

Hypocrisy Exposed...Help Extended  
Isaiah 58:1- 59:21  
by Dellena Ludwig

Haven't we all heard the excuse, "I won't go to church. There are too many hypocrites there." Well, such an excuse is not new. Isaiah the prophet faced the scourge of hypocrisy among the people of Israel too. Even in the city of Jerusalem, many hypocrisies were evident among temple attendees. This lesson will expose those faithless acts and note the help that the Lord God offered His people.

Isaiah presented God's message about hypocrisy almost as if Judah was on trial. The evidence was presented and evaluated in chapters 58 and 59 in this sequence:

1. The Accusation: Hypocrisy in Worship (Isaiah 58:1-14)
2. The Evidence: Their Iniquities (Isaiah 59:1-12)
3. The Verdict: Guilty of Rebellion and Treachery (Isaiah 59:13-16)
4. The Sentence: Redemption Required (Isaiah 59:17-18)
5. The Reparations: Redeemer will Come (Isaiah 59: 19-21)

Google's definition of hypocrisy is as follows: "The practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one's own behavior does not conform; pretense."

Isaiah chapter 58 opens with a serious accusation that God has declared upon Israel. "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins." [Isaiah 58:1]

Rebellion. That is a very serious charge! The people replied that they were regularly going to the temple and even fasting! How could God say they were guilty of rebellion?

But God saw through their religiosity and continued His charges, in verse 2. "For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them." [Isaiah 58:2]

Israel did seem very religious. They prayed daily, seem eager to know what God wants them to do, and appear eager to be associated with God. With that type of lifestyle, seeming to be dedicated to live in close relation with God, how could Jehovah bring charges of rebellion on them?

The Scriptures tell us that God looks into people's hearts. He doesn't just keep track of how many times we go to church, pray or stop to worship Him. He also takes note of our attitude during those moments of devotion. It is so easy to demonstrate our faith in these moments of group worship. But in reality, we might be keeping a check list or really feeling our heart's desires impatiently waiting for church to be over.

God found duplicity in the hearts of Judah. “‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists.” [Isaiah 58:3,4]

So, the charges against Judah concerning their fast days, were:

1. They just did as they pleased.
2. They exploited their workers and
3. They quarreled and fought.

To understand these charges, we need to understand what God said about fasting. When God gave Moses the law, He instituted one fast day per year, regarded as the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement is the high holy day of the Jewish calendar. God instructed Israel about it in Leviticus chapter 16.

On the tenth day of the seventh month, the high priest must first offer a bull as a sin offering for himself. After washing and putting on his high priestly garments and then killing a bull for his own sin sacrifice and sprinkling its blood on and before the atonement covering, he is then ready to minister before the people.

Two goats are brought before the congregation, in front of the tabernacle or temple, and presented to the Lord. Lots are drawn to choose one goat to be the scapegoat and the other to be the sacrifice for the sins of the people.

Symbolically, all the sins of the people are placed onto the goats. The high priest is to speak all the sins of the people as he places his hands on the scapegoat.

One goat was killed as a sacrifice. The blood of this sacrifice would be then sprinkled on the atonement covering of the ark of the covenant, and before it, and on the altar outside. This is the only time anyone was ever allowed into the Most Holy Place of the temple; just the high priest, just this once on the Day of Atonement, to sprinkle the blood.

Then the second goat would be set free outside of the city, taken into a remote place in the wilderness. Then finally, both the bull and the other goat would be burnt on the altar for the sins of the people.

The reverence before God on this day was palpable. God’s instructions to the people said, “This is to be a lasting ordinance for you; On the tenth day of the seventh month, you must deny yourselves and not do any work – whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you – because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a day of sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance.” [Leviticus 16:29-31]

This day of a national fast began with the solemn weight of all the sins accumulated during that year, weighing heavily on each person. The suspense of waiting for the High Priest

to fulfill his duties precisely, and the sacrifices being accepted sometimes felt like the nation's collective breath being held, until all was completed. Only when the full sacrifice was paid and the scapegoat was lost in the wilderness could the nation retire to their homes for a meal to break their fast.

This was never meant to be a fast that could sway God to grant positive answers to their prayers. It was a ceremony to temporarily cleanse their hearts of their sins; for one more year.

The Day of Atonement was the only fast day required of all of Israel. But additional fasts could be added for specific reasons. Nehemiah fasted personally when he heard about the condition of the Jews who had returned to re-build the temple. He desired God's favor so that he might be able to ask the king to allow him to go to Jerusalem and help rebuild the wall.

Queen Esther asked the Jewish population in Persia to pray and fast on her behalf so she would be able to ask King Xerxes to save the Jews from a sentence of death ordered by Haman.

The prophet Zechariah mentioned that by the end of 70 years of exile, the Jewish people fasted in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> months of each year. (Zechariah 8:19)

Fasting was meant to be a means of setting aside one's normal activities so that extra time for reflection, confession, and prayer could make each person's hearts right before the Lord. First to forsake any sin against God, and secondly to seek God's help about requests a person might have.

However, God saw that the people of Israel had gotten into a sloppy attitude about their fasts and devotion to God. Besides the grumpy attitude they exhibited during their fast, they also just went through the motions without seeking a pure heart.

"Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?" [Isaiah 58:5] Their fast was only an outward show.

But God told the people what He really wanted. "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" [Isaiah 58:6,7]

The people easily could compare their life choices with the ideal of the Holy One of Israel and see how they were guilty of His charges against them.

But as Jehovah's trial against the hypocritical religion of His people continued, He gave evidence of further sins. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness." [Isaiah 58:9,10]

This lifestyle of outward religion at the same time as inward selfishness must stop! No wonder their prayers, even during a fast, seemed to go unanswered! This distance was not what God had in mind for His people.

“The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun- scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.” [Isaiah 58:11]

During the latter portion of Isaiah’s life, the king of Israel was Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh. He rebelled against his father’s faith. 2 Kings 21:2,3 summarized Manasseh’s life in a very negative way. “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them.” [2 Kings 21:2,3]

Under the example of this unfaithful king, it is no wonder that Israel’s faith and worship had become stale. Manasseh even placed the evil Asherah pole in the temple! He also shed innocent blood from one end of Jerusalem to the other. (2 Kings 21:7,16)

God would hold Israel as a nation accountable for their lack of faithfulness. The nation would face seventy years of exile as their penalty for their sins as a nation. He also wanted individual people to turn their hearts back to Him.

God had restoration in mind for Israel, not hypocrisy. “Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.” [Isaiah 58:12] The time would soon come when all of Jerusalem would lie in ruins. God’s people needed to be prepared to do the hard work of rebuilding, after their exile.

However, would Israel be prepared to step back into their ruined homeland and begin the difficult work of restoration when their hearts were so far away from God, as it was now? What could be done to get their lives into the proper attitude when they now stood so obviously guilty as charged?

The mark they fell so short of reaching, was the one standard they must dedicate themselves to. “If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the Lord’s day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the Lord, and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.” [Isaiah 58:13,14]

The people of God had slipped from keeping the Lord’s Day, holy. No wonder they were guilty of hypocrisy! They had turned their hearts away from true worship and made their day of worship a farce.

As a nation, they had made the Sabbath to be just like any other day. They just did whatever they wanted to do, not seeking what the Lord wanted them to do. They called the Sabbath restrictions a burden instead of a delight. They pushed the boundaries of the holy Sabbath Day so that it was filled with their own idle words instead of being dominated with the Word of God.

No wonder the people complained that God was not noticing their fasts and prayers. They were so wrapped up in going their own way, that they were dreading God's Day, instead of eagerly looking forward to devoting time to meditate on and devour His Word. They were turning their backs on the Lord yet expecting Him to grant their selfish requests.

Now that God's charges had been stated, Isaiah revealed God's evidence of their guilt. He began with a counter argument to their excuse, that God was not helping them when they asked for it.

“Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear.” [Isaiah 59:1,2]

Their feeling far from God was not God's fault. He was absolutely just as powerful and able to save them as He had been from their beginning as a nation. God had not abandoned them, but their sin had built a barrier between them and God.

When we sin, our sins are like building a brick wall between ourselves and God. Each sin, unconfessed, stands between us and God's face. As we add sin by sin, we are building that barrier higher and higher until we feel as though God is gone – we feel abandoned.

In reality, He is not any further away from us, but that we have hidden behind our excuses for our sins and do not see His loving presence. His arm is not too short to reach us, but we are hiding from Him, unwilling to repent and tear down this flimsy wall that is between us.

As evidence of their sins, God calls for the people to look at their own bodies. “For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken falsely, and your tongue mutters wicked things.” [Isaiah 59:3]

In that they had oppressed those who served and worked for them even on holy days, their hands were stained with blood. In that they withheld food or clothing from the poor and needy, their fingers were stained with guilt. In that they turned away from the needs in their own families, their lips had spoken falsely. In that they spoke of anything but God on the Sabbath, their tongues muttered wicked things.

Further evidence of their hypocrisy showed in their justice system. “No one calls for justice; no one pleads a case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments, they utter lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.” [Isaiah 59:4] They had wandered so far from the Lord that they were using His Laws, and many made up by men, to take advantage of the poor and rob from their neighbors.

The twisting of the law and logic had gotten so bad that God likened it to viper's eggs and spider's webs. When one Israelite went to court with another, their accusations and arguments were so convoluted that the settlement offered was like offering a snake's egg. If it was taken, it was worthless. If it was refused and crushed, the viper would wriggle out of the broken egg to bite the defendant. There would be no justice found.

Similarly, the strands of argument stretched the law so thin it was like a thread of spider's web. It no longer could be recognized as the strong cord of the law, because it was no longer true to the spirit of the law. "Their deeds are evil deeds, and acts of violence are in their hands." [Isaiah 59:6b]

And with the decision of twisted justice firmly in their pocket, the perverter of justice runs off to do evil. "Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. They pursue evil schemes; acts of violence mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks along them will know peace." [Isaiah 59:7,8]

Notice how God points out their whole bodies as evidence of their guilt. Their hands were stained with blood (v.3); fingers with guilt; lips speak falsely; tongue mutters wickedness; and their feet rush to sin (v.7).

He adds their eyes in verse 10, because they grope in the bright light of midday as if they are blind. And their voices are like a grumpy bear or mourning dove because "We look for justice but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away." [Isaiah 59:11]

The evidence was given. The prosecution rests. There is no defense, only a plea of guilty as charged. "For our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities: rebellion and treachery against the Lord, turning our backs on our God, inciting revolt and oppression, uttering lies our hearts have conceived." [Isaiah 59:12,13]

Notice in these verses that the prophet Isaiah identified with the guilty. The pronouns are personal. If we are honest, we also are guilty of many of these charges. Have we taken the Lord's Day as a day to do things we like to do without keeping our Sabbath holy? Don't we twist the telling of any confrontation so that we become the victim, justified in reacting as we did? Don't we harbor our own sins as our personal wall between us and God?

We feel like God is so far away from us and that He doesn't hear our prayers, just like the people of Israel did in these chapters. We moan just like they did: "So justice is driven back and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey." [Isaiah 59:14,15]

Just watching our own news verifies that our lives are riding parallel to the lives of Isaiah's people. Guilty as charged. So, the verdict is pronounced. "The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there

was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.” [Isaiah 59:15,16]

How amazing! The Lord God Almighty, the Righteous Judge, saw the sorry state of all of humanity, and reached out with His own arm to achieve salvation for us guilty sinners.

The final verses of chapter 59 revealed God’s future judgment that would be given as punishment for mankind’s sins. First, God would prepare as a soldier entering battle: “He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.” [Isaiah 59:17]

We have just celebrated our holiday called Easter. We saw that the Lord Jesus came, lived a righteous life and they found that He was without sin. He, in His innocence, died for our sins on the cross. But death could not deal that fatal blow, because He conquered sin and death to give us salvation. He rose again! He provided salvation from all sins, not just for a year, but forever!

So, now we wait for Him to come again. After wrapping Himself in zeal, He will bring judgment for all who refuse to accept this wonderful salvation He has offered to us. “According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes; he will repay the islands their due.” [Isaiah 59:18]

Finally, the Lord will return to rule and reign in Jerusalem. “‘The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins.’ declares the Lord. ‘As for me, this is my covenant with them,’ says the Lord. ‘My Spirit who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children, on the lips of their descendants – from this time on and forever.’ says the Lord.” [Isaiah 59:20,21]

Justice is served. The guilty will be punished. The repentant will find redemption. God’s Word will dwell with His people forever. Case closed.