



Mid-Week Bible Study: Hard Questions about Pain & Suffering

Week 2: I want to be useful during suffering

Text: Isaiah 58:3-11

INTRODUCTION

Some of the most popular stories in books or movies revolve around great injustices or crimes. Everyone loves the story where all the wrongs are made right and those who were powerless come out on top in the end.

God cares how we treat those who face injustice. Our faith is clearly on display when it comes to how we respond to the injustice we see right before our eyes.

Setting: Isaiah prophesied primarily to the Southern Kingdom of Judah for approximately four decades (740-700 BC). So, his ministry overlapped the fall of the Northern tribes to Assyria in 722 BC. Much of his preaching warned Judah to avoid the sins of the Northern Kingdom. He called the people back to God, challenging them to stop playing religious games and to protect the mistreated.

In This text the people at wrestling so h the misunderstanding about what God was and was not doing among the people. Some believe that they were faithfully worshiping God but not being appropriately rewarded for their efforts.

In response God instructed the prophet Isaiah to remind these religious Israelites that a special divine blessing does for flower from God to the people who do not desire to please God in every area of their lives.

- The wellbeing the community is connected to the righteous behavior of each individual person within that same community.

This text is designed to provide correction to the who have misunderstood God's just ways of dealing with them.

ISAIAH 58:6-7

Verse 3: the people asked the question why has God not answered our prayers?

- They had been fasting & praying on a regular basis, but God has not seemingly responded to their deeds.
- They went to temple/Church, and worshipped God but it appeared that God had not noticed their sacrifice.

Here God through the prophet makes it abundantly clear that their church acts did not equate to their immoral practices.

- The prophet told them that your fasting has been ineffective, but fasting is not just about getting God's attention, but it's designed to humble the one fasting this allowing them to draw closer to God.
- instead while they were fasting, they still abused and oppressed others around them.
 - America refuses to pay people a livable wage
 - America refuses to provide universal health care even in times of crisis
 - America still refuses to treat all of us as equals because we have been made in the image of God.
- **Read Proverbs 14:31; Proverbs 22:16**

Verse 4: along with taking advantage the people also had issues to violence and drama.

- During the time of our text there were actually moments when the people even fought each other on how to worship.
 - Sounds familiar. The church for years has engaged in what I called worship wars...
 - praise & worship music vs traditional hymns and Athens.
 - Pulpit chairs and podiums vs a table and a stage
 - Screens vs no screens.
 - True Worship does not create division or drive people apart. Instead it unifies us in a bind of love and authentic fellowship.
 - **Read 1st Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:1-3**

Verse 4b: Isaiah informs the people that God expects better of them. And God expects better of us.

- Beloved there see times that God has to shake things up to get our attention.
- He told them that their current worship & practice would continue to result in nothing.
- He was calling them to repent and seek to be revived in their walk & worship.
 - When Sin is present God is under no obligation to hear it respond to our request or complaints.
 - Attractive external worship gets us nothing but sorrow and suffering.
 - God is looking for deep transcendent worship and lifestyle change.
 - **Read 2nd Chronicles 7:14**

Verse 5: To be crystal clear of what God expected, God spoke to Isaiah and told them that God's idea of fasting looked completely different than anything that the residents of Judah had been engaged in.

- God demanded trust personal sacrifice. - Read Luke 9:23 (deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.)
- God expected humility - Verse 5b "bow our head like a reed"
 - This is the image of a reed that is being bent by the weather.
- God called them to express sorrow for their sins. - verse 5c
 - Sackcloth and ashes were known as traditional signs of mourning.
 - **Read 1st John 1:9** (if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just.)

ISAIAH 58:6-7

The Prophet here continues to inform them of the kind of fast God is looking for from them.

- It's not meaningless rituals but through authentic relationships.
 - **Read Amos 5:21-24 MSG**
- This is critical because here God is telling them and us that church going and activities that do not lead to real transformation and tangible impact means nothing to him.
- Therefore, we will continue to suffer until God's people begin to express their love for God in how we treat each other especially in matters of justice and equity.
- **Question: where do you see injustice and oppression in today's culture?**

Verse 6: God offered some practical actions for creating what Dr MLK JR called a beloved community. In other words, being a just community.

- Helping others break the chains of injustice. *KJV called injustice wickedness = unfair treatment*
- Untie the ropes of the yoke = *slavery or oppression.*
 - This is critical because if how is it that we as a nation and world are praying for health and healing but still refuse to remove the exotic barriers that prevent a large majority of persons from getting quality health care.
 - We want God to give us mercy and grace, yet our prisons are filled with men and women that we refused to pardon and give a second chance.

- We have those who are more afraid of the economy than this virus yet still price gouge and take economic advantage of others.

It's hypocritical to ask God for the thing that we could provide others but refuse to.

- **Read Isaiah 61-1:3.**

Verse 7: The people also needed to not just defend weak and oppressed. But he expects us to also have a personal hand in meeting those needs. One cannot meet a need that they don't see, or refuse acknowledge.

- Preaching the need for redemption to a person hungry and worried about paying their rent is a daunting task. But when the church meets their needs, they are more apt to receive our message of Christ!

In verse 7 they were given two ways to be the hands of feet of God.

- Share your bread with the hungry
- Provide shelter to the homeless
- Clothe the naked
- Don't ignore your own flesh and blood

ISAIAH 58:8-11

In these last few verses, the Prophet Isaiah informs the people that their recovery will come quickly when God begins to see their righteous behavior.

Verse 8: Since God cares about justice and stopping oppression as God's ambassadors we should as well.

The text says that when we obey God their light will appear like the dawn.

- Light is always symbolic of God's presence. **Read John 8:12 & 1st John 1:7.**

The text says that they will experience a spiritual recovery.

- Our recovery is an act of God's healing not just physical but by all forgiving and Restoring.

Verse 9 & 10: Here God promises that their actions will allow them to once again experience God's presence and hear God's voice.

- Yet this only happens when we genuinely seek God out.
 - **Read Deuteronomy 4:29**

The people will also be allowed in God's presence again when they accept responsibility, submit to God without pointing fingers as to who is at fault.

- **Read James 4:11-12.**

Verse 11: Currently, our life feels like the parched land that the text describes. Rising death and infection rates.

But regardless of the circumstances, God told them, and he tells us that we can count on God to supply our needs and strengthen our bones.

- The more they served and ministered to others the more God would look out for their interests.

For he promised to make us like a spring that never dries up all because our source, that being God never dries up.

CONCLUSION:

We are all called do our part even in difficult times. How don't do that:

- **Check your heart**
- **Check you surrounding**
- **Check your opportunity**