

10. Doing the Unthinkable

Texts: Isaiah 50-53

Quotes:

- Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it. *Will Durand*
- Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death. *Albert Einstein*
- Soldiers may have actually pounded the nails in Jesus' hands but God Himself is responsible for His death. God killed Jesus! Why would God ever do such a thing? God was extremely angry with us, more angry than we can ever know. *Steve Sweetman*

Introductory questions

What is “unthinkable” in what God does? How is the “suffering servant” imagery important in our understanding of God? Why is he not “desirable” in appearance? Why is he despised and rejected? How does punishment bring peace? If you were to explain the message of Isaiah 53 to someone who did not know Jesus, what would you say?

Discussion ideas

The verses of Isaiah 53 provide the main theme for this week's study. They are poetic, very moving, and persuasive. They reveal in uttermost clarity the mission of Jesus.

Yet even here the Devil has done his work. By perverting understanding as to the method of God's atonement, he has made it appear that God has an unrelenting demand for payment before he will forgive, and that Jesus was made to suffer so that God might be persuaded to offer salvation. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As the Bible makes so clear, Father, Son and Spirit are equally committed to our salvation, and there is no sense to the concept that one part of the Godhead needs to persuade or make provision for another part.

So when we read that “by his stripes we are healed,” we are not to read that in a pagan sense of appeasing the wrath of an offended deity; rather that sin has painful—even fatal—consequences that we need to see and understand. Though we may “consider him stricken by God,” this is our flawed perspective, and not the truth. Otherwise we have the picture of a tyrannical dictator who metes out vindictive punishment on an innocent in order to satisfy his own demands for vengeance. This is not our God, and so when we read “Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,” (53:10 NIV), we must understand that statement in the same context as other Biblical assertions that assign responsibility to God for events that occur that he may not have willed. The classic example is God hardening Pharaoh's heart, but there are many more in which God is credited for actions that he surely did not commit. In stressing the all-powerful nature of God, even Bible writers may be saying more than they intend about the will of God...

Nevertheless, the “suffering servant” described by Isaiah is surely a compelling image of God as he truly is. In looking for their Messiah, this passage seems to have been forgotten by the Jews of Jesus' time. Because they believed they needed a powerful earthly leader who would vanquish the Roman occupiers, they glossed over those passages that did not fit their image of who Messiah should be. Is it possible we can do the same kind of thing—make our Messiah in our own image?

Ellen White Comments

[Isaiah 53:3-5 quoted.] The grace of Christ and the law of God are inseparable. In Jesus mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other. In His life and character He not only reveals the character of God, but the possibility of man. He was the representative of God and the exemplar of humanity. He presented to the world what humanity might become when united by faith with divinity. The only-begotten Son of God took upon Him the nature of man, and established His cross between earth and heaven. Through the cross, man was drawn to God, and God to man. Justice moved from its high and awful position, and the heavenly hosts, the armies of holiness, drew near to the cross, bowing with reverence; for at the cross justice was satisfied. Through the cross the sinner was drawn from the stronghold of sin, from the confederacy of evil, and at every approach to the cross his heart relents and in penitence he cries, "It was my sins that crucified the Son of God." At the cross he leaves his sins, and through the grace of Christ his character is transformed. The Redeemer raises the sinner from the dust, and places him under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As the sinner looks upon the Redeemer, he finds hope, assurance, and joy. Faith takes hold of Christ in love. Faith works by love, and purifies the soul. {1SM 349}

Christ suffered humiliation to save us from everlasting disgrace. He consented to have scorn, mockery, and abuse fall upon Him in order to shield us. It was our transgression that gathered the veil of darkness about His divine soul and extorted the cry from Him, as of one smitten and forsaken of God. He bore our sorrows; He was put to grief for our sins. He made Himself an offering for sin, that we might be justified before God through Him. Everything noble and generous in man will respond to the contemplation of Christ upon the cross. {4T 374}

Extra material

"Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it. The Greek mind, dying, came to a transmigrated life in the theology and liturgy of the Church; the Greek language, having reigned for centuries over philosophy, became the vehicle of Christian literature and ritual; the Greek mysteries passed down into the impressive mystery of the Mass. Other pagan cultures contributed to the syncretist result. From Egypt came the ideas of a divine trinity, the Last Judgment, and a personal immortality of reward and punishment; from Egypt the adoration of the Mother and Child, and the mystic theosophy that made Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, and obscured the Christian creed; there, too, Christian monasticism would find its exemplars and its source. From Phrygia came the worship of the Great Mother; from Syria the resurrection drama of Adonis; from Thrace, perhaps, the cult of Dionysus, the dying and saving god. From Persia came millenarianism, the "ages of the world," the "final conflagration," the dualism of Satan and God, of Darkness and Light; already in the Fourth Gospel Christ is the "Light shining in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it Out." The Mithraic ritual so closely resembled the eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass that Christian fathers charged the Devil with inventing these similarities to mislead frail minds." (*The Story of Civilization, Caesar and Christ*, Will Durant, Part III, 1944, p. 595) <http://www.bible.ca/trinity/trinity-Durant.htm>

"The crowd of Jews and Christians waved signs with phrases like 'God killed Jesus' written on them." Report on demonstration against church sign "Jews killed Jesus": Jean Torkelson and Brian D. Crecente, *Rocky Mountain News*, February 26, 2004.

11. Waging Love

Texts: Isaiah 55, 58.

Quotes:

- In the hope of reaching the moon men fail to see the flowers that blossom at their feet. Any religion or philosophy which is not based on a respect for life is not a true religion or philosophy. Albert Schweitzer

Introductory questions

What does God call us to “buy”? Why is there this emphasis on what are to do, and the costs involved? How does God make it possible for us to be saved? What are the consequences of following God’s value system? Can we claim to be followers of God and not act in the way he does? If God’s ways and thoughts are not like ours, what does this tell us?

Discussion ideas

The lesson (Sabbath pm) asks the question, “What did salvation cost?” That is a frequent question, especially to human minds that are accustomed to financial transactions, contracts, and bargaining. While Scripture certainly identifies the fact that salvation had a high cost, it does not go into details as to whom the payment was made, what the currency was, or other issues that we might like to discuss. Most of all the perspective is that God gave incredibly of himself. But let us not get sidetracked by wondering about the details of this “transaction.” In fact to see this as some kind of contractual process (like buying something in the store) means we miss the main aspect—that salvation is from the freely given graciousness of God himself.

In fact Isaiah 55 says the exact opposite of contract and bargaining! We are invited to come and “buy” without money and without cost! We are encouraged not to spend what we have (our time, talents, selves) on what is not bread. In a world preoccupied with material possessions and physical satisfaction, this is an essential corrective. God wants to have us eat what is good, the spiritual bread of eternal life. And in case we get all philosophical and other-worldly, he explains the practical results of God’s way: “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away...?” (58:6, 7 NIV).

In Wednesday’s lesson we read, “Anyone can be religious; anyone can go through religious rituals, even the right rituals, at the right time, with all the right formulas. But that’s not alone what the Lord wants. Look at the life of Jesus. However faithful He was to the religious rituals of His time, the gospel writers focused so much more on His acts of mercy, healing, feeding, and forgiveness to those in need than on His faithfulness to ritual.” We might even say that is not *at all* what the Lord wants. Rituals and formulas do not save, as the religious authorities in Jesus’ time proved.

How are we to understand the verses that the Lord’s ways are not our ways, and his thoughts not our thoughts? Does this mean we should not try to understand God? Is he telling us he is not to be questioned? These would be false conclusions. God frequently calls for our understanding, and invites our questions. This is not some oppressive appeal to overwhelming authority—rather this is a comfort (in the context) that God *does* know, and that his understanding and actions are not like us in all our frailty and fallibility.

Ellen White Comments

[Isaiah 55:1-3 quoted.] In word and in deed the Messiah, during His earthly ministry, was to reveal to mankind the glory of God the Father. Every act of His life, every word spoken, every miracle wrought, was to make known to fallen humanity the infinite love of God. {PK 6962}

We do not understand the greatness and majesty of God nor remember the immeasurable distance between the Creator and the creatures formed by His hand. He who sitteth in the heavens, swaying the scepter of the universe, does not judge according to our finite standard, nor reckon according to our computation. We are in error if we think that that which is great to us must be great to God, and that which is small to us must be small to Him. He would be no more exalted than ourselves if He possessed only the same faculties. {5T 337}

The piety and advanced spiritual knowledge and growth of a church is proportionate to the zeal, piety, and missionary intelligence that has been brought into it, and carried out of it to be a blessing to the very ones who need our assistance the most. Again I urge you to consider Isaiah 58, which opens a wide and extensive vineyard to be worked upon the lines which the Lord has pointed out. When this is done there will be an increase of moral sources and the church will no more remain almost stationary. There will be blessing and power attending their labor. The selfishness that has bound up their souls they have overcome, and now their light is being given to the world in clear, bright rays of a living faith and godly example. The Lord has His promises for all who will do His requirements. {4BC 11487}

Extra Material

Jesus turns our value systems right around: inside out and upside down. His values are the mirror image of this world's—the exact opposite. All that this world sees as important is reversed in God's kingdom. Priorities are inverted; “reality” is back-to-front. Mirrorland. Or is our world the mirrorland, and God's kingdom the true reality?

For example, in Jesus' “Charter of the Kingdom”—the Sermon on the Mount—those who are truly blessed are those who do not conform to the ways of the world:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Matthew 5:3-6 NIV.

Those who are the “have nots” are the “haves” in God's kingdom, says Jesus. Those who are proud of what they have—whether it's material possessions or presumed spiritual wealth—will be disappointed. The mirrors of mirrorland show us the *way* we are and point out *who* we are. They show us that what we most value is worthless, and they also point out the real nature of God's kingdom. “My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus affirms at the end of his earthly life. So, he tells us, “Seek the first kingdom of God. Get your priorities straight according to God's value system. Look for the things of true value—the treasure hid in the field, the pearl of great price, eternal life.”

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.” Isaiah 55:1-3 NIV. True and lasting treasure is in knowing and trusting God, in valuing His system and His ways, and accepting his eternal salvation.

12. Desire of Nations

Texts: Isaiah 59-61

Quotes:

- Religion is especially liable to reflect the vagaries and weaknesses of human nature; and, as the forms and habits of thought connected with worship take a firmer hold on the mental constitution than do those belonging to any other department of human experience, religious conceptions should be subjected to frequent and careful examination in order to perceive, if possible, the extent to which we are holding on to ideas which are unsuited to existing conditions. *Eliza Burt Gamble*
- When we blindly adopt a religion, a political system, a literary dogma, we become automatons. We cease to grow. *Anais Nin*

Introductory questions

What causes the separation between us and God, and why? Is it true that God cannot hear us? What do the words of Isaiah 59 tell us about sin and its inherent consequences? In this lesson there's much talk about justice—what does this imply? Why did Jesus choose to quote from Isaiah 61 at the beginning of his ministry? How does this apply to us today?

Discussion ideas

The twin themes in this lesson are the consequences of sin and God's answer. Isaiah contrasts the hopelessness in which we find ourselves, and the glorious salvation that God offers.

He points out that it is not because God does not want to help, but that because of our freedom of choice God does not intervene unless we wish. The poetic picture is not of an offended deity who pouts because of our disregard of his rules, who is sulking and refusing to hear what we say, but rather of a loving Father who cannot act because we have turned our backs on him (59:13). The separation is a result of our choice. Through our actions we have separated ourselves from the only Being in the universe who can truly help us. The separation can only be ended through our choice to return to him, and to accept his offer of salvation-healing.

The lesson (Sunday) speaks of this sin-caused separation. "Here is one of the clearest statements in the Bible regarding the effect of sin on the divine-human relationship. Isaiah spends the rest of chapter 59 elaborating on this point, which is seen all through human history: Sin can destroy our relationship with the Lord and thus lead to our eternal ruin—not because sin drives God away from us, but that it drives us away from God." This is very important—because some have taught that the problem is on God's side. The Bible makes it very clear that the problem lies with us, not with God or with some misunderstood concept that God needs to be propitiated ("paid off") before he can end the separation.

Jesus in announcing his mission (see Luke 4:18) chose to quote the words of Isaiah 61, so we should pay close attention to what is said. First of all, it is *good* news. All too often, God is seen as *bad* news! The concepts that are stressed are healing and freedom—exactly what you would expect of a loving, caring, trustworthy God who values freedom above all. The consequences are comfort, gladness and praise (61:3). "I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness." (61:10 NIV).

Ellen White Comments

Had the people in sincerity studied the word for themselves, they would not have been misled. The sixty-first chapter of Isaiah testifies that Christ was to do the very work He did. Chapter fifty-three sets forth His rejection and sufferings in the world, and chapter fifty-nine describes the character of the priests and rabbis.

God does not compel men to give up their unbelief. Before them are light and darkness, truth and error. It is for them to decide which they will accept. The human mind is endowed with power to discriminate between right and wrong. God designs that men shall not decide from impulse, but from weight of evidence, carefully comparing scripture with scripture. Had the Jews laid by their prejudice and compared written prophecy with the facts characterizing the life of Jesus, they would have perceived a beautiful harmony between the prophecies and their fulfillment in the life and ministry of the lowly Galilean. {DA 458}

The gospel which He taught was a message of spiritual life and physical restoration. Deliverance from sin and the healing of disease were linked together. And at the close of His earthly ministry, when He charged His disciples with a solemn commission to go “into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature,” He declared that their ministry would receive confirmation through the restoration of the sick to health. Ye “shall lay hands on the sick,” He said, “and they shall recover.” Mark 16:15, 18. By healing in His name the diseases of the body, they would testify to His power for the healing of the soul. {CT 465-6}

Extra material

If someone has some kind of mental illness, do we worry so much about their odd actions, the way they behave, what they do? Or do we try to help by curing the internal disease, trying to heal what they are, not fix what they do?

It’s the same with sin. Jesus is not after outward conformity. He wants a cured heart. Over and over again Jesus re-emphasizes this point. How did Jesus announce his ministry? Luke 4:18 (a quote from Is. 61:1,2 -- showing that the God of the OT just as keen on healing): “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... he hath sent me to *heal the brokenhearted*.” What a promise! What a clear demonstration of what he wanted to do for the downtrodden, sick and spiritually diseased people around him. And what a promise for us too! Jesus doesn’t want to “clear your bank account of the sin overdraft.” Rather, he wants to free you from sin sickness. That is true salvation—for in the end, you will be healed completely, and sin’s disease will be gone.

God has always been like that. He has always been “the Lord who heals you”. He promises in Jer. 3:22 and Hosea 14:4: “I will heal their backslidings”. He says in Ps. 147:3 that “he heals the broken in heart”. David cried out to God in Psalm 41:4: “Lord be merciful unto me: *heal my soul* for I have sinned against thee. In that prophecy of the healing Messiah we hear: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.” Is. 53:5.

“For the Sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings”. Malachi 4:2. No question about it. Sin is a terrible sickness of the soul, and God is the only one who can heal us.

Imagine you’re sick. Maybe you don’t even know. There are many dread diseases in our world today, despite medical advances. But the doctor diagnoses some major problem. Do you ignore it and hope it goes away? Do you pretend nothing’s wrong? Or do you go to the only one who can treat you and make you well again? Obvious, isn’t it? Even children can see that. Yet when it comes to our spiritual sickness we should listen to the children. They know more than we do, for we so often turn away from the God who promises to heal us.

13. Rebirth of Planet Earth

Texts: Isaiah 65-66.

Quotes:

- Words, like glass, obscure when they do not aid vision. *Joseph Joubert*
- Man creates his own gods; they are powerless to change him. *Eliza Burt Gamble*
- I do not understand those who take little or no interest in the subject of religion. If religion embodies a truth, it is certainly the most important truth of human existence. If it is largely error, then it is one of monumentally tragic proportions—and should be vigorously opposed. *Steve Allen*

Introductory questions

Why is the promise of the future so important to us? Isaiah uses ideas that make sense to his hearers—would it be different if written today? How? Does God wipe our minds so we don't remember the past? What would be wrong with that? Can we enjoy eternity if we are plagued by ideas from the past? What of vegetarian lions? What does God really want (see Is. 66)?

Discussion ideas

God promises a new heaven and a new earth. Much of the New Testament imagery of the future comes from the Old Testament, an expression of what was wonderful for those of that time. No doubt the Bible writers would have used modern metaphors if they had been aware of them. The most important assurance is however the presence in eternity of our loving Lord.

But what will this experience be like? Is it a time of endless harp-playing? And what of our memories? If it is true that the former things will not come to mind, how will we know who we are, and know each other? More importantly even than this self-awareness is the awareness of sin and its consequences, gained at such dreadful cost. Is such evidence to be so quickly erased?

The significance of these words surely points to the experience of unqualified happiness, rather than divinely-engineered amnesia. We will *know* what sin has done, and will continue to *choose* God's way of truth and right. That is what makes God's government secure for all eternity. The alternatives are either continual sin, or the destruction of freedom and choice.

The images of tranquillity and bliss are very much from a pastoral background. Even the savage animals that were feared are now docile and tame. The fear that someone else would benefit from your house and crops is ended. In so many ways the future life is simply described as the opposite of life here—no wrong, no pain, no death etc. But God's eternity is to be seen as the extension of all that is positive, and unlimited in time and scope.

In Isaiah 66, the last chapter, what God truly wants is spelled out. It is not a question of formal obedience, or of rituals and sacrifices. On the contrary, God speaks strongly against those who rely on such mechanical aspects of religious observance. Ending as he began, Isaiah points out the futility of sacrifices to achieve a saving relationship with God. God's "requirement" is spelled out simply and briefly: "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word." (66:2 NIV). This contrasted with the one who sacrifices, who is likened to a murderer and an offerer of pig's blood! Once again God is pleading for a true and honest and open relationship that is not confined by meaningless rituals and false ideas of worship. God seeks an intimate relationship of love, trust and confidence in the present that will continue throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity.

Ellen White Comments

Fellow pilgrim, we are still amid the shadows and turmoil of earthly activities; but soon our Saviour is to appear to bring deliverance and rest. Let us by faith behold the blessed hereafter as pictured by the hand of God. He who died for the sins of the world is opening wide the gates of Paradise to all who believe on Him. Soon the battle will have been fought, the victory won. Soon we shall see Him in whom our hopes of eternal life are centered. And in His presence the trials and sufferings of this life will seem as nothingness. The former things “shall not be remembered, nor come into mind.” “Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and He that shall come will come, and will not tarry.” “Israel shall be saved . . . with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be ashamed nor confounded world without end.” Isaiah 65:17; Hebrews 10:35-37; Isaiah 45:17. {PK 731-2}

In the Bible the inheritance of the saved is called “a country.” Hebrews 11:14-16. There the heavenly Shepherd leads His flock to fountains of living waters. The tree of life yields its fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree are for the service of the nations. There are ever-flowing streams, clear as crystal, and beside them waving trees cast their shadows upon the paths prepared for the ransomed of the Lord. There the wide-spreading plains swell into hills of beauty, and the mountains of God rear their lofty summits. On those peaceful plains, beside those living streams, God’s people, so long pilgrims and wanderers, shall find a home.

“My people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.” “Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise.” “They shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: . . . Mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands.” Isaiah 32:18; 60:18; 65:21, 22...

Pain cannot exist in the atmosphere of heaven. There will be no more tears, no funeral trains, no badges of mourning. “There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying: . . . for the former things are passed away.” “The inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.” Revelation 21:4; Isaiah 33:24.

There, immortal minds will contemplate with never-failing delight the wonders of creative power, the mysteries of redeeming love. . . . And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. {GC 675-8}

Extra material

“The Lord Jesus Christ...is our hope.” “On him we have set our hope.” “We have put our hope in the living God, who is the saviour of all men.” (1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:10; 1 Timothy 4:10 NIV). How amazing and central this hope! Romans 8:24 even says that “We are saved by hope”! How definite and assured this hope is. If you do not have this hope, how can you face the future, how can you live in the present? Only the hope that comes from God can give what we all need the most: confident security in the present, and the assurance of a wonderful future in God’s presence. For “we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (Hebrews 6:19 NIV). What is the result? “Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.” “We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.” “Christ in you the hope of glory.” (2 Corinthians 3:12; Romans 5:2; Colossians 1:27). There *is* hope for this world: the blessed hope.

© Jonathan Gallagher 2004