

# Adult Teaching Resources

August 16, 2020



## What the World Needs Now...

Genesis 32:22-32—"The World Needs Engagement"

1 Kings 19:9-18—"The World Needs Faith"

**Isaiah 56:1-8 (RCL 1, 6-8)—"The World Needs Justice"**

Isaiah 51:1-8 (RCL 51:1-6)—"The World Needs to Remember"

Jeremiah 15:15-21—"The World Needs Mercy"

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# The World Needs Justice

*Isaiah 56:1-8 (RCL 1, 6-8)*

## FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

### Bible Background

**Key Text: Isaiah 56:1—**

Thus says the LORD:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,  
for soon my salvation will come,  
and my deliverance be revealed.

Exile is a part of the biblical story. For most of us, exile was an idea, something from history, and something we heard about in a sermon. Exile wasn't real until COVID-19.

When the pandemic hit the United States restrictions, stay-at-home orders, and mass closings were the new norm. Travel, even outside of the neighborhood was limited. All of a sudden, exile became real. We started live a biblical narrative.

### Opening

After everyone arrives, have everyone remain in the large group. Ask everyone to think back to the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic and how your church, community, and state reacted.

What were some of the first restrictions you remember?

When was the first Sunday you weren't allowed to worship together? What do you remember about that day?

What was your biggest challenge during the stay-at-home orders?

How has the previous normal shifted now that things are more open?

How has church shifted after the pandemic?

How have you adapted to this side of the coronavirus wave?

Give your group time to remember and share with each other. Spend the necessary time for folks to share before moving on the Bible.

## Reading the Bible

What are we to do until God's salvation comes? (maintain justice and do what is right)

Who is happy? (the one who does what is right, who keeps the sabbath, who does not profane it, and who refrains from doing any evil)

What should the foreigner joined to the Lord not say? ("The Lord will surely separate me from his people.")

What should the eunuch not say? ("I am just a dry tree.")

What will the Lord give to faithful eunuchs? (a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.)

What will the Lord do for the faithful foreigners? (he will bring to his holy mountain and make them joyful in the house of prayer, their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on God's altar)

Who is God's house of prayer for? (all peoples)

Who has God gathered? (the outcasts of Israel)

Who else does God gather? (others beside those already gathered)

## Making Connections

What did it feel like to be under restrictions and executive orders during COVID-19?

What was the first thing you did when restrictions were lifted and you could get back to living "normally?"

What do the words justice, salvation, and deliverance mean to you? How do these words inform your understanding of God?

Our passage begins with the words, "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed." Looking back on your experience in 2020, how did you maintain justice and do what was right during COVID-19? What comfort did God provide during your time at home?

When have you experienced something when you wanted something more than God to help get you through? What was the situation? What did you want? What ultimately happened?

What does Sabbath mean to you? How do you incorporate Sabbath into your spiritual practice?

Have you ever been on the inside of a group that excluded others? What was the group? How did you get in? How did that membership make you feel?

Have you ever been on the outside of a group and been excluded? What was the group? Why didn't/couldn't you get in? How did that exclusion make you feel?

## Making Connections *continued*

Our Lesson Writer says, “Speaking words that would have been radical and provocative, he claimed that God had issued new guidelines that superseded the traditional law with respect to including both eunuchs and foreigners.” Can you think of anyone who should not be offered inclusion into your church? Into God’s kingdom? How inclusive is your community? Your church? You?

What laws can you think of that challenged previous laws of exclusion and division? Why did the new laws get written and passed? How were the new laws accepted and followed?

Are there any “laws of exclusivity” related to worship at your church? For example, is there only a certain group of people that can be ushers? Are a select few only allowed to handle the Lord’s Supper (communion)? Is the pulpit open to male, female, and people of all races? What do those laws, or lack of laws, say about your church?

## So What?

In the large group, spend time discussing these thoughts from our Lesson Writer:

“Sometime in the 2040s, America will no longer have a white majority—and the broader church is ahead of the curve. The most dynamic growth in the church is among blacks, Spanish speakers, or other language groups, especially in the Global South.”

“Many ethnic or language groups prefer to worship in their own language or cultural style, but others would love to assimilate into their neighborhood churches.”

“God’s vision is more expansive than many want to recognize. The same God who had gathered “the outcasts of Israel” by returning them from exile also declared “I will gather others to them besides those already gathered” (v. 8).”

What can we do to include others, especially those who are “different” than us, in the kingdom of God?

How much should we ask them to assimilate into our fellowship? How much should be willing to accept as they join us?

What is holding our churches back from fully embracing those who are “different” from us into the life of our church?

What do you think your church will look like in 5 years? 10 years? 15 years? 20 years?

How can we be just and do right by all people?

Give your group time to talk and have conversation. Focus on the fact that God invites everyone into the fold. It’s not up to us to decide who gets to come in. It’s up to God, and we have the responsibility to make them feel welcomed

## The Challenge

This week, think about how you would feel if you weren’t allowed to be a part of your church. What would you miss? What would you want? How would that exclusion affect you? Then, think about who you know that could benefit from being included in your church fellowship. Reach out and invite them.

## Prayer

*Loving God, this has been a different and difficult year. With COVID-19 we have a better understanding of what exile is. We did not like having to stay at home. We did not like having things close. We did not like not being able to get together and worship together. We have a better understanding of what it means to be on the outside. Shift our hearts, Lord, so that we will be more open to including all others in our church. Help us to accept them for who they are and what they bring, for they are your beloved creation. Amen.*

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**The text**—As is often the case, the Revised Common Lectionary text skips over part of the passage. The lectionary text goes from Isaiah 56:1 straight to the inclusion of foreigners in vv. 6-8, bypassing the inclusion of eunuchs in vv. 2-5. This may be so a liturgical reading of the text would line up better with the New Testament readings, which speak to the inclusion of Gentiles. Even so, it neglects an integral part of the prophet’s argument, so we will not ignore it.

**Purity and pedigree**—Census lists found in Ezra 2:1-70 and Neh. 7:6-73 purport to indicate the families who returned from Babylonian exile, indicating those Jews who were considered to be of pure blood—as opposed to Jews left behind in Judah, who might have intermarried with non-Jews.

The total number of returnees is given as 42,360, which is about 12,000 more than the sum of the people on the list. The same total is given in Ezra 7:64, Nehemiah 7:66 and 1 Esdras 5:41, even though the numbers within the three lists differ at several points. None of them add up to 42,360. Some have suggested that only men were included on the list, but women were included in the total. If so, the number of returning women would have been surprisingly small, less than a third of the total.

The number of additional servants (7,337) and singers (245) suggests that many returnees were quite prosperous. Servants, perhaps the singers among them, were considered as personal property and thus included with the other property—such as the 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys that reportedly made the trip, pack animals essential to a successful journey.

**No intermarriage**—Both Ezra (9:1-15) and Nehemiah (10:30, 13:23-27) were insistent that Jews not intermarry with other ethnic groups. The intention was valid, as they feared that the worship of Yahweh would then be mixed with that of other gods. The problem is that those who remained faithful to Yahweh were also excluded, causing serious tension. The prophet behind Isaiah 56:1-8 believed God’s grace was wider than the postexilic leaders believed it to be.

**We don’t want your help**—Ezra 4:1-24 recounts how local Jews who had not been in exile, along with people from other nations who had been imported by the Assyrians but had chosen to worship Yahweh, offered to help rebuild the temple, but the religious leaders refused their aid because their ethnic pedigree was mixed. The people, who still worshiped Yahweh and considered themselves Jews, became known as “Samaritans.” Understandably offended, the Samaritans then sought to undermine and frustrate the work of the “pure” Israelites who had returned to take over. Later, they adapted the Pentateuch to support their worship at a temple they built atop Mt. Gerizim. This schism was at the root of the deep animosity between Jews and Samaritans that maintained even during the time of Jesus.

## Digging Deeper *continued*

**Doing justice**—What does it mean to “maintain justice and do what is right?” (v. 1). Isaiah 58:6-9 offers a fuller definition and also ties the practice of justice with God’s favorable response to the people:

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs 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.

**Keeping Sabbath**—Keeping the Sabbath was one of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:8-11 and Deut. 5:12-15), a central pillar in Israel’s religious life. Violations of the Sabbath were a subject of criticism both during the exile (Ezek. 22:8, 23:38, 46:1) and after the exile (Neh. 9:14, 13:15–21). Isaiah 58 also speaks to the notion of what it means to keep the Sabbath, again connecting it with a divine response:

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
if you call the sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;  
then you shall take delight in the LORD,  
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

**Eunuchs**—In the ancient Near East, eunuchs were typically made that way by castration, but in some cases, the penis was cut off as well.

**Who’s in and who’s out**—Deuteronomy 23:3-6 pointedly excludes Ammonites and Moabites from being accepted as people of Israel, the rationale being that they did not provide assistance to the ancestors who journeyed through their lands after the exodus from Egypt. Surprisingly, despite Israel’s deep-seated animosity toward Edomites (who also failed to help) and the Egyptians who had enslaved them, they were allowed to convert after the third generation (Deut. 23:7).

# The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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## How many Isaiahs were there?

Many readers, especially those who hold to an inerrant, literal interpretation of the Bible, assume that a single author was responsible for the entire content of a biblical book attributed to him. One might argue that the first Isaiah simply had God-given foresight, and during times of meditation, he wrote prophecies concerning specific situations that would not arise for more than 150-200 years. The most likely explanation, however, is that multiple prophets contributed to the compilation of prophecies that became known by the name of its primary author, Isaiah of Jerusalem.

During the eighth century, the Israelites lived in two separate kingdoms: a northern realm called “Israel,” and a southern one known as “Judah.” The first Isaiah, often called “Isaiah of Jerusalem,” spent most of his life in Judah’s capital city, but spoke to the people of both nations. He lived in an age of relative peace and prosperity for the Israelites as a whole, but a time of oppression for the poor as wealthier Hebrews bought up property, often leaving the poor homeless and forced to work as indentured servants. The false security of peaceful times led many to think of religion as a system of required rituals, with no demand for personal righteousness and justice. In various parts of Isaiah 1-39, Isaiah of Jerusalem excoriated the powerful priesthood. He joined the prophets Micah, Amos, and Hosea in decrying injustice and launching verbal barbs designed to deflate Israel’s false sense of security.

Isaiah understood the political scene as well as the economic, social and religious aspects of life in Palestine. During Isaiah’s ministry, the northern kingdom was defeated and its people were scattered to other lands. As the prophet predicted, Judah also fell under the power of Assyria, living as a vassal state. Much of Isaiah 1-39 describes this period in Israel’s life.

With chapter 40, however, the scene clearly shifts from eighth-century Judah to sixth-century Babylon. Judah fell to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE. Many Judahites were marched to Babylon that year, and many more were forced into captivity following the destruction of Jerusalem 10 years later.

God used Isaiah of Jerusalem to afflict the comfortable and warn them of the coming captivity. More than 150 years after his time, as the people languished in exile, God raised up another prophet who spoke comfort to the afflicted. We often speak of him as “Second Isaiah.” This prophet spoke encouragement and hope to a defeated and downhearted people. His work appears in Isaiah 40-55. As he preached in God’s name, this Isaiah envisioned a coming “servant” who would suffer in behalf of his people.

Following the exile, the Hebrews who returned to Jerusalem faced different challenges, which are reflected in Isaiah 56-66. It is possible that Second Isaiah returned with the other

## The Hardest Question *continued*

Hebrews and continued to speak in that context, so some of the prophecies there may be his. This section is not as unified as Second Isaiah, however, and it is likely that multiple prophets arose to preach in the spirit of Isaiah. The first Isaiah had threatened judgment if the people did not repent. Second Isaiah preached hope and deliverance to those who experienced the judgment of exile. The prophets of Third Isaiah sought to explain why Second Isaiah's hopeful promises did not all turn out as expected, and to call for truly faithful response to following God's way.

The possibility that multiple prophets contributed to the book called "Isaiah" does not take away from the Scripture's authority, but testifies to God's interest in providing the message people need to hear in the time they need to hear it.