

God Promises Light

Mack is working to end the oppression of hunger and malnourishment. In his Sunday school class, he expressed the idea of serving one meal a month to the needy families in the church's community—and then giving them food boxes as they returned home. Before long, he had teams of people coordinating every aspect of the meals and food give-aways. (Plus, each person sponsors at least one child through Compassion International to feed families well beyond their community.)

Angela is working to end the oppression of children being raised in unfit homes. She joined her county's foster care board. She teaches a class on parenting skills. She conducts clothing and food drives for children transitioning into or out of foster care and has three foster children in her home.

Ralph may have retired from pastoring, but at 75 years old, he will soon receive a degree in rehabilitative counseling—all while initiating an expansive Celebrate Recovery program sponsored by seven different churches in his hometown.

Shocked by the extensive sex trade in her Midwestern city, Melissa works with law enforcement to establish a halfway house for exploited women. She earnestly seeks women in trouble—talking with and providing material help for young women working in strip clubs and young prostitutes working street corners, all while collecting information on others who may be locked up in seedy hotels.

- 1. Why do you think there is so much oppression in the world?**
- 2. Why does social injustice grieve our Lord Jesus? Provide examples from the Gospel accounts.**
- 3. Why does our servanthood to Christ include ending the oppression we see in our society?**

The Type of Fast God Chooses

Isaiah 58:6-7, 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?

Isaiah 58:6-7, NIV

⁶“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer
with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your
own flesh and blood?”

In Isaiah 58, we encounter the Lord’s message to His people about true service to God. It consists not in merely following certain rituals, but in doing good and leading holy lives. This message would have been directed both to Israelites in Isaiah’s day and to Jews who would be reading it after the Babylonian exile.

Sadly the people were fasting for the wrong reasons. We find them portrayed in verses 2 and 3 as voicing concern over God’s apparent lack of response to their fasting. After all, the people gave every appearance of diligently seeking God and His will, just as if they were an obedient nation.

The people abstained from eating food, perhaps on annual fast days or on special occasions. At these times, they also adopted traditional signs of humility such as bowing their heads and lying on sackcloth and ashes (vs. 5). Yet, God apparently paid no attention to their fasting, for He had not given them what they sought. That’s because, when they fasted, they kept on oppressing their workers (vs. 3). Through various unscrupulous means, they kept their workers in virtual poverty and debt.

Outwardly, the people of God appeared to be humble, devoted, and pious, but they were also quarreling with each

other. The Lord was unimpressed, for He saw right through the hypocrisy of His people (vss. 4-5).

God did more than condemn the people for their hypocritical fasts. He also explained “the kind of fasting” (vs. 6) that would be genuine. The people were to free those who had been wrongly imprisoned, rather than keep them in their deplorable state of confinement. Also, rather than oppress those who worked for them, the wealthy were to treat the poor (as well as all people) with fairness and pay them what they had earned.

Clearly, the people of Isaiah’s day had missed the point when it came to fasting. God didn’t want their pious acts when they had unforgiven sin in their hearts and they continued their immoral lifestyles. They may have had correct worship and doctrine. Yet, they should have also had genuine compassion for the oppressed, the poor, and the helpless.

To emphasize the true nature of justice, Isaiah told the people to feed the hungry and provide clothing and shelter for the poor. Apparently, the well-to-do in Israel ignored the poor among them, their “own flesh and blood” (vs. 7). Isaiah chastised the rich for turning away their fellow citizens.

The law of Moses carefully prescribed how Israel was supposed to take care of the poor in the land (Deut. 15:1-11). For instance, those who enjoyed good harvests were supposed to share with those in need. Widows, orphans, and landless aliens were often victimized by greedy people, especially moneylenders. Debtors often were thrown off their farms.

Such injustices are why spokespersons for God (such as Isaiah) continually cried out against the wicked rich in Israel. The prophets declared that true worship meant obeying God’s laws, including the care of the poor. Otherwise, the people’s worship was a pious fraud.

4. What sort of “fasting” (vs. 6) did God value most?

5. What sort of priorities did God want to see among His people?

The Result of Genuine Fasting

Isaiah 58:8-10, KJV

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.

Isaiah 58:8-10, NIV

⁸“Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

⁹Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

¹⁰and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”

It was not too late for the people who were fasting improperly. They could yet change their ways. And if they did, God was prepared to bless them richly—if they were sincerely obeying Him.

Isaiah 58:8-9 records one group of promises of divine blessings. If the people practiced true fasting—that is, accompanied by helping the needy—then “light” (vs. 8, spiritual blessing) would break forth and “healing” (spiritual restoration) would quickly appear. Not only that, but righteousness would go before the people and the glory of the Lord would follow them

as their "rear guard."

The above description reflects the experience of the Israelites during their exodus from Egypt, which was a time of great blessing. Although God did not answer the people's prayers when they fasted improperly, their obedience would open the way for Him to answer them and declare, "Here am I" (vs. 9). He would be there for them.

However, before the people's "light" could shine, they needed to remedy several problems plaguing the nation. They needed to do away with "oppression," "the pointing finger" (probably a gesture of contempt or accusation), and "malicious talk" (vs. 9). Also, they needed to help the hungry and the oppressed (vs. 10).

If the people began acting righteously in these ways, then the nation's darkness would be turned to "light," and their spiritual "night" would "become like the noonday." This means their distress and calamity, which were results of their sins, would give way to the sunshine of God's glorious blessing. Righteousness would also ensure that the people would receive divine guidance, have their needs met, and receive strength.

We live in a broken world where people need help. It is not enough to nod our heads and say, "What a shame!" Isaiah said we must "spend [our]selves" (vs. 10) in behalf of those who are oppressed and meet the needs of those who have less than we have. If we do that, we will become the "light" that both Isaiah and then Jesus talked about: "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

- 6.** *In what ways would the Lord bless His people?*
- 7.** *How would God respond to His people's petitions?*
- 8.** *What deplorable conduct among God's people did He despise?*
- 9.** *What dramatic turnaround did the Lord envision for His people?*

To Act Justly

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” declared Martin Luther King, Jr. That is the pervasiveness and toxicity of injustice when it is left unchallenged. Therefore, even when injustice casts a pale and slight shadow about us, evil lurks to create greater damage to human souls.

We are not necessarily called to full attention and lifetime work to opposing oppression, though God does call some of us to do just that. For most followers of Christ Jesus, however, our battlefield is in our daily lives and in the moments when we witness a wrong committed to the less fortunate in the world in which we live.

When you hear a racial slur directed at a minority, speak up! When you see someone being bullied, stand in his or her defense! When a senior is mistreated because of her or his vulnerability, address that abuse. You don’t have to join a movement to resist injustice to be a light that reflects God’s justice. Opportunities to express Christ’s love in such situations emerge unexpectedly and yet periodically.

Sometimes injustice creeps into our own behavior. We may be aware or unaware of its intrusion into our lives, but in either case we desperately need God’s help in comprehending the magnitude of how our actions are hurting others as well as our own faith in Christ. Therefore, God’s call to confront injustice must be both inward and outward.

How we walk with the Lord matters much to Him, and that’s why Scripture is clear about our obligation to be a just people. Indeed, God’s Holy Word tells us: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

- 10.** *What has the Bible taught you about social injustice?*
- 11.** *What oppressions do you see in your world? What are you doing about it?*
- 12.** *How does injustice manifest itself in your own behavior? How are you addressing that sin?*

Defending the Weak

The Hebrew prophets spoke against the injustices during their day in their own way. Isaiah condemned those who placed the yoke of oppression on the vulnerable and praised those who stood up for them. God's message is no different today; therefore, as God's people, we are to uphold God's justice while we defend the weak and stop oppression.

► *What acts of oppression or injustice have you helped correct in the past? Which ones do you see now that you, your class, or your church can help end? Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance in finding and bringing about solutions.*

KEY VERSE

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. —Isaiah 58:10, KJV

“And if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”

—Isaiah 58:10, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

Week of January 23 through January 29

(See *The Quiet Hour* for devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. 1 John 4:1-8—God Is Love.

Tues. 1 John 4:9-21—God's Love Revealed.

Wed. 1 John 5:10-21—Testimony to God's Love.

Thurs. Exodus 33:12-23—God Will Go with You.

Fri. Exodus 34:5-17—The Lord, Merciful and Gracious.

Sat. Joel 1:1-4, 14-20—God Is Near Despite Adversity.

Sun. Joel 2:18-31—God Will Pour Out the Spirit.