

Isaiah Part 36: “You shall be like a watered garden...”

Isaiah 58

True and false fasting (Isaiah 58 v 1 to 14)

In the opening verses of this chapter God exposes the shallow worship of his people, who are asking, ‘Why do our prayers go unanswered?’ “Cry aloud; do not hold back... declare to my people their transgression” (v 1) – God spoke loudly and directly. His people needed to hear their transgression – but would they hear? “They seek me daily, and delight to know my ways” (v 2) – God first described the appearance of their spiritual life. On the surface, it seemed that God’s people loved him and were devoted to him. They had the reputation of a “nation that did righteousness”, and they looked like people who would “delight to draw near to God”. “Why have we fasted, and you see it not?” (v 3) – with this spiritual veneer, they felt God was being unfair to them. It was as if they said, ‘LORD, we have fasted, but you do not answer our prayers!’

“In the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers” (v 3) – now God exposes the reality: his people fasted as an empty ritual, and exploited their employees. God did not accept their fasting when it wasn’t connected with a sincere heart of obedience. “You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist” (v 4) – they fasted and said selfish prayers like, ‘Lord, help me win this argument’, or ‘Lord, help me defeat this person’. “Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high” – the purpose of their fasting was to promote and glorify themselves by shouting loudly...

“Is such the fast that I choose...?” (v 5) – the kind of fasting God rebukes here is a hollow, empty show, without spiritual substance. Even though they do all the right things in fasting (bowing down, sackcloth and ashes), God does not even “call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD.”

- Does fasting have any value in God’s sight? What does God look for in his people, and why is such conduct called ‘fasting’?
- In verses 8 to 12, what promises of spiritual blessing does God give to those who are right in spirit towards him, and towards people?

The people of Isaiah’s day had the same problem as the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. They trusted in empty ritual, rather than spiritual reality. Real fasting, accompanied by true repentance, has great power before God (Matthew 17 v 20, 21), but God sees through the hypocrisy of religious ritual. In Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, the Pharisee made a special point of saying, ‘I fast twice a week’ (Luke 18 v 9 to 14). The answer is not to stop fasting, but to get right with God. As Jesus taught about the religious rituals of the Pharisees, “These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (Matthew 23 v 23).

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness...” (v 6) – God tells his people, ‘If you want to fast in the way that pleases me, begin with getting right with your brothers and sisters. Stop oppressing other people and reach out to help them.’ First, they had to *stop* acting wickedly towards others. This means that getting right with God *begins* by stopping the wrong things we do towards others. Then, they had to *start* acting lovingly towards others. This means that getting right with God *continues* by doing right and loving things for other people.

“Then shall your light break forth like the dawn” (v 8) – if God’s people were to couple their fasting with lives of righteousness and love, then they would see their prayers answered! They would have lives full of light, healing and righteousness, full of the glory of the LORD. When they call out to God, then the LORD will answer (v 9)...

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“If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness” (v 9) – again God tells them three things to *stop* doing: (i) they must stop oppressing others, treating them as animals bound with a yoke; (ii) they must stop pointing the finger at others and see where they are to blame; (iii) they must stop speaking wickedness. These are sins of *commission*. They are sins that we do against God and against others. If we are to walk right with God, we must stop and guard against sins of commission.

“If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted” (v 10) – again God gives them two things to *start* doing: (i) they needed to minister to the hungry with more than food: they had to extend their souls to the hungry; (ii) they had to look for afflicted souls and seek to satisfy them. Failing to do these are sins of *omission*. They are things that we should have done, yet we have not. If we are to walk right with God, we must open our eyes and do what is our loving duty before God.

“Then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday” (v 10) – to the repentant, God promises blessing. Not only will they have light, but even their darkness shall be as the noon. “The LORD will guide you continually” (v 11) – this is a promise for those who do more than just empty religious rituals. To have the guidance of the LORD, empty religious ritual is not enough. We need to seek God with both sincere hearts and sincere actions.

“You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail” – those who serve God with sincere hearts and actions enjoy refreshment, sustained health of the soul that is impossible for the superficial follower of God to know. “Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt” (v 12) – those who serve God with sincere hearts also accomplish things for God’s kingdom. They build, and are called the “repairer of the breach”, the “restorer of streets to dwell in”. You cannot build anything for God’s kingdom on the foundation of a superficial walk with God.

“And call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable” (v 13) – the Sabbath was another empty religious observance for the Jewish people of Isaiah’s day. God calls them to take a delight in the *heart* and in the *purpose* of the Sabbath. This fits in perfectly with the fulfillment of the Sabbath in light of the finished work of Christ on the cross. We keep the Sabbath when we set aside every day to honour him, and not going our own ways as a means of justifying ourselves. Galatians 4 v 10, 11 tells us that Christians are not bound to observe days and months and seasons and years. The rest we enter into as Christians is something we can experience every day, not just one day a week – the rest of knowing we do not have to work to save ourselves, but that our salvation was accomplished in Jesus (Hebrews 4 v 9, 10).

“Then you shall take delight in the LORD” (v 14) – when we keep the meaning of the Sabbath, not merely as an empty religious ritual, then God will bless us: “I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father”, speaking metaphorically of spiritual victory (riding on the heights) and of the inheritance we have in Christ (1 Peter 1 v 4), of which the ‘heritage of Jacob’ is a part.

In this chapter, God exposes the emptiness of two religious rituals as practised in Isaiah’s day: fasting and keeping the Sabbath. Both of these are expressions of *not doing* things. In fasting, you *don’t eat*. In Sabbath keeping, you *don’t work*. An important aspect of this chapter is showing us that what we *don’t do* is not enough to make us right before God. We are made right with God, and we have peace with God, through the finished work of Christ upon the cross; and our onward walk with the Lord should not just be defined by what we *don’t do*, but by what we *do* for him (1 Corinthians 15 v 58).