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Old Testament: Isaiah 58:1-12

Context: Isaiah 58 is a wake-up call from God: real worship is not loud religion or empty sacrifice, but justice, mercy, and repair. It confronts performative spirituality and ties spiritual renewal to how we treat our neighbors, especially the vulnerable.

FALSE AND TRUE WORSHIP

Shout out; do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments;
they want God on their side.

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day
and oppress all your workers.

You fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.



Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, “Here I am.”

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your needs in parched places
and make your bones strong,
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water
whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

OVERVIEW

Isaiah 58:1-12 challenges a people who are serious about religious practice (fasting, prayer, public devotion) but disconnected from the kind of life God actually calls “faithful.” They want God’s attention and blessing, but they are ignoring injustice, exploiting workers, and neglecting the poor.

The passage has two big moves:

1. **God exposes fake fasting** (religion that looks holy but keeps people crushed).
2. **God defines true fasting** (loosing bonds, sharing bread, housing the homeless, lifting burdens), and then promises what follows: light, healing, guidance, restoration, and becoming “repairers of the breach.”

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

What comes right before (Isaiah 57)

Isaiah 57 includes hard words about idolatry, spiritual unfaithfulness, and hypocrisy. But it also includes a tender theme: God is “high and lifted up,” yet close to the contrite and humble, to revive and heal. **The pattern is: God confronts sin, but aims toward restoration.**

Our passage (Isaiah 58:1-12)

God tells the prophet to speak plainly and loudly (“cry aloud”) because the people are religiously active and spiritually confused. They ask, “Why have we fasted and you do not see?” God answers: because your fasting is mixed with oppression, quarrels, and self-serving religion.

Then God redefines fasting as justice-and-mercy in public life, and ties it to community healing and rebuilding.



What comes right after (Isaiah 58:13-14)

Immediately after, the focus shifts to Sabbath delight: honoring God's ways not as burden but as joy. So, the flow is important:

- True worship is justice and mercy (58:1-12),
- and true devotion is also learning delight, restraint, and reverence (58:13-14).
In other words: God wants both right worship and right living, fused together.

Broader narrative and theological context of Isaiah

Isaiah is a long prophetic book that spans judgment and hope:

- **Sin named honestly** (idolatry, injustice, hollow worship).
- **God's holiness and mercy** held together.
- **A vision of restoration:** God sets things right, not just inside individuals, but in the community, the city, and the world.

Isaiah repeatedly insists that "religious activity" without justice is spiritual self-deception. And it repeatedly promises that God's salvation is not merely private, but societal: healing, peace (shalom), and restoration.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Isaiah 58 reads like it was spoken into a society where:

- Religious practice was visible and valued.
- Economic life included exploitation (especially of laborers and the poor).
- People believed fasting could obligate God, like a spiritual transaction.

In the ancient Near Eastern world (including Judah), fasting was often practiced during crisis, repentance, or petition. But this text confronts a common temptation: using religious ritual to secure divine favor while keeping unjust systems intact.

Politically, the prophets often addressed:

- Unequal power between landowners/employers and laborers.
- Corrupt courts or leadership that favored the wealthy.
- Neglect of widows, orphans, foreigners, and the poor.

So, Isaiah 58 is not "a random moral lecture." It is covenant language: if you are God's people, your worship must show up in your economics, your speech, your work practices, and your care for the vulnerable.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

Isaiah is complex because it spans themes and eras. A helpful (simplified) framing:

- **8th century BC:** The historical prophet Isaiah is active in Judah (roughly during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah). Assyria is the major threat.
- **Late 7th to 6th century BC:** Judah collapses; Babylonian exile follows (Jerusalem falls in 586 BC).



- **Late 6th to 5th century BC:** Many scholars locate material like Isaiah 56-66 in the **post-exilic** period, when people returned and rebuilt but faced disappointment, inequality, and religious conflict.

Isaiah 58 fits very naturally in a post-exilic setting: people are rebuilding religious identity, but old injustices are reappearing and spiritual life is turning performative.

BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original language and dating

- **Language:** Hebrew.
- **Likely setting:** Many scholars place Isaiah 56-66 (including chapter 58) in the post-exilic era, though the book as a whole holds material across multiple periods.

Major stages of English translation (very brief)

- **Early:** Latin Vulgate influenced Western Christianity for centuries.
- **Reformation-era English:** Translations like Tyndale and the KJV shaped English biblical vocabulary.
- **Modern era:** Translations balance word-for-word accuracy with clarity (examples: RSV/NRSV, NASB, NIV, ESV, CEB).

Theologically significant translation choices (layered words)

- **“Fast”:** not just skipping meals; it implies a religious practice meant to express repentance or urgency before God. Isaiah treats it as hollow if it does not change behavior.
- **“Loose the bonds of wickedness / undo the straps of the yoke”:** the imagery is emancipation language. Isaiah isn’t calling for upheaval. He’s calling for us to notice where we may be adding weight to someone else’s life — and start removing it.
- **“Oppression”:** the Hebrew idea includes being crushed, exploited, or treated violently by systems or people.
- **“Righteousness” and “glory” going before/behind you (v. 8):** “righteousness” is not only personal morality; it is right-order living and covenant faithfulness. The “glory” of the Lord evokes God’s protective presence.
- **“Repairer of the breach” (v. 12):** breach is a break in a wall, a rupture in community life. This is social restoration language: rebuilding trust, safety, and communal integrity.

These layers matter because the passage is not mainly about private spiritual discipline. It is about public faithfulness that reshapes the community.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

A scholarly metaphorical read sees Isaiah 58 as diagnosing a spiritual illness: **the separation of devotion from responsibility.**

Think of it like this:

- The people want “religion” to function like a receipt: “We fasted. Where is our blessing?”
- God says: “Your worship is not a coupon. It is a covenant.”



Metaphor: “The cracked foundation”

Isaiah 58 suggests a community can look fine above ground (services, events, public prayers) while the foundation is cracked (exploitation, neglect, contempt, poverty untreated). God is not impressed by the paint job if the house is unsafe.

Grant County translation (how this lands locally)

In a place like Grant County, this passage presses on very ordinary, very local issues:

- **Work and wages:** Are workers treated fairly, scheduled fairly, spoken to with dignity? (Think factories, service jobs, farms, small businesses.)
- **Housing and stability:** “Bring the homeless poor into your house” is not only personal charity; it is a community posture toward housing insecurity, evictions, utility shutoffs, and “people one paycheck away.”
- **Food insecurity:** “Share your bread with the hungry” sounds like pantries, school lunches, neighbors quietly struggling, and the gap between “plenty” and “barely.”
- **Community repair:** “Repairer of the breach” sounds like mending broken trust across church/community lines, addressing loneliness, addiction fallout, and the quiet fractures that happen when people feel unseen.

Isaiah is basically saying: if our religion does not touch real need, it has become a performance. But if it does, the community becomes brighter, healthier, and more resilient.

HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Examine our version of “performative faith.”**
Not just “Are we religious?” but “Is our faith costly in love, fairness, and honesty?”
- **Connect worship to economics.**
Ask: Do my spending, hiring, wages, generosity, and political instincts treat neighbors as image-bearers?
- **Practice a “fast” from harm.**
Isaiah’s fast includes restraining the tongue, refusing contempt, ending exploitation, and lifting burdens.
- **Choose one concrete repair.**
One family helped, one neighbor checked on, one policy supported, one ministry strengthened, one relationship repaired.
- **Expect God’s promises to be communal, not just individual.**
The “light” and “healing” in Isaiah 58 are not only inner feelings. They look like restored neighborhoods, strengthened families, and renewed trust.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *Where do you see the passage connecting “worship” and “workplace ethics”?*
- *Which phrase hits hardest: “pointing the finger,” “speaking wickedness,”?*
- *What might “sharing your bread” look like in a community where people hide need out of pride?*
- *When does religious devotion become a way to avoid responsibility rather than embrace it?*
- *What is one realistic action we could take this week that aligns with Isaiah 58:6-7?*



Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

Context: Matthew 4:1-11 shows Jesus, immediately after his baptism, stepping into the wilderness to face temptation. It is a story about identity under pressure: what we do when we are hungry, afraid, and offered shortcuts.

THE TESTING OF JESUS

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished.

The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written,

*‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”*

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

*‘He will command his angels concerning you,
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”*

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, *‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”*

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

*‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’ ”*

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

OVERVIEW

This passage is often called “The Temptation of Jesus.” After his baptism (Matthew 3), Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, fasts forty days, and is tempted three times by the devil:

1. **Stones to bread** (use power to satisfy hunger and prove yourself).
2. **Jump from the temple** (force God to prove He is with you).
3. **Bow for the kingdoms** (gain influence through compromise).

Jesus answers each temptation with Scripture from Deuteronomy, refusing to treat God as a tool, refusing spectacle, and refusing power gained by worshipping something other than God. The scene ends with the devil departing and angels ministering to Jesus.



BIBLICAL CONTEXT

What comes immediately before (Matthew 3:13-17)

Jesus is baptized by John. A voice from heaven declares, “This is my Son... with whom I am well pleased.” That matters because the temptations immediately attack that identity: “If you are the Son of God...”

What comes immediately after (Matthew 4:12-17)

Jesus begins his public ministry in Galilee: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The wilderness showdown is a kind of “pre-game film”: it reveals what kind of Messiah Jesus will be (not a stuntman, not a magician, not a tyrant).

Broader narrative and theological context of Matthew

Matthew is written to present Jesus as:

- The fulfillment of Israel’s story (“this happened to fulfill...” appears often).
- A new Moses-like figure (teaching on a mountain, authoritative interpretation of the law).
- The King whose kingdom is not built through violence, manipulation, or compromise.

In Matthew, temptation is not just about personal morality; it is about **what kind of kingdom** Jesus will bring, and **how** it will be established.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

- **Roman occupation:** First-century Judea and Galilee lived under Roman imperial control. “Kingdoms of the world” were not abstract; they were real political systems with real power, taxes, and violence behind them.
- **Messianic expectations:** Many Jews longed for deliverance. There were multiple visions of what that deliverance might look like (revolution, reform, purity, withdrawal). The third temptation (power over kingdoms) is a direct challenge: “Take the fast track. Rule now.”
- **Temple culture and public proof:** The temple was the center of religious, social, and political life. The temptation to jump from the temple is basically: “Win people with spectacle. Force a sign. Make it undeniable.”

This scene hits three classic “pressure points” of any community under strain: survival, certainty, and control.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- **Event timeframe (Jesus’ life):** Early in Jesus’ ministry, immediately after John’s baptism.
- **Approximate dating:** Often placed around the late 20s AD (exact year debated), during the period of Roman rule in the region.
- **Matthew’s composition (approximate):** Common scholarly ranges place Matthew in the **late first century AD** (often around 70-90 AD), written for a community wrestling with how Jesus fulfills Israel’s Scriptures and how to live faithfully under imperial realities.



BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

Original language and key terms

- **Language:** The Gospel of Matthew was written in **Greek**.
- **“Tempted”:** Can mean “tempt,” but also “test” or “prove.” The sense is not only seduction into sin; it is pressure that reveals what is true.
- **“Devil”:** Literally “slanderer” or “accuser.” The voice that twists identity and questions trust.
- **“Worship”:** To bow down, to give ultimate allegiance. The third temptation is about loyalty, not merely behavior.
- **“Bread alone”:** Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3. It is about trusting God’s word and timing, not manufacturing control.

Major stages of English translation (very brief)

- Early English: Wycliffe (from Latin), then Tyndale (from Greek), then major lineage through the King James Version.
- Modern era: a wide range of translations using earlier manuscript evidence and modern scholarship (some more word-for-word, some more thought-for-thought).

Theologically significant translation choices (where one English word carries layers)

- **“Tempted” vs “tested”:** If you only hear “tempted,” it sounds like a private moral struggle. If you hear “tested,” it also sounds like: “What kind of Messiah will you be?”
- **“If you are the Son of God”:** This can be heard as “since you are” (a rhetorical challenge) or as a direct attempt to destabilize identity. Either way, the goal is to make Jesus prove himself on the devil’s terms.
- **“It is written”:** Jesus’ repeated phrase emphasizes Scripture as formation, not ammunition. He is not just quoting verses; he is staying inside God’s story.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

A helpful metaphorical read: these three temptations are the three big “shortcut offers” that show up whenever we try to do good in the real world.

1. Turn stones to bread (survival without trust)

- a. Metaphor: “Do whatever it takes to meet the need right now.”
- b. Modern: When anxiety is high, we justify harshness, dishonesty, or scapegoating because “we have to survive.”
- c. Grant County angle: When factories, farms, schools, or local budgets feel tight, the temptation is to treat people as problems to manage rather than neighbors to love. “We need results” becomes permission to lose our soul.

2. Jump from the temple (certainty through spectacle)

- a. Metaphor: “Make faith prove itself with signs so you do not have to live with mystery.”
- b. Modern: The craving for viral proof, dramatic stories, outrage headlines, or “owning” someone in debate.
- c. Grant County angle: Small-town life can magnify reputation. People sometimes want public religion that is impressive, not necessarily faithful. This temptation asks: Are we serving God, or performing God?



3. Bow for the kingdoms (influence through compromise)

- a. Metaphor: “You can do a lot of good... if you just bend the knee to the system.”
- b. Modern: Trading integrity for access. Using fear, manipulation, or “ends justify means.”
- c. Grant County angle: Local politics, church conflicts, school board drama, community leadership, even family systems: it is easy to believe “I can fix things if I just play their game.” Jesus refuses. The kingdom does not arrive by worshipping power.

In this reading, the wilderness is not just a place. It is any moment where you are stripped down to essentials and forced to choose what you actually worship.

HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Name the temptation before it names you.** Most of our failures start as reasonable-sounding stories: “I deserve this,” “I have to,” “It will help in the long run.”
- **Treat identity as gift, not achievement.** Jesus does not prove he is God’s Son by doing tricks. He lives from what was already spoken at baptism.
- **Use Scripture as formation, not a weapon.** Notice: the devil quotes Scripture too. The issue is not quoting verses; it is whether the interpretation serves trust and love or serves control and ego.
- **Refuse shortcuts that cost your soul.** If the “solution” requires dehumanizing others, manipulating truth, or worshipping influence, it is not the kingdom of God.
- **Practice small resistances.** Temptation is usually not a dramatic cliff-jump. It is tiny compromises that slowly become your personality.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *Which of the three temptations feels most “modern” to you right now?*
- *Where do you see “shortcut spirituality” today (trying to get outcomes without formation)?*
- *The devil begins with “If you are...” Where do you hear that voice in your own life (doubt, shame, proving)?*
- *Jesus answers with Scripture, but the devil also quotes Scripture. What is the difference between using the Bible to form us and using it to win?*
- *What does “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” look like in everyday life (especially when we are scared)?*
- *What is one compromise that looks small but would slowly change who you are?*
- *What is one practical “wilderness practice” you could try this week (silence, fasting from media, accountability, prayer, generosity)?*



Addendum

Isaiah 58:1–12 — If It Were Said Today (Plain English)

“Say this clearly and don’t soften it.

My people think they’re doing great spiritually.

They show up.

They fast.

They pray.

They act like they want to know my will.

And then they complain that I don’t seem impressed.

Here’s why.

*On the very days you’re trying to be ‘religious,’
you’re still pushing people around.*

You’re still taking advantage of others.

You’re still fighting, arguing, and cutting people down.

*Skipping meals doesn’t impress me
if you’re still mistreating people.*

*Looking miserable in public so others see how spiritual you are?
That doesn’t move me either.*

Here’s the kind of ‘fast’ I actually care about:

Stop exploiting people.

Stop crushing others with your power.

Release people from unfair burdens.

*If someone is stuck in a system that’s hurting them,
help loosen it.*

If someone is hungry, feed them.

If someone doesn’t have shelter, don’t look away.

If someone is struggling and you can help, do it.

Don’t pretend they aren’t your responsibility.

If you live like that,

things will change.

You’ll see clearly again.

Healing will come faster than you expect.

Your integrity will protect you.

You’ll sense my presence with you.

*When you call for help,
you won’t feel alone.*



*If you stop pointing fingers,
stop spreading venom,
stop talking about people like they're disposable,
and instead spend yourselves helping the exhausted and overwhelmed,
then light will show up in dark places.*

*Your life will feel steady.
You'll have what you need.
You'll become the kind of person
others can rely on.*

*And your community —
the parts that feel broken and worn down —
can actually be rebuilt.*

*People will say about you:
'They helped put things back together.'*

Comment:

Now... here's the interesting part.

When we strip away the poetry, we realize something: **It's not complicated.**

It may be uncomfortable, but that may be why the poetry is there. Poetry softens the blow just enough to get it heard.

But in plain English? It sounds like a performance review from God.

[Matthew 4:1-11— If It Were Said Today \(Plain English\)](#)

Matthew 4 is different.

- It's narrative.
- It's already fairly direct.
- It's almost cinematic.

If we rewrote it as if someone today were telling it, it might sound like this:

- *Right after his baptism, Jesus didn't go celebrate. He went alone. No food. No crowd. Forty days.*
- *When you're that hungry, the mind starts bargaining.*
- *A voice says: "You're God's Son? Then why are you starving? Fix it."*
- *Then: "If God's really with you, prove it. Make it undeniable."*
- *And finally: "You could have influence right now. Just bend a little."*

Jesus refuses the shortcuts.

He chooses trust over control, obedience over spectacle, faithfulness over power.

This tells us something: Matthew is already written in pretty tight, straightforward Greek. It's not dense Hebrew poetry. It's storytelling with theological intent.



If we wrote it today, three things might come out more strongly:

1. **Internal struggle** – Modern storytelling emphasizes inner psychology. Matthew is sparse. We might highlight Jesus' emotional state more than the text does.
2. **Tone of the “devil”** – We might translate it less as a horned villain and more as a whispering inner accuser.
3. **Systemic temptation** – A modern writer might frame the third temptation as institutional or political compromise more explicitly.

But the bones of the story?

They hold up remarkably well.

Narrative ages better than prophecy in translation exercises.

