

The King of Zion and the Epicenter of God's Salvation *The Book of Isaiah*

The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor, Part 2: The Cry of the Sick *Isaiah 58 – 59*

Mako A. Nagasawa

Last modified: September 12, 2021 for Neighborhood Church of Dorchester

Introduction: The Fast Pandemic and the Slow Pandemic

COVID-19 is a pandemic. But if we look carefully, COVID is the fast pandemic. There has been a slow pandemic happening for years. COVID just turned the pressure up and made bad things worse. What do I mean? Here is just one example: According to an April 2021 article in the American Medical Association, children who are obese are more likely to get COVID, to require a ventilator, and to need extra oxygen.¹ That is just one example of how COVID is the fast pandemic. Who are the people who are most likely to have severe COVID symptoms? People who have underlying health problems: not just obesity, but asthma, immune system problems, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Race, money, and immigration status have a lot to do with it. Our profit-driven companies have slowly and steadily stolen our health. It affects us in different ways.

In August of 2012, I developed some weird health problems. First I had gout, which is where uric acid crystallizes in your joints. I had it in my feet. Some people have said that gout pain is the closest thing to labor pains that men can experience. As a man, I'm not able to compare, but it was pretty bad. Next, I started to have skin rashes. I took a blood test and found that I had developed immune reactions to different foods. I tested as pre-diabetic.

It took months to figure out. And at first I was worried it was related to my kidney, because now I only have one kidney. So as part of figuring out what I was allergic to, I went on an elimination diet. I eliminated everything that turned to sugar in my body. No wheat or flour -- so no bread, no crackers, no cake, no pies, no pita bread, no burrito wraps. No rice -- no rice and beans, no curry rice, no sushi rice, no jollof rice. As a person of Japanese descent who loves Asian foods, that was a real challenge. No corn. No barley. No beer. No wine. No fruit. No dairy -- no milk, cheese, ice cream. I would walk by pizza places and my tongue would just hang out. I only ate meat, vegetables, and nuts. And sometimes nuts would give me a skin rash. Even though the rest of my family didn't have to do this diet, we switched to organic. We paid attention to chemicals. It was really hard. During the first few days, I would salivate sugar. It's like my body was craving it, and trying to trip me up.

But let me tell you what happened. I lost 30 pounds, even though I felt like I was constantly eating. I reversed my pre-diabetic condition. My teeth had no plaque on them. My fingernails and toenails became super strong. I stopped snoring. I slept better. I had more energy during the day. I could exercise more effectively and I enjoyed it. And I could fit into pants that I kept from high school. I found that my taste buds adjusted. I snacked on carrots; bell peppers, cucumbers. I was able to taste the subtle natural sweetness of vegetables.

Eventually I found out what the problem was. My small intestine had developed small holes in it. This is also called leaky gut syndrome. So food particles were leaking directly into my bloodstream and causing major problems. And the remedy was to take more vitamin B6 and B12 and a supplement that helped my body absorb the vitamins. My small intestine healed up. But more importantly, as my diet broadened out again, I learned a lot about shopping more carefully, cooking more creatively, and eating more cleanly with nutrient dense foods. So when I think about the slow pandemic happening underneath the fast pandemic, I think about things like this.

Relevance

The title of this series is, *The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor*. So who are the poor? We started on Labor Day, and we considered how Jesus and the original Christian tradition cared about the working conditions of the poor. This

¹ Timothy M. Smith, "The Bad News -- and the Good -- About Obesity and COVID-19," *American Medical Association*, April 14, 2021; <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/bad-news-and-good-about-obesity-and-covid-19> writes, "In addition, it's often thought that kids are much less susceptible to COVID-19, but here again overweight plays a role. Children experiencing bad outcomes often have obesity, requiring ventilation or extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, or ECMO."

week we will consider how, in many ways, the poor are the sick. In future weeks, we'll take different slices of how Scripture answers who are the poor.

And if the Lord hears their cry, then how does He answer? Well, Jesus is God's response to the cry of the poor, because he is the source of a new humanity. Jesus is God's vision of shalom which impacts every aspect of our lives. We will deepen in our love for Jesus, because we'll see him from multiple angles. And as a community, as Neighborhood Church of Dorchester, we can really help each other by being a learning community -- learning together and trying not to be judge-y but appreciating the principles that each person can express.

Context

I'm going to move throughout the whole biblical story throughout this series. But I'm going to start the series with the book of Isaiah. Isaiah the prophet lived some 800 years before Jesus. The Jewish people had been a people for about 400 years. Isaiah served in the royal court at Jerusalem. He saw the power and the corruption. So Isaiah looked backwards to God's creation in Genesis, and looked forwards so much that the four Gospels tell the story of Jesus by quoting from Isaiah's poetry, and the Book of Revelation is built on Isaiah.

Stealing Health: Isaiah 58:6 – 7

We are looking at Isaiah 58 – 59. Isaiah says God hears the cry of the poor. Here is just a small part of Isaiah 58. We read verse 6 last week. This week, let me read a little more, into verse 7.

⁶ “Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free
And break every yoke?
⁷ Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry
And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him;
And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

God had given the Israelites laws which addressed all these things. So when Isaiah the prophet looked at what the rich were doing to the poor, he looked back and asked, is this what God intended? No. God intended for us to be a restoration of Adam and Eve in the garden land. That's why God brought Israel into a new garden land. And Isaiah probably thought about Deuteronomy.

- Nakedness was a form of indebtedness, like student debt, mortgage debt, and medical debt rolled into one. That's because clothes were assets that you could use to get a loan. So if you were naked, it probably means that you took out a loan, were late on a payment, so your creditor came and took your clothes. To fight *nakedness*, God said that when a poor person put their clothes down as collateral for a loan, because it's one of their last valuable things, you have to let them keep their clothes. That is Deuteronomy 24:10 – 13 and 17 – 18.
- To fight *homelessness*, God restored land to families every Jubilee year in Leviticus 25 and told the Israelites to forgive debts in a seven year cycle in Deuteronomy 15.
- To fight *hunger*, God gave the law of gleaning in Deuteronomy 24:19 - 22. You could only harvest your crops once over. The aftergrowth -- what comes up later -- was for people who didn't have land, like the alien, orphan, and widow.
- To fight *wage theft*, God said, “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.” That is Deuteronomy 24:14 – 15.
- Being kidnapped into slavery definitely hurt people's health, as you could be worked to death in the bands of wickedness and bonds of the yoke, as Isaiah says. So God said, “Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death.” That is Deuteronomy 24:7 and Exodus 21:16.

So God had a vision of shalom and justice for Israel on behalf of the world (Deut.4:1 - 6). Shalom means wholeness that leads to human flourishing as God envisioned it. The Israelites were supposed to not mistreat human beings

who bear God's image. But Isaiah saw the rich inflicting poverty, hunger, homelessness, and nakedness upon the poor. Meanwhile, they pretended to be serious about God. They even fasted. Oooohh -- they were people who fasted. You know people who fast are serious about God, right? Do you ever feel intimidated by people who fast because they seem extra spiritual? Well, fasting can be a good spiritual practice. But if you are building up self-restraint by skipping a meal counts and meanwhile you're treating people like slaves, making them go hungry, homeless, and naked, then God says your fasting means nothing. Which is why God was so mad. As Jesus would later say, "You do the little matters of the Torah, but you neglect justice and the love of God" (Luke 11:42).

Of course, stealing wages leads to stealing health from the workers. But there are ways to steal health from the whole community.

I know this is counterintuitive but what we call "obesity" is what the Bible calls "hungry." How can that be? Because people today are undernourished. Let's take sugar, especially processed sugar. Sugar is addictive. And it damages your liver. What does your liver do? Handles the toxins in your body. Where does sugar get processed? Completely in your liver. What does that tell you? That sugar is a poison. The American Heart Association recommends that you eat only 6 - 9 teaspoons of sugar per day. The average American eats how many? 22 teaspoons. So we are overloading our livers and burning them up. What's scary is that we don't know where it comes from. Do you know when you look on the back of a package and see the ingredients? Well what is maltodextrin? A sugar. What is diastase? A sugar. Ethyl maltol? Treacle? Dextran? Sucrose? Rice syrup? Sugar. Why does sugar have so many names? 56 names in all. So companies can hide the poison. How are we eating so much? Only 1/6 of the sugar we eat comes from desserts. Fully half the sugar in our diet comes from food that didn't used to have extra sugar. Today, extra sugar is added to spike the food. Salad dressings. Tomato sauce. Ketchup. Crackers. Hamburger buns. About 1/3 of the sugar comes from drinks, and I strongly urge you to stop drinking soda or anything with high fructose corn syrup, including fruit juice and chocolate milk when schools serve it to children.

What is at the top of the ANDI, the Aggregated Nutrient Density Index? Kale, Collard Greens, Swiss Chard are at 1000; Bok Choy at 895; Spinach at 707; Arugula at 604; Brussels Sprouts at 490; Carrots at 458; Cabbage at 434; Broccoli at 340. Yet U.S. Farm Bill subsidizes corn. We have a lot of high fructose corn syrup because we make so much corn we don't know what to do with it; so companies turn a lot of the corn into corn syrup and high fructose corn syrup, and they stick it in everything. Not only is high fructose corn syrup a poison, causing diabetes and other metabolic diseases, but it's addictive, and it shuts down the receptor in your brain that tells you that you're full. That's why kids can drink a Big Gulp and still feel hungry.

Listen to this: "Only 2% of American children eat a healthy diet... About 16% of the total calories in kids' diets comes from added sugar [as opposed to natural sugar in fruit] and a significant amount is in the form of high fructose corn syrup."² The U.S. has higher rates of childhood obesity than most other countries: 22.7% of kids ages 5 - 9 are obese.³ About 30% of all kids are obese.⁴ About 36% of adults are obese, and 80% of them have type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and other metabolic diseases. But 40% of "normal weight" Americans have those same diseases. Why? Because of how many of our food companies make money by stealing your health.

Hasn't there been this pattern throughout U.S. history? Of course chattel slavery of African Americans was stealing their health, families, and lives. To make what? Sugar. That was the first plantation product. Then tobacco. Are either of these things good for us? No.

But that's a major pattern of U.S. history: The poor are the sick. Because the rich don't want to kill the poor. They want to pay low wages and charge high prices, even for things that aren't even good for you. No wonder the poor are sick.

² Roxy, "15 Countries That Are Killing Their Kids With Obesity," *The Clever*, July 7, 2017; <https://www.theclever.com/15-countries-that-are-killing-their-kids-with-obesity/>.

³ Jacqueline Howard, "Why These Pacific Island Nations Have the World's Highest Childhood Obesity Rates," *CNN*, February 13, 2019; <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/13/health/child-obesity-parenting-without-borders-intl/index.html>.

⁴ Roxy, "15 Countries That Are Killing Their Kids With Obesity," *The Clever*, July 7, 2017; <https://www.theclever.com/15-countries-that-are-killing-their-kids-with-obesity/>.

Then when the cotton gin was invented, it caused even more stealing of health. In the South, it led to a deeper commitment to racial slavery and racial capitalism. They were depleting the soil, so the plantations were stealing from the future health of their own land and people. So Southerners wanted the Western territories to become slave states so they could do the same there. In the North, the big factories stole the health and lives of children. Then came the railroads. Who worked the railroads? The Irish going east to west, and the Chinese going west to east. In freezing cold and searing heat, they lost fingers, arms, and lives, for low pay.⁵ The Library of Congress mentions an old saying: "[there was] an Irishman buried under every tie."⁶ Then came coal power. The Scotch-Irish in the Appalachian Mountains became the country's coal miners. They got black lung. The Navajo dug for uranium. They got cancer. Then, people who live in cities have more asthma, more lead poisoning, are hotter, and have less green space so they have what one New York Times writer called "nature deficit disorder."⁷ Anywhere there are energy companies, people have health problems. Cancer Alley in Louisiana. Springfield, Massachusetts is the asthma capital of the nation.⁸

And then there are patterns at the national level where the poor are the sick. The U.S. military is disproportionately black and brown and lower-income because they recruit more heavily in poorer areas. As veterans come back with mental health and physical health struggles, there's a long history of the government betraying veterans: Veterans have had their pensions withheld, health benefits delayed indefinitely, don't get mental health treatments they need, and are left on the streets.⁹ Not to mention the health and lives stolen from the people of Afghanistan; about 71,000 many of whom were children. Pharmaceutical companies are the biggest political lobby and are totally stealing our health; they keep their prices high through patent laws, even though we as taxpayers funded a lot of their research.

God's Response in Christ: Isaiah and Matthew

So how do we respond to all this? Well, let me translate Isaiah 58

⁶ "Is this not the fast which I choose,

⁷ Is it not to divide your nourishment with the undernourished

And bring the poor into your gated communities;

When you see the indebted, to cover them with good wages and assets;

And not to hide yourself, your finances, and your taxes so that nobody sees what you're doing?"

Illus: One South African Christian theologian, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, says in a paper about food justice, "A church which honestly prays: 'give us today our daily bread' must become a public church, engaged in struggling for a world in which God's gift of daily bread reaches every human being on this earth. This is our calling and this is our promise."

Illus: Another Christian who is a Lebanese-Syrian botanist said in an article about food justice and Jesus. The Roman Empire was stealing the most nutritious and abundant food produced in the Galilee region.¹⁰ Maybe that's partly why when Jesus multiplied the fishes and loaves in the Galilee region, they wanted to make him king (John 6:15). And Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a banquet, where people share their food and the hungry are

⁵ Library of Congress, "Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: Struggling for Work," <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/chinese/struggling-for-work/>.

⁶ Library of Congress, "Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: Joining the Workforce," <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/irish/joining-the-workforce/>.

⁷ Meg St-Esprit McKivigan, "'Nature Deficit Disorder' Is Really a Thing," *New York Times*, June 23, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/parenting/nature-health-benefits-coronavirus-outdoors.html>.

⁸ David Abel, "In the Nation's Asthma Capital, Plans to Burn Wood for Energy Spark Fury," *Boston Globe*, October 20, 2020; <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/10/20/science/nations-asthma-capital-plans-burn-wood-energy-spark-fury/>.

⁹ Liam Brennan, "How Veterans Affairs Denies Care to Many of the People It's Supposed to Serve," *Washington Post*, November 8, 2019; https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/how-veterans-affairs-denies-care-to-many-of-the-people-its-supposed-to-serve/2019/11/08/2c105b48-0183-11ea-9518-1e76abc088b6_story.html. Jen Christensen, "Veterans Aren't Always Getting Mental Care They Urgently Need, Report Finds," *CNN*, February 1, 2018; <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/01/health/veterans-mental-health-care-federal-investigation/index.html>. Sandee LaMotte, "Americans Are Not Getting the Mental Health Treatment They Need, Report Says," *CNN*, May 3, 2021; <https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/03/health/mental-health-treatment-us-wellness/index.html>.

¹⁰ Amy Frykholm, "Enthobotanist Gary Nabhan on Food Justice and Jesus," *Christian Century*, March 31, 2021; <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/enthobotanist-gary-nabhan-food-justice-and-jesus>.

invited and nourished (Luke 14:12 – 33). That is because when God’s kingdom comes in fullness, there is abundance, shalom, and justice.

Listen also to Matthew 8:16 – 17.

16 When evening came, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill. 17 This was [fill to the full] what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: “He Himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases.”

It’s not that Jesus endured every human sickness. It’s that every human sickness is the result of the deeper sickness of fallenness, and a fragment of it. Jesus shared in our sickened human nature that we might share in his healed human nature. That’s why Jesus did miracles of healing. Everything Jesus did outside of himself was a reflection of what he was doing inside of himself, and what he would do inside of us by his Spirit, and what he calls us to do for one another by his love.

Let’s jump back to Isaiah 59:

^{15b} Now the Lord saw,
And it was displeasing in His sight that there was no justice.
¹⁶ And He saw that there was no [human partner],
And was astonished that there was no one to intercede;
Then His own arm brought salvation to Him,
And His righteousness upheld Him.
¹⁷ He put on righteousness like a breastplate,
And a helmet of salvation on His head;
And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing
And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle.

So when Jesus was born as a naked baby, he was wearing righteousness and salvation and vengeance and zeal. When Jesus was stripped naked on the cross, he was wearing righteousness and salvation and vengeance and zeal. Because he was burning righteousness and salvation into his humanity so that we could wear him. He was avenging God’s original vision for who were meant to be. When Jesus was most exposed, that’s when he was most wrapped in zeal.

So when we go into God’s world, vulnerable like Jesus was, we work for God’s shalom and human flourishing. We say, “We are meant to nourish each other and heal each other.” We respond to sicknesses, but we also say, “There is a sickness behind the sickness. And the good news is that in Jesus, there is a healing behind the healing.” And when are reminded that Cesar Chavez prayed and fasted with the United Farm Workers, and called for a boycott on California grapes, we say that is true fasting. When we read about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. standing with the sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee before he was assassinated, we say he was calling for true fasting. When we read about British abolitionists who called for people to stop putting sugar in their tea as they fought to abolish slavery in the sugar plantations, we say that is true fasting.

Application

So in that light, I want you to think and pray about one way you are going to cut down on sugar personally, and in our policies. Personally, it might be that you’re going to stop drinking soda. Or maybe you’re going to make your own lemonade or smoothies at home for your kids so you can control the amount of sugar or use stevia as a sweetener or natural fruit as a sweetener. Or maybe when you go shopping, you’re going to read the label on one thing and learn about that thing. If you like milk chocolate, you can switch to dark chocolate, which is actually good for you. Those are personal choices.

There are also policy choices. Every 5 years, the U.S. Farm Bill comes up in Congress for renewal, write to your Congressperson to reduce the subsidies on corn, and subsidize healthy fruit and vegetables instead.