

God Promises Light

The building is still a good, sound structure,” said Caleb. Caleb was trying to sway two members of the city council to his side during their working session. He was proposing that a non-profit agency run a shelter and transitional services for the homeless in St. Louis.

Caleb attended a prayer breakfast last year where a homeless non-profit group showcased its programs and services for the homeless. Caleb remained in touch with the representatives, saying he would do his best to see the agency increase its efforts in St. Louis.

“We have enough things in the city for the homeless,” said Doug Lynch.

“Actually, we don’t,” said Caleb. “Many of the homeless and those on the fringe just need a helping hand. This company has had good success at its other location in the area.”

Caleb went on to explain about other non-profit agencies wanting to work in collaboration with this company to provide comprehensive services, which included renovating the old health clinic, providing services and volunteers.

After 90 minutes of questions and discussion, Elizabeth conceded, “This is a very good proposal. I thought the venture would be destined to fail, but it seems to have great support. And you’re right, Caleb, we need to do more for the homeless. This is a good way to do this.”

“Thank you, Councilwoman Gray. Councilman Lynch, can I count on your support as well?” Caleb said.

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. Sadly the people were fasting for the wrong reasons. We find them portrayed in verses 2-3 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. Verses 3-5 say they also adopted at these times traditional signs of humility, such as bowing their heads and lying on sackcloth and ashes. 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. Through various unscrupulous means, they kept their workers in 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 saw right through their hypocrisy.

But 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, but they needed 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 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 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” (Isa. 58:6) 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 changed, 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 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, we will become the “light” that 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. 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 lifetime work to opposing oppression, though God does call some of us to do just that. For most Christians, 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 someone, 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 and be a light that reflects God’s justice.

Sometimes injustice creeps into our own behavior. We may be aware or unaware of its intrusion into our lives, but either way, we 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 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” (Mic. 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 FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of January 23 through January 29

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* 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.