

Isaiah Chapter 58

What Can Separate Us from God?

Have you ever wondered why things don't go as you wish they would? Has it ever seemed like your prayers didn't get any higher than the ceiling, or maybe you've felt that there is a barrier between you and God? Perhaps there is. If so, chapters 58 and 59 of Isaiah may help you understand it.

In Isaiah 58:1–66:24 Israel is divided into the faithful and the faithless in order to clarify the conditions for entering into God's future glory. It forms a final invitation and comfort. The heart of this section is the remnant's prayer for deliverance (63:7–64:12) and God's answer (65:1–25). The book ends by showing who will be excluded from the blessings of the new heavens and earth (66:1–24).¹

In the final chapters of his prophecy, Isaiah calls on his listeners to clearly understand the reality of sin. This provides the backdrop for a revelation of **God's purposes in judgment and salvation**. Isaiah speaks again of the judgment and salvation of God and spells out clearly the conditions for taking part in His salvation. Isaiah calls to account those who only went through the motions of religious observance (58:1–3) while at the same time committing sin and promoting injustice (58:3–5).²

God helps those who help—you think I am going to say, “themselves.” But I am not. That statement is totally unscriptural. Rather, God helps those who help others. The kind of worship God desires includes a sincere effort to promote morality and help the poor and oppressed (Isaiah 58:6-7, 9-10). Only if Israel experiences a complete spiritual reformation and does away with “*the yoke of oppression*” will God answer His people's prayers and sustain them (verses 8-12). You see, the poor and oppressed are always close to God's heart.

It also means setting aside the **Sabbath** as a time to take pleasure in and honor the Lord rather than pursuing earthly pleasures (58:13). Only if God's people honor Him will they discover the joy and blessing to be found in their God (verses 13–14). This kind of worship will bring health and joy and satisfying fellowship with God (Matthew 23:23).

In chapter 59 Isaiah tells the people of Israel that sin alienates them from God, and that their **iniquities** (sins) have separated them from their God (59:1–2). Isaiah follows this announcement with a listing of Israel's sins (verses 3–15) and the grim announcement

¹ Hughes, Robert B. ; Laney, J. Carl ; Hughes, Robert B.: *Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House Publishers, 2001 (The Tyndale Reference Library), S. 268.

² See also Isaiah 1:10–17; Proverbs 21:3.

that God has put on righteousness as His breastplate. As a warrior He advances to repay according to what peoples' actions deserve (verses 16–19). Yet even now there is hope for those who “*repent of their sins.*” God will establish His covenant with them, and with their children (verses 20–21). Let’s now begin our study by reading Isaiah 58:1.2 NAS:

*1 “Cry loudly, do not hold back; **Raise your voice** like a trumpet, And **declare to My people their transgression** And to the house of Jacob their sins.*

*2 “**Yet they seek Me** day by day and delight to know My ways, As a nation that has done righteousness And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask Me for just decisions, **They delight in the nearness of God.***

God called for heralds to go about telling the nation of their “*transgressions*” and sins. In Scripture there are several different words used to describe various kinds of sins.

“*Transgressions*” refers to sins that come from breaking the Law of God. Like a trumpet used to get people’s attention, the heralds were to shout. Outwardly the people seemed eager to want to know God and for God to be near them.³

These folks apparently attended religious services regularly and participated in all the rituals. By all outward actions they certainly appeared religious. But is attendance at Sunday services a good measure of one’s true relationship with God? Not in Israel and not in the United States either.

Many of you might be shocked quite and surprised to learn that one area of southwest Michigan, with the highest percentage of membership in one conservative Protestant denomination, has one of the highest rates of spousal abuse in the U.S. Don’t mistake “*religiosity*” for a true relationship with God.⁴

Isaiah 58:3-5 NAS:

3 ‘Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?’ Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, And drive hard all your workers.

4 “Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist. You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.

*5 “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 sackcloth and ashes as a bed? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the Lord?*

Perhaps you heard on the news recently about the so-called *fast* that started on July 4. It is

³ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:1113.

⁴ Richards, Larry: *The Bible Reader's Companion*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1991, S. 442.

being led by Cindy Sheehan who has said she will consume only water, tea, and juice until September 1. She is doing this for political reasons because she wants the government to pull all our troops out of Iraq and bring them home. Sheehan is being joined by Susan Sarandon, Sean Penn, and Rev. Al Sharpton, among others, in what they are calling a “*rolling fast*,” which they describe as fasting on designated days. One commentator, however, called it, a “*tag team fast*.” He said they were planning to have one person fast for a few hours and then the next person would pick up the fast for a few hours, and so on. They are “*fasting*” in hopes they can persuade the government to do what they want.

Isaiah 58 is the “*classic*” chapter in the Bible on the subject of fasting. It gives us God’s guidelines for fasting and it distinguishes between ritualistic fasting and true fasting. Ask God a question and He will often give the answer, but be sure you really want to know God’s answer. Here in verse 3 the people wanted to know why their fasting wasn’t accomplishing anything. So God told them: they were fasting with all the wrong attitudes and for all the wrong reasons. Just as many people today go through religious observances and religious rituals in all the wrong ways and for all the wrong reasons.

The people expressed concern that they were in trouble even though they believed they were doing what the Law required. They **fasted** and outwardly **humbled** themselves, but they feared that God had not **noticed what they were doing**. Apparently they thought that by going through the motions of religion, even if there wasn’t any inward reality of faith, they would be blessed.

God responded by pointing out that **He was more interested in their obedience** than their rituals. Unfortunately they, like many people, had confused rituals with relationship, outward acts with true obedience. Their fasts didn’t erase their poor relationship with others. They were disregarding other peoples’ needs by exploiting their employees and by quarreling and fighting.⁵ **Therefore their prayers would not be heard**, for their kind of fasting was not what the Lord accepted. Their hearts, not just their heads or knees, needed to bow before the LORD.⁶

Isaiah 58:6,7:

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?”

⁵ Deut. 24:14-15; James 5:1-6.

⁶ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:1113.

The Israelites were going through all these religious motions but many specific commands were not being followed. So the Lord reminded the people that they should be just and openhearted with those in need, the hungry, the poor, and the naked. The Israelites were to consider themselves members of one family who at one time had themselves been slaves in Egypt.

Therefore they were not to neglect each other. In fact, when someone shared with one in need, it was a reminder that everything he owned belonged to God.⁷

In Christ's time, the zealous Pharisees, that is, those who had an eager interest in pursuit of being considered super-religious, fasted each Monday and Thursday (Luke 18:12). Jesus condemned the practice of dirtying the face to show others that one was fasting, but He did not condemn fasting. In fact He pointed out that sometimes fasting is an important adjunct to prayer.⁸ He Himself fasted 40 days just before beginning His public ministry (Luke 4:1-3). There are several New Testament examples of fasting (Luke 1:37; Acts 13:2; 14:23)

Isaiah's point is that fasting as an expression of piety, which shows reverence for deity and devotion to divine worship, is of far less concern to God than a righteous lifestyle. Spirituality is shown by the loving quality of our personal relationships (Isaiah 58:4) and by our commitment to social justice and to helping the poor and oppressed (Isaiah 58:6-7), not by fasting.⁹

Isaiah 58:8-12 NAS:

*8 "Then your **light** will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will speedily spring forth; And your righteousness will go before you; The glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.*

*9 "Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' **If you remove the yoke from your midst**, The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,*

*10 And **if you give yourself to the hungry** And satisfy the desire of the afflicted, Then your light will rise in darkness And your gloom will become like midday.*

*11 "And **the Lord will continually guide you**, And satisfy your desire in scorched places, And give strength to your bones; And you will be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.*

12 "Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; You will raise up the age-old foundations; And you will be called the repairer of the

⁷ Op Cit.

⁸ Matthew 17:21, NAS and NKJ; Mark 9:29, NKJ.

⁹ Richards, Larry: *The Bible Reader's Companion*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1991, S. 442.

breach, The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

If the people would fast as God has directed in verses 6 and 7, then the light of God within them would burst forth, much as the dawn bursts forth from the night and brings a new day full of brightness and light. Light is a frequent theme throughout Scripture to denote living in relationship with God (1 John 1:5-7). Jesus called Himself the Light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5) and He also said that believers are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). So here in verse 10 we can see that if we are living according to God's directions, then we have His light and we will shine in the darkness. Isaiah also tells us here that fasting in this manner would bring blessing; which would include healing, righteousness, protection from trouble, and answered prayer (Deuteronomy 28:1-14).

If the people would do away with oppression and gossip and would help others in need, then the Lord would bless them, give them guidance, satisfaction, strength, fertility, and physical restoration by rebuilding the ruins of their land.¹⁰

Isaiah 58:13, 14 NAS:

*13 "If because of the **sabbath**, you turn your foot From doing your own pleasure on My holy day, And call the **sabbath** a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, And honor it, **desisting from your own ways, From seeking your own pleasure And speaking your own word,**
14 Then you will take delight in the Lord, And **I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;** And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."*

Let us take a closer look at the Sabbath, in verses 13 and 14. The whole point is not a legalistic "do this" (rest) and "don't do that" (work of any kind). The words here point to inner heart attitude and to priorities. God here contrasts "*doing your own pleasure*" with delighting in the Lord. What comes first on the Sabbath Day for you: seeking your own pleasure, doing what you want to do, speaking about your own business and personal matters? Or delighting in God's Word, speaking of spiritual things, praying, and honoring the Lord God Jehovah by setting aside a day to rejoice in your relationship with Him?

As we saw in chapter 56, breaking the Sabbath indicated people's lack of trust in God. So therefore Sabbath observance for the Jews was a barometer of one's faithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant (Isaiah 56:4-6). By following the rules for the Sabbath a person acknowledged the importance of worshiping God and showed that he or she trusted God to provide for them even if they took time off from work. By putting God first and not seeking to do only as one wished, a person would have joy, not only in salvation, but also in having their needs provided for. All this was certain because the Lord had spoken (Isaiah 1:20; 40:5).

¹⁰ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:1113.

We saw in verse 1 that God told Isaiah to shout aloud with a voice like a trumpet and announce the sins of the nation. The people went to the temple, obeyed the letter of God's laws, fasted, and appeared eager to seek the Lord; but their worship was only an outward show. Their hearts were far from God.¹¹

When we worship because it's the proper thing to do, not because it's our response of love to our God who has done so much for us, then our worship becomes something we do that has no true meaning for us.

The Jews were commanded to observe only one fast on the annual Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29–31), but they were permitted to fast personally if they wished. They complained that nobody seemed to notice what they were doing. Perhaps they were trying to “*buy God's blessing*” by their fasting. Worshiping God involves more than observing an outward ritual; there must be an inward obedience and submission to the Lord (Matthew 6:16–18).

If in my religious life, I am doing what pleases me, and not focusing only on what pleases God; if doing what I do does not make me a better person, then I'm wasting my time, and my worship is sin.

Betty had this graphically impressed on her once some years ago. She had been fasting regularly as a part of the expression of her relationship with the Lord. At the same time she also had a friend who was very needy and who, if she could not sleep, thought nothing of calling Betty at 2 a.m. to talk for 45 minutes about her problems. She might then also call Betty at 4:30 or 5 a.m. to talk some more. Betty had gotten to the point of dreading answering the phone, lest she be dragged into a long reiteration of her problems and worries. So one evening about 10 p.m. Betty was reading this very section in Isaiah 58 about fasting and guess what? The phone rang and it was her needy friend. The Lord at that moment impressed on her that she could do all the fasting she wanted, but if she didn't reach out her hand, or in this case her ear, lovingly to this emotionally hungry and needy person she was wasting her time fasting.

For some additional examples, let us consider that worship and fighting do not go together or that gossip is a sin. Yet how many families walk piously out of church at the close of a Sunday worship service, get in the family car, and proceed to argue with each other all the way home! Or how many others talk negatively about other people in the congregation during Sunday dinner.

¹¹ Isaiah 1:10–15; 29:13; Matt. 15:8–9.

True fasting will lead to humility before God, obedience to His commands, 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 something for ourselves from God (other than guidance), instead of to become better people for the sake of others, then we have missed the meaning of worship. It delights the Lord when we delight **in** the Lord.¹²

¹² Wiersbe, Warren W.: Be Comforted. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1992 (An Old Testament Study), S. Is 56:9