

Isaiah 58 – Study Guide

God's Chosen Fast

Isaiah 58:1,2

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. (Isa 58:1,2 ESV)

Study Guide Verse 1:

God is giving a command to the prophet Isaiah to deliver His message to His people.

What is the tone of this verse?

What could motivate God to use this type of tone?

What level of importance is God placing on this message?

In what type of setting would you use this kind of language?

What should the response be of those who hear this message?

What would your response be if someone spoke this way to you?

Study Guide Verse 2:

Verse 2 almost sounds like a compliment except for four words that completely change the whole message: “as if they were”.

How often did the Israelites seek God? (Note, God did not say that they were NOT seeking Him)

What was Israel’s attitude in seeking God?

Did they want to know God’s will and His ways?

How did they FEEL about being in God’s presence?

God’s issue with them was NOT that they didn’t have the right motives, nor even the right emotions. His issue was that their “heart” did not motivate their actions. They loved the presence of God. They delighted in agreeing with His Word. Their problem was that they didn’t actually EXHIBIT righteous behavior, and even though they agreed with the judgment of God, they forsook it by not obeying it.

What could be the motivation of people who, like the ancient Israelites, seek God daily, delight to know His ways, ask Him for righteous judgments and delight in His presence, yet do not obey His commands?

What behavior would you expect from someone who truly loved God with their whole heart, mind and strength?

What did Jesus say was the one indicator of a person's love for Him? (John 14:15)

Do you now understand the tone of verse 1?

Isaiah 58:3

'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. (Isaiah 58:3 ESV)

The Israelites, in their pride, immediately jump into the same blame God game that Adam started right after the fall (see Gen 3:12), accusing God of being at fault for their failure in fasting. Certainly, their suffering during the fast should have earned them some respect from God! Certainly, their obvious humility should have caught His attention!

God immediately reveals the attitude of their hearts: they fasted to seek their own pleasure! In other words, their fast was self centered. They focused on how much they could endure, how others would view them, even of what God would owe them for their sacrifice. The evidence that their fast was self centered was the fact that it made them even meaner to their subordinates. Self righteousness will always make you see others as inferior.

What are your motives for this fast?

Are you secretly hoping that others will look up to you because you are so spiritual?

Are you hoping that God will notice the great sacrifice that you are making and give you special attention?

Do you find yourself feeling superior to those who are not partaking in the fast to the same extent as you are?

Ask God to expose your true motives for this fast and to give you any necessary correction.

Isaiah 58:4

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. (Isaiah 58:4 ESV)

Continuing the thought from verse 3, God further exposes the true motive of their fast. A person will only quarrel and fight with someone who opposes them. Why? Because their pride is injured or stifled.

If we become combative and surly during a fast it is a clear indication that our motive is not godly but selfish. In this verse we see the progression from quarreling to fighting to hitting with

a wicked fist. The person gets progressively more violent as their self centered pride is opposed by others.

Do we become more or less compassionate during our fast?

As we fast, do we develop an uglier attitude toward others?

Do we write it off as, "I just get crabby when I'm hungry"?

Is God trying to expose an area of our life as needing serious correction?

God promises in this verse that wrong motives for the fast will not gain any reward for us.

Let us seek God for His correction and rebuke where it is necessary, and humbly apply that correction to our lives.

Isaiah 58:5

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? (Isaiah 58:5 ESV)

God again questions the motive of the fast. He is making it very clear that our fast must be more than just a momentary disruption in our normal everyday life. He is not impressed with our external appearance. Laying on sackcloth (burlap) and ashes is very uncomfortable, but God is not impressed. He asks us to decide who is the truly the One that decides what a fast should be.

Are we impressed with our sacrifice during the fast?

Are we trying to just endure the discomfort (and even pain) that accompanies the fast in the hope that God will take note of our suffering?

Have we allowed God to define both the goal and the means of our fast?

Ask God to purify your heart and give you His motives for the fast.

Isaiah 58:6,7

6) 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?

7) 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? (Isaiah 58:6-7 ESV)

Verse 6 study:

Now God defines the fast that is acceptable to Him. He is looking for permanent change in the person who engages in His fast. Once bonds of wickedness are loosed no one wants to be re-bound. Once the oppressed are set free they will not easily be again oppressed. Once a yoke is broken it cannot be used again.

What sin holds you captive? Are you willing to let God break its hold on you forever?
Is there someone in your life that you have not forgiven for harm done to you?
Do you try to manipulate people to do things your way?
Do you use people to attain your ends?
Pride and self-centeredness are the root of these sins. Ask God to break the power of these roots during this fast.

Verse 7 study:

God now moves to more practical evidences of a heart that has been changed by fasting.
What attitudes of the heart are exhibited by someone who shares their bread with the hungry?
What would motivate someone to bring a poor homeless person into their house or to clothe the naked?
What does it mean to “hide yourself from your own flesh”?
What causes someone to hide themselves from their own family? What change is necessary to stop us from hiding ourselves from those we love.
Ask God to remove all obstacles to His power that can cause these positive effects to take place in your life.

Isaiah 58:8,9

(8) 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 rear guard.

(9) 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, (Isaiah 58:8-9 ESV)

Verse 8 Study:

Note the triumphant change of tone in this verse. Notice also that the word “then” makes everything that follows conditional on what precedes it. After we have fasted according to God’s specifications and made the changes He proscribed, THEN we can look forward to the eternal benefits and blessings of God that all true children of God desire.

What does, “your light shall break forth like the dawn” mean to you?

For what areas of your life do you desire God’s healing?

How does fasting help us to satisfy our “hunger and thirst for righteousness”?

What would you expect in your life if “the glory of the LORD” was “your rear guard”?

Verse 9 Study:

There are few promises in the Bible greater than those found in this verse. To have the Creator of the Universe answer when we call, to have Him make Himself available when we cry out to

Him is an honor unimaginable outside of this promise. That God would even make this promise and show us the way to obtain it reveals His love for us and the Humility He has to invite such as us into His presence and care.

Again, the promise is conditional on our change of heart in the fast.

How can we “take away the yoke from our midst”?

In what ways have we tried to blame others (even God) for our failures, disappointments and sin?

What could be the root of such an accusatory attitude?

God’s definition of wickedness is quite different from ours. What type of speech do you think God would consider wicked that you might not? What scriptures back up your conclusion?

The goal of our fast is even greater than we can imagine. We have God’s assurance that if our fast pleases Him, our lives will be changed forever. Pursue God’s will during this fast with all your heart.

Isaiah 58:10,11

(10) 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.

(11) 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. (Isaiah 58:10-11 ESV)

Verse 10 Study:

Have you sometimes felt like you are groping your way through the darkness of the uncertainties of life? Do you at times feel depressed by thoughts of your inadequacies or regrets for your past, or from disappointment of how you’ve been treated by others? God again provides an escape from the gloom and the darkness IF we do as He commands.

What would “pouring yourself out for the hungry” entail in practical terms?

What attribute would you have to possess to be able to “pour yourself out”?

What attitude would you have to get rid of that prevents you from pouring yourself out?

What does it mean to satisfy the desire of the afflicted?

Who are the afflicted?

Are you personally aware of people in your sphere of friends, family, acquaintances, co-workers that might be considered afflicted?

Have you thought of ways that you might alleviate their afflictions?

The cure for depression is not medication. God indicates in this verse that turning our focus from ourselves and onto others causes Him to lift us out of the gloom.

Verse 11 Study:

God continues His promise from verse 10 with more promises that seem incredible. YHWH, the Creator of everything that exists, the One Who by His power holds everything together (Col 1:17) promises to guide us continually, to satisfy us in the bleakest of places, to strengthen us and to make us fruitful forever!

What are the prerequisites for obtaining these blessings?

What obstacle or obstacles are in your life that prevent God from fulfilling this promise to you?

Do you desire to rid yourself of these obstacles, or are you comfortable with them?

If Jesus did not consider equality with God as something to be clung to, but humbled Himself to the point that He poured Himself out for us and became a servant, do we have the right to cling to the pride that keeps our focus centered on ourselves?

What power is necessary to overcome our self centered pride?

Seek God earnestly for His power to overcome obstacles to His humility in our lives.

Isaiah 58:12

And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. (Isaiah 58:12 ESV)

As we look back through Christian history, it is safe to conclude that today's western Christianity is a shadow of its former glory. To compare it to a ruin would not be much of a stretch.

What a magnificent honor it would be to be among those who could restore the Glory of God to His true Church; to be able to construct a foundation of true righteousness that generations who follow would be able to stand firmly on. What glory we could bring to God if we could help repair the strife caused by denominationalism and the quarreling among Christians caused by pride and lack of love. What joy it would be to help restore avenues of communication between Christians that would facilitate brothers dwelling together in unity (Psalm 133:1).

This is a very tall order. Men have attempted over the years to make all the above repairs, usually without much result.

God promises that His fast will produce people who, by His power and blessing, can and will make these changes.

Do these promises of God seem beyond any possible fulfillment to you?

Do you desire to see God glorified by a renewed Church?

Do you desire to see future generations serve God in spirit and in truth?

Do you hope to see a true unity in the Spirit among Christians?

Are you willing to do what is necessary to allow God to use you in these pursuits?

What do you lack to obtain God's promises in these areas?

What hindrance to these promises lives within you?

God's heart is one of reconciliation, rebuilding and unity. Ask Him to bring our heart into alignment with His and then show us our part in His plan.

Isaiah 58:13,14

(13) "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 honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;

(14) 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 58:13-14 ESV)

Verse 13 Study:

God's final condition for His final set of promises in Isaiah 58: That we diligently observe His Sabbath. Does this mean strict observance of the Sabbath described by Moses? It goes much deeper than that.

Moses proscribed physical rest from ones labor. The new covenant instituted by Jesus demands rest from our efforts to attain righteousness, and instead to obtain the Righteousness of Christ by faith.

Verse 13 is calling us to realize that we are living in a continual Sabbath. Hebrews 4:9,10 says, **So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.**

We are not to serve God in a way that pleases us, we are not to determine what we will offer to God and what we will withhold. We are not to seek God for the pleasure that it will bring to us! And He certainly takes no delight in our empty, vain words that do not accurately reflect His glory or will. He is telling us in this verse to seek Him, to worship Him in Spirit and in Truth (as determined by Him, not us) and to refrain from presenting to Him our feeble attempts at worship. What possible way is there to stop all of our efforts and to rest in Him other than to die to ourselves?

Verse 14 Study:

If we abandon our efforts to please God and present to Him the true worship of resting from our labors and dying to our own agenda and desires he promises that we "shall take delight in the LORD". When our delight is truly in Him, He will make us "ride on the heights of the earth". What does He mean by making us "ride on the heights of the earth"? Could He mean that we will be above the cares of this world? Or that we will not be destroyed by those things of this world that destroy so many others? Could it mean that He will enable us to "seek the things that

are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” and to “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. “ (Col 3:1,2)

What could He mean by feeding us “with the heritage of Jacob, our father”? Could He mean the promise He gave to Jacob in Genesis 35:11,” And God said to him, ‘I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.’”

We need to seek God for understanding His promise completely, but as He concludes this chapter, “the mouth of the LORD has spoken”. If we do our part, we can be assured that He will do His part.