

January 22 Lesson 8 (KJV)

## God Promises Light

Devotional Reading: Ephesians 5:11–20

Background Scripture: Isaiah 58:1–14

Isaiah 58:6–10

**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 rereward.

**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 noonday.

### Key Text

*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 noonday.*

—Isaiah 58:10

From Darkness to Light

Unit 2: God's Promises

Lessons 5–9

Lesson Outline

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*A Growing Crisis*
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- A. Fasting Today
- B. Prayer
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### How to Say It

Immanuelh-*man-you-el*.

IsaiahEye-*zay-uh*.

pharaoh*fair-o* or *fay-roe*.

## Introduction

### A. Persistent Poverty

Government agencies and academic researchers have good reason to study why poverty persists. Their studies have produced specialized vocabulary, with terms such as “food insecurity,” “persistent poverty regions,” and “economic blight.” The official poverty rate in America consistently hovers at around 10 percent of the population, with some counties having rates over 30 percent. Every community has poor people in its midst, folks struggling to have adequate food, clothing, and housing.

Isaiah repeatedly addressed care for *all* people, exhorting his hearers to recognize the poor among them and offer relief. This week's lesson has wonderful, timeless teaching for us as we consider the Christian's obligations to the poor in our churches and communities.

### B. Lesson Context

This is now our third lesson from the book of Isaiah, so the Lesson Contexts of the previous two lessons apply to this one as well. Our text, found in Isaiah 58, focuses on fasting, though not as the audience would have expected.

The essence of fasting is self-denial. The intent behind this practice is typically understood as being reminded of complete dependence on the Lord, as Jesus expressed during His temptation

(Matthew 4:1–4; compare Luke 12:22–31). Fasting on a regular and devout basis could earn the respect of the community. For example, a heroine of the Jews who lived in the intertestamental times, Judith, was renowned for her extensive fasting practices, said to have occurred all the days of her widowhood (see the non-biblical Judith 8:6).

Community fasting was a solemn event for the people of Israel (1 Samuel 7:6; Esther 4:1–3, 15–17; 9:31–32; Joel 1:14–15; contrast 1 Kings 21:9–12). Fasting could be an appropriate personal condition for a dedicated time of prayer (2 Samuel 12:16, 21–23; Nehemiah 1:4; Daniel 9:3). It was for the humbling of the soul (Psalm 35:13).

Unfortunately, fasting could easily become an empty ritual, more about recognition for Judah’s own piety than as a spiritual discipline (see Zechariah 7:5–6; Matthew 6:16–18; Luke 18:9–14). In that vein, Isaiah begins chapter 58 by loudly declaring the rebellion and hypocrisy of Israel (Isaiah 58:1–2). The people invited that critique by pointing to their fasts (58:3a) as evidence of their humility, only for God to point out what should have been the obvious error in their way: fasting gave the appearance of humility, but it actually resulted in exploitation (58:3b) and violence (58:4)! “Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?” (58:5). What kind of fast does God *really* desire?

## I. God’s Chosen Fast (Isaiah 58:6–7)

### A. Break Every Yoke (v. 6)

#### 6a. Is not this the fast that I have chosen?

Isaiah 58:7 (below) begins with a similar question. *This* refers to what follows rather than what came before, which is demonstrably not what God desires (58:1–5, not in our printed text). The resulting lines of parallel thoughts help our understanding, as those parallels serve to interpret each other. The overall effect is to make crystal clear the kind of *fast* God desires.

And sadly, this might offer insight into the wickedness of the people Isaiah was addressing. Is it possible that to this audience, actively pursuing righteousness amounted only to “fasting” from the evil habits they enjoyed? After all, unscrupulous and unrighteous actions were (and still are) one way to become and remain wealthy or powerful. Giving up wickedness as a fast speaks to how the people benefitted from their injustice and to the pain they would feel giving it up.

#### 6b. To loose the bands of wickedness.

Although the actions are named as the Lord’s chosen fast for Israel (see commentary on Isaiah 58:6c–7a, below), the list does not read as things to avoid doing. Instead, these actions have more to do with adding righteous actions and actively obeying the law than with giving up negative or neutral actions.

Hebrew poetry often uses parallelism of thoughts or phrases to emphasize a point, so we can assume that the actions listed here through Isaiah 58:7 are tightly connected and will help interpret each other. *Wickedness* is a broad category and can describe any sinful habits that need to be repented of and discarded. Given Isaiah’s preaching against idolatry (example: 2:8, 18, 20), we might think of all the wickedness that false gods were thought to condone. The first evil of idolatry is giving any credit to an idol when *all* credit belongs to the Creator and Lord alone (example: 40:18–26). All other idolatrous sins grow out of this.

To describe wickedness as *bands* to be loosened suggests that the people were entrapped by wickedness, whether of their own doing or that of society at large. Such restraints could only be escaped with outside help. Ultimately only the Lord could *loose* these restraints, though the people are called to participate in the work. In order to experience freedom granted by God, the people needed to repent of the sinful thoughts and actions that prevented them from having God's blessing.

**6c. To undo the heavy burdens.**

The word translated *heavy burdens* is also translated "cords" elsewhere in the *King James Version* (Job 36:8; Psalms 129:4; 140:5; Proverbs 5:22; Isaiah 5:18; 54:2), and that is the sense here. This phrase might turn our thoughts to the exodus, when the pharaoh gave the people more and more work to do, out of fear that they would escape or become powerful in their own right (Exodus 5:4–18). This injustice explained the command to follow Sabbath regulations—time when each man, woman, child, and even *animal* was to be given rest (Deuteronomy 5:12–15; see Isaiah 58:6e, below). Jesus' so-called woes pronounced to the Pharisees and other legal experts is evidence that, sadly, the problem of legalistic adherence to *some* laws (or human traditions; see Mark 7:8–13) would persist. And often the laws set aside were those concerned with justice and mercy (see Matthew 23:4; Luke 11:37–54).

**6d. And to let the oppressed go free.**

Letting *the oppressed go free* sounds like Year of Jubilee language, when slaves were to be emancipated and familial lands returned from essentially being rented out for up to 50 years (Leviticus 25:10–13). This language is closely related to sabbath-year language (25:4), though the Jubilee was intended to occur only every 50 years. This concept also relates to the exodus; the reason Israel was to care for the stranger (a vulnerable person because of the lack of familial ties to Israel) was because of their own experience in Egypt (19:34; compare Luke 4:18). Zechariah 7:10 lists various categories of oppressed people.

**6e. And that ye break every yoke?**

Sometimes the yoke symbolized an invading nation that gained control over the people of Israel (example: Isaiah 14:25). In that regard, a yoke symbolized oppression, compelled obedience to a master (example: Jeremiah 27:2). While yoking farm animals often was necessary for them to do their work, the image of yoking people was one of grave cruelty. It suggested that the yoked ones were less than human and could be treated as such.

But the Lord had commanded that even animals be allowed to rest from their work on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14). If He cared for the beasts, how much more the people (Matthew 10:29–31)? And all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Treating even one person by lower standards than the standards for a beast of burden is a failure to recognize God's great care for those made in His image. The culmination of God's fast entails breaking the metaphorical *yoke* so that it could not be used again to oppress anyone (see lesson 7).

**B. Provide for Any Need (v. 7)**

**7a. 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.**

Withholding food from *the hungry* results in an ironic, horrifying, forced fast. The appropriate fast would be to turn from these evils (see commentary on Isaiah 58:6b–6e, above) and care for *the poor* and *the naked*. In each instance, the solution is to care appropriately for the need of the person. The people should “fast” from the active wickedness of the sins of commission and “gorge” on opportunities that, if ignored, would be sins of omission.

Jesus took this a step further, teaching that what was done to the hungry, thirsty, etc., was also done to *Him* (Matthew 25:31–46). We show love for God by loving those who are made in His image (example: Luke 10:25–37; see commentary on Isaiah 58:6e, above). And while we are saved only by faith in Jesus rather than works of the law (Romans 3:21–26), the fruit of the Spirit and the works of our hands are evidence of that faith (Galatians 5:22–23; James 2:14–20).

### **7b. And that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?**

The family unit has been the basic building block of societies since ancient times. When we can count on no one else, we expect to be able to call on our family members for help. Even when this is not the case, deep down we feel we *should* be able to call on our relatives. Hiding *from thine own flesh* thus represents a particularly painful example of refusing to offer appropriate aid. In a community where not even families care for one another, what hope is there for the widow, the orphan, or the foreigner who lives without the same safety net? Loving one’s own people is basic righteousness, something Jesus says even the publicans do (Matthew 5:46)!

## **II. A Bright Future (Isaiah 58:8–10)**

### **A. God’s Protection (vv. 8–9a)**

#### **8a. Then shall thy light break forth as the morning.**

*Light* has long been associated with right conduct and knowledge thereof (see especially 2 Samuel 23:4). When the Israelites lived, or walked, in the light as fresh and bright *as the morning* (Psalms 36:9; 37:6; see commentary on Isaiah 58:10, below), they were shown to have nothing to hide. And by living as light they could fulfill their calling: to be a priestly nation ministering to a dark world, revealing the righteous God through word and deed (Exodus 19:6).

The blessing and calling to live as light continues into the church. Jesus saw himself as a light to a dark world (John 12:46). Paul admonished the Ephesians to live as “children of light” (Ephesians 5:8), and Peter reminded his readers that their faith had the effect of bringing them from the darkness to the light (1 Peter 2:9; see lesson 13). Living as light should be the desire of every Christian; such a life does away with selfishness and hypocrisy.

#### **8b. And thine health shall spring forth speedily.**

It would be easy to over-spiritualize restoration of *health* and assume that this *only* applies to spiritual healing. Undoubtedly there is a strong element of spiritual care and health here. However, we know that God is concerned with the whole person—mind, body, and spirit—and this is made evident in Jesus’ own ministry (see examples in Mark 5). By extension, this relates to the health of God’s chosen community as well. When the most vulnerable people are cared for,

society has the potential to function well. This is God's desire for all people, and this is what was promised to Israel if they turned back to God in sincerity.

**8c. And thy righteousness shall go before thee.**

Israel's *righteousness* here is a metaphor for the Lord himself, similar to His military might (Exodus 15:3; Psalm 18:1–2, 13–14; etc.). He would once again be the advance guard, as armor against the wicked (compare Exodus 13:21–22; 14:19–25).

**8d. The glory of the LORD shall be thy reward.**

The vanguard of righteousness would be complemented by the rearguard protection of *the glory of the Lord* (see Isaiah 52:12). *Rereward* is an old English term referring to the rearguard of an advancing army (compare Joshua 6:9, 13). This strengthens the apparent allusion to the exodus (see commentary on Isaiah 58:8c, above). The people would be protected on all sides and in all ways by the Lord himself.

**9a. Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am.**

It is easy to assume that a feeling of God's absence or silence is evidence that He "hidest ... in times of trouble" (Psalm 10:1). The biblical evidence is mixed regarding God's attention when we feel He is far away. On the one hand, Job experienced the loss of his fortune and family as God's absence, even though we know by reading the book that God was present throughout Job's heartbreak (Job 1:1–2:10; 42:7–17). But God himself asserted that He would punish the people when they sinned and failed to repent (Deuteronomy 31:16–21; Lamentations 5:19–22); examples of this are found not only in the exile when repentance came too late but also in the cycles of repentance found in the book of Judges (example: Judges 2:10–19).

In the case at hand, the Lord had deliberately turned away from the people. So His choosing to *answer* their *call* really would be evidence that He was choosing to hear and to bless once again. And the ultimate fulfillment of God's answering with *Here I am* was to come in Immanuel—Jesus—about whom Isaiah had prophesied (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). In Jesus and through the Spirit we experience God among us.

## **B. God's Promise (vv. 9b–10)**

**9b. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity.**

This is the first time that fasting language—*take away*—is used in place of affirmative commands. Still, this language echoes what has already been stated (see commentary on Isaiah 58:6, above). This is a reaffirmation of the need for justice in the community at all levels and active easing of the effects of grinding poverty.

*The putting forth of the finger*—a Hebrew phrase unique to this verse—seems to be the pointing of an accusing finger at someone, an insulting sign of disrespect (compare Proverbs 6:13). In context, it is another mark of arrogance and hypocrisy in the wicked in their treatment of unfortunate members of their society.

The word translated *vanity* is often found in Isaiah as "iniquity" (Isaiah 1:13; 31:2; 59:6–7, 12). It can have the sense of emptiness, but also of a falseness with evil intent. The heart saturated with iniquity blocks the prayers of such a person (Psalm 66:18). A society that becomes a slave to

falsehood is an evil place and will not be blessed by the Lord. It becomes a chaotic, self-destructive place (see 7:14–16).

**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 noonday.**

This verse echoes the fast that God desired, starting with the *if* statement (see commentary on Isaiah 58:6a–7, above), and the blessings that would follow according to the *then* clause (see commentary on 58:8a–9b). The result of getting these priorities in order would be lives of *light*. The image of *darkness be as the noonday* is one of the complete dispelling of all that darkness represents: selfishness, insincere worship, hypocritical fasting, and all manner of other sinfulness.

The chapter closes with positive metaphors of Israel as a garden and a rebuilt city (Isaiah 58:11–12, not in our printed text).

## Conclusion

### A. Fasting Today

Isaiah pushed Israel to understand that what God deems important is not a temporary willingness to fast from food, but a spiritual health that leads to righteous behavior. So we might ask ourselves two questions: Do I go through ritualistic motions on a regular basis instead of allowing my heart to really be turned toward God during those practices? What “fast” might I need to undertake to align myself with the type of fasting God desires?

A just and caring community will consider the “hungry” in all aspects Isaiah has already defined: food, clothing, and housing (Isaiah 58:7). How can we feel comfortable in our abundance if we know there is suffering in our neighborhoods (1 John 3:17)? It may be impossible for any one individual to meet every community need, but this does not excuse us from keeping our eyes open to the plight of others or striving to meet the needs we see.

Experience has taught me that I am most successful with fasting if I practice it in community, with at least one partner. Then the limits of the fast are mutually agreed on and there is an accountability that helps keep me focused and faithful to the practice. Maybe you should seek a “fasting partner” who will share the experience and grow with you. That way you can grow in grace and truth together (see John 1:14, 17).

### B. Prayer

Lord God, give us hearts that seek a lifelong “fast” from the pleasures of sin and an ongoing “feast” of obedience to You. May we not be guilty of making a show out of our religious actions while having hearts of stone. Give us a character that cares about the needy, abstains from pointing fingers at others, loves and practices truth, and reflects the light of Your Word. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Fasting is meaningless without a heart of repentance and humility.<sup>1</sup>

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