

The King of Zion and the Epicenter of God's Salvation *The Book of Isaiah*

God's Cry for Justice, Part 2 *Isaiah 58:8 – 14*

Introduction: Our Spring Breaks

This past March during spring break weeks, our Christian fellowships in Boston sent 220 students to do Katrina relief work in the 9th ward in New Orleans, which was flooded by the broken levy, and Bay St. Louis, MI, considered the epicenter of Hurricane Katrina. About a third of those students were non-Christian friends of our Christian students. We as staff intentionally structured the trip to be friendly to non-Christians. They were skeptics, cynics, Buddhists, a Hindu student, a homosexual student, and people who never gave Christianity a second thought. They had been invited by their friends to do this alternative spring break project exploring the intersection of Jesus, justice, and service. They spent the days rehabbing houses that had been flooded or hit by debris. Some of them smelled rotted food in refrigerators that hadn't been opened since Hurricane Katrina. Gross!! One student asked, 'Why are there numbers spray painted on some of these houses?' Our guide replied, 'That's the number of bodies found in each house.' In the evenings, they looked at what the Bible had to say about Jesus and the poor, Jesus and racism, Jesus and reconciliation, Jesus and suffering. All the students were impacted, especially the 60-70 non-Christians. Richard from BU was inspired by the Christians around him. He kept coming to the fellowship LG back on campus, and found a joy that he couldn't explain in musical worship. Two months later, he gave his life to Jesus. Cara from Wellesley was exploring Jesus by the time she got to New Orleans. She was so moved by the needs of the city that she felt God invite her to make a long-term commitment to New Orleans, and she wasn't even a Christian! She got back to campus and two weeks later, she gave her life to Jesus and has been eagerly growing in faith. The stories go on and on. Two Harvard students gave their lives to Jesus either during or shortly after the trip. One MIT student who didn't even go on the trip watched his friends go and return, and he was so struck by the sincerity of their faith that he decided to become a Christian!

Relevance:

That is awesome stuff. This is why campus ministry exists. This is why you meet on campus as student organizations. To have this kind of impact on the campus around you. You see, you do not exist to be an ethnic enclave or to be a safe haven for Asian American Christians. If that's all you are, then you might as well pack up your bags, fold up your tent, and go home, because local churches could do it better. You exist as an organization to impact the campus. AACF's mission statement is: 'To reach into the university and collegiate community, primarily to those who are Asian Pacific-Americans, with the life-changing message of Jesus Christ.' That means evangelism. And the best way to do evangelism is to do justice. When you allow God to express His heart through you, He will act. He will show Himself. And people will be drawn to Jesus through you. What I'm saying is that your fellowships do not exist for the sake of Christian community. Community happens, and I hope it happens well, but that's not the reason you exist. You exist for the sake of God's justice and evangelism.

Context:

We are in the second half of Isaiah 58. We're building on the foundation from 58:1 – 7. God cares about bodies and souls, not just souls. He cares about community, not just individuals. God hates privatized spirituality. Our spirituality is supposed to be directed outward and is meant to be public. Now the questions that come up for us are: What happens if we let God express his heart through us? What happens if we sacrifice? What happens if we work for justice? What happens if we take the spiritual energy that God puts in us when we fast and pray and turn it towards others? What will God do? Three things: First, God will surround you with His glory in v.8 – 10. Second, God will refresh you in v.11 – 12. Third, God will delight you in v.13 – 14.

Repent, and God's Glory Will Surround You: v.8 – 10

First, God's glory will surround you in v.8 – 10. Let's look at this. Now in this passage Isaiah puts effects before causes. The effects are:

⁸ Then your light will break out like the dawn,
And your recovery will speedily spring forth;
And your righteousness will go before you;
The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
⁹ Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'

That's an awesome picture of how influential these people will be. Light will break forth like the dawn. Recovery will happen. God will go before and after you. People will see you coming. People will see you going. You will have an impact like light impacts the darkness. How do we get to be so influential? By caring about God's justice. By reversing our apathetic attitude towards injustice. Another way to say this in our language is, 'If we want to see more people come to Jesus, what's the best way to do it?' The best way to do evangelism is to do justice. Look at v.9b:

'If you remove the yoke from your midst,
The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,

Isaiah uses a series of idioms. It'll help us to unpack them. The yoke is what you would normally put on oxen so they could pull your plow. But the unjust put the yoke of injustice on the poor so they do their work for them. God says, 'That needs to stop.' Finger pointing symbolizes corrupt authority. That's why it's coupled with the phrase 'speaking wickedness.' You point your finger and speak wickedly when you're blaming, accusing, being judgmental, using your authority to drive people into the ground. By complete contrast, the people God has made us to be is in v.10:

¹⁰ And if you give yourself to the hungry
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness
And your gloom will become like midday.

This is strong language. Isaiah says, 'If you give yourself.' Not if you give a little bit of yourself, but your whole self. And to what? To satisfy the desire of the afflicted. If we're giving our whole selves, how do we deal with this fact: 60% of the world today is poor, mostly urban poor, 30% desperately poor. But less than 10% of missionaries go to live and minister among the poor. This constitutes a math problem. (statistic from InnerChange) It doesn't mean that you are all called to do direct ministry to the poor. But it does mean that you all must care about it. The value is justice and mercy. You have got to be committed to that with your whole life. The expression of how those values get lived out – that's flexible. The value can have multiple expressions. Value: Because God cares about them; they are our flesh, human beings just like us. Expressions: You can make a decision right now that you will not buy luxury cars for the rest of your life. Or, don't shop at expensive stores or eat at expensive restaurants. Whatever it is, do something, and then keep growing in it. Other people need that money more than you do. We tend to be more interested in boundary issues, issues where we cross a line, like stealing, lying, or sex outside of marriage. In all of those cases, you know when you're sinning. You know when you're stealing, lying, or having sex outside of marriage. There is a boundary that is crossed. But caring for the poor, love for others, and the heart of the Christian faith are not boundary issues. No one can ever say, 'I have satisfied the desire of the afflicted. I'm done.' You're never done. But if you want to give yourself, then you're never satisfied. You hear a suggestion about how you can be more giving, and you're not defensive. You're grateful. Even if you choose not to do that thing right then and there, you're grateful because maybe you will later.

My life was transformed because I saw Gail and Jon Yoshimine and their two friends Bryce and Bruce share a house in the suburbs, in Anaheim, CA. You don't have to live in the inner city to live in community. Given the right people, it makes sense in lots of ways. People might look at you crazy, because a suburban house is supposedly for a nuclear family. But hey, God can do crazy things with us. Relationally, their house was such a warm place. Anytime I wanted to go over to talk, I could find someone to talk to. And financially, it made sense. Gail was in ministry. Jon was in the flower business.

Bruce was an engineer and loved his work. Bryce had been an engineer but had felt like God actually wanted him to be a high school teacher. He could never have been able to afford life and his past debt on a teacher's salary. But when he lived in community, his rent went down so low he could afford it. You can live in community in the suburbs. You could be a better witness for Jesus to your suburban neighborhood. You could be enabled to do more for God's kingdom. You could be a support to each other. And you could be so much more generous.

And if God so leads you, you can do direct service to the afflicted. The L.A. Times published a story last week on June 14, 2006. It was entitled 'A Wok With Jesus: Saving Souls in Chinese Kitchens.' The article starts: 'MILPITAS, Calif. The dining room lights are dimmed at the A&J Restaurant, a tiny strip-mall eatery where a handful of Chinese kitchen workers relax at tables during the lull between the lunch and dinner rush. The customers gone, the owner away running errands, the place is as quiet as a chapel. The only noise is the hum of the cooler chilling the green bottles of Tsingtao beer and slabs of brown tofu. It's time to pray with Esther Lou. She breezes in saleswoman-friendly, a onetime Chinese restaurant owner turned religious crusader who knows her way around a professional kitchen and the exhausting lives endured by legions of low-paid food workers.' The article goes on to describe Esther Lou. She 'married into the restaurant business. In 1967, her husband's family opened the King Tsin eatery in Berkeley. The couple later owned five locations. After a long day, they blew off steam by partying with favorite customers. Eventually, Kang Lou got hooked on drugs. For 19 years, he kept his drug use secret from his wife. 'I was very tricky,' says Lou, 62. While Esther Lou tried to help her husband kick his habit, the two briefly separated. Through her struggles, she found [Jesus. HALLELUJAH! Then] she saw the work of the Chinese Christian Herald Crusade Restaurant Mission and vowed to bring the idea back home. [Her husband] Kang Lou got cleaned up and has often joined her campaign. Yet not everyone has been so enthusiastic. Many congregants at her church in suburban Walnut Creek disagreed with reaching out to often illiterate restaurant laborers [who have a lower social place].' WHAT IS UP WITH THAT?!? But here's a success story: 'Betsy Liu once owned a Japanese restaurant staffed by Chinese workers. She rejected Lou, who then turned her attentions to the owner's ailing father. 'She came to my home to pray,' Liu recalled. 'I thought, 'Wow, that's kind of pushy.' My dad passed away eight months later. Thanks to Esther, he became a Christian before he died. I feel better about that.' Liu now works for the cause.'

For you Northern California folks, that's right in your backyard. You could get involved. You could be inspired to do something else. I mention that also because Chinatowns are not just good places to eat; they're hard places to live. In Boston's Chinatown, strip clubs and adult entertainment stores moved in from somewhere else after they were relocated by new construction. They intentionally chose Chinatown because they're racist but also because they knew Chinatown wouldn't resist: It's hard to do community organizing in Chinatown because people work all the time; because communication is hard because there's a few different dialects; and because there's a Chinese value on silent suffering. So right next to the Josiah Quincy junior high school is a strip club. Can you believe it? That would never happen in Palos Verdes, or Cerritos, for that matter, right? But my friend Tom Lee, who is a pastor in a Chinese church in Chinatown has been organizing the community and together, they got one of the more notorious clubs to shut down. In the meantime, his church reaches out to youth and families in Chinatown. It's a great witness. Maybe God has something for you to either support or be directly involved with.

If you don't distance yourself from others, you'll give yourself to the hungry. If you don't distance yourself from others, you'll relate to their pain, you'll work for their relief. If you give yourself, you won't point your finger. Instead, you'll hold out your hands, your arms, your heart. The outcome will be that your light will rise in darkness, your gloom will be transformed into the light of high noon. God will surround you with His glory. You will have the godly influence you want, that God wants to have through you.

Here's an example of what light can dawn on campus. In the late 70's the Christian Fellowship at Tufts University in MA was known for caring for people pretty well. One year, there was a fairly high profile student who suffered a major accident. It left him handicapped, in need of assistance in his day to day living. Here is this afflicted guy, maybe hungry for support. The President of the fellowship back then befriended this guy, and after becoming decent friends, asked if he wanted to room together. Meanwhile he rallied the whole fellowship to serve this guy with the handicap. They all laid down their lives to love this

guy. A Jewish student named Daniel Joshua Abrams ('77-'81) watched all this happen. As a result of seeing Jesus' love expressed, he became a Christian. The only problem was that Abrams is the son of one of the most prominent rabbis in Boston. The Boston Globe published a major article about this. AND THE NAME OF JESUS WENT FORWARD!

Light breaks out. God's righteousness and glory goes forward. You will have a presence. God will make people see more than just you. They will see Him. If you go into the lame dorms that everyone wants to avoid, in order to be a blessing to people there, people will see Jesus in you. If you organize service projects for spring break rather than go to Cancun, people will see Jesus in you. If you change your major or career goals to be of more help to the poor, as at MIT where half of the people in the urban studies major are people in the Asian Christian Fellowship, people will see Jesus in you.

Repent, and God Will Refresh You: v.11 – 12

Will you burn out by living this way? No, because second, God will refresh you, in v.11 – 12.

¹¹ And the LORD will continually guide you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.

¹² Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins;
You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the breach,
The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

God's promise is that He will guide you and satisfy you. When a land is sun-scorched, nothing can grow. But God is saying, 'You will be like an oasis in a desert.' Isaiah uses the language 'you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.' That's an image that comes from Genesis 2, the Garden of Eden. You will live like humanity was originally meant to live, because you're doing what humanity was originally meant to be doing! And then you will rebuild, raise up, repair, and restore. Those are powerful images, and great responsibilities.

The neighborhood my wife and I live in is called the 'youth corridor' of Boston. The last statistic I heard was that an estimated 17,000 youth live in the immediate area. It is a high crime, lower income community, mostly African-American, Caribbean, and Latino. It has the highest concentration of DSS case families, which means that every time the state has to intervene in a family's life because of abuse or neglect, they create a 'case,' and our area has the highest density of that. The major street right next to us is called 'Prostitution Alley.' Just to give you even more flavor: One summer, in broad daylight at 2 o'clock, several men drove by and fired gunshots into the house across the street from us two doors down. They did that while construction workers were working right next door! Then within the same week, a man robbed the hardware store on the corner at gunpoint, and then ran down our street waving his gun around while children were playing outside! Craziness!!! After five years of living in our neighborhood, we saw God open up a key opportunity: My wife helped a non-profit organization write two grants for \$35,000 to get musical equipment and a brand new video projector into the community center across the street, and also to build a community garden right next door. The grant money helped us pay teens and young people in our neighborhood to work on the garden. We converted a run down vacant lot right next to our house into this beautiful garden, growing corn, basil, collard greens, onions, peppers, eggplant, and beans. My favorite was the sun-gold tomatoes. They were so good that you could just pop a few in your mouth right off the vine. And they grew really fast, too! As a result, we got fairly close to many people. Out of all the relationships that we had, we started a monthly neighborhood meeting, a monthly crime watch meeting, a weekly women's bible study, a weekly youth bible study, a weekly family games night, a weekly family movie night, a weekly African dance and drums class. It was awesome. And we're seeing God at work in people's lives, and we feel like He is revitalizing our neighborhood. We want to be involved as God rebuilds, raises up, repairs, and restores. He is allowing us to do that with Him.

This will bring new meaning and new life into what you're doing. And we need it, don't we!?! A lot of the time, you have no energy because you have no real sense of purpose. If I were to really get to know some of you, and hear you talk about your future and what career you're thinking about, I'll bet I would hear a lot of tiredness, reluctance, uncertainty. Is this career thing really worth all that sacrifice? Well, maybe not. What's worth your life? Well, nothing you've found so far!! Some of you are more likely to be a tired 30 year olds because you don't actually believe in what you're doing. Maybe if you were more connected with God's heart and His call to us, you would have more of God's energy and power.

Illus: My wife Ming went to Harvard, and when she was finishing her senior year, she had a choice to make. She had gotten into Harvard Law School, and she had to decide whether to go. Something in her told her that she wasn't really excited about it. Sure, it was a great name, but... She had even taken the LSAT and missed 1! But it wasn't the place where she thought God was bringing her life. So instead, she did campus ministry for 8 years, learned a lot about ministry, people, herself, and Jesus. Then when we had our first child, she became a full time mom in our neighborhood, and she's enjoyed that for 6 years. Now, she's going back to grad school, but not for a law degree. She's going back for a Masters in Social Work because she knows that she enjoys counseling adults; she discovered that over the years as something that God has gifted her in.

My point is not that law is a bad field. I don't think that, and Ming could choose law at some later point. My point is that the way we often choose is messed up. We think we have to 'live up to our potential' or live in our parents' value system as opposed to pay attention to God's heart on the one hand, the way God has gifted us on the other, and making decisions out of real relationship with people. The historic black church had a saying: 'Get your degree and come back and help.' I think that's important for us. We need to 'care about the poor' not just in theory but in actual relationship. So you may need to go visit poor or oppressed people and have real relationship with those people before you presume to know what they need. We will lose steam in life unless we are connected to God's larger purpose in the world. And we will lose love unless we are in relationship with people we're trying to care about.

Rest, and God Will Delight You: v.13 – 14

Third, God will delight you, in v.13 – 14:

¹³ If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot
From doing your own pleasure on My holy day,
And call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable,
And honor it, desisting from your own ways,
From seeking your own pleasure
And speaking your own word,
¹⁴ Then you will take delight in the LORD,
And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

Sabbath does not mean rest. It means completion, as God completed the creation, and the posture towards completion is therefore rest. Now in the Old Testament, believers would take a Sabbath day of rest on Friday night to Saturday night. They would not work. It was a day dedicated to rest and rejuvenation of our souls, to worship of God and to relationship with others. In Isaiah's day, some people would ignore the Sabbath, or maybe observe it for themselves but make their workers work on the Sabbath in the meantime. That's what Isaiah finds so repugnant that he calls it, 'seeking your own pleasure and speaking your own word' in v.13. In the New Testament, the Sabbath is not a day of the week. It's an overarching principle that in Jesus we rest from our own work and enter into rest in him. That is the major idea of Colossians 2 and Romans 14. So therefore our compassion is meant to overflow from Jesus through us all the time. How much more compassionate we can be when our Sabbath is not just a day but a principle of life with Jesus.

Sabbath in Isaiah is a rest from working for personal gain. It's a disengagement from the entire system of production and consumption. It's unplugging. It is not just another thing to do; it is a statement that we are

not buying into the lies around us. It, too, is bound up with this question of justice vs. injustice. If you can take a Sabbath in the truest sense of how God intends, then you'll be more able to see other human beings as human beings, as God sees them, not just as objects to be used or cogs in a machine. If you can trust God to provide for you, even when you're busy college students, you'll be less likely to neglect your family, to neglect or oppress other people through your work habits.

With the right understanding, it is still good to take certain times of your life, whether it be a part of a day, a whole day, or more, to rest. Even some companies have recognized this and now give sabbaticals so people can be with their families. So times of rest can be a dynamic thing, but the principle is the same. To illustrate this, let me read you a quote from a student at Harvard: 'My life here isn't all that great. All I ever do is study study study--always busy, always stressed. My mind and body are not at peace, which can be seen through an eating disorder. I felt like I was obligated to live life, as I was obligated obey my parents or as I was obligated to study. I did not ***enjoy*** life. The thought that I could die with Christ, and be given a new life--a rich, fulfilling life--truly captured me. Sometime between Friday and Saturday, I decided to take a sabbath--the first sabbath of my life. If you know me, then you know that I'm psycho-premed, and that the only time I take breaks is when I'm too burnt out and too exhausted to work. God has constantly been showing me that I need to chill, to take a break. Yet, I never did, because I was afraid that I wouldn't get my work done, or that I wouldn't beat the mean on the next exam. There was no time for God, no time to rest! So this Easter, I took a sabbath. On Saturday, I worked extra hard to do two problem sets and some reading. Then on Sunday, I rested. It has been amazing! I feel like a new person--I went to two church services joyfully; I tossed a frisbee for the first time in months; I actually TALKED with my friends. Somehow, it strikes me that this is the life that God wants for me: He wants me to take time to rest, He wants to bless me, and He wants me to find joy in life. My roommate (who's Muslim and also very hard-working) noticed such a difference in me that she's thinking about taking Sundays off too! As I prepare to go back to work tomorrow, I feel like that my work is less daunting. Although I didn't really finish all the reading that I had planned on doing this weekend, I'm not worried. I'll get up early tomorrow and finish it then. I have assurance that it will be all right, because God is in control.'

In verses 1 – 7, we saw that God means for fasting to develop other-centeredness in us. It is not meant for just ourselves. The same is true of Sabbath rest here in v.13 – 14. It is not meant for just ourselves; it's also for others, so that we would be more loving towards others. If you take it legalistically, as if you can score more points than someone else on some cosmic scoreboard, that's utterly wrong. It's meant to carve out space in our lives for God to fill. And, like I said before, in the New Testament, the Sabbath becomes not just a day, since we can take one at any time, but a principle, that our whole lives are about resting from ourselves so that Christ can live his life through us. I'd venture to say that other people will watch you if you have a posture of rest. Not just whether you take a day of rest, but have an overall life posture of rest. You'll be less threatened by other people, or tough professors. Even when you're not sure you're having that kind of impact, you are. The Christian doesn't always know the impact of what s/he's done.

Nowadays, globalization brings work to people, and that's important. But it's also important to bring rest to people, too. You can have that impact as students. How many of you have Domino Sugar in your kitchen shelves? Do you know why it's called Domino Sugar? Because they grow sugar in the Dominican Republic. Years ago, some students who were doing Christian relief, development, and youth work in the DR noticed that Domino Sugar was particularly affected by the idolatry of money. So much so that they weren't paying their workers decent wages. They weren't concerned about the shanty towns that popped up near the factory. They weren't rotating crops so that the soil could have a rest and be replenished. Instead, the soil was getting depleted quickly because it was just being used to grow sugar. So these students, along with a professor of sociology at Eastern College named Tony Campolo, bought one share of Domino Sugar. That entitled them to go to a shareholders' board meeting. They got there, and said, 'We've noticed all these things about our company. We are Christians, and we believe Jesus is concerned with the people of the Dominican Republic than he is about profit. In fact, we believe he will come back one day, and that he will not be happy with the way you are running this company.' But the executives said, 'Give us a few weeks. Let's schedule some meetings together to see what we can do.' Weeks later, the board of Domino Sugar came out and said, 'We resolve to do the following: We will increase the wages of our workers in the DR. We will implement a system of crop rotation, alternating sugar with food, for long term health. We will dedicate so many millions of dollars over the next few years to education, so

many millions of dollars towards infrastructure development, and so many millions to health care initiatives.' Jesus made a huge difference in lifting oppression and giving rest. Can you imagine the witness these Christians had in the Dominican Republic since then? Satisfying the desire of the afflicted!

Some of you may be uncomfortable with the idea of standing up on behalf of the poor because you'd have to confront powerful people who are being unjust. Your paradigm is that you need to evangelize them first, and then after a long process of discipleship, then those powerful people can be led by God to stop their injustice. But if you hold justice and evangelism together, you can actually call people away from injustice and towards Jesus in the same movement. Jesus himself did this. When Jesus did evangelism, he said to people, 'Sell what you have and give the poor, and come, follow me.' Was he speaking to disciples? No. He was speaking to unbelievers, on multiple occasions: Luke 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, and 19. He called them to do justice with him. In Luke 19, Jesus transforms Zaccheus, the chief tax collector, the wealthiest man in the Bible next to Solomon. Zaccheus gave half of everything immediately to the poor, and then said he would return fourfold what he defrauded anyone. Restorative justice! He had defrauded a lot of people, folks! So it's not like he thought he would have a lot of money left over. Justice and evangelism go together, always, so you CAN say to someone, 'You'd better stop doing that and come to Jesus. You'd better stop being selfish and come to Jesus. You'd better stop just thinking about your own career and future and come to Jesus.' Isaiah unites justice and evangelism. Why would you make them separate?

'You will take delight in the LORD.' We won't delight in the stock market going up as much as we delight in the LORD. We won't delight in playing Texas Hold 'Em as much as we delight in the LORD. We will delight in His kingdom going forward, in the name of Jesus going forward. Even if we are in the inner cities or in the slums of the Third World. We will see the truth about the world and our delight will be God, not our salary. God is 'the heritage of Jacob your father.' A pot of stew is the heritage of Esau, who was ruled by his stomach. So we will feed on God and delight in Him. We'll have strength and energy for the long haul. If we do justice, God will surround us with His glory, He will refresh us, He will delight us. May it be so!!