
Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y O N E

REVIVAL *that* **COUNTS**

Perhaps the leaders initiated the call for revival. Or maybe the people themselves sensed the need for reformation across their community. They had been called to be the people of God in their past and they rightly felt it was time to refocus their lives on God—and that God should bless them more obviously.

They began to meet together daily to worship, praying for God's power and presence to be with them. They studied the Scriptures and encouraged each other in their spiritual practices. The people even fasted for periods of time, going without food to express their devotion and their desire for greater holiness.

But somehow it seemed God did not notice or respond. Despite their apparent earnestness, seemingly fervent prayers, and many worship services, the people did not feel any closer to God—or God to them. At first, they re-doubled their efforts. God must want greater commitment, they thought, a more whole-hearted 24-7 kind of faithfulness. Pray harder. Study harder. Worship more. Give more. Give up more.

But some of the people began to tire of these spiritual exertions. While some continued to fast regularly, others began to give up and return to their former routines. If God would not recognise and respond to their prayers and offerings in more powerful ways, perhaps He was not so interested in them after all—maybe they were not His people anyway. Who were they to think they could be anyone special?

Then the prophet arrived. Isaiah was known around the nation for his strident pronouncements and his claims to speak on behalf of God. He certainly caught the people's attention when he arrived at the temple and his proclamations echoed around the city like a trumpet blast. He had a message from God.

"Why have we fasted," the people asked God, finally able to voice their frustrations with their recent faithfulness, "and You have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and You have not noticed?"

Isaiah reported that God had noticed their efforts to catch His attention but He was not impressed. Their hard spiritual work was noted, but not appreciated. Their religious endeavours were somehow missing the mark of what God longed to see in His people.

The problem with religion

Like all of us, the relationship and faithfulness of God's people went up and down across the years encompassed by the stories of the Old Testament. During the better times in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the people would return to the temple and the worship of God from time to time. But, according to the prophets, sometimes even the people's most focused attempts at religion were not enough to turn them from the injustice and self-centredness in their daily lives, how they failed to care for, help, and serve others. And no matter how hard they worked at being

religious through their rituals of worship, they could not drown out the cries of the poor and oppressed by the music of their hymns.

The prophet Amos described the people of his day as those who "trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land" (Amos 8:4). He imagined their anxiousness to be done with worship in the form of Sabbath and the New Moon festival so they could reopen the market and get back to their dishonest trade, "buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals" (Amos 8:6). Why bother with this form of religion, Amos said to these merchants, if it only gets in the way of the exploitation and profit that is your real focus in life?

While we might not run a business, deny paying wages to our employees, or seem to actively oppress others, do we take the opportunities we do have to care for, help, and encourage those who are hurting, disadvantaged, lonely, unwell or forgotten?

Through His prophets, God used strong language to express His disappointment with religion and worship that is disconnected from the things that were wrong in the world around them, the people who were hurting and the wrong that was done to them. We read of God saying that He “hates,” “despises,” and is generally disgusted by their worship. Their gatherings are described as a “stench,” and their offerings and music are dismissed as less than worthless.

In Micah 6, we see a series of increasingly inflated suggestions as to how we can most appropriately worship God. The prophet offers the suggestion of burnt offerings, then increases the offering

to “thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil” (verse 7) before going to the horrific—but not unknown—extreme of suggesting sacrificing his firstborn child to gain God’s favour and forgiveness.

But the answer is more simple, more profound, and more worshipful: “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Back to Isaiah 58

Speaking through Isaiah, this is how God responds to His people in search of revival: the kind of worship I want from you is to serve those who need your help. Help people be released from the things that

hold them back, help them live as freely as possible. Feed the hungry. Provide shelter to the homeless and those who need it. Share clothes with those who don’t have enough (see Isaiah 58:6, 7). Even if we have only a little, it might be more than someone else has, and God calls on us to be generous with any resources we have to those who we can help.

Such service is not merely a “nice” thing to do; these verses describe it as a way to worship God. It is not the only way to worship but, speaking through Isaiah to His revival-focused people, God urged them to try this seemingly different approach to worship. In God’s view, it seems this form of worship might be preferable



to some of the people's more traditional worship practices, especially if that worship is conducted while ignoring the needs of others.

Worship is not inwardly focused but something that brings a blessing to all those around the worshippers of God. It is remarkable that the spirit of Jesus and the heart of faithfulness to God are so other-focused that even our spiritual renewal is not about us—reaching out instead to the poor, the oppressed, the hurting, and the hungry. “The true purpose of religion is to release men from their burdens of sin, to eliminate intolerance and oppression, and to promote justice, liberty and peace” (Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, Vol 4, page 306).

In Isaiah 58:8-12, God promises blessings in response to this form of worship. In effect, God is saying that if the people were less focused on themselves they would find God working with them and through them to bring healing and restoration. This

was the revival the people were seeking, a renewal of their hope and purpose as found in God with a real sense of His presence in their lives and community: “Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I” (Isaiah 58:8, 9).

Sabbath sharing

Interestingly, Isaiah 58 also connects this serving-others kind of worship with a renewal of “delight”-filled Sabbath keeping, which is something that should catch our “Seventh-day” attention. Compared to their religious strivings described earlier in God’s response through Isaiah, Sabbath is a gift. It arrives each week and we are called to remember and honor it. Sabbath is a symbol of God’s grace by which our salvation

is not earned but received. This is an important symbol of our humble walk with God (remember Micah 6:8).

But, as well as being a valuable element of our relationship with God, there is something about Sabbath that should transform our relationships with others. In the form of Sabbath, this same grace and goodness is to be shared with others. Reflecting on these verses, Ellen White commented, “upon those who keep the Sabbath of the Lord is laid the responsibility of doing a work of mercy and benevolence” (Welfare Ministry, page 121).

One of the obvious things from a quick reading of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20) is that the fourth commandment is the most detailed by far. While some of the commandments are recorded in as few as three words in some translations, the fourth commandment gives space to the why, how, and who of “remembering the Sabbath day.”

Significant among these Sabbath details is the focus on others. In *The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, Sigve Tonstad describes how this kind of command is unique in all the cultures of the world. The Sabbath commandment, he explains, “prioritizes from the bottom up and not from the top looking down, giving first consideration to the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Those who need rest the most—the slave, the resident alien and the beast of burden—are singled out for special mention. In the rest of the seventh day the underprivileged, even mute animals, find an ally” (*The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, pages 126-7).

The fourth commandment urges that Sabbath is a day to be enjoyed by everyone. From the view of Sabbath, we are all equal. If you are an employer during the week, you have no authority to make your employees work on Sabbath—God gave them a day of rest. If you are a

student, an employee, or even a slave for the rest of your days, the Sabbath reminds you that you are equally created and redeemed by God, and God invites you to celebrate this in ways other than your usual tasks or duties. Even those outside the Sabbath-keeping people—“any foreigner residing in your towns” (Exodus 20:10)—should benefit from the Sabbath if it is within our capacity as Sabbath keepers.

Little wonder that Isaiah would describe the Sabbath as a delight as we set aside a day to focus on things that are more important than all the other things that keep us busy for the rest of the week (see Isaiah 58:13). Again these verses come with a promise of renewal, delight, and an ever-growing closer relationship with our God (see verse 14).

Jesus and the religious people

Of course, it should not surprise us that Jesus knew a lot about the message of Isaiah 58. He

lived a life of caring and service. His interactions with others, His healing miracles, and many of His parables demonstrated and urged that a life lived in such a way was the best kind of devotion to God. But the religious leaders were both His greatest critics and the target of His harshest criticism.

Like the religious people of Isaiah’s day, these people worked hard at being religious and believed they ensured their special relationship with God because of their religious practices. But at the same time they were exploiting the poor and ignoring the needy (see Mark 12:38-40). Their worship was out of step with their justice and Jesus did not hold back His condemnation of such hypocrisy.

Perhaps Jesus’ most frightening sermon—particularly for religious people—is that found in Matthew chapter 23. Not only did Jesus describe their religion as not helping people who are disadvantaged in life, but He considered such religion as adding to their

burdens. By their actions, or at times their lack of action and caring, Jesus said, they “shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces” (Matthew 23:13).

But echoing the prophets of centuries earlier, Jesus also directly addressed the gap between their serious religious practices, and the injustices they condoned and profited from. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23). Jesus was quick to add that religious practices and observances are not wrong in themselves, but they should not take the place of “doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly and faithfully with God,” echoing Micah’s call to true worship and truer revival.

Isaiah’s call and promise

We don’t know how those first hearers of Isaiah’s call to truer revival responded. As demonstrated by the fact that Jesus confronted these same religious issues, perhaps there are always those who are content with mere religion, while others hear the call to worship in a way that truly changes us and those around us. Perhaps that is why Isaiah’s voice like a trumpet blast still echoes today.

Ellen White urged that the principles and action described in Isaiah 58 were important for the church she cared about: “Read this chapter

carefully and understand the kind of ministry that will bring life into the churches. The work of the gospel is to be carried by our liberality as well as by our labours. When you meet suffering souls who need help, give it to them. When you find those who are hungry, feed them. In doing this you will be working in lines of Christ’s ministry. The Master’s holy work was a benevolent work. Let our people everywhere be encouraged to have a part in it” (Welfare Ministry, page 29).

If we are serious about following Jesus, we will also focus on others. If we are serious about Sabbath keeping, we will allow its grace to benefit everyone through us. If we are serious about revival, we will be serious about service.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- 1. How would you explain what has gone wrong in the relationship between God and His people as described in the early part of Isaiah 58?**
- 2. Have you ever thought about doing justice and loving mercy as acts of worship? How might this change your approach to caring for others? How might this change your approach to worship?**
- 3. Do you think your relationship with God could be renewed through more “active” worship such as that described in Isaiah 58? How could this happen?**