

Lesson 28
Isaiah 58:1 – 59:21
Promises and Punishments

Memory verse: “If we claim to have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.” (1 John 1:6 NIV)

Isaiah in chapter 58 presented the folly of simply going through a system of worship without changing one's attitudes and conduct, especially in relationships (1:10-20; cf. Zech. 1; Matt. 5—7). In chapter 1, God threatened His people with destruction if they did not change. Here He promised them blessing if they did change. The difference is due to His provision of the Servant. God appealed to redeemed people to change.

Many of the Israelites were relying on their practice of the Mosaic rites to satisfy God. The true meaning of the rites had not affected their lives. Their practices involved worship, fasting and observation of the Sabbath. They thought that fasting is repentance. But repentance is not for the purpose of getting God to do anything; it is an expression of the conviction that my ways are wrong and God's ways are right, whether he does anything for me or not. In this chapter, it exposes the superficial attitude of many of God's people with strong irony. Here, Isaiah depicted true religion to his people. The warning of superficial worship still holds for believers today.

Yet, Chapter 59, begins with God's people wondering why God did not seem to rescue them from their trials. They wondered if perhaps God had diminished in strength – if His hand had become shortened. Isaiah the prophet assures them that this is not the case.

This touches on one of the greatest problems in practical theology: how can there be a God of love and all power when there is human suffering? If we loved someone and had the power to end their suffering, wouldn't we do it? Isaiah addresses those who wondered if God wasn't all powerful, and that is why their suffering continues.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a remarkably wide-selling book titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. It sold more than a half a million copies before going to paperback and was on the New York Times best-seller list for a whole year. The whole point of his book is to say God is all loving but not all powerful, that God is good, but not sovereign. So, when bad things happen to good people, it is because events are out of God's control. Kushner advises his readers to “learn to love [God] and forgive him despite his limitations.” This certainly is not the God of the Bible, because the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save. Isaiah simply says otherwise “Surely not....”

The problem isn't with God's power, His knowledge, or His interest. The problem is with our iniquities. Sin has separated you from your God. How easy it is for us to blame our problems on everything except our iniquities! We will even blame God before seeing that the problem is with us! We will deny who God is before seeing that the problem is with us!

Chapter 59 continues with Isaiah's accusations against God's people. There was a great deal of injustice in the land, with the rich exploiting the poor and the rulers using their authority only to make themselves rich (see 1:17–23; 3:13–15; 5:8–30). The people lifted their hands to worship God, but their hands were stained with blood (1:15, 21).

Yet, God promises that He would deliver His people from the sin that plagued them as redeemed people! God's judgment on His people was a foreshadowing of that final day of the Lord when all the nations will be judged. When it is ended, then “the Redeemer shall come to Zion” (Isa. 59:20), and the glorious kingdom will be established. Israel will be not only God's chosen people but God's cleansed people, and the glory of the Lord will radiate from Mount Zion. The glory of the Lord in the promised kingdom is the theme of the closing chapters of Isaiah. While we are waiting and praying, “Thy kingdom come,” perhaps we should also be interceding and intervening. We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13–16), and God expects us to make a difference.

Scripture reading: Isaiah Chapter: Is.58:2-7; 59:1-21.

Things to learn: 1) The hypocrites 2) The Unjust 3) Confession and Restoration

Discussion Questions:

Q1. Why did Isaiah in chapter 58, called the seemingly religious Israelite people hypocrites? What should they be doing instead and can that be applicable to believers today?

Q2. According to one commentator, the Israelites' sins are referred to 32 times in chapter 59, and there are 23 separate charges brought against them. In what ways did Isaiah condemn the people of Israel as unjust in Is. 59: 1-11?

Q3. What did the people of Israel confessed in Chapter 59, verses 12 to 15a and how did God respond in verses 15b to 21?