

Isaiah 58: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 58. Cry aloud, do not hold back, lift up your voice like a trumpet, declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God. They ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

Why have we fasted and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves and you take no knowledge of it? Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily. Your righteousness shall go before you. The glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer. You shall cry, and he will say, Here I am. If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness, and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and make your bones strong. And you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt. You shall raise up the foundation of many generations. You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.

If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, and the holy day of the Lord honourable. If you honour it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly, then you shall take delight in the Lord. And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth. I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Isaiah chapter 58 describes the hollow worship of Israel in verses 1 to 5, contrasting that with true worship of the Lord in verses 6 to 14. This returns us to themes familiar from the beginning of the book in chapter 1 verses 11 to 17.

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices, says the Lord. I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

[3 : 1 0] When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings. Incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations. I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them.

When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves. Make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct oppression. Bring justice to the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause. John Oswalt sees a parallel between the structure of chapters 56 and 57 and chapters 58 and 59. The first eight verses of chapter 56 described true religion. Chapter 56 verse 9 to 57 verse 13 described the failure of the leaders and the adultery of the people. And then the rest of chapter 57 spoke of the Lord's saving action.

Within chapters 58 and 59, chapter 58 corresponds to chapter 56 verses 1 to 8. In the former section, the inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs who observed the Lord's Sabbaths and kept his

covenant was declared. In chapter 58, it is fasting that is the central practice of religious devotion that is discussed. But at the end of the chapter, Sabbath is returned to. The prophet is instructed to lift up his voice to Jacob and declare their sins to them. Yet reading the beginning of verse 2, we might wonder what their sin could be. They seem to seek the Lord diligently and daily and delight to know his ways.

But their practice is fundamentally hypocritical. They are as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God. They are not, in fact, such a nation. They feign the appearance of such a nation. They do the right rituals. They say the right words. But even though they supposedly delight to draw near to the Lord, their hearts are not near him at all. [5 : 17] The people wonder why the Lord does not respond to their acts of religious devotion. Surely, in their careful observance of the rituals and the prayers that they have offered, they have given the Lord good reason to attend to them. Israel only really had one major fast every year on the Day of Atonement. At various other times, however, there would be occasional fasts. Fasts that responded to a national crisis or were a form of public repentance and turning back to the Lord. The fast in view here, whether a particular fast that they had offered or a more general practice of fasting, is not accepted by the Lord because of their oppression of each other. True religious devotion, as we see in many places in scripture, is something that must be confirmed in the way that we treat our neighbour. Yet there is obviously a sharp disconnect between the religious practice of Israel here and the way that they treated their neighbours. They have compartmentalised their piety. In the day of their fast, they are seeking their own pleasure, perhaps better understood as doing their own business, and then oppressing their workers. On the one hand, they are seeking mercy from the Lord, yet on the other, they are showing no mercy to their neighbour. Perhaps we are to imagine a situation where wealthy men were getting their servants to work on the day of their fast, rather than giving them a day of rest to join in the fasting, and then mistreating them when they found that they hadn't done as much work as they had hoped in the absence of their oversight. Like the unforgiving servant in Jesus' parable, they were expecting a treatment from God that they would not extend to their neighbour. And as a result, the Lord would not hear their voices. In verse 5, the Lord asked them concerning the character of true fasting, the sort of fasting that he desires from them. The Lord describes some of the outward actions that might be characteristic of a day of fasting. People afflicting themselves, bowing down to the ground, using sackcloth and ashes. None of these outward motions of penitence and humility are wrong in themselves. Indeed, they can serve as a very powerful aid and expression of a penitent heart. But when a people's heart is far from the Lord, none of these religious rituals really count for anything. In verses 6 to 14, the character of true fasting is set out, in contrast to all of this false and hollow fasting. True fasting, as described here, has as its primary end the liberation of the neighbour. The various metaphorical descriptions of this liberation can overlap significantly, but we might be able to see different shades of meaning.

In loosening the bonds of wickedness, we might think about those habits and practices, or those ties that were wicked and oppressive. The straps of the yoke to be undone are maybe those things that entangle people within difficult and oppressive situations. Letting the oppressed go free is sending people forth into a new situation of freedom. And breaking every yoke goes beyond just loosing the bonds and undoing the straps and letting people go free, it's destroying those structures that would bind people in the first place. The emphasis in this chapter seems to be upon dealing with the economic and social injustices within the society. The importance of such practices is underlined in the original covenant given at Sinai, which places a great emphasis upon the way that you treat servants. Israel has been released from the house of bondage in Egypt, and as a nation they have become the servants of the Lord. Not enslaving and liberating each other in their social and economic practice is a manner in which the meaning of the exodus is both instituted and continued in the nation's life.

A few key representative practices are mentioned in verse 7, sharing bread with the hungry, providing a home for the homeless, clothing the naked, and not hiding yourself from your own flesh, helping your family members when they need your aid. This is a similar list to those that we find in Matthew chapter 25 verses 35 to 36 in the context of the so-called parable of the sheep and the goats.

For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison

and you came to me.

The result of these practices would be twofold. The light of the people would break forth like the dawn. They would reflect the light of the Lord's own face, perhaps also foreshadowing the dawn of the great eschatological day. Something of the light of the Lord's own justice would be seen in them.

[9 : 36] This would also lead to the speeding up of their own healing. The way of justice that they had committed themselves to would furnish a way before them and the majestic splendour of the Lord would protect them. These surely are all the things that they would have looked for as a result of their farce. And here the Lord freely promises them to them, if they'll only observe the sort of farce that he is looking for. Most particularly, when they called, the Lord would then answer. This required that they remove oppression from their midst. The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness is perhaps false accusation, threatening and slandering of others. Rather than seeking to cut people down through these sorts of practices, they should pour themselves out, giving richly of themselves for the hungry, and seeking to address the needs of those who are sufferers. As they would do this, they would take on something of the character of the Lord himself, and the Lord would respond to their needs in a like bountiful manner. Verse 11 describes such rich provision in times and places of need. As they removed oppression and attended to the needs of others, their whole society would be rebuilt. Ruined cities would be restored, foundations that would endure for generations established.

Those who committed themselves to such righteous practice would be seen as the foundations and pillars of this new society. They would be those who restored the walls that had been broken down, the ones that made streets habitable once again. In the final two verses of the chapter, we move from the practice of fasting to the practice of the Sabbath. As we saw in the context of chapter 56, the Sabbath was the great sign of the Mosaic covenant. It was the sign of the liberation that they had received, and it was something that was refracted in the many different feasts of the year, and something that was fundamental to the social life, especially in ensuring that liberation was a continual principle.

If they devoted themselves to the Lord's Sabbath, observing it as they ought to, and not seeking their own will, but learning to delight in the good gift that God had given to them, their delight in the Lord himself would deepen. They would know the fullness of his blessings as he raised them up as a nation, and gave them the full inheritance that he had promised to Jacob their father. Once again, all of the things that they would have sought from the Lord from their fasts are here promised to them, if only they are prepared to receive them in the way that the Lord calls them to.

A question to consider, how might we relate the teaching of this chapter to Jesus' practice of the Sabbath within the Gospels?