant sign given to Israel under the Law, not bound on Christians (Isaiah 58:13).
- Christians gather to worship on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2).
- We do not transfer Sabbath regulations onto Sunday or bind Sabbath-keeping on believers.
- The enduring principle is delighting in the LORD rather than merely seeking our own pleasure (Isaiah 58:14).
- Worship shaped around our convenience drifts toward the self-seeking Isaiah condemns.

Discussion Prompts

- What enduring principle about delighting in God carries over for us from Isaiah 58:13–14?
- How can our Lord’s Day worship drift toward self-seeking, and how do we guard against it?

- What would it look like for you to truly delight in the Lord rather than merely please yourself?

Question 8

Student Question:

Isaiah 58:9–11 promises that if we pour ourselves out for the hungry, our light will rise in the darkness and the LORD will guide us continually. When have you experienced that giving yourself away for others actually filled rather than drained you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Returning to the promises of chapter 58, verses 9 through 11 deserve their own reflection. “If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places.”

The imagery is of personal renewal flowing from self-giving. The one who feeds others finds light rising in his own darkness. The one who satisfies the afflicted is himself satisfied in scorched places and becomes like a spring of water that does not fail. There is a divine economy here that runs opposite to our fears.

We instinctively assume that pouring ourselves out will leave us empty, so we hold back. Isaiah says the opposite. The path to a watered-garden life runs through giving yourself away. This is the same principle Jesus taught when He said it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Teachers should invite testimony. Many in the class have experienced this firsthand, finding that a season of serving others, far from draining them, became a source of unexpected joy and renewal. Drawing out these stories makes the promise concrete and credible.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-giving toward the afflicted brings personal renewal and light in the darkness (Isaiah 58:10).
- God’s economy runs opposite to our fear that giving will leave us empty (Isaiah 58:11).
- The path to a watered-garden life runs through pouring ourselves out for others.
- This reflects Jesus’ teaching that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Discussion Prompts

- When have you found that serving others renewed rather than drained you?
- Why do we instinctively hold back, and how does Isaiah 58:11 challenge that fear?
- What is one place of scarcity in your life where God may be inviting you to give first?

Question 9

Student Question:

Isaiah 59:1-2 declares that God's hand is not too short to save, but "your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God," and then verses 15-21 announce that, seeing no one to intervene, God Himself put on righteousness and salvation as armor, and "a Redeemer will come to Zion." Romans 11:26-27 identifies this Redeemer as Christ, and Ephesians 6 takes up this same armor for the believer. Trace how sin separates us from God and how God Himself provides the only remedy in the Redeemer. Why is it crucial to see that salvation begins with God's initiative, and how does true worship flow from being redeemed rather than earning redemption?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal climax of the lesson. Chapter 59 opens with a vital clarification: "Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear" (59:1-2). The problem was never God's ability. The problem was sin, standing like a wall.

The chapter then gives a sweeping confession of sin: hands defiled with blood, lying tongues, feet swift to do evil, the way of peace unknown, justice turned back and far off. Truth has fallen in the public square. It is one of Scripture's most honest portraits of how thoroughly sin corrupts a society and severs it from God. This is personal accountability, not inherited guilt; the people own their own iniquities.

Then the great turn comes in verses 15 and following. The LORD saw that there was no justice and no one to intervene, "then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him." God put on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation, and "a Redeemer will come to Zion." The remedy for the separation is not human achievement but God's own intervention.

Romans 11:26-27 identifies this Redeemer who comes to Zion as Christ, who turns away ungodliness and takes away sin. The true Zion is the people of God, and the Redeemer is Jesus. Ephesians 6 then takes the very armor God wears here, the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation, and clothes the Christian with it, because what God provided in Christ is now ours to put on.

The teacher should land two truths firmly. First, salvation begins with God's initiative; when there was no one to intervene, God Himself acted. We do not earn redemption; we receive it from the Redeemer who came to Zion. Second, true worship flows out of being redeemed rather than as a way to purchase redemption. This is the answer to the hollow fasting of chapter 58: worship that pleases God springs from grateful hearts that have met the Redeemer, and it is answered in the obedient faith the New Testament teaches, never as a means of buying God's favor.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin truly separates us from God; the barrier is our iniquity, not God's inability (Isaiah 59:1–2).
- This is personal accountability for personal sin, not inherited guilt; the people own their own iniquities (Ezekiel 18:20).
- Salvation begins with God's initiative; when there was no one to intervene, God Himself acted (Isaiah 59:16).
- The Redeemer who comes to Zion is Christ, who turns away ungodliness (Romans 11:26–27).
- The true Zion is the people of God, and the armor God wears becomes the Christian's armor (Ephesians 6:10–17).
- True worship flows out of being redeemed, not as a way to earn redemption.
- Acceptable worship is answered in the obedient faith the New Testament teaches, never as a purchase of God's favor.

Discussion Prompts

- How does seeing that sin truly separates us from God make the coming of the Redeemer better news?
- Why is it crucial that salvation begins with God's initiative rather than our achievement?
- How does true worship change when it flows from being redeemed rather than trying to earn redemption?

Question 10

Student Question:

Isaiah 59:21 promises that God's Spirit and His words will not depart from His people's mouths. Name one specific way you want Christ to be forming the words you speak this week, so that what comes out of your mouth begins to match the God you worship.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter closes with a covenant promise in verse 21: "And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the LORD: My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring... from this time forth and forevermore." God pledges His Spirit and His words to His redeemed people permanently.

Notice that the promise concerns words in the mouth. After chapters that exposed lying tongues and a society where truth had fallen in the streets, God promises a people whose mouths are filled with His words. Redemption reaches all the way to the way we speak.

For the capstone, the teacher should connect speech to character. The Redeemer who removes the separation also reshapes the redeemed from the inside out, including their words. A changed heart eventually shows up in a changed mouth, which is exactly where chapter 59 began its indictment.

Encourage each student to name one specific way they want Christ to form the words they speak, so that what comes out of their mouth begins to match the God they worship. This turns the whole lesson toward concrete formation rather than mere information.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God pledges His Spirit and His words to His redeemed people as a lasting covenant (Isaiah 59:21).
- Redemption reaches all the way to the way we speak, healing the lying tongue of earlier verses.
- A changed heart eventually shows up in a changed mouth.
- Formation, not mere information, is the goal of meeting the Redeemer.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one specific way you want Christ to reshape the words you speak this week?
- Why is it significant that God's covenant promise centers on words in the mouth?
- How does a redeemed heart begin to show up in redeemed speech?