



1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Isaiah, Part 1

Theme: Judgment

Overview: Isaiah was called to warn God's people that judgment was coming. In this unit, students will learn from Isaiah to say "Yes" to the Lord's call, to turn away from sin before judgment comes, to worship God through praise and right living rather than empty ritual, and to turn from false fasting to a true fast of selfless service.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

INTRODUCTION

Author

The book identifies its author as “Isaiah son of Amoz” (Isaiah 1:1). Isaiah prophesied in Jerusalem and is often called “the gospel prophet” because of his many prophecies about the coming Messiah. Jesus and the New Testament writers quote Isaiah more than any other prophet.

Audience

Isaiah spoke primarily to the people of Judah and Jerusalem (Isaiah 1:1), though his messages also addressed the northern kingdom of Israel and the surrounding nations. He called God’s people to repent and trust the Lord rather than foreign powers.

Date

Isaiah prophesied “during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isaiah 1:1), roughly 740–700 BC. He received his call “in the year that King Uzziah died” (6:1), about 740 BC.

Setting

Isaiah ministered during a time of prosperity on the surface but deep corruption underneath. Idolatry, injustice, drunkenness, and empty religious ritual were common. The Assyrian Empire was rising, and Isaiah warned that God would use nations such as Assyria and Babylon to judge his people (Isaiah 5:26-30).

Theme

Judgment. The holy God, whose “glory fills the whole earth” (Isaiah 6:3), would not overlook his people’s sin.

Yet even in judgment God offered mercy: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (1:18). He called them to turn from sin, worship him sincerely, and care for the oppressed.

Why Study Isaiah?

Isaiah reminds believers that God is holy and that sin brings judgment. This study calls Christians to answer God’s call, to turn away from sin, to worship through praise and right living, and to show their devotion through selfless service to the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed.

STUDY CONTENT

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WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Say “Yes” to the Lord.**

STUDY: Isaiah, Part 1

THEME: Judgment

LESSON TEXT: Isaiah 6:1-12

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 28:18-20; John 21:17-22

WHO WILL GO?

BY MARK SCOTT

John Piper tells an engaging ministry story in *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*. He preached a sermon on Isaiah 6 without one word of application. He wondered if the majesty, power, and glory of God was enough to retain the congregation's interest without cute little homespun life points. Later he found out that one of the families in the church had experienced a huge trauma. He felt embarrassed that he had virtually no pastoral word for them in that Isaiah 6 sermon. The message almost seemed to him, at that point, totally other-worldly. But when he later ran into the father of that family, the man said that Piper's sermon on Isaiah 6 about the wonder of God was the only thing that had sustained them in their dark hour. Maybe people interested in representing God should remember that the glory of God in itself is a healing balm.

People Caught by God's Majesty*Isaiah 6:1-4*

Who can represent God in the world? People caught by his majesty. At least that was true for Isaiah. The story of his calling as a prophet was delayed until chapter six. Maybe the intensity of Israel's situation (i.e., idolatry) demanded a call for repentance right out of the gate (Isaiah 1:2-17; 5:1, 2). But in the context of King Uzziah's death Isaiah recorded his call to prophetic ministry. No matter how bad things were on earth, God was still on his throne. The majesty of God's glory would be what God would use to hold Isaiah in a tough ministry.

Isaiah had a majestic vision of God in his throne room of Heaven. The *Lord (Adonai)* was *high and exalted*. He was pictured as *seated on a throne* (i.e., in total control and sovereign). The *train of his robe filled the temple* (i.e., it was impressive and it indicated God's royal nature). God was worshiped by angelic beings called *seraphim* (flaming ones). These angelic beings had six wings (four which symbolized their humility before God covering faces and feet and two symbolizing service for God by flying). Their chant indicated holiness to the third power. The *Lord Almighty* (Yahweh of Hosts—used twice in this text) was totally other and set apart from the rest of the universe. No matter how life looked to Isaiah in his day, the whole earth was full of God's glory. When the angels chanted, the temple shook. Smoke was just one more indication that Isaiah was having a genuine encounter with the living God.

People Cleansed by God's Mercy*Isaiah 6:5-7*

As soon as Isaiah had a proper view of God it made him conscious of his own sin. This is the only approach of an honest person. We are not ready to go for God until we have been cleansed from sin by God. "Woe is me" is a cry of despair. Isaiah owned his sin. He said that he was *ruined* (lost or destroyed). He did more than acknowledge his own sin; he emotionally owned the sins of his people. They too had unclean lips.

But the Lord specializes in the impossible. He could meet Isaiah at the point of his need. One of the seraphim stepped up and became the means of God's mercy to Isaiah. In this heavenly vision was an altar. It contained heated coals. The seraph used tongs to grasp one of the coals but then put it in his hand and proceeded to touch it to Isaiah's lips as a symbol of the cleansing. Isaiah's *guilt* (punishment or iniquity) was taken away and his sin *atoned* (covered or purged). God's majesty is impressive, but it is God's mercy that makes service possible.

People Committed to God's Ministry*Isaiah 6:8-12*

Christian living is just gratitude for grace. Once Isaiah was cleansed of his sin he was ready to be commissioned. God himself issued the challenge, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Isaiah reported for duty. But perhaps his response ("Here am I. Send me.") should be understood as, "God, I am here. Will I do?" (D. A. Carson, "Preaching in the Hands of a Holy God," *Preaching Today*). Maybe the response was not pompous but humble.

God sent Isaiah out on his mission, but he also promised Isaiah that his ministry would not be a walk in the park. People would listen and see but not respond well. Their hearts would be as hard as Pharaoh of Egypt. Isaiah was taken aback. He asked how long he had to do this. God answered, "Until judgment comes and captivity takes place." If the message is still judgment (our theme for these lessons) who will be willing to still go?

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AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST

BY DAVID FAUST

The church is in the reconciliation business, so you and I must be in that business, too. God “reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9), but in today’s atmosphere charged with political hostility and ideological division, peace is desperately needed and decidedly counter-cultural.

The apostle Paul declared, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20). Imprisoned for preaching the gospel, Paul called himself “an ambassador in chains” (Ephesians 6:20). Our English word *ambassador* comes from a Latin root that means “servant.” The Greek word translated “ambassador” in the New Testament comes from the verb *presbeuo*, to be elderly or mature. It describes someone with sufficient experience and character to serve as a trustworthy, respected representative.

Diplomats represent their countries at the United Nations, but what does it mean for us to be ambassadors of Christ, serving as emissaries on behalf of his kingdom? A job description posted in the careers section of a university website summarizes an ambassador’s role by saying, “Ambassadors usually live in a country different from their home and work as a delegate for and representative of their home country . . . they are responsible for understanding the culture in which they live as an ambassador, but they must always work to keep the best interests of their home country in mind.”

Representing the Lord

Here are some principles ministers of reconciliation should keep in mind.

Ambassadors communicate what they are told. They are under orders to pass along whatever messages the rulers of their home country want to communicate. Likewise, as ambassadors of God’s kingdom, we aren’t the final authority; Jesus is. He possesses “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). His weighty words, not our lightweight personal opinions, define our message to the world. Our job isn’t to impress others with our own clever rhetoric and personal charisma, but to proclaim “the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27).

Ambassadors represent their nation’s values. If the American ambassador misbehaves in another country, it reflects poorly on America. Likewise, our behavior should demonstrate in a positive way that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). It’s important to connect with our culture, but in the pursuit of relevance, we shouldn’t compromise kingdom values grounded in Scripture. God’s call to holy living applies in postmodern times just as it applied in the first century. Peter declared, “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

Ambassadors go wherever they are sent. Jesus said, “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:38). If we dare to pray that prayer, we must trust the Lord to match his harvest workers with harvest fields that fit them well. Christ sends his ambassadors across the world, across the street, and sometimes simply across the room.

Are you willing to engage in the ministry of reconciliation as an ambassador of Christ? Will you go and serve in the field he assigns to you? Will you say, “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8)?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- Have you ever seen or visited European palaces where heads of state reside and work? What are they like?
- Imagine standing before someone who led a world power or possessed absolute royal authority. (Think: Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte, or the president of the United States). What would it be like to be commissioned to do the greatest work project you've ever attempted in order to change the world as we know it?

Read Isaiah 6:1-7

1. This passage of Scripture is one of multiple detailed throne room scenes described throughout the Bible. Discuss and list the elements (environment, beings, architecture) of Isaiah's vision. (To help you imagine, understand, and remember it better, draw and capture the scene on paper, even if it is a basic illustration.)
2. Terrified as he stood in the presence of a holy and all-knowing God, Isaiah immediately confessed his guilt. Talk about the sin Isaiah confessed. Can you relate? Confronted with seeing God Almighty in his glory and power, how would you respond if you were standing in Isaiah's shoes?
3. A seraph provided the remedy to Isaiah's guilt and fear. Why was the fiery coal a perfect answer to the prophet's problem?

Read Isaiah 6:8-10

4. As if Heaven wasn't already remarkable enough, Isaiah heard the Lord speak. What did God ask? Discuss why Isaiah would have been so eager to respond immediately.
5. Jesus and Paul quoted Isaiah 6:9, 10 as they preached. What is God saying in these verses about humankind? What is the solution to our spiritual blindness and understanding?

Read Isaiah 6:11, 12

6. The Israelites would be taken by ruthless foreign rulers and resettled in lands far from home. Isaiah was commissioned to warn them of their impending doom. He asked, "For how long, O Lord?" (v. 11). What was God's response to his question? Was this a one-time shot for the prophet or his life-long ministry message?
7. Reflecting on the introductory questions, in what ways might God be asking you to change the world, one person at a time, by sharing your faith in Jesus Christ? Read John 21:17-22 as if you were Peter. Now read Matthew 28:18-20 and discuss what practical steps you can take this week to respond.

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Lord, help us to see, hear, and understand your words and respond with a hearty "Yes!" to your calling on our lives. Show us how not only to be world changers for now, but heavenly focused servants for eternity.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Turn away from sin, or judgment will come.**

STUDY: Isaiah, Part 1

THEME: Judgment

LESSON TEXT: Isaiah 5:18-28

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 2 Peter 1:10-14; 1 Corinthians 3:18-20; Hebrews 5:14

WARNING!

BY MARK SCOTT

The real irritating thing about the bearded guy who carries the sign, “Turn or Burn” is not the beard or the guy—it is the truth of the sign. As much as we may think the sign’s content is offensive, it is true. People must turn back to God or face judgment. Both testaments proclaim this message.

Our text immediately precedes the text from last week’s lesson (Isaiah’s call to service in chapter six). Isaiah 5 begins by portraying God as a lover singing to his beloved. [Sidebar: God’s judgment is always in the context of his love.] The love song likened his people to a beautiful vineyard that the Lord had made. But the irony of all ironies is that God came looking for fruit from his vineyard, and all he found was wild grapes (i.e., sinful people). Therefore God destroyed his vineyard (judged his people). In Isaiah 5:8 the judgments (in the form of “woes”) begin. Materialism, alcoholism, and pride are just a few of the sins mentioned. God’s people would be judged because they had rejected the knowledge of the Holy (vv. 13, 16).

The Sins of the People*Isaiah 5:18-23*

Our text begins with an interjection intended to get the attention, “Woe.” It can be translated, “O” or “Alas.” We might say, “This is terrible.” It appears four times in this section. With each woe comes a specific sin. First was the sin of presumption (vv. 18, 19). Evidently Israel wanted God to save them, but they wanted salvation on their own terms. They wanted to continue in sin that grace might abound (cf. Romans 6:1). They did not want to give up their lives of sin. This is what “sin along with cords of deceit, and wickedness as with cart ropes” means. They wanted to see God’s miraculous hand at work and his plans enacted, but they did not want to change their ways.

Second was the sin of perversion (Isaiah 5:20). Their values were upside down. Evil was called good and good evil. Darkness was substituted for light and light for darkness. Bitter was exchanged for sweet and sweet for bitter. These opposites indicate how twisted the thinking of God’s people had become. When the conscience is seared as with a hot iron it no longer works at all (1 Timothy 4:2).

Third was the sin of pride (Isaiah 5:21). “Wise in their own eyes” is a phrase consistently used in Scripture to indicate arrogance (Romans 1:22). They were clever

(shrewd) in their own sight. They thought they had become too smart for God.

Fourth was the sin of injustice (Isaiah 5:22, 23). Israel’s leaders would deny justice to the innocent and *acquit* (the same root of the word for justice) the guilty for a bribe. What made matters worse was that this skewed version of justice was driven by alcoholism. The *heroes* (mighty men) became experts at drinking wine and mixing drinks. It is difficult to render fair judgments when the mind is cloudy.

The Anger of the Lord*Isaiah 5:24-28*

The key phrases in this section are *the Lord’s anger burns against his people* and *his anger is not turned away*. The Hebrew word for *anger* is what the English word denotes. It means wrath and at times is translated as “nose” or “nostrils,” so it has some emotion in it. God’s anger is actually what gives passion to his justice. It keeps the world right side up. It is the black cloth underneath the diamond of God’s love. And while there is some truth to God hating the sin and yet loving the sinner, he always punishes sin in the sinner. He never punishes it abstractly.

Analogies and nations are used to describe God’s anger and to dispense God’s anger. At least four metaphors are used to describe God’s anger. His anger is fire licking up straw and dry grass. This caused any flower to be blown away like dust. His anger is a hand raised to strike people down. His anger is a mountain that is shaking. His anger is deadly, leaving dead bodies lying in the streets like trash.

God raised up nations to dispense his judgments. Wicked nations such as Assyria and Babylon (as well as many other nations mentioned in the book) were summoned by God to do his work. He would lift up their *banner* (signal or ensign). He whistled for them to come from the ends of the earth. These nations came like a well-oiled machine. They were fast, efficient, active, ready, battle-tested, and impressive. They also roared like a lion and growled like the sea (vv. 29, 30). The best way to avoid the burn is to turn.

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A FAMINE IN THE LAND

BY DAVID FAUST

Do you get cranky when you are hungry? When I go too long without eating, I become light-headed and my thinking grows foggy. My spirit is willing, but my flesh is weak.

A few years ago, the makers of Snickers candy bars produced a series of humorous commercials bearing the tagline, “You’re not you when you’re hungry.” The first of these TV spots, featuring aging actors Betty White and Abe Vigoda as inept athletes playing in a pick-up football game, was rated the number one Super Bowl ad for 2010 in a *USA Today* poll.

While the most nutritious remedy isn’t a Snickers bar, we’re truly not at our best when we’re hungry—and this is true in the realm of the soul. Spiritual hunger makes people do foolish things, but it also can motivate them to search for God.

In Jesus’ parable about the lost son, the prodigal left home and traveled to a distant country where he squandered his wealth in wild living. Then, “after he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need” (Luke 15:14). That’s what happens when we run away from our heavenly Father. The fruit of sin tastes sweet at first, but eventually a famine sets in.

The Desperation Behind the Debauchery

Do you ever feel like our society has lost its collective mind? Moral values are being turned upside down. In Isaiah’s time there were truth twisters who tried to “call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20). There was a famine in the land, but it was “not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11).

It makes me angry to see Scripture ignored and dangerous ideas normalized, but anger shouldn’t be my only response. I also grieve because the church has failed to disciple people well. Spiritual starvation leads to desperate measures. If you’re hungry enough, you’ll eat from a garbage can; and if you have never been taught God’s wholesome truth, you’ll search for sustenance wherever you can find it. Most of us would show extra grace to someone who is physically starving. How do we treat our neighbors who are spiritually famished?

Viewing others with compassion doesn’t change what is right and wrong, but it helps us understand the desperation behind the debauchery. Signs of spiritual malnutrition abound. Unfulfilled desires for healthy intimacy devolve into sexual immorality. Emotional and sexual abuse lead to anger and mistrust. Drug and alcohol addiction plague far too many families, claiming impressionable children among their victims. Individuals who have been mistreated by authority figures have trouble respecting leaders and working well with others. Is it surprising when folks who haven’t been taught the Bible act unbiblically?

People are starving for God. If you’re weary of all the crazy things happening in our culture, don’t despair. Yes, we must fight for truth, but our enemy is the devil, not those he has deceived. Yes, it’s heartbreaking to see biblical truth ignored and rejected. But the rumbling means people are hungry for God and their stomachs are growling. Our job isn’t to attack them. Our job is to feed them.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- What do human traffickers, serial killers, crooked judges, and absolute dictators have in common?
- How are we different from the people listed above?

Read Isaiah 5:18-23

1. The word woe was used not only by prophets in the Old Testament, but also by Jesus in the Gospels, written about in Jude, and recorded many times by John in Revelation. Woe means to have great distress, misery, or sorrow. It implies a curse. Here in Isaiah it's used four times as an exclamation in reference to people who were doing wrong. Discuss and analyze the kind of person the prophet is targeting. Do you personally know or have you heard of people like this in the news?
2. Talk about and list several practical ways to distinguish good from evil. Read Hebrews 5:14.
3. Do you consider yourself clever and wise, or know someone who does? Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-20. Discuss by what standards we should measure "wisdom."
4. Are there any "woes" where the Holy Spirit is convicting you personally? List them, praying and asking God to help you determine an action plan for overcoming your sin.

Read Isaiah 5:24, 25

5. Power and corruption may seem overwhelming in the present, but God's eventual judgment will prevail. Consider the imagery of straw, dry grass, and flowers in verse 24. What is the eventual fate of those who reject and have contempt for the Lord Almighty?
6. Note the collateral damage incurred by people who live under the authority of leaders who have no respect for God. Discuss how they are punished alongside their rulers.

Read Isaiah 5:26-28

7. Isaiah warned of the imminent demise of Israel and Judah, something the nation experienced within 100 years of the end of his ministry. In no uncertain terms, the prophet explained what would happen if the people did not return to God and renounce and repent of their destructive behavior. In these verses, Isaiah described the nations from the north that God would use as an instrument to invade and destroy the land and kidnap or annihilate the people living there. Do you see potential parallels to modern times or governments that turn away from God? Brainstorm what we can do and what our responsibility is as Christians to keep this from happening wherever we live.
8. Praise God there is hope! Read 2 Peter 1:10-14. How do you know if you are saved? Talk about what the apostle says are the basics of making your calling and election sure.

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Judgment is real and it is scary, but Lord, thank you for Jesus Christ! Father, praise you for your Word and for an ancient warning and exhortation that we can heed even today.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Worship through praise
and right living.**

STUDY: Isaiah, Part 1

THEME: Judgment

LESSON TEXT: Isaiah 1:10-20

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Romans 12:1, 2

EMPTY WORSHIP

BY MARK SCOTT

Henry Alford (1810–1871) wrote “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come.” But on this Thanksgiving Sunday, what if our worship is not thankful? What if it is empty? During Isaiah’s prophetic ministry Israel’s worship was anything but thankful. The lack of inward righteousness made a mockery of Israel’s external worship of the Lord. This theme began the prophecy of Isaiah. Right out of the gate this gospel prophet brought God’s case against Israel for their hypocritical worship. Heaven and earth were called to witness how disobedient Israel had become (vv. 2-4). Israel had itself to blame for why its land was in desolation (vv. 5-9).

Inward Corruption Derails Outward Ritual*Isaiah 1:10-15*

One of the outstanding characteristics of Hebrew poetry (and prophecy too) is parallelism. This is where one line is parallel to another line in thought and meter. Parallelism aids with variety in form yet often intensifies the thought being made. In our text today there are several examples (vv. 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 18, 18-20). The *word (dabar)* of the Lord and the *instruction (torah)* of God came to the leaders and people of Israel who figuratively are called Sodom and Gomorrah—not complimentary.

Isaiah called out God’s people for their empty worship. God was totally frustrated by the motions of worship without the proper motives for worship. No amount of “form” can atone for the lack of genuine faith. First was the issue of sacrifices. God had commanded sacrifices, burnt offerings, the fat of fattened animals, the blood of bulls and lambs and goats, and incense (Leviticus 1-7). But God basically said, “Enough already.” When worship is more the state of the art than the state of the heart God takes no *pleasure* (delight) in it. Worship amounted to nothing more than trampling God’s courts. The offerings were *meaningless* (empty) and the incense was *detestable* (disgusting or abominable).

Second was the issue of festivals. God’s people have always been “liturgical animals” (James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*). If we are not given patterns or traditions, we will create them. God had given Israel special celebrations that coincided with the calendar. Sabbaths, New Moon Feasts, and special convocations were all part of Israel’s religious memory (Numbers 28:11-14; Leviticus 16:31; 23:3, 4-7, 15-21, 24, 26, 27, 34, 39). These appointed festivals were not bad in and of themselves. But God said, “I hate them with all my being.” They became a *burden* (cumbersome or trouble), and God was weary of *bearing* (lift up as in forgiving

someone) them. Even the prayers that accompanied these festivals (1 Kings 8:22; Lamentations 1:17) wearied God. He said that he would shut his eyes and not listen to them. Empty worship does not trick God. The final accusation was, “Your hands are full of blood!” But the blood stains were not just external. They were worse. They were internal.

Inward Cleansing Drives Outward Behavior*Isaiah 1:16-20*

Acceptable worship sometimes has nothing to do with ceremony or liturgy. Often it has to do with lifestyle and behavior (Romans 12:1, 2). God called his people to an internal cleansing that would show up in moral excellence and proper behavior toward others. This is worship outside of the worship service.

Nine imperatives precede one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible on forgiveness (Isaiah 1:18). The first two of those imperatives parallel that beautiful verse. *Wash* (bathe) and *make yourselves clean* (pure). This was an image that Israel understood (Exodus 30:17-21), to say nothing of the *mikveh*, a ritual cleansing tub or cistern capable of holding 200 gallons of water.

Worship that was not empty was described in the other seven imperatives. *Take* (remove or abolish) evil deeds away, *stop* doing wrong, *learn* to do right, *seek* justice, *defend* the oppressed, *take up* the cause of the fatherless, and *plead* the case of the widow were the others. The latter half of these dealt with what might be called biblical justice concerns. Acceptable worship consisted of taking good care of others.

Verse 18 is an imperative, an invitation, and a court order all rolled into one. God was not unwilling to help Israel with moving their worship from empty to acceptable. But it had to start with the heart. Let us *settle* (reason, decide) the matter. Their sins could be like scarlet and crimson, but they could be like snow and wool if the people became willing and *obedient* (*shema*—the word for hear and heed) and would not resist and rebel. Good things come to those who obey God and worship in spirit and truth (John 4:16-26). Henry Alford would remind us, “Gather Thou Thy people in, Free from sorrow, free from sin; There, forever purified, In Thy presence to abide.”

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THE OTHER 167 HOURS

BY DAVID FAUST

If you only eat one meal a week, your body will be malnourished. If you are paid to do a full-time job, your boss won't be pleased if you only show up to work one hour a week. An NFL football player can't skip practice all week and expect to be in the starting lineup on Sunday afternoon.

Christians gather for an hour or two on Sunday, but there are 168 hours in a week. The other 167 hours matter just as much as the time we spend together at church. In Isaiah's day, God rebuked his people for bringing pointless sacrifices, "meaningless offerings," and perfunctory prayers (Isaiah 1:10-15). They had reduced worship to a series of empty rituals. Their faith in God lacked sincerity and depth, and their treatment of others lacked compassion and justice.

They should have been reading their guidebook for worship, the book of Psalms. It's appropriate that the Hebrews' book of praise occupies the physical center of the Bible and contains more chapters and verses than any other biblical book, for worship should be at the center of our lives. The first Psalm opens with a reminder that worship is a lifestyle, not a ritual. "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night" (Psalm 1:1, 2). The goal is to stay in touch with God "day and night," all 168 hours of the week.

At the other end of the book, Psalm 150 addresses the where, why, how, and who of worship. It starts with the positive exhortation, "Praise the Lord" (Psalm 150:1), for only the true God deserves our praise.

Worship—Where? "Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens" (v. 1). Anywhere we go can be a sanctuary, a holy place filled with a touch of Heaven itself.

Worship—Why? Because of who God is and what he has done. "Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness" (v. 2). In worship we acknowledge God's mighty deeds and his flawless character.

Worship—How? With every tool at our disposal! Psalm 150 encourages praising God with various musical instruments: trumpet, harp, lyre, timbrel, strings, pipe, and cymbals (vv. 3-5). The point isn't merely to make a lot of noise. The goal is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Praise in our hearts must find outward expression in our words and deeds. Worship isn't merely a ritual, it's a lifestyle. Just as breathing is natural to a living body, worship flows continually from a soul that's alive in Christ. Twenty-four hours a day we breathe in God's grace and exhale his praise while we work, rest, eat, travel, play, study, and pray.

Worship—Who? "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord" (v. 6).

When we praise God during the other 167 hours of the week, church attendance won't be a burden but a blessing. Gathering with God's people on Sunday becomes a time to encourage one another, commune with the Lord, and refuel our souls so we can serve him effectively the rest of the week.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- Have you ever promised God you would stop doing a particular sin only to find yourself doing it again?
- If you've ever found yourself in this vicious cycle, what did you do to try to escape it?

Read Isaiah 1:10-14

1. Right out of the gate, Isaiah charged the people of God with being a rebellious nation. Why do you think he compared the people to Sodom and Gomorrah, the most detestable cities of the ancient world who were destroyed in a day by fire and brimstone for their complete lack of righteousness? In verse 10, discuss what the prophet gave as the solution to their problem.
2. Empty promises and sacrifices are just that: empty. There is nothing behind them of substance or sincerity. The people were required to make sacrifices for their sin; the cost was the blood of animals. The "Oops, sorry, God!" method of confession clearly didn't work because God took notice and harshly rebuked them through Isaiah. Talk about what the text describes as "meaningless offerings" and "worthless assemblies" and why God hates them so much.

Read Isaiah 1:15-17

3. What are the costs of disobedience and empty worship? List them. Discuss what it takes to turn away from this pattern.
4. While Isaiah wrote long ago about his vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem, there are many applications we can glean today. How much does selfishness come into play in continuing sin cycles? Read verse 17 and talk about how helping other people less fortunate and in worse situations helps you.

Read Isaiah 1:18-20

5. Confession is simply agreeing with God and admitting that you're guilty. God's people had this part down pat. But as soon as they walked away from worship, there was no godly repentance, no turning away from sin or change whatsoever. What is the fate of all those who rebel? Do you think they will literally die by a sword? Discuss what you think this means for believers today. (Consider that Ephesians 6:17 says the sword of the Spirit is the word of God.)
6. Are there places in your life right now where you are resisting God? Discuss what makes it so hard to be willing and obedient and what excuses people make to justify rebelling and resisting.
7. The key to ending our repeated cycles of sin comes in the refreshing words of Paul in Romans 12:1, 2. Spend some time here and craft a plan of attack to combat sin for your upcoming week.

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Lord, convict us of empty promises, confession, and worship. Let us heartily worship you in praise and right living as we turn away from our sin. Amen.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Turn to a true fast of selfless service.**

STUDY: Isaiah, Part 1

THEME: Judgment

LESSON TEXT: Isaiah 58:1-10

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 6:16-18; James 1:27

FALSE FASTING

BY MARK SCOTT

Perhaps a good way to usher in Christmas this year (today is what is called the first Sunday of Advent) would be with fasting—a change of pace from the wild office party. In the incarnation of Jesus, the widow Anna set a good example of worshiping the Lord in the temple, “fasting,” and waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36-38). At the very least the coming of God to the world demands the contrition of humankind to receive him. Isaiah 57:15 reminds us that God dwells in the high and holy place but also “with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.” This spirit is best captured by genuine humility and lowly fasting.

Hypocritical Fasting*Isaiah 58:1-5*

The real servant of Yahweh (not Cyrus or the nation of Israel) would come and die a vicarious death (Isaiah 52, 53). This would establish peace and bring the success of Yahweh’s word (Isaiah 54, 55). This in turn would lead to the salvation of the nations (Isaiah 56). Therefore Israel should put away all idolatry (Isaiah 57) and give themselves in humility to Yahweh (Isaiah 58).

But Israel’s eagerness to know and serve God was only skin deep. They were still just going through the forms of religion. They were more into spiritual theatrics so that God would notice them. Isaiah had to call them out for their hypocrisy. He would raise his voice like a *trumpet* (ram’s horn). He would *declare* (make known) their *rebellion* (transgression).

On the surface Israel seemed eager to follow God’s ways. They pretended to do what was right and tried to look as if they were not forsaking the commands of God. They even asked for *just decisions* (righteous judgments). For all intents and purposes they seemed like they wanted God to come near. Israel looked like they wanted God to notice their “righteousness.” In reality all their religious activities gave God a first-class yawn. He was not impressed with their pretended piety.

Israel’s seeming eagerness to follow God was really an excuse for doing as they pleased. Originally the only day of fasting in Israel’s history was perhaps the Day of Atonement in the fall (Leviticus 16:29, 31). On that day Israel was to “humble” (afflict) themselves, which might imply fasting. This evidently got practiced later in a more regular manner (Zechariah 7:3, 5; 8:19). But even fasting on special days was not enough to cause God to overlook the way they exploited their workers (Deuteronomy 24:14, 15; James 5:1-6) and gave themselves to quarreling and strife. To make matters worse they

became violent, striking each other with wicked fists. They thought that God would pay special attention to them if they looked contrite and lay in sackcloth and ashes. But God cannot be fooled. Isaiah’s question is convicting: “Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?”

Authentic Fasting*Isaiah 58:6-10*

In contrast to Israel’s hypocritical fasting, through Isaiah God redefined fasting for his people. He marked out for them a type of fasting that went all the way to the bone in authenticity. It has within it the emphasis of Matthew 6:1, 16-18. Abstaining from food to have more time to pray and seek God’s will is noble. But inner righteousness joined with the spirit of authentic fasting will show up in outer acts of justice.

Authentic fasting is made known through enabling freedom and acts of liberation (Isaiah 58:6). God’s people should work to *loose* (open) the chains of *injustice* (wickedness). Where there are unjust *cords of a yoke* (bars restricting the oppressed—cf. verse 10 where we read *satisfy the needs of the oppressed*) believers should act to bring God’s mercy (Isaiah 42:1-4). Notice how close to this calling is the Messiah’s mission (Luke 4:18, 19).

Authentic fasting is made known through proactive benevolence (Isaiah 58:7). *Sharing* (dividing or breaking) food with the hungry—later in verse 10 it says *spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry*, providing the *poor wanderer* (homeless) with shelter, clothing the naked, and not turning away your own *flesh and blood* (fellow Israelite)—were all parts of authentic fasting (cf. Matthew 25:31-46; James 1:27).

When authentic fasting is embraced God’s people can experience God’s genuine healing. No less than six things are promised when false fasting is jettisoned. Light will break forth like the dawn (maybe similar to creation), healing will appear, righteousness will go before you (be your vanguard), the glory of the Lord will follow them (even as it led them in the wilderness), prayers will be answered, and the night will become like the noonday (as in the Holy City, Revelation 22:5). Before the feasting of Christmas, give yourselves to authentic fasting.

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SURPRISING DELIGHTS

BY DAVID FAUST

I grew up on a farm in Ohio with two brothers and no sisters. My wife, Candy, grew up near New York City with three sisters and no brothers. We started dating and quickly discovered cultural differences we needed to overcome.

I introduced Candy to my family's fields of corn and soybeans, and I gave her a tour of our milking parlor and the chicken house. When we came to the hog barn, she held her nose and muttered, "Oooh, what's that smell?" (My dad smiled and quipped, "Smells like money to me!")

On the flipside, when I visited her family in New York, Candy introduced me to some new cultural sensations of my own. Busses spewed out noxious fumes and subway stations emitted an unpleasant stench. Holding my nose, I muttered sarcastically, "Oooh, what's that smell?"

Here's a little life lesson I have learned along the way: No matter where you live, something stinks.

And here's a more important lesson: If you look for it, no matter where you live, you can find something that smells good, too.

Over time, Candy came to understand and enjoy the blessings of country life, like the fragrance of new-mown hay and the inviting aroma of my mom's homemade blackberry pie cooling on the kitchen counter. And I learned to appreciate the delicious flavor of a New York bagel, and to savor the taste of pizza made by hand in a *ristorante* run for years by the same Italian family.

The Aroma of Christ

Have you ever learned to like something you never thought you would enjoy? I wonder: Were Isaiah's

readers surprised by the suggestion that it can be delightful to obey God? Isaiah insisted, "If you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord" (Isaiah 58:13, 14).

The Lord intended for the Sabbath to be a delight—a day to rest, worship, and recalibrate body and soul—but many of his people considered Sabbath laws a burden. Perhaps they reasoned, "Sabbath-keeping makes no financial sense. We'll lose money if we stop working our fields and shut down our businesses one-seventh of the week." And fasting felt extra burdensome. So instead of serving the Lord with cheerful hearts, the people became self-centered, mean-spirited, and malicious. In the process, they missed the joys of faithful obedience.

God's "commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). There are unexpected joys to be found in doing the right things for the right reasons. Reach out in kindness to someone you previously overlooked, and you might discover a new friend. Go to church even when you feel like staying away, and you might end up strangely refreshed. Open the Bible though you aren't particularly in the mood to study, and in the process, you might unearth a scriptural gem.

God wants us "to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere" (2 Corinthians 2:14). Followers of Christ ought to be a breath of fresh air. When we serve God with cheerful hearts and pursue justice for others, we'll experience some surprising delights, and a tense and divided world will catch a pleasant whiff of God's amazing grace.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Use one or both of these questions to introduce the lesson.

- Have you ever thought you were doing an important project according to a particular format, only to find out you were doing it completely wrong? How did it make you feel?
- Think of a time when someone seemed eager to hear your counsel. Maybe there was a sin issue and they completely agreed with everything you offered, only to go through the motions of your suggestions yet still fail. (Has this ever been you?) In what ways does it frustrate you when people do this?

Read Isaiah 58:1-3a

1. Through the warning words of Isaiah, God made known to everyone in Judah that they were rebelling against him. List clues from this passage that indicate the ways the people had failed to do what was right.
2. Based on this section of the lesson text, what should have been the purpose of their fasting?
3. The phrase *seem eager* appears twice in verse 2. In other translations, the word *delight* is used. What did the people of Judah seem eager or delight to get from God? In context of the Scriptures, discuss if they seemed willing to do what God asked of them. Were they only going through the motions to get them?

Read Isaiah 58:3b-5

4. Here Isaiah is calling out the poor behavior of Judah and Jerusalem during their days of required fasting. Clearly, God is not interested in the rote ritual of wearing sackcloth and sitting in ashes; nor is it just about abstaining from food. List the negative effects their fasts had on one another and discuss why God wasn't honored by them.
5. Fasting is prevalent throughout the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. Prophets, judges, kings, and the people fasted for many reasons. Jesus went without food for 40 days before he entered public ministry. Read Matthew 6:16-18. Talk about the appropriate demeanor for times of fasting.

Read Isaiah 58:6-10

6. After reading the Isaiah passage, also read James 1:27. On one side of a sheet of paper, list the components of God's chosen fast. On the other side, list local, state, or international agencies that advocate for each. Talk about which one stirs your heart and where you might be prompted to selflessly serve.
7. Is your religion merely a ritual or is it an expression of a real relationship with God? Discuss how we can miss out on intimacy with the Lord and true heart change when we are simply "play-acting" in church.
8. Now list the ways God's Word tells us we will prosper when we serve others in the "true fast." Which of these would be the greatest benefit to you?

Conclude your group time with prayer, using the following as a guide. Lord, show us what a life of selfless service should truly look like. Please help us to discern when we are just playing at church or truly and honestly being the church. Amen.

For Next Week: This week's lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional "1717: Your Word Is Truth" studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.