

The Book of Isaiah

Lesson 23: True Worship, True Fasting, and the Redeemer of Zion -- Isaiah 56:1-59:21

Imagine a man standing at the edge of the temple courts, watching the worshipers go in. He is a foreigner, and he is a eunuch, and by every social and ceremonial rule he knows of, he does not belong. He has heard that people like him are cut off, dried-up branches with no name and no future among God's people. And then a word comes to him through Isaiah that he can hardly believe: God will give him a place inside the walls and a name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. The door he assumed was locked is being held open by the hand of God Himself. That is where chapter 56 begins, and it tells us something we badly need to hear: the heart of God is wider than our fences.

These four chapters move through some of the most searching territory in all of Isaiah. We meet a God who welcomes the outsider and then turns to rebuke the insiders who have made His house a den of self-indulgence. We hear Him expose religion that fasts and bows its head and yet crushes its workers and ignores the hungry at its own gate. And we come to the sobering, clarifying word of chapter 59: "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God." The problem was never that God was too far away to hear. The problem was sin, standing like a wall between a holy God and the people He loved.

Running through all of it is a single, piercing question: what does God actually want from us? Chapter 58 answers it with unforgettable force. The people are fasting and wondering why God does not notice, and God tells them their fasting is a sham because they oppress their workers and quarrel and strike with a wicked fist on the very day they pretend to seek Him. "Is not this the fast that I choose," He says, "to loose the bonds of wickedness... to share your bread with the hungry?" Real devotion does not stop at the church door; it walks home and feeds someone. God has never been impressed by religious performance that leaves the poor still hungry.

But these chapters do not leave us crushed under our own sin. After the wall of iniquity rises in chapter 59, God Himself moves. Seeing that there was no one to intervene, He puts on righteousness as a breastplate and salvation as a helmet, and "a Redeemer will come to Zion." The New Testament tells us that Redeemer is Christ (Romans 11:26-27), and Paul borrows this very armor to clothe the Christian (Ephesians 6). So the journey of this lesson runs from the wideness of God's welcome, through the searching demand of true worship, into the honest diagnosis of sin, and finally to the Redeemer who comes to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. Let us walk it with open hearts.

Group Discussion: Isaiah 58 describes people who fast and bow their heads yet oppress their workers and ignore the hungry, and God says the fast He chooses is "to loose the bonds of wickedness... to share your bread with the hungry" (58:6-7). As a group, discuss where modern religious life is most tempted to substitute ritual and appearance for genuine mercy and justice. What would it look like for our congregation to fast the way God describes?

Personal Reflection: Isaiah 59:1–2 says, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you.” Is there a sin you have been tolerating that has put distance between you and the Lord? What would it take to bring it honestly to Him this week?

Read Isaiah 56:1–59:21

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Mark 11:15–17, Jesus cleanses the temple and calls it “a house of prayer for all the nations”; Acts 8:26–39, the Ethiopian eunuch hears the gospel and is baptized; Ephesians 6:10–17, the armor of God drawn from the Redeemer's own armor in Isaiah 59

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