

Waging Love



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 55:1–7; Isa. 55:6–13; Isa. 58:1–12; Isa. 58:13, 14.*

Memory Text: “If you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday” (*Isaiah 58:10, NKJV*).

A Jewish cantor (worship leader) and his wife who lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, began receiving threatening and obscene phone calls. They discovered the calls came from a leader of an American hate group, the Ku Klux Klan. Knowing his identity, they could have turned him in to the police. But they decided on a more radical approach. When they learned that he was crippled, they showed up at his door with dinner! He was utterly flabbergasted. His hatred melted before their love. The couple kept visiting him, and the friendship grew. He even thought of becoming Jewish!

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry . . . ?” (*Isa. 58:6, 7, NRSV*). Ironically, the couple in Lincoln kept such a fast by sharing their feast with a hungry *oppressor*, thereby setting him free from his own bonds of unjust prejudice!

Let's learn more about this important spiritual principle as depicted by the prophet Isaiah.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 13.

Buy Something Free? (*Isa. 55:1–7*)

Read this text: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” (*Isa. 55:1, NRSV*). What contradiction do you see there?

Suppose you took food and stood on the street in a big city and announced to the hungry and homeless there: “You who have no money, come, buy and eat!” (*NIV*). But how can they buy if they have no money?

However, if you add the words, as Isaiah did: “without money and without price” (*Isa. 55:1, NRSV*), the point becomes clearer. Isaiah appeals to people to accept forgiveness (*Isa. 55:7*) freely. Yet, the word “buy” emphasizes that what God offers people to meet their needs and desires is valuable; so, receiving it requires a transaction (transfer of something of worth). God freely offers forgiveness within the framework of a restored covenant relation with His people, but not because it was free for Him: He bought it at the terrible, blood-drenched price of His own Servant. Though free, it came at an astonishing cost to Himself.

What was the price for our salvation? (*See 1 Pet. 1:18, 19.*)

How does Isaiah’s approach to salvation compare with that of the New Testament? (*Eph. 2:8, 9.*)

Isaiah encapsulates the gospel in the Old Testament, and it is the same as the gospel in the New Testament. There was no “old-covenant” salvation by works, to be superseded by “new-covenant” salvation by grace. Ever since God’s promise of a Deliverer to Adam and Eve (*Gen. 3:15*), there has been only one way to salvation: by grace through faith (*Eph. 2:8*); “the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom. 6:23, NRSV*). From the ancient Gilgamesh, who did heroic exploits in a vain search for eternal life, to modern actors who believe in reincarnation, people have tried all kinds of different routes to salvation, but all are fruitless. This is why they need to know about Jesus and what He has accomplished for them at the cross.

Salvation is free in that there’s nothing we can do to earn it. Our works can never be good enough to save us. Yet, at the same time, it can cost us everything. What does that mean? (*See, for instance, Matt. 10:39, Luke 9:23, Luke 14:26, Phil. 3:8.*)

High Thoughts and Ways *(Isa. 55:6–13)*

Why does God say His thoughts and ways are higher than ours, “as the heavens are higher than the earth” (*Isa. 55:8, 9, NRSV*)? What do you think that means?

There’s no question that the God who created a universe in which even some of the simplest things contain mysteries that our minds cannot begin to fathom is a God whose ways are beyond what we can ever begin to fully grasp. This knowledge of His infinite superiority should, therefore, make it easier for us to humbly receive His help. (*See Isa. 57:15.*)

Read Isaiah 55:6–9. What is the context in which the Lord talks about how His ways and thoughts are higher than what we can imagine? What is He saying He does that is so hard for us to grasp?

Of all the great mysteries of the universe, no doubt the greatest one of all is the plan of salvation, a mystery we can only barely begin to understand. (*See Eph. 6:19.*) That the Creator of the universe would stoop to clothe Himself in humanity, live a life of toil and suffering, only then to die in our behalf, a sacrifice for sin, all in order that He could pardon us and show mercy to us is a truth that will thrill the hearts of God’s created beings for all the ages of eternity.

“The theme of redemption is one that angels desire to look into; it will be the science and the song of the redeemed throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity. Is it not worthy of careful thought and study now? . . .

“The subject is inexhaustible. The study of the incarnation of Christ, His atoning sacrifice, and mediatorial work will employ the mind of the diligent student as long as time shall last; and looking to heaven with its unnumbered years, he will exclaim, ‘Great is the mystery of godliness.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 360.

Look at the bad things you have done: the people whom you have hurt, the unkind words you have spoken, the ways in which you have disappointed others, not to mention yourself. And yet, through Jesus, you can be forgiven for all these things and stand, right now, perfect and righteous in the sight of God. If that isn’t a mystery, what is?

Fast Friends *(Isa. 58:1–8)*

What is the “fast” referred to in Isaiah 58:3?

This must be the fast of the Day of Atonement, the only fast commanded by God (*Lev. 16:29, 31; Lev. 23:27–32*). This is confirmed in Isaiah 58:3 by the parallel expression “humble ourselves” (*NRSV*), which follows the terminology of Leviticus. Humbling or afflicting oneself referred to various forms of self-denial, including fasting (*compare Ps. 35:13; Dan. 10:2, 3, 12*).

The Day of Atonement setting explains God’s command to “Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” (*Isa. 58:1, NRSV*). This kind of ram’s horn trumpet, called a shofar, was to be blown as a memorial or reminder 10 days before the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 23:24*). Furthermore, every fiftieth year, on the Day of Atonement, it was to announce the beginning of the jubilee year of freedom (*Lev. 25:9, 10; compare Isa. 27:13*).

Read Isaiah 58:3–7. What is the Lord complaining to them about? What was wrong with their “fast”?

It seems the people were expecting the Lord to congratulate them for their “piety.” Of course, they had it all backward. Practicing self-denial on the Day of Atonement was to express their gratitude and loyalty to Him on the day the high priest went before God to cleanse the sanctuary and thereby cleanse them from sins for which they had already been forgiven (*Leviticus 16, compare Leviticus 4*). Their acts should have been done in thankfulness and gratitude to the God who saved them in the day of judgment, not in order to get God’s approval for their “piety” and “devotion.” After all, it was the sins of the people that had defiled God’s sanctuary. It had to be cleansed with blood that was shed because of *what they had done*.

One of the crucial lessons that comes from these texts points to the difference between being merely religious and truly being a follower of Christ. How do we see the difference there? How do we, as individuals, face the same danger as the individuals presented here, which is believing that our religious rituals somehow show we are really following the Lord as He asks us to?

Fast Fight *(Isa. 58:1–12)*

Ten days after trumpet blasts have reminded God's people that the Lord is acclaimed as their King on the very Day of Atonement when their humility through self-denial is to affirm their loyalty to Him as King, the prophet lifts up his voice like a trumpet to declare that they are rebelling against Him (*Isa. 58:1*).

Read through Isaiah 58:6–12. What are acts that God considers true acts of self-denial? After all, what's harder: to skip a few meals or to use your own time and money to feed the homeless in your town? What is the principle to be seen behind these acts? How do these acts comprise true religion?

Anyone can be religious; anyone can go through religious rituals, even the right rituals, at the right time, with all the right formulas. But that alone is not what the Lord wants. Look at the life of Jesus. However faithful He was to the religious rituals of His time, the Gospel writers focused so much more on His acts of mercy, healing, feeding, and forgiveness to those in need than on His faithfulness to ritual.

The Lord seeks a church, a people, who will preach truth to the world. But what will better attract people to the truth as it is in Jesus: strict adherence to dietary laws or a willingness to help the hungry? Strict rest on the Sabbath or a willingness to spend your own time and energy helping those who are in need?

Read Matthew 25:40 and James 1:27. What do they tell us?

Look at the blessings in Isaiah 58 that God says will come to those who seek to minister to the less fortunate. What do you think the Lord is saying to us here? Are these promises of supernatural intervention in our lives if we do these things? Or, perhaps, is He telling us of the natural blessing we receive by giving of ourselves to others as opposed to being selfish, greedy, and self-absorbed? Explain your answer.

A Time for Us *(Isa. 58:13, 14)*

Why does Isaiah discuss the Sabbath in Isaiah 58:13, 14? What connection does this have with the Day of Atonement setting of the earlier verses?

The yearly Day of Atonement *was* a sabbath day. This special ceremonial sabbath was like the weekly Sabbath in that all work of any kind was prohibited (*Lev. 23:27–32*). Therefore, as recognized by early Seventh-day Adventists, the rule that the Day of Atonement period of rest lasted from evening to evening (*Lev. 23:32*) informs us that the same must be true of the weekly Sabbath. Similarly, although the primary context of Isaiah 58:13, 14 is the ceremonial Day of Atonement Sabbath, its message also applies to the weekly Sabbath.

Read Isaiah 58:13. What kind of day is the Sabbath supposed to be? How can we make our Sabbath experience like the one depicted here? Also, when you think about what the Sabbath represents, why should it be the kind of day described in this text?

Isaiah 58 deals with three main themes: self-denial, social kindness, and the Sabbath.

What are the connections between them?

First, all three involve concentration upon God, His priorities, and recognition of our dependence upon Him. Second, by doing all three, humans pursue holiness by emulating God (*see Lev. 19:2*), who, in the form of Christ, humbled Himself (*Phil. 2:8*), who demonstrates self-sacrificing kindness (*John 3:16*), and who ceased from labor on the Sabbath at the end of the Creation week (*Gen. 2:2, 3; Exod. 20:11*).

Look at these other ties between the themes of self-denial, social kindness, and the Sabbath as depicted in Isaiah 58: Sabbath freedom from weekly toil is kind to people because it lets them be refreshed (*Exod. 23:12, Mark 2:27*); Jesus showed that kind acts are appropriate on the Sabbath (*Mark 3:1–5, John 5:1–17*); true Sabbath keeping brings joy (*Isa. 58:14*), as does helping others (*Isa. 58:10, 11*). What must change in your own life in order to experience these blessings yourself?

Further Thought: “No one can practice real benevolence without self-denial. Only by a life of simplicity, self-denial, and close economy, is it possible for us to accomplish the work appointed us as Christ’s representatives. Pride and worldly ambition must be put out of our hearts. In all our work, the principle of unselfishness revealed in Christ’s life is to be carried out. Upon the walls of our homes, the pictures, the furnishings, we are to read, ‘Bring the poor that are cast out to thy house.’ On our wardrobes we are to see written, as with the finger of God, ‘Clothe the naked.’ In the dining room, on the table laden with abundant food, we should see traced, ‘Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry?’ Isaiah 58:7.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 206.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Look at the question Isaiah asked the people of his time: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” (*Isa. 55:2, NRSV*). Ask yourself, in what ways, if any, are we doing the same thing, laboring for that which does not satisfy? Why is it so easy to fall into that very trap?
- 2 If self-denial, social kindness, and the Sabbath were important on the Day of Atonement in Isaiah’s day, are they just as important in the end-time day of atonement (*Dan. 8:14*), during which God’s jubilee trumpet will signal ultimate freedom at the second coming of Christ (*1 Cor. 15:52; compare Lev. 25:9, 10*)? Explain your answer.
- 3 In class, open up a discussion on the question of Sabbath keeping. What do you think Isaiah means when he says we should turn away from doing our own pleasure on the Sabbath, and yet, at the same time, call it a delight (*Isa. 58:13*)? How can we do both? Keep in mind the context of the complete text of Isaiah 58.

Summary: In Isaiah 55 and 58, the prophet appeals to his people to give up their thoughts and ways and return to God, whose ideal for their happiness is so much higher than their own. He mercifully pardons and then insists that the pardoned be merciful, in harmony with the spirit of the Day of Atonement and the Sabbath, because the gift of God’s forgiveness, if it is truly received, transforms the heart.