

"Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed and for spreading out a sackcloth and ashes for a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord?" (Isaiah 58:5)

"Do you think I'm impressed with this kind of fast? Is it just a day to starve your body, make others think you're humble, and lie down in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast? Do you think I, Yahweh, will be pleased with that?" (Isaiah 58:5, Passion Version)!

Remember last week's lesson on Isaiah 57? Where Isaiah writes that as the leadership of Israel worsened, the number (and apparently the percentage) of righteous people in Israel began to shrink, with the average person not really noticing, or understanding what was going on--while God permitted more of the unrighteous ones to live on and suffer the consequence of the judgment He was about to deliver upon the nation! So while the godly ones would be preserved from calamity, and find peace, "resting serenely upon their death beds," the ungodly would be taken away (alive!) into captivity and suffer the consequences of God's judgment! Which, we noted, shouldn't come as a surprise for any of us! For, as Constable notes, God will do something similar when He removes the church from the earth (at the Rapture!) before He brings the Tribulation on it! And He also did something similar in the past, e.g., when He rescued, and removed, Lot before He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah! (And remember Matthew Henry's observation that "it's a sign that God intends war when He calls home His ambassadors"!)

And so, it's no wonder that God was about to judge Israel, as we read (in Isaiah 57:3-13) about the widespread "apostasy" and unspeakable evil practices that were taking place, both publicly and privately, as the Israelites, God's "chosen people," were forsaking Him, and pursuing idols! God, in fact, called them "sons of a sorceress, offspring of an adulterer and a prostitute...and children of rebellion"! (And, as we noted, God sees idolatry as "spiritual adultery and prostitution"!)

I won't repeat the horrible details that are cited by Isaiah in verses 3-13, which we included in last week's write-up, but they obviously posed a great grievance for the Holy One of Israel! So much so, in fact (as verse 6 indicates), that He "pondered over" whether He should "relent concerning these things," and (in verses) expressed wonder over why they wouldn't "remember Him...and or even give Him a thought...or fear Him" when they were living the way they were! "Is it because I have been (overly?) patient and long silent that you no longer fear Me?" (Verse 11, in the Passion version, puts it!)

Then remember verse 15, the verse Oswalt calls "one of the finest one-sentence summations of Biblical theology in the Bible), where Isaiah records God declaring, in His own words (!), that He "dwells in high and holy places...with the bruised and lowly in spirit, those who are humble and quick to repent"... and that He "dwells with them to revive the heart of those who are broken over their sin!" And that "even though He had seen their ways, He would heal them...and guide them forward...and offer peace to those who are far from Him, and to those who are near, and heal their deepest wounds"! Wow! "But the wicked are like the tossing sea...as it tosses up refuse and mud! There is no peace for the wicked," says our God!

And with that we moved on to our lesson last night, on Isaiah 58!

And it begins with God telling Isaiah to "cry out loudly and raise his voice like a trumpet, and not to hold back with what He wanted him to say to them, concerning their sin! (Reminds me of an expression my dad used to use frequently, whenever he saw something he didn't like going on, including something I was doing that upset him! "For crying out loud...!" I can still hear him saying that, and sometimes I find myself using it as well!)

And so, I can imagine Isaiah (maybe even God Himself) shouting: "For crying out loud!" in this passage! As He saw His peoples' transgressions, and "the sin of the house of Jacob"! All while they were "claiming" to be "seeking the Lord daily," and "delighting in His ways," and "fasting" (often!) Etc. etc.! And yet God was not impressed! Or at all pleased with their "system of worship," and their way of living, and particularly with their fasting! (Interesting that Isaiah 58:1 would refer to "the sins of the house of Jacob," since Jacob was the Old Testament figure characterized as trying to deceive and "manipulate" God (and others, including his father!)

Verse 3 (the Passion version) says that when they fasted, they "only tried to please themselves...and made a clear attempt to appear spiritual and manipulate God"! They even ended up quarreling and fighting with each other (probably over who did the most, or the best, fasting), when it should have resulted in them humbling themselves before God, "loosening the bonds of wickedness, (or injustice)," and being broken, and penitent, over his sin!

Remember what Isaiah wrote at the beginning of his writing, in Isaiah 1, where God likened "His people" to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and stated that He "had enough of their burnt offerings and sacrifices...", and that "their incense was an abomination to Him," and that He "hated their new moon festivals...and had become weary of their appointed feasts"! The same could be said of His views of their fasting rituals in this chapter!

So how could fasting be done in a way that would be "acceptable" to God?

Isaiah addresses that in verses 6-12! Among other things, he says, it would involve more than an outward ritual and merely "going through the motions"! MacArthur sums it up as one involving "penitence over one's sin, with consequent humility, disconnecting from sin and oppression of others, using the food that they would set aside for the fast to instead feed the hungry, and acting humanly toward those in need"! (Wiersbe writes that "true fasting will lead to humility before God and ministry to others! We deprive ourselves so that we might share with others and do so to the glory of God! If we fast in order to get somethings for ourselves from God, instead of to become better for the sake of others, then we have missed the meaning of worship! It delights the Lord when we delight in the Lord'!)

Jesus would later clarify (in Matthew 6:16-18) what kind of fasting would work for Him! "Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting! Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full! But you, when you fast, anoint your head with oil and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who sees what is done in secret, will reward you!"

When (and if!) Israel would (eventually) learn and practice the proper way to fast, verses 8-9 say, "Then your light will break out like the dawn...and then you will call and the Lord will answer...and when you cry He will say, 'Here I am'!"

Then, in verses 13-14, Isaiah turns from fasting to feasting (exhibiting a contrast between the humiliation of the fast, with the joy and delight of the sabbath)! And he describes the sabbath as "the holy day of the Lord," which Motyer says, "calls for careful, thoughtful living"! A day to be kept by one "desisting from your own ways," and as a symbol of obedience to the law of Moses"! But also a day of joy and delight! And a day, MacArthur notes, "when repentant people walking in fellowship with the Lord experience satisfaction of the soul"! Speaking of a day to come (in the millennial age!) when Israel will demonstrate true repentance and the fullness of blessing (and the "heritage of Jacob"! ) will be poured out on her"!

Moyter notes that "the Lord is more interested in our enjoyment of His blessings through obedience than in self-imposing deprivations...and that the heart of true religion is to conform with what God has ordained"!

And so, for crying out loud...!

"Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful singing...Enter into His gates with thanksgiving and His court with praise...Give thanks to Him and bless His name! For the Lord is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting and His faithfulness to all generations!" (Psalm 100:1-5!)

And, Psalm 37:4-5--"Delight yourself in the Lord and He shall give you the desires of your heart! Trust also in Him, and He will bring it to pass!"

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