

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

May 18, 2014



Discussion Guide

God's Story. My Story.

Isaiah 58.1-9a

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- How would you describe what it means to seek justice? In your mind, what type of person fits this description? Could you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Use the notes and comments to explain the larger context for Isaiah 58.

- Read Isaiah 58.1-9a aloud slowly. Pause to give time to allow the words to sink in. Read Isaiah 58.1-9a once more, seeking to experience the words as one hearing Isaiah speak them.
- According to Isaiah, what did God's people believe God desired? What did God truly desire?
- What seems to have been the resulting experience of offering God something other than he desired?
- It has been said that the people of God thought God was interested in the practice of religion while God was interested in the living of one's life. In your mind, what is the difference between the two? Can you elaborate?
- Where, if at all, do you witness the attitude that God is interested in the practice of religion? In your opinion, what is the outcome of this attitude?
- To which do people seem to be drawn more: the practice of religion or a life lived? Why might this be so? To which are you drawn?
- The statement has been made that to experience God one must join him in what he is doing. Do you feel that this statement is in agreement or disagreement with what Isaiah says? Could you explain?
- What, if anything, keeps you from joining God in what he is doing?
- What steps might you be willing to take to join with God in what he is doing?
- Conclude your time by praying for your group and for Union Center.

Context and Background

Fasting

Fasting is the practice of self-denial with regard to food for a specific period of time for moral or religious reasons. Nearly all religions have some version of fasting, though the purposes and uses of this practice differ. In primal religions, fasting was used as a means of appeasing the gods or garnering their favor. In the Greek religions, fasting was often used as part of the process of preparing to hear a prophecy from an oracle. In a similar manner, Native American and African religions use fasting to gain access to the spirits or spirit-world. Eastern religions use fasting to cleanse the mind/body so that one might be prepared for a state of deeper insight or enlightenment. The Jewish and Islamic religions use fasting as a means of expressing repentance for sins committed.

God only formally commanded the Jews to fast in connection with the Day of Atonement as a physical demonstration of their remorse over sin (Leviticus 16.29-31; 23.26-32; Numbers 29.7-11). However, the Jews did engage in other public and private fasts, typically to express remorse (1 Samuel 31.3; 1 Kings 21.27-29; Nehemiah 9.1-2), though they also used fasts to express deep concerns to God (Daniel 9.3; 2 Chronicles 20.1-4). By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees seem to have made fasting a weekly practice, probably with the intention of using the practice to deepen one's connection with God.

Jesus fasted as part of his preparation for ministry (Luke 4.1-2), but he stressed the private nature of the practice (Matthew 6.16-18), and did not lay out any formal rules for his disciples to follow. He does seem to imply that fasting is sometimes necessary in seeking God's power (Mark 9.29), but in light of the whole of Jesus' teaching, one cannot interpret this as a practice that demands God's response.

The earliest believers continued the practice of fasting, particularly in seeking God's guidance (Acts 13.3). Second generation Jesus-followers, particularly those who expressed their faith by retreating to the African desert, used fasting in spiritual warfare. The Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions have maintained fasting within the observance of Lent as a means of

expressing remorse. More recently, Pentecostal Christians and some Evangelicals have stressed the practice of fasting as a means of deepening one's spiritual life, and some Catholic and Evangelical believers have encouraged fasting as a means of reducing one's expenses so that the excess might be shared with those in need.

The Text

Isaiah 58.1-5:

The shallowness of a religious life

The prophecy of Isaiah in chapter 58 is the conclusion of a longer prophecy which begins in chapter 56. This larger context focuses on God's desire for his people to seek justice and to live their lives with uprightness (Isaiah 56.1). In chapter 58, God confronts the people of Israel with their false dependence upon religious practices as a substitute for a life of justice.

God addresses his people through Isaiah by exhorting Isaiah to make these final words clearly heard (a loud, trumpeted proclamation). His message is that the people of Israel are behaving in rebellious (sinful) ways. The irony is that God's people are blind to their behavior because they perceive themselves to be in full pursuit of both God and his desires for their lives. However, God's judgment is that they have not done what is right nor have they kept God's commands. Therefore, God is refusing to answer their prayers or draw near to them. The people of Israel complain that God is not behaving properly. They have fasted but God has not answered them. (See Fasting.) Clearly, the people of Israel believe that they have earned a response from God because they have engaged in the religious practice of fasting. More than likely, this fast is one in which people were seeking to deepen their spiritual walk with God; that is, they were responding to the apparent absence of God's presence.

While the people believe they are seeking God in their fasting, God reveals that their true motive is self-serving, a selfishness revealed in the sharp divorce between their religious practices and their daily lives. While they are behaving appropriately according to religious standards, the people are at the same time engaging in acts of violence and exploitation. God declares that such fasting

does not please God; that is, religious practices divorced from daily life practices is not what God desires of his people. God makes it clear that what he desires is more than simple (or complex!) religious practices. He desires more than a day which has been set aside or physical acts of debasement (bowing of head, sackcloth, and ashes).

Isaiah 58.6-9a: *The richness of a just life*

It seems that the people of Israel had come to a point in which they believed that what God wanted most of them was religious observance, observance divorced from the way they lived their daily lives. God rejects this type of thinking (and practice!) and clarifies what he truly desires of his people. Speaking in religious terms, God states that the type of fasting he desires is a life lived in pursuit of justice. This life of justice involves actively seeking to release those who find themselves in all forms of bondage as well as the meeting of the physical needs of all people. (More than likely, the reference to “your own flesh and blood” is a general reference to one’s fellow person in the sense that another person is of the same essence, that is, human.)

God states that when his people choose to live justly they will experience the tangible benefits of God’s presence. Their light will break forth. Light is often used to refer to God’s presence. Healing would take place among God’s people. Righteousness, a physical sign of God, would go before them, and God’s glory would follow them. These are simply four ways of saying the same thing! People experience God when they behave justly. Because God is near, he would hear their prayers and answer. A question exists as to why God appears when the people behave justly, but this may approach the issue from the wrong angle. God has already declared that he is moving to seek justice (Isaiah 57.14-21 and 61.1-11). Therefore, more appropriately, when God’s people behave justly, they experience him because they have drawn near to him, joining him in what he is already doing.

Application:

What does God want of us? We may speak many answers, but our lives often reveal what we truly believe. We believe that what God desires is religious observance. So long as we attend church services, give faithfully, read our Bible, or faithfully carry out those practices which our faith has held up as exemplary, God is pleased. Once we have completed these practices we have fulfilled our duties and may move about our normal lives as we please. However, something is wrong, horribly wrong. We complete our religious activities faithfully but we do so with an absence of God’s presence and power in our lives and faith communities. The issue is not that we have not performed these activities well enough but we have missed what God desires of us altogether. God desires for us to impact how we live, not how we perform for him. God’s deepest desire is that we take up a life of justice. In taking up this life we are in fact taking up his life, joining our story with his story. When we join God in what he is already doing, we naturally experience God’s power and presence.

Want to know how this looks in real life? Check out Blake’s blog at BlakeShipp.blogspot.com



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