



DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS
30 & 31 OCTOBER 2021
ISAIAH 58

- **Begin by reading the Scripture passage together.**
- **Review the video of the sermon if needed (see <http://www.brmc.org.sg/category/resources/sermons>).**
- **As the [main study guide](#) does not cover Isaiah chapter 58, please use this material.**
- **Feel free to discuss as few or as many questions as best fits your group's current context and present stage in life.**
- **Remember to budget some time (15-20 min) to pray with and for one another, before ending your group session.**

Sidebox: Fasting in the Bible

In simple terms, fasting is to stop eating (and even drinking) completely or partially for a certain amount of time or intermittently. The Old Testament commands Israel as a nation to fast only on two occasions – at the festival of Purim (Esther 9:31), and at the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-30, where the phrase 'humble yourself' includes self-denial of food, sexual relations, and washing or anointing with oil). Apart from these occasions, fasting was commonly practised as an expression of grieving or repenting of sin. People also fasted when seeking God's favour or to commemorate a tragic event (Zechariah 7:5). Fasting might be done on one's own (1 Kings 21:27) or in groups (Jonah 3:5). Fasting was not the only practice to show devotion, repentance or mourning. The wearing of sackcloth and ashes as well as prostrating oneself on the ground were also prevailing practices.

While Christians are not commanded or obligated to fast (Colossians 2:16), fasting remains an important and beneficial spiritual discipline. The early church is recorded as having practiced it (Acts 13:3), and generations of later Christian disciples – from the Church Fathers to Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and C.S. Lewis – all encouraged the practice of fasting.

Jesus engaged in a lengthy fast following his baptism, although there is no indication he did so during his public ministry. Jesus also taught about fasting in the Sermon on the Mount, where it is assumed the practice would continue ("whenever you fast") but with an emphasis on honouring God than seeking the approval of men (Matt. 6:16–18). This is particularly relevant for our current study, as both Isaiah 58 and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount criticise fasting that is done as a mere outward act that is self-seeking, rather than fasting that is accompanied by genuine devotion for God and care for others.

For more details on fasting's importance and its practice today, please read this article, ["The Place of Fasting in the Christian Life"](#).

Core Discussion Questions

1. Isaiah takes a critical tone. How does God describe Israel's behaviour in verses 2-4? In what ways are their actions inconsistent with their stated beliefs and attitudes?

- *Note that verse 2 is ironic language, where the key word is "as if". Israel is only outwardly claiming to seek God and his ways, but their unjust actions of abusing the workforce (v.3) and mutual infighting (v.4) show up the true state of their hearts. Their professions of belief simply do not match up with their deeds.*

2. Why is God displeased with the people's fasts? Compare and contrast verse 5 and verse 6-7. Which is the kind of "fast" that God really wants?

- *The type of "fast" God wants is described in verses 6-7. Yet note these are not acts of fasting per se, but acts of justice and compassion to others. The point Isaiah makes is this: God is not pleased by mere outward acts of piety directed toward God, when one does not at the same time display genuine love and care directed at one's neighbour.*

3. List out the different components of a true fast – that is, genuine devotion – as described in verses 6-10. Refer also to Matt 6:16 How do you see these in modern day terms? In what areas of our lives today can we act with greater compassion and justice?

- *Isaiah 58 explains what genuine worship/devotion looks like - it goes beyond personal piety or the keeping of religious rituals. Genuine devotion involves: (a) loving one's neighbours, caring for others' practical needs, and practicing fairness and justice instead of oppression (vv.3-4, 6-7, 9-10 and see also 59.1-15, which is a foreshadowing of Jesus' own teaching, particular in the Greatest Commandment); and (b) seeking to please God above pleasing ourselves and our own interests (v.13).*

4. Read verses 10b-12. Describe the ways in which God will care for those who have cared for the oppressed, hungry and needy.

- *God promises to provide a bright light in a dark place, water and strength in a dry and parched land, and the rebuilding and reoccupation of ruined places. These metaphors indicate God's working to bring relief and reversal of his people's trials and suffering, just as his faithful people relieve and reverse the plight of the poor and oppressed.*

5. When we think of the Sabbath, we frequently think of a day of rest and cessation of activity. But what other aspect of observing the Sabbath does Isaiah emphasise in vv.13-14? If we were to observe the Sabbath in such a manner and with such an inward attitude, what would our day look like?

Sidebox: The Sabbath in the Prophetic literature

The prophetic texts [...] utilize the Sabbath as an example for how the Israelites “ritualized” the ceremonies God commanded, losing the inner meaning of the event. God expresses that observing the Sabbath (among other festivals, rituals, and offerings) is detestable when conducted for the wrong reasons (Isa 1:13; Ezek 22:8, 26, 23:38).

- Ezekiel 20:12–24 details that profaning (perhaps meaning secularizing) the Sabbath occurred as early as the period of the exodus, and is not unique to the time of the prophets. Profaning the Sabbath brings about God’s wrath.
- Jeremiah 17:21 echoes this negative tone, warning that ignoring the Sabbath will lead to the destruction of Jerusalem.
- Hosea 2:11 specifies that one consequence of Israel’s disobedience will be the discontinuation of Israel’s celebrations.
- Amos 8:5 details that the Israelites were eager for the Sabbath to end so they might engage in commerce.

The prophetic texts also contain positive references to the Sabbath.

- Isaiah 56:1–4 illustrates that a person (applying to Israelites and non-Israelites) who preserves justice and does righteousness is blessed and will not profane the Sabbath.
- Isaiah 58:13 and 66:23 emphasize that Sabbath observance includes a voluntary abstinence from personal pleasures in order to follow God’s will.
- Ezekiel 20:12, 20 stresses that the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant between God and Israel.

As with the historical books, the prophetic texts highlight abstinence from work on the Sabbath and a call to keep the day holy (Jer 17:21–27).

- From Bryan C. Babcock, “Sabbath,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

Response, Application, Prayer

6. Perhaps we have difficulty in recognising our own blindspots, or we think we lack the ability or courage to act generously with love and grace. Ask God to guide us and to show us the areas or the people to whom we can be compassionate and fair towards.