

An Acceptable Fast: An Adult Lenten Study

Session 1—Isaiah 58:1–12 and Deuteronomy 26:1–11

Be grateful.

Goals for the Session

Participants will review the themes and biblical texts of this study and reflect on the theme of gratefulness.

Preparing for the Session

- This session does not assume that the group members have received and read the Participant Handout prior to meeting. Time will be used during the session for them to read specific sections and discuss them. Distribute the following session's handout at the end of the meeting and agree as a group to come to future sessions having read the handouts.
- Read the Participant Handout and this Leader's Guide and decide how you will lead the session. If possible, read the entire study. It will make for a much better experience if you as the leader know what is coming. Perhaps you will want to make a few changes for your group's needs.
- This is a Lenten study and uses the Old Testament lections for Year C; however, it may be used during any lectionary year.
- Consider adding an additional worship component to the study if this is something your group enjoys. Lighting a candle at the beginning of each session, arranging a center table with cloth and a cross, or singing an opening hymn are some options.
- In this session, activities 1 and 5 ask the leader to summarize important points. Be prepared to do so.
- Make copies of Resource Sheet 1 and distribute it during this first session. Ask participants to

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Today's theme
- Opening discussion question
- Opening prayer

EXPLORING

- Read Isaiah 58:1–12 and "Ash Wednesday"
- Summarize "A Preliminary Roadmap"
- Read Deuteronomy 26:1–11
- Read "The Discipline of Gratitude"
- Small-group elevator speech

RESPONDING

- Write a prayer of gratitude

CLOSING

- Prepare for next session
- Closing prayer

bring it with them each week. It includes space for them to make notes and also offers a reflection question for them to consider during the week.

Materials Needed

- Copies of Participant Handout
- Copies of Resource Sheet 1

- Bibles
- Pens
- Colored slips of paper for bookmarks or posting

Teaching Tips

- Every group has its own dynamic and you know your group best. The Leader's Guides for this study offer ideas and are planned so that a group of three to fifteen people can get through the activities in approximately 55 minutes each session. Feel free to alter sessions depending on your group's preferences. Some groups prefer working alone, others in small groups, and others prefer working together as a large group throughout the session.
- While this study includes some Bible study given that it is based on Old Testament lessons during Lent, it is meant to be used more as a devotional study. Do not get too hung up on technical Bible study questions, especially if it draws away from the reflection time in which participants get to reflect on their response to the theme.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Today's Theme

Welcome participants as they arrive and introduce any visitors. Distribute a copy of the Resource Sheet at the end of this Leader's Guide to each participant. Tell them that it is for their use and that they should bring it to every session during these six weeks. It is for them to use to take notes, and during the week it offers a question for them to consider at home. Briefly introduce the overall theme of the study using the following points as guides:

- The study is based on the Old Testament lectionary texts for Year C.
- Today's session will give a broad overview of the study and then look at one passage from Isaiah and another from Deuteronomy.
- It examines six themes of Christian discipline and reflection. Each week covers one theme.
- Today's theme is gratitude.
- Today we will read parts of the Participant Handout during the session. At the end of each session, the Participant Handout for the following week

will be distributed (either electronically or as a hard copy). Future sessions will assume that the group has read the Participant Handout prior to the session.

2. Opening Discussion Question

Form pairs and invite each person to tell (in under a minute) what makes worship meaningful for him or her. After a few minutes, return as a large group and allow brief responses from pairs.

3. Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks for bringing us together to study your Word. Guide us by your Holy Spirit that through our study we may be led into deeper discipleship as we follow Jesus Christ, our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Exploring (35 minutes)

4. Read Scripture and "Isaiah 58:1–12: Ash Wednesday"

Have participants turn to Isaiah 58:1–12 and read it aloud. Distribute the Participant Handout and allow a few minutes for everyone to silently read the second section, which is titled "Isaiah 58:1–12: Ash Wednesday."

Facilitate a short group discussion based on the following questions:

- What is God's prayer through the ages, according to Isaiah 58:1–12?
- What is the purpose of Ash Wednesday according to the author?

5. Summarize "A Preliminary Roadmap"

To save time, summarize this section of the Participant Handout by mentioning the following points:

- The Old Testament texts used during these six weeks jump around in random order between four different books of the Bible. Our study will focus on important themes for Lent using the readings for the day.
- Please read this section during the week and also pay attention to the text boxes in the Participant Handout this week.
- Today's readings come from the books of Isaiah and Deuteronomy, which cover two very different time periods in Israel's history.

- Isaiah 58 concerns the time around the sixth century BCE, when a destroyed Israel is returning home after years in exile to rebuild its life. Themes of repentance, of avoiding the bad practices of the past, and of protecting the weak and the poor abound.
- Deuteronomy covers Moses' instructions to the Israelites after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years after the exodus from slavery. They are about to enter the promised land.

6. Read Deuteronomy 26:1–11

Have a volunteer read the text aloud.

7. Read “The Discipline of Gratitude”

Allow a few minutes for participants to silently read this section in the Participant Handout.

8. Small-Group Elevator Speech

Gather in groups of two to four persons and have each group prepare a fifteen-second elevator speech summarizing what Moses said. Allow each group to report. Try to hold them to the fifteen-second time limit.

Responding (5 minutes)

9. Write a Prayer of Gratitude

Distribute colored strips of paper and have participants write a brief prayer of gratitude that they would like to use during the season of Lent based on today's texts. They may use a Scripture verse if they prefer. Encourage them to take these home and post them somewhere where they will see them during the season of Lent.

Closing (5 minutes)

10. Prepare for Next Session

Distribute copies of Participant Handout 2 and agree as a group to read it during the week.

Encourage people to take home the Resource Sheet and reflect on the question for week 1 during the week.

11. Closing Prayer

Begin in silence and invite volunteers to read the prayers that they wrote in activity 9. End with the Lord's Prayer said in unison.

Teaching Alternatives

- Some groups may prefer to read the entire Participant Handout in silence at the beginning of the session and discuss it. In that case, use some of the discussion questions in this Leader's Guide and do the Responding activity and Closing ones.
- Decorate bookmarks with phrases from today's Scripture that express the need to be grateful. An alternative is to write the words to contemplate, “What do I have that I have not been given?”

Key Scriptures

Isaiah 58:1–12

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

For More Information

Studies from www.thethoughtfulchristian.com:

Gratitude as a Spiritual Discipline, by Lynne M. Baab

Deuteronomy, by W. Eugene March

Isaiah, by Walter Brueggemann

Resource Sheet 1: Lenten Reflection Questions for Home

This study examines the Old Testament lectionary passages of Lent (Year C) for six themes of Christian discipline and reflection: voicing gratitude, taking the long view, choosing well, accepting responsibility, welcoming the future, and trusting God through times of conflict. Such practices cultivate a life of contentment, honoring God and God's creation, and living generously toward neighbors. Please use these questions each week between sessions and bring it with you to the study. It will be used during the session as well.

Week 1—Be Grateful

Things to Remember

Things to Do

Question to Contemplate during the Week

- What can I do to more fully live a life of gratitude?

Week 2—Take the Long View

Things to Remember

Things to Do

If you have access to the internet, go to www.youtube.com and search for and watch the video "The Girl Who Silenced the World for 5 Minutes"

Question to Contemplate during the Week

- What is one thing I can do to improve the lives of future generations?

Week 3—Choose Well

Things to Remember

Things to Do

Question to Contemplate during the Week

- What choices do you need to make and keep?

Week 4—Take Responsibility

Things to Remember

Things to Do

Question to Contemplate during the Week

- Of all the reflecting you did during this session, what is the one thing you most hope to accomplish?

Week 5—Welcome the Future

Things to Remember

Things to Do

Questions to Contemplate during the Week

- What change is happening in your life now that is painful?
- How do you want God to help you?
- What are you learning in this process?

Week 6—Maintain Trust in Times of Crisis

Things to Remember

Things to Do

Question to Contemplate during the Week

- Imagine that you are in a situation like those struggling for civil rights in the 1960's. What do you need to remember in situations where society may be totally against the Christian community?

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Introduction

In the northern hemisphere, Lent marks the melting days of winter and earliest rains of spring. During this muddy season we recall that we too came from the soil, molded like clay figurines before God breathed life into us (Gen. 2:7).

In fact, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday with the sober exhortation to remember that “you are dust, and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:19). Though modern culture avoids facing our fragility, in our heart

of hearts we know that our lives are earthly and physical, humble and mortal. Lent teaches us to number our days and to use them well. It invites reflection, confession, and preparation. Such practices run counter to contemporary society, where reflection too often tends toward narcissism, confession is what fallen politicians do, and preparation involves externalities rather than soul work. Yet life is not about success or its appearance, but about the adventure of dedicating ourselves to values greater than ourselves, as Jesus did. In such enlarged living, we find our joy and purpose.

The gospel lesson on Lent’s first Sunday always narrates Jesus’ wilderness temptation as he prepared for his ministry and, ultimately, his death and resurrection. Following his footsteps during Lent we make time to consider, as the days begin to lengthen and

the year picks up its pace, how we wish to live more mindfully this year than last. How might we cultivate habits of the heart that best serve our God, our loved ones and neighbors, and ultimately our own souls?

Moses teaches them a new lesson about gratitude in Deuteronomy 26:1–11, where he prescribes a ritual of deep gratitude that he expects every householder to fulfill at every harvest.

This study will examine the Old Testament lectionary passages of Lent for six themes of Christian discipline and reflection: voicing gratitude, taking the long view, choosing well, accepting responsibility, welcoming the future, and trusting God through times of conflict. Such practices cultivate a life of contentment, honoring God and God’s creation and living generously toward neighbors. Today’s session begins with the Ash Wednesday passage from Isaiah for a general Lenten orientation. Then it will offer a brief historical roadmap to place the other Old Testament texts in context before turning to examine the passage for the first Sunday of Lent, which comes from the book of Deuteronomy. In subsequent sessions we will review each text in its context, investigate the text in relation to a major Lenten theme, and meditate on the passage in relation to our own lives.

Israel, Judah, Jerusalem, Zion, Canaan—Who Is Who?

Our faith ancestors in the Old Testament were associated with a variety of geographical names that can confuse modern people. It is especially confusing that the term “Israel” came to be used in a variety of ways over the course of time.

“Israelites” is the name given to all the descendants of Jacob, who was also called Israel (Gen. 35:10). Jacob had twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. One of these sons was Judah. Things became confusing hundreds of years later when, two generations after King David, the kingdom of Israel split into two nations. The northern kingdom continued to call itself Israel and the southern kingdom took the name of its largest tribe, Judah.

But after the northern kingdom was destroyed by Assyria in the eighth century BCE, “Israel” once again became available as a name for all the descendants of Jacob, including the Judeans. At this point the names became somewhat interchangeable. Though the political name of the nation that was left remained “Judah” (and later “Judea”), and though the terms “Judaism,” “Jew,” and “Jewish” derive from this name, “Israel” continued to be used side by side with these terms.

The other three names are easier to distinguish. Jerusalem is the city in Judah that King David adopted as his capital. “Zion” is another name for Jerusalem. “Canaan” identifies the physical land that the Israelites occupied because it was originally inhabited by Canaanites.

Isaiah 58:1–12: Ash Wednesday

In Isaiah 58:1–12, a prophet calls hearers to ponder what sincere prayer looks like. He portrays his hearers asking questions of God: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” (Isa. 58:3). We don’t know what leads them to accuse God of inattention. Perhaps they wish for a change in their fortunes that they do not see. They seem truly baffled by God’s unresponsiveness.

But the prophet accuses them of insincerity: people who mean their prayers change their behavior and not just their clothing. He spells out a distinct contrast in verses 5 and 6: It’s not enough, the prophet says, to go around looking sad, to wear mourning clothes, and to sit around despondently. Rather, they must “loose the bonds of injustice.”

The reason for this goes back to Egypt. The God to whom the people pray is the God who once sent Moses to the King of Egypt with a divine directive to abandon his slave economy, to “let my people go” (Exod. 5:1). Forty years later, before the former slaves entered the promised land, Moses told them to provide for one another’s needs, remembering their own days of suffering: “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God

redeemed you from there” (Deut. 24:17–18). An economy in which employees are ill-treated, in which some go hungry or homeless or ill-clothed, is not one in which freedom is gratefully remembered.

So now, centuries later, as his hearers complain that God is not listening to their prayers, the prophet essentially replies, “You are not listening to God’s prayers.” True responsiveness means, he says: “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke . . . 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” (Isa. 58:5–7). True repentance is indeed a journey inward for self-examination. But it is also a journey outward, adopting practices that mend the world.

Applied to the season of Lent, this word is sobering. The ashes of Ash Wednesday are not placed on our foreheads to make us feel more spiritual, nor to demonstrate our piety to others. We do not approach Lent for ourselves. Rather we do it so that, like Jesus, we can prepare to serve God in ways that honor God and neighbors. True, preparation for service ought to make us better people. But it may not make us feel better. In fact, it may open our eyes to our distance from the things of God. Yet the practice prepares us to travel that distance with Jesus.

A Preliminary Roadmap

The lectionary lessons during this Lenten season are found in four different books of the Bible and cover two distinct time periods: the sixth century BCE during Persia's reign, and its legendary past many centuries before. The passages are not arranged chronologically. Rather, they jump back and forth across time, so a roadmap can be helpful.

The daily occasion of eating from God's bounty is a prime moment to voice gratitude for what we could never do ourselves.

Besides Isaiah 58, three other passages this Lent come from the book of Isaiah, all from the same basic historical setting. We will examine this period below. The other three passages look back on times much earlier in Israel's story.

Genesis 15 (week 2) is part of the saga of Abraham and Sarah, the couple considered the nation's first ancestors, who come to the land of Canaan from the east. It relates God's promise to Abraham, while he and Sarah are still childless, that their descendants will become a nation.

Toward the end of Genesis, long after Abraham's and Sarah's deaths, the family of their grandson Jacob migrates to Egypt, where they remain for several generations and are eventually enslaved by their hosts, as mentioned above in reference to the exodus narrative. The story of their liberation from Egypt begins with God calling Moses to lead them to freedom in the land where their ancestors lived. This story is told in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua. This first week we will examine **Deuteronomy 26**, part of Moses' instructions to the Israelites just before they arrive in Canaan. The fourth week's passage, **Joshua 5**, concerns their arrival there.

A long and tangled history separates these three passages from the four in the book of Isaiah. Several generations after the Israelites' arrival in Canaan, they are united by King David, whose story is colorfully told in 1 and 2 Samuel. In his grandson's time his kingdom splits into two: the larger, and shorter-lived land of Israel, and the smaller but more stable nation of Judah to the south, whose capital is Jerusalem.

But these and the surrounding small countries cannot withstand the growing power of larger nations to their

east; first Assyria, which destroys the northern kingdom of Israel, and then Babylon. In 586 BCE, Babylonian soldiers burn Jerusalem, destroy Solomon's temple, kill many, and take captives, leaving the rest to starve in desolation. This "exile," as it comes to be called, ends the reign of David's descendants and disrupts all expectations for the future. It compels Jerusalem's leaders to reevaluate their past, reinterpret their beliefs, and in the process to record their stories.

Without this watershed time of reflection, confession, and preparation, neither Judaism nor Scripture itself would have emerged as they did. It is fair to say that the Bible was born in captivity.

The theological poetry that comprises Isaiah 40–55 argues for a new understanding of Judah's past and future: this is not the nation's end but its beginning. Babylon is weakening, another new ruler is approaching, and he, Cyrus of Persia, is freeing captured peoples. These chapters urge Judeans living in exile to return to their ancestral land, to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple, and to reclaim their identity as God's chosen people. Isaiah 55 (week 3), 43 (week 5), and 50 (week 6) are part of this hope-filled poetry. We might rightly imagine that in the more than six centuries between Moses and Cyrus, very much has changed. But a wealth of stories and poetry about the distant past allows thoughtful Judeans to make connections between events long before and events in their own time.

As we have seen already, Isaiah 58's call to repent and to establish justice sets the tone for Lent. Of all the passages we will be reading, Isaiah 58 reflects the latest time period, the time when many Judeans have indeed returned to Jerusalem and joined with others who had never left, to reestablish the city.

Jerusalem has never, either in ancient times or more recently, lived up to the dreams of its prophetic advocates. Given the mixed bag that humans are, it is doubtful that any city ever will. But without ideals and models, without self-examination, we would utterly fail. Just as the ancestral stories provided blueprints for later Judeans, so all these passages offer us models for renewing our own discipleship to God. Though originating from a wide spectrum of time, these passages, taken together, point toward what our ancestors in faith considered a well-examined and well-lived life.

Deuteronomy 26:1–11: The Discipline of Gratitude

At the doorway to the promised land, forty years after escaping slavery in Egypt, forty years after the nation's charter was first given by God on Mount Sinai, forty years into God's daily provision of manna to eat in the wilderness, just when the Israelites are poised to rush into the land, Moses stops them and delivers a really, really long speech: most of the book of Deuteronomy. It is not only the cautionary speech before a new chapter in Israelite history opens. It is also Moses' farewell address before his death, because Moses is not going with them to the promised land. Soon the manna that had sustained them through the wilderness will cease entirely, and they will eat the produce of the land. But before they even set foot there, before they have fields to plant and grains and fruits to harvest, Moses teaches them a new lesson about gratitude, in Deuteronomy 26:1–11, where he prescribes a ritual of deep gratitude that he expects every householder to fulfill at every harvest. In the days before tractors and combines, when every stalk of grain was cut by hand, when every fruit was carried on foot, before long-distance shipping and overstuffed grocery shelves, the first action Moses prescribes at the moment of harvest is to give. This kind of giving is not just the grudging portion to the government on tax day, nor the dutiful gift of excess as the offering plate goes by. It's neither passive, nor convenient, nor easy.

According to Moses, householders are directed to take baskets of produce to the priest. They do not simply set them down, but also rehearse a narrative—not the narrative of their own labors, but of God's. A narrative that begins deep in history with the words "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor . . . he went down into Egypt" (referring to the stories of Genesis) and "the Lord brought us out of Egypt" (referring to the exodus story). The Israelites give back to God because God has given them everything they have and are: their freedom, heritage, land, community, family, muscles, and yes, the fruit itself. With gratitude this story is told, not because the priest hasn't heard it before, but because each giver needs to say it once again.

A complaint in our household goes, "If I didn't do this, it wouldn't get done." When applied to things everyone in the household could be doing, it's a scold. But there are certain things that only one person has the talent or skill for. One of us operates the glue gun. Another plans a bud-

Important Dates (approximate)	
1250 BCE	Exodus from Egypt under Moses' leadership
1000 BCE	King David's reign begins
922 BCE	Israel divides into north (Israel) and south (Judah, which includes Jerusalem) after Solomon dies
742–701 BCE	Isaiah's lifetime
722 BCE	The Assyrians destroy and annex the north
587 BCE	The Babylonians destroy the south and exile many leaders
587–538 BCE	The exile in Babylon
539 BCE	The Persians under King Cyrus conquer Babylon and then allow exiles to return and rebuild the Temple

get or a family outing. Another cooks. These things might happen otherwise, but not as skillfully or enthusiastically.

Going to the garden to pick raspberries for breakfast, I find myself pondering this statement, "If I didn't do it, it wouldn't get done," in a different key. We planted the bushes and try to maintain their health. But if the bushes didn't concern themselves with making berries, we couldn't make it happen. It wouldn't get done. It's not by magic that luscious fruits grow every year, but to us it might as well be. The same holds true for the tomatoes setting fruit nearby, and the knee-high cornstalks. If these plants didn't do the mysterious things they do, food wouldn't happen at all.

Furthermore, when we examine all the activities that we think are our own—the hard work we do to earn the money to own a little plot of land in the first place; the gaining of skills to grow a garden; the work of sowing and planting, cultivating, watering, thinning, and controlling pests; or alternatively the work to earn money for groceries—we can fantasize that food acquisition is entirely our own doing. But when we watch how food production really works, as

the ancient Israelites did, we see that while humans may help, we are not the ones skilled to turn seeds into foods. The daily occasion of eating from God's bounty is a prime moment to voice gratitude for what we could never do ourselves. Every harvest becomes a time to share, and every meal an opportunity to restate our thanksgiving.

What is true of our daily food is also true of our spiritual lives. Every bit of nurture we receive, every moment of insight, growth, and joy, comes not from ourselves but

ultimately from the God who made us who we are. As Isaiah teaches, our lives are not transactional. It's not "We pray so that God will give." Rather, our lives are participative. God has provided, and we are both receivers and channels of God's grace.

About the Writer

Patricia K. Tull is Professor Emerita of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary and the author of several books and Bible studies, including Isaiah 1–39 in the Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary Series.

SAMPLE SESSION