

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

May 25, 2014



Discussion Guide

That's Just the Way It Is

Isaiah 58.9b-14

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

- When you consider all that is wrong in and with the world, what is your reaction? Can 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 58.9b-14 aloud slowly. Pause to give time to allow the words to sink in. Read Isaiah 58.9b-14 once more, seeking to experience the words as one hearing Isaiah speak them.
- As you hear the words of Isaiah, to what is God inviting his people? To what ends might their acceptance lead? (Seek to draw out as many answers from the text as possible.)
- How might you restate God's invitation and promise in your own words? Does anything about this statement surprise or stand out to you? Would you elaborate?
- What do people believe God's role in righting wrong in the world to be? People's role? What concerns, if any, do people have about mixing these roles?
- What do you understand your role and God's role to be in righting wrong? Where might you have developed this understanding?
- In what ways, if any, are these (your) beliefs similar or dissimilar to what God says through Isaiah?
- What, if any, are the implications of these similarities and dissimilarities?
- It has been said that we cannot change the world apart from God but that God does not wish to change it apart from us. How do you feel about this statement? Would you elaborate?
- Read Isaiah 58 aloud slowly, giving space and time to hear God speak through the text. What personal invitation, if any, is God extending to you? How does hearing this invitation make you feel? Could you elaborate?
- How might we as a group support one another as a group in responding to God's invitation?
- Conclude your time by praying for your group and for Union Center.

The Text

Isaiah 58.9b-12: *What can be in the present*

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 take up his way of being by seeking justice and living 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 his way of being, a life of justice. He invites them to join him in what he is doing, promising his people that in joining him they will experience his power and presence.

While God's invitation extends the promise of God's presence and power, it appears that this invitation raises questions in the minds of the people of Israel, questions which bring about a sense of hesitancy. When one surveys the train of thought in the conclusion of Isaiah 58, God seems to answer two unspoken questions: (1) What will happen to the people of God personally if they take up God's way of being?, and (2) What good will be accomplished if they respond positively to God's invitation? God answers both of these questions with respect to present and future realities through two "if . . . then" clauses. These clauses seem to imply that the present and future realities promised are not set but are somewhat contingent upon the positive response of God's people.

Isaiah notes that God's people have the choice of doing away with oppression. This is a restatement of verse 6, but with an additional comment. The yoke of oppression includes the pointing finger and malicious talk. These phrases refer to a mocking/contemptuous attitude toward another person; thus, Isaiah points to the pursuit of dignity and worth for all people as a form of releasing from oppression. Isaiah also notes that God's people can choose to spend themselves to care for

the needs of the hungry and oppressed. The implication is that their own lives cannot continue unchanged as personal sacrifice will be required; that is, they must do with less so that others might have some. Isaiah highlights the point that responding to God requires personal choice, a choice that is costly for God's people.

While the acceptance of God's invitation would require personal sacrifice, the result would be that light would shine in the darkness. The implication is that darkness (evil) would be penetrated by light (perhaps a reference to God but more likely to justice). The people of God would experience the guidance of God and a satisfaction of their needs. It is important to note that Isaiah does not speak of a cessation of darkness or the removal of a sun-scorched land. Both continue to exist; that is, evil/injustice will remain, but God's people will find themselves cared for and their efforts effective. In fact, God's people would undergo a transformation in which in the midst of darkness and dryness they would be like a well-watered garden or an ever-running spring. God's people would be refreshed and become a refreshing people for others. This refreshing people would, in the present, begin to rebuild that which had been torn down. (The reversal of the effects of Sin is in view.) Further, they would be known as those who repair walls and restore dwellings.

Isaiah 58.6-9a:

What will be in the future

Isaiah returns to the invitation to take up God's life with a call to honor the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a day of rest commanded by God (Exodus 20.8-11), but it was a practice rooted in the activity of God (Genesis 2.2). Thus, to invite a person to honor the Sabbath is to invite them to take up God's way of being.

It is also an invitation to depend upon the sustaining provision of God, because honoring the Sabbath required a cessation from work. The challenge in honoring the Sabbath (picking up God's way of being) is the desire to live on one's own terms. Isaiah mentions this tension three times in verse 13, thus highlighting the powerful influence of this idea. In many ways, Isaiah is repeating the invitation he extended in verses 6-7. However, the promise that is given appears to be future-oriented rather than present-oriented. Some might argue that the future orientation of the resultant promise is less than clear. Yet, the language employed is eschatological (end time): riding on the heights and feasting. Both images are stock images found in apocalyptic texts (Daniel 7.13; Mark 13.26; Revelation 19.9; Isaiah 25.6-8; Matthew 8.11). The promise is that the positive response of God's people will result (in the future) in a final triumph and time of rest and refreshment. While the final victory belongs to God ("I will cause," verse 14), the necessity of a positive response from God's people is hard to miss. It appears that God's people cannot bring about the final triumph on their own, but God does not desire to do it apart from their involvement.

Application:

What does God want of us? His desire is that his people pick up his way of life, partnering with him in what he is doing in the world. But why? Why does God want us so badly? If he wants us, what good could we do, really? The damage of Sin in everyone and everything at every level is mind-boggling, and our understanding of our personal effectiveness against such staggering odds is underwhelming at best. While God does not technically need us to partner with him, it seems that he does not desire to work apart from us. God's desire is to work in this world with and through us. This has been God's design since the beginning of time, making people in his image (Genesis 1.27-28) and is part of God's redemptive design (Genesis 12.1-3). God is working with and through people, his people. When God's people accept his invitation (and only when they accept his invitation), things change. Things change in the present. Self-sacrifice is met with personal provision and community transformation. Darkness may remain but hope challenges despair and the effects of Sin can be reversed in staggering ways. However, darkness will meet its end, for in the future, this partnering of God and his people will lead to a final triumph and state of eternal rest.

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