

The King of Zion and the Epicenter of God's Salvation

The Book of Isaiah

God's Cry for Justice, Part 1

Isaiah 58:1 – 7

Introduction to me: Becoming Aware of God's Heart

When I was a junior in high school, despite how independent I wanted to be, I found myself drawn to Jesus through 3 friends. I started going to a worship service where I learned about Jesus. After about seven months of this, my friend from this church said to me, "Let's go spend our spring break in Mexico." There was a group of Christian folks who were going to go there and do various things. I thought we'd be building affordable housing or new buildings or something: something I could see with my hands and be proud of, something that I could look back on and say, "That was a total guy thing to do, and I did that." Later I found out that 2,000 other Christians were going as part of the larger program. Well, we got there, a small town near the border of California and Mexico, and I saw poverty like I had never seen before. People were living in cardboard shacks with three walls and an aluminum roof. We had to be really careful about drinking the water and being in the shower. And we didn't get to build any buildings. Instead, we played with kids and taught them little Bible lessons. And I didn't like kids, back then. All those kids cared about was, "Are you going to come back tomorrow?" They didn't care about the fact that I had big dreams and that I was going places. But it hit me that the love that the kids showed me was kind of like the unconditional love that God said He had for me; He didn't love me because of what I had done or what I thought I was going to accomplish. That was a lot for me to handle. I didn't want to be there anymore. I was taking a week off of swimming training almost in the middle of the season to be there, and I was risking my performance that season to care about these kids. But I looked around me and there were 2,000 people there who loved Jesus who were glad to be in Mexico and glad to spend their time that way. At that moment, my life just seemed so selfish and small it was unbearable. I felt like I had wasted my life up to that point. That's when I said, "Jesus, I know enough about you that I'm ready. My life just feels small. Take my life and do what you want." So I came to Jesus because I wanted my life to mean something.

I began to get a glimpse of what God might do with me during my freshman and sophomore years in college. I went to Stanford from 90 – 94. I wound up going to AACF there, and that's how I met David and Derek Miyahara, Alan Oda, Dave Fong, Kenji Kobayashi, and Melanie and Bruce Chow. I wanted to study to understand why poverty like that existed. I saw certain weird things. Like how Stanford University had negotiated with the City of Palo Alto not to have liquor stores within 1 mile of campus. So when you drove down University Avenue for 1 mile, you wind up in East Palo Alto, which was a very poor community. In 1992, it had the highest per capita murder rate out of any city in the nation. And guess what was there? Three major liquor stores within 50 feet of each other, which contributed to major loitering, delinquency, alcoholism, and drug traffic. When I would go there to mentor an elementary school boy, I wondered, 'Does God care about this?'

Then God used two major current events in 1992 to disturb me, like 9/11 and the Iraq War might be for you. The first major incident was the Rodney King Incident. Being from L.A., I was really shocked by the burning of L.A. Somehow, I graduated from high school thinking that America's race problems were solved. The tension between Whites, Blacks, and Koreans, the late night radio talk shows interviewing church leaders in various communities – my heart burned and I stayed up late at night listening to the news. It made me ask the question, 'Where else have I been lied to? Where else does injustice exist?' The second major incident was the U.S. payment of reparations checks to Japanese American survivors of the internment. That's when I began to understand the injustice done to my family and many others. My dad was six when he and his mom, dad, and three sisters were moved from L.A. to Heart Mountain, Wyoming, out in the middle of nowhere. After the War, they restarted their hotel business in Skid Row where the family struggled with enormous stress. I asked, 'What does Jesus think about this? Does he have good news about injustice? Does the Bible address these issues?'

Relevance:

Over the years, I've come to find that God DOES care about these things!!! Jesus has great news about injustice. And that's great for us. At many college campuses, there's an incident that happens every year involving alcohol and racism. When that happens, we need to know that Jesus has a word for that. When we experience issues like Nike exploiting workers in Asia, or inner cities and the growing gap between rich and poor, we need to know that Jesus has a word for that. When we have activist friends or activist professors who ask us, 'Does your Jesus have anything to say about this?' we can answer, 'Yes, he does!!'

Context:

We're going to look at one of the best passages in Scripture on the topic: Isaiah 58. Isaiah looked ahead into the future and saw that Israel's sin would just get worse. And for that sin, God would send the nation into Exile and the city Jerusalem would fall. From the point of Jerusalem's fall, God's judgment would also ripple outward over the world. Cities will be judged. Capitals will be judged. Washington DC will be judged. That's what Isaiah 1 – 39 are about. But then, in Isaiah 40, Isaiah looks ahead and sees how God would transform all of that mess. It would also start at Jerusalem, and from there would ripple outward into the whole world, in a wave of blessing, justice and mercy. The key figure in that wave of blessing is the King of Israel, who would begin to reign from Jerusalem. And it's his reign that would bring peace, love, justice, and mercy as it rippled outward all over the world. Isaiah 58 is about what Jesus' reign will bring.

Let me mention Micah 6:8, which is also about this. Micah and Isaiah almost certainly knew each other. They lived at the same time. Even their messages are the same, except that Micah's is much smaller. Micah 4 is Isaiah 2 verbatim. Micah also says, 'Jerusalem is going to fall, but the Messiah's reign from a new Jerusalem will ripple outward over the world. People will beat their swords into plowshares.' And he says in 6:8, 'What does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.' Isaiah says the same thing in Isaiah 58, but he does it in a more expansive way.

Attention! v.1

^{Isa.58:1} 'Cry loudly, do not hold back;
Raise your voice like a trumpet,
And declare to My people their transgression
And to the house of Jacob their sins.

On the one hand, this is bad news because it's going to sound really hard. On the other, it's good news, too, because God always looks to draw out the venom and heal. But He needs to give us the diagnosis first. The first symptom He identifies is that you are complaining.

Your Frustration: v.2 – 3a

² Yet they seek Me day by day and delight to know My ways,
As [if they were (NIV)] a nation that has done righteousness
And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God.
They ask Me for just decisions,
They delight in the nearness of God.
³ Why have we fasted and You do not see?
Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?'

Let's say we were to stop there and interview these guys, and say what's up? Why do you think God is so upset? Seems like these guys would say, 'Heck if I know.' When we look at verse 2, these guys sound really great spiritually. Day after day, they are seeking God out. They seem eager to know his ways. They are so psyched that God lives in the Temple, near to them and far from the Gentiles. If these guys were a campus fellowship, they would sound like an amazing fellowship. What more could you ask for? They have daily prayer meetings. They play wonderful worship songs and even write them. They have weekly Bible study, and they're always going to more conferences and retreats. And yet why doesn't God help us with our grades? Why doesn't God help us deal get the summer job we so want? Why doesn't God make that person want to date me? Why doesn't He help me with my parents? Why does it feel like God seems unconcerned with the rest of my life? He adds all these things for me to do, like go to this meeting and that, show up for this and that, but He doesn't help me with the things that are most important to me?!?

I've made God my biggest extracurricular activity, and yet, God, why don't you see me? Why don't you notice me? What's the problem, God? Why don't you acknowledge me?

Do we ever feel this way? Does it ever feel like we're doing all the right things, but that our relationships with God don't seem real? Well, here in Isaiah 58, God says the operative words for Israel are 'as if.' As if. As if you did what was right and had not forsaken my commands. As if.

One of the problems is that they don't think there's a problem. Day after day they did their quiet times, as if they were doing everything right. So, to them it seems as if God is in the wrong. God is the one not keeping up his part of the bargain; God is the one not coming through for them. God's not coming through for the United States. Don't you see, God, we're even going above and beyond. Why have we fasted and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves before you, and you haven't responded?

My Frustration: v.3b – 5

Well that's the first symptom God sees. But the underlying disease is really serious. The disease is that the people's hearts are not the same as God's heart. Here's God's response in v.3b – 5:

'Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire,
And drive hard all your workers.
⁴ Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist.
You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.
⁵ Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it for bowing one's head like a reed
And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?
Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD?'

This passage shows God's heart. First, God cares about bodies and souls, not just souls. The Greco-Roman view of the world was that the physical world was bad, more or less, and so were our bodies. The Greco-Roman view was that your soul was imprisoned in your body and just wanted escape. And if your bodies were bad, then you should deny your body, like the Stoics did, and forbid marriage and sex, or you should indulge your body, and have sex with whoever you wanted to, like the Epicureans did. But in either case, you would not care about the poor, because other people's bodies just don't matter. You could abuse other people. However, the Jewish view of the world is that God in Genesis 1 created our physical bodies and said, 'It is good.' He said about the physical world, 'It is good.' Sin and death are bad, but the body is still good. Listen to how physical Isaiah's concerns are: you drive hard all your workers; striking with a wicked fist. He cares about rest for the body, and appropriate physical boundaries that protect the body. In the Jewish and Christian worldview, you don't want disembodiment, where your soul escapes your body forever. You want resurrection, where your soul and body are reunited forever. That's what Jesus' resurrected body means: the physical body is good and will be redeemed from sin and death; the physical world is good and will be redeemed from sin and death. And if the body is good, then we need to not only have sexual ethics rooted in God's story, but we need also need to care for the poor. Those two things go together and cannot be separated. Jesus took this pretty far in Luke 12:33 – 34, 'Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Store up treasure in heaven.' John said, 'Whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?' (1 Jn.3:17) Paul said, 'They only asked us to remember the poor--the very thing I also was eager to do' (Gal.2:10). That's why the early Christian community took this so seriously. They had a saying, 'We share all things but our spouses.' American culture today might say the opposite, 'We share our spouses, but not our money.' God cares about bodies and souls, not just souls.

Second, God cares about community, not just individuals. It's as if your family owned a grocery store or dry-cleaning business or a restaurant or something, and because you want to stay open on Sundays, you hire certain people. You don't share Jesus with them because then you'd probably have to pay them a higher wage just out of common Christian courtesy, they'd want to come to church with you, and you'll have to find new workers. So it goes against your financial self-interest. That happens today, doesn't it? Or, what about all of those custodians on campus? We usually don't think about them. Are they a part of, or can they become part of, the Christian community? Let's not think about that. But God's entire way of

relating to people is to bring us into community with one another. He saved Israel out of Egypt, and into the promised land in order for them to be a community. He saved us out of sin and into the promised land of walking with Jesus in order for us to be a community. He gave Israel commands so they would respect one another's boundaries and care for each other. He gave us commands so we would respect one another's boundaries and care for each other. Imagine that one of my two children hits the other, and then comes up to me and smiles and says, 'I love you Daddy.' Imagine how I would feel? Well, that's the same way God feels. God wanted these people to be a vibrant community. God does not just save individuals and stop there. That's why it's wrong to drive hard all your workers, strike with a wicked fist, fast one day for yourself and not even care about others. You're forming community with rich people like yourselves, but God draws us into a bigger community, one that includes people that you'd rather not care about. And He keeps wanting to draw more people into that family.

Illus: In 1995, I moved into East Palo Alto, that community that I mentioned earlier with the highest per capita murder rate in 1992. I moved into one of the most dilapidated apartment complexes in the city. It was right next to a freeway onramp and offramp so drug dealers were always there. Kids played in or near huge garbage dumpsters. There were cockroaches everywhere. There were 100 apartments filled with Mexican immigrant families. I was being mentored by a couple, the Espinosas, and they had a lot of relationship with these folks. One of the families that I met was the Sanchez family. One day I was going to work in the morning and Graciela Sanchez, the grandmother of this family, asked me for a ride. She said, 'My usual ride was arrested.' I asked, 'Where do you work?' She told me, and I realized that it was only 10 minutes away from where I worked, Intel Corporation. The next morning, there she was again. So I took her again. She asked if I could pick her up from work, too, because it cost her a lot of money and time to take the train and bus. I thought about it, and realized it would mean that I could get my work at Intel done by 4:30pm so I said sure. I took this Mexican grandmother to and from work every day for over a year. And she wasn't the easiest person to get along with, you all know what I mean? During that time, my supervisors at Intel pulled me aside and said, 'Mako, we'd like you to take this promotion by helping out this organization. They're in trouble and it would take some serious overtime, but you'd get some good experience.' We were an internal management consulting group. I prayed about it and said, 'I can't.' They were surprised. This was the late 90's, when Intel's stock price was doubling every 18 months, and it would have been a raise with more stock options. A few months later they said, 'Mako, there's another opportunity.' It was a similar situation. I turned down that promotion, too. I told them, 'This probably won't make sense to you, but I love Jesus and I love this family. I'm taking this grandmother to and from work every day, and they depend on me right now.' So I had a chance to witness to my coworkers! God had helped me feel close to this family, and I was beginning to understand something about God's heart for community and evangelism. This went on, and one day as I was driving grandma Graciela home, she asks, 'Mako, can you be the padrino, the godfather, of my grandson?' Do you know what an honor that is? In Mexican culture, if something happened to the adults, I would have been entrusted with that grandson. God cares about physical needs. God cares about community.

Third, God hates privatized spirituality. He says, 'Look, the people who work for you? You overwork and underpay them.' The original audience Isaiah spoke to seemed to be actively cruel in their public lives. They'd fast so that God would give them good crops. They'd fast so that God would bless their families. Meanwhile, they'd go out into the fields and hit their workers, intimidate them, and make them work all the time. We may or may not do that today, we may not be actively cruel, but we seem to be passively cruel in our public lives. We pray for God to give us a good summer internship, so that we could make a lot of money. We pray for God to give us good grades. But let's be real now. When your professor grades on a curve, you might as well pray for God to make other people fail more frequently than you. The worst thing is that these rich people would go off and create a privatized spirituality that had nothing to do with their own injustice. There is something in American and Asian cultures that would say back to God, 'That's none of your business.' We tend to divide our ethics so that our private lives go one way and our public lives go another. We treat our families with love, loyalty, and sacrifice. Then we have the way we treat everyone else, which is about competition and trying to get the best deal out of them you can.

That's also why in Micah 6:8, those three things – do justly, love mercy, walk humbly – are really just one thing. If you don't do justly, you're not really walking humbly with God. If you don't love mercy, you're not really walking humbly with God. You're just walking arrogantly by yourself.

True Spiritual Discipline Has Social Impact: v.6 – 7

But most importantly, we need to know God's heart. So God cares about bodies and souls, not just souls. God cares about community, not just individuals. God cares about our careers, our businesses, our major, not just our private lives. So in light of God's heart, how should we think about prayer and fasting and spiritual disciplines? Isaiah tells us in verses 6 – 7.

⁶ Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

God's heart for us fasting and doing other spiritual disciplines is for others. What is fasting for? Is it to lose weight? So we can be healthier? No. Isaiah says, it's to free us to love others. What happens when we pray and fast? At least two things: First, we are learning to restrain ourselves for the sake of God's bigger things; second, we are learning to trust God so that we won't need to keep other people down. How often does it feel like you're in survival mode, or on the defensive all the time, protecting yourselves from other people, or even controlling them to serve you? Instead, God wants us to restrain ourselves and trust Him.

So what are the bands of wickedness? Who is oppressed? A good working definition is: people who are relationally or systemically disadvantaged. Everyone is pretty good at seeing relational dynamics. If you call someone a racial slur or burn a cross on someone's lawn, that's relational oppression.

Here's an example of relational oppression. There was a group of Christian students at MIT who went to a frat party. There was a freshman there. The frat boys were forcing him to drink shot after shot. At some point, he passed out. The Christians saw all this happening and then left the party. That frosh died later that night. He drowned in his own vomit. The main question is not, 'Can Christians go to parties?' Of course Christians can go to parties, at least most of them. The main question is, 'What is our motivation when we go the parties?' Is it to escape your own stress? Is it to indulge yourself? Or is it because you prayed and you sense God leading you into places of brokenness and competition and darkness in order to serve Him there? Is it because you fasted and you know how to restrain yourself? If you've learned those things, you can go to those parties; you'll stay sober enough to keep listening to the voice of the Spirit. If you've learned to trust God with your future, you'll be able to release your grades a bit to look out for others. It's not wrong to go to parties. In fact, sometimes that's exactly where God wants us to make a difference on campus!! But God wants us there with His eyes, His ears, His heart, and His motivations. He wants us to loosen the bands of wickedness and let the oppressed go free.

Systemic oppression is more difficult to see. It's when laws, companies, banks, schools, government, and systems have the effect of keeping people down. For example, we live in the worst school district zone in Boston. Poor neighborhoods never have much money because public schools are funded by what? Local property taxes. So America claims that the system is fair, that all you have to do is work hard. But let me tell you, plenty of kids work hard. But in a school system where the average employment of a new teacher in the Boston Public School system is 2 years, there's not a lot of quality teachers. There's not enough resources to deal with gang and violence issues. Meanwhile rich parents know how to cheat the system. They can pay up to \$2k for SAT prep. Their kids get into good colleges by legacy admission anyway. That's oppression.

Maybe for some of you, you don't see oppression. Why should we care about the poor? Didn't we just work hard? Didn't they do it to themselves? The model minority myth says that Asian-Americans achieved a lot simply because they worked hard. But it is a myth! If the system is fair, then if you haven't

made it, then you didn't work hard. So if you're poor, it's your fault. What a lie! What I'm going to say may shock some of you. Some of you are from middle and upper class backgrounds and you may need to ask, 'Where else have I been lied to?' How many of you have parents that immigrated to the U.S. after 1965? In 1965, after the Hart-Cellar Act, the U.S. targeted educated, managerial, or skilled laborers from China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. These people, some of them being our parents, were fairly sure to succeed. It's easy if you take the elite from Asia, bring them into the most materialistic country in the world, at the right time in history so as to benefit from the Civil Rights gains by African Americans against racism. That's why our parents tend to say things like, 'If you work hard enough, you'll make it.' And sure, our parents worked hard. But plenty of people have worked just as hard and never 'made it.' Look at the fact that Chinatowns are some of the poorest places in the U.S. Look at how the U.S. just snatched Hawaii from its own people. Look at how the U.S. destabilized Southeast Asia and the Philippines and what that did to the refugees. These people's experiences were totally different. They know the system isn't fair. We need to come close enough to people to feel that, too.

Some of you come from working class backgrounds, or even oppressed backgrounds, and have felt that difference on campus and maybe in the fellowship. Maybe those students aren't here at LTC right now. Your circumstances might not be as dire as the ones that Isaiah describes. But whenever people go out to eat, you have second thoughts about whether you can afford it. Whenever someone organizes a ski trip, you're not sure you should go. You wonder how people can afford that car, those gadgets, all that stuff! Sometimes if you have that background, you might feel ashamed. But let me tell you, you are a gift to the rest of us. You can help the rest of us understand your story, your perspective, and how we can be sensitive. Maybe the fellowship needs to think of new ways of having fun together that are more creative but accessible to more people. We need you in order to be a healthy community that is growing spiritually in justice and mercy. And the rest of us need to not distance ourselves from you.

Feed people. Bring people into your home. In fact, Isaiah says, 'Don't hide yourselves from your own flesh.' Even if they are illegal immigrants or international students who feel out of place. You know how Asian-Americans often don't want to hang out with Asian internationals? God wants us to see that we are connected to others. Other people are your own flesh. The world seems very able to ignore the AIDS crisis in Africa, maybe because we are able to distance ourselves from black people who are suffering. It's so easy for us to distance ourselves from people who are suffering. But they have the same needs and weaknesses and struggles you do.

What are some internal barriers you have to seeing the need around you? (1) Maybe for some of you, it's a fear of ongoing relationship with people you're not comfortable with. For most of us, for most of our lives, we have developed ways of pushing people away from us that make us uncomfortable. If you let certain other people into your life, you might start feeling out of control. But God never promised you that you'd feel in control. He promised to make you compassionate. So that pushing people away...that might have been kind of appropriate when you were younger, but now that you're older, that needs to stop. (2) Maybe for some of you, it's a fear of consequences. What would your parents think if you started living in a more biblical way? What would it cost your career? Maybe God would line you up with a different job than you originally thought. What would it mean about your marriageability? But God never promised you an easy life. He promised you a meaningful life, if you'll take it. (3) Maybe some of you have a fear of leadership. Maybe you see the issues around you, but you're afraid to take a step forward and let Jesus engage those issues through you. Maybe you need to let God's Spirit into those fears, and let Him minister to you, and strengthen you. It's my hope during our time together that God would do that, and that you'll let Him.

As a practical first step, here's a thought. You can pray about this and if God leads you to do this, great. Calculate how much you spend every month on entertainment, shopping, and going out to eat. Then, plan out a different way of having fun with friends. Do that in community if you can. But take the money that you would ordinarily spend on yourself and give it to a ministry that serves the poor somewhere in the world.