

"Hypocrisy Exposed . . . Help Extended"
Isaiah 58:1 – 59:21
Laurel Porro

You are well aware by now of the historical context of these ending chapters of Isaiah. The ancient Jews are headed for exile in a few generations, but they already know that after a period of time in captivity, they will return to their homeland and rebuild their soon-to-be-destroyed city. They knew that there would be a Messiah and eventually, a time of future glory for all of Israel. This section we have studied the last few weeks is written not only in a desperate attempt to prevent the conquest of Jerusalem, but also to comfort and warn the people of their future. It's warning reach across the centuries to remind God's people, once again, of major principles for living righteous lives. Did you think to yourself, as I did, "Haven't we heard this before?"

Well, yes, we have heard the same song, but in this lesson, we hear a different verse. We could refer to it as learning to speak God's love language. How God tells us He wants to be loved, and how we try to love Him the way we want to love Him, are often not the same. God says fast this way, but His people fasted their way. God says observe the Sabbath this way, but we often want to observe it our way.

God's way, my way: My way might look good to others, I may even be convincing myself that I'm doing it right by getting in my devotion time; getting to church on Sunday; even fasting once in a while. But the reality is that Isaiah 58 contains some of the strongest indictments against hypocrisy, which often accompanies fasting and observing the Sabbath. The challenges faced by the Israelites have strong implications for us today. Get ready to take notes and see where we as a church can grow stronger.

58:1 – "Shout it aloud": God wants it shouted loudly, like a trumpet, of the rebellion of His people. Shouting is usually reserved for praises, and rejoicing; but here God is wanting shouting to announce sin! Normally, we keep sin quiet, undercover, talk about it in whispers, but not to God; do not hold back, He says!

What does God want shouted out? That His church is engaging in religious practices, which show off their piety, but fooling no one. God had to declare the sin loudly to be heard above the clamor of the apparent eagerness of the people to draw near to Him. In the Levitical system of worship, when people brought their sacrifices to the temple, they did so with the expectation that by bringing the right sacrifices and offerings, saying the right prayers, doing the right things to humble themselves, that they would then enjoy the nearness of God. But God had given the practices to be the manifestation of an inward reality of humbleness of heart, brokenness of spirit, and love of others.

58:3 – “Why have we fasted and you have not seen it, humbles ourselves and you have not noticed?”

In the faith of the people of ancient Israel, such a lament was an expression of piety, an aspect of longing for God’s pardon and restoration. Complaints that God had failed to hear and act were a fairly consistent part of Psalms and other parts of the Torah. But in this case, the people were using their lament to cover up their sin. Without repentance, their complaints were actually a mockery.

58:4-7 – God was condemning the outward appearance of a committed practice of religion, because the reality was that their hearts were far from Him. What seemed like the eager devotion was actually aimed at a selfish earning of benefits from the Lord. The fasting that was intended to win divine approval actually brought out the worst in people; understandable if hungry people are forced to spend time together. The people were humble in front of others, but harsh at home in private.

Verse 6: A true fast is for correcting the wrongs in human conditions. Its purpose is to have an affect on one’s soul. A brief look at fasting in Scripture shows that people fasted in time of threat of war, (Judges); when loved ones were sick (David); when loved ones died; when they sought God’s forgiveness (Moses, Nineveh, Daniel); and when they needed God’s help for a serious issue of significance for a large number of people (Esther). A normal fast was abstaining from food, but drinking water, and was often one day, from sunrise to sunset. However, Moses fasted 40 days, David fasted 7 days when his son was ill, and in the Book of Esther, the Jews fasted three days.

In the New Testament, Jesus referred to fasting as an expectation when He told the people in the Sermon on the Mount that when they fasted, they were not to make a show of it. Fasting is intended as a bodily aid to detach oneself from the wants of our daily lives in order to focus the mind on the Lord. But even fasting is not immune from degenerating into a performance. Jesus later told His critics that His disciples did not need to fast while He was with them. If a fast has the purpose of calling on God to hear your prayers, it was not necessary to bombard the gates of heaven when God was right in their midst.

Later in the book of Acts, the church fasted before important events, such as choosing elders, and before sending out Barnabas on a missionary journey. Paul himself fasted often and taught the Corinthians that the only time that a husband and wife may withhold themselves from each other sexually is during a time of fasting and prayer. Both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches fast as a part of church law. Perhaps many of you grew up on a can’t-eat-meat-Friday and fast days during Lent.

But in the history of the Protestant church, fasting has alternately gained and lost in popularity. During the time between 1861 and 1954, not one book on the subject was published in the U.S. In a culture where there is a fast food restaurant on every

corner, and where we've been taught that if we don't eat a properly balanced diet from the food pyramid each day – 6 servings of carbohydrates, 9 servings of fruits and vegetables, etc. – fasting seems out of date.

However, as we have studied in Isaiah this year, we have seen the writing on the wall. We are a nation, indeed a world, that is quickly headed toward self-destruction. Prayer has become intense, revival is breaking out in many areas, certainly among the young people, and overseas. Fasting is gaining popularity as God's people have reached the end of their resources. A search of the web last week yielded over 44,000 sites on the subject. People fast for health reasons to cleanse the body of toxins from our food, and can serve to help the body recover from many of our health ailments caused by dietary overload. Many of the sites concerned those issues. But many of the religious, including evangelical Christian sites, had opportunities to join large groups of intercessors in fasting and prayer, as well as information on how to prepare for a short or long fast.

For those of you who have never done a long fast before, you should know that when God told people to fast, He was using a physical rejuvenation process to demonstrate a spiritual rejuvenation reality. What seems like deprivation, is actually enrichment when used according to God's Word. The first two days of a fast are difficult because the body is ridding itself of toxins in our digestive system and in our bloodstream. But after two or three days, your body begins a rejuvenation process, which restores balance to your system. The hunger wanes, and you don't miss food nearly as much as you thought you would. In fact, as long as you stay away from situations where people are eating, you will be surprised at how much better you feel physically and spiritually. The soul becomes more sensitive to the sound of the Lord's voice. The bottom line is this: If a fast does not promote the putting away of sin, it is a diet, not a fast.

58:5 – God chides the people for going through the motions: Is that what you call a fast? A day acceptable to the Lord?

Verse 6: Is not this the kind of fast I have chosen? One who would be true to God must not retreat into private acts of study and ritual, which leaves the social problems of the world to the secular, and often self-serving community. If you have fasted and prayed during an election, and seen results, you felt you had a part in the victory – fasting and prayer for a purpose yields such sweet results!

Is fasting like a magic trick to get God to do what we want? Hardly! If done with the right motives, for the right reasons, in an attitude of repentance, then blessings will abound: vs.8b – then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call and God will answer: Here am I. (reverse of Isaiah's response when the Lord asked, "Who will go for us?") Exactly the opposite of

the beginning of the chapter, when the people said we have humbled ourselves and fasted and you have not seen it!

58:8-12 – God tells the people how He will respond when they do it His way with a series of “if” and “then” statements:

Vs. 9 **if** you do away with the yoke of oppression, **if** you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry, **then** your light will shine in the darkness, and your night like noonday.

Vs. 11 **Then** the Lord will guide you always and He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land . . . He will help us when we are vulnerable and things seem bleak.

The theme of restoration, with the well-watered garden, and the rebuilt ruins, reminds us that rebuilding of the walls, the city and temple of Jerusalem, would require stamina and supernatural strength. The tasks, which would confront the returning exiles, would only be surmountable if God gave them the power to complete the tasks. To apply the restoration to our own day, we see that God will restore the ruins of our lives, which have been devastated through our own mistakes and failed opportunities.

58:13 – God then reminds His people, through Isaiah, of another sign of their rebellion: that is the breaking of the Sabbath.

In Exodus 31, God had said, “You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so that you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy.” The purpose of a day set aside for God’s agenda would tell the world that this was a people devoted to their God. It would also provide a time of physical, emotional, and spiritual rejuvenation after six days of the rat race. The Jewish people, who were moving into captivity, would be tempted, as we are today, into not observing the Sabbath as they assimilated themselves into a pagan society.

We have the same problem today. Many of you remember the days when stores were closed on Sundays, you spent the afternoon either taking a nap, or in my case, my family loaded the car and we drove over to grandma’s house for a visit. Because most of the country followed Christian traditions, there were not nearly as many options for spending a Sunday afternoon as the are today. We are tempted to spend Sundays just like the rest of the world does, but our observance of the Lord’s Day is a test of our fidelity to Him. By taking a thoughtful approach as to how it is used, making a conscientious decision not to shop, do housework, take care of business, or catch up on some errands, but instead using it to catch up on your Bible study, you’ll find yourself calling the Sabbath a delight, delighting the Lord as well, and getting the physical and spiritual recharging we all need for our busy workdays.

58:14 – Look at the benefits: you will find your joy in the Lord. You will ride on the heights of the land; you will feast on your inheritance. The sufficiency and provision that the Lord has in mind for us is based on all His covenant promises since He gave them to Jacob. Speaking God’s love language to Him then becomes our delight, and we will receive the blessing.

59:1-8 – Isaiah anticipated the time when they will return to Zion from exile, anxious to please Him, but torn between their learned pagan ways and their foggy understanding of their own laws.

The Lord is not deaf to our cries, not is He unable to change our conditions, but He needs a repentant heart first. So, the first order of business in the hear-changing business is acknowledgement of sin. If there is one thing I recall about the first 25 chapters of Isaiah, it’s the accusation leveled at the people about their pride and arrogance. If we come to God with a humble and repentant heart, we will receive everything we need from God. But if we come to justify ourselves and make excuses, God has no obligation to even hear us, much less respond to us. People are strangely reluctant to admit that they contribute to the problems they face. Our wrong actions or attitudes are often responsible for much of the evil in the world.

59:4 – In verse 4, the sin is spelled out: not taking a public stand for injustice, and righteousness, misusing the legal process for illegal ends, empty and worthless arguments which bring forth lies and trouble. How many of the things we argue about, or get into conflict about, are meaningless in the long run?

Isaiah used descriptive metaphors here to emphasize the enormity of the evil that would take place among His people. Paul quoted the same words in Romand 3: Spinning webs, eating viper’s eggs, covering their bodies with cobwebs, feet quick to rush to evil, crooked paths, and no peace. These are not just generalities, but the disintegration of the social order much like we are seeing today.

59:9-13 – The remnant of God’s people responds by admitting their failures. The change in these verses is marked by a shift to first person: God’s Word has finally had its effect.

Yes, it’s true, there is no justice in our paths, we grope like blind people, stumbling even during daylight, like people who are dead, as indeed, we are dead in our sins, and our darkness pervades showing itself in our growling like bears, moaning like doves, for our many offences. An equitable justice system is the mark of a civilized society, but here the justice system is marked by treachery. And here are the results, justice is driven back, righteousness stands at a distance, and truth and honesty are nowhere to be found.

59:16-17 – In God’s covenant with Israel, God called the people into partnership with Himself; they would be His people, a light to the nations, and He would be their God. A cooperative effort where the universe would come to know God, and love Him wholeheartedly so that all would enjoy the benefits of a loving Creator. But He looks around in verse 16, and there is no one! Story over, experiment over, Satan is the victor, a tragic conclusion. No faithful people to be a light to the nations. Who can save us from this dilemma; we’re stuck in the muck of Romans 7:1; I want to do what I cannot do, and I do what I don’t want to do, and who can save me from myself?

Verse 16: ...so His own arm worked salvation for Him and His own righteousness sustained Him. The Lord possesses within Himself all that is needed to solve the problem of man’s rebellion. But this is not humble lamb being led to the slaughter, but one who is putting on armor and garments of vengeance and zeal, and dealing out wrath to His enemies in accord with His righteous demands and the standards of His holy character. What sort of grace is this?

59:18-20 – Grace consistent with an apocalyptic vision for liberty and justice for all. For a day is coming when God will repay all the evil in the world in in doing so, all will see His glory.

His achievement will be worldwide; no one will know the truth without responding to Him in complete reverence. The victory will be centered in Zion, but it will not be for all those who liv there; only those who repent of their sins will be saved. At precisely the point when there doesn’t seem to be anyone to intervene in the crisis of your life, God comes with all His power and turns the tables upside down. This is the hope which sustains us in difficult times, which affirms God’s sovereignty and reminds us of the destiny of all who will not repent of their sinfulness.

The message is clear for us; we live in a culture that has no higher standard than our own human expediency. Today’s advances in economics, communications, technology, medicine threaten every boundary line put in place by an ingenious and loving Creator.

59:21 – God once again declares that His covenant with His people is eternal. Verse 21 brings the chapter to a fitting conclusion; His covenant reached back through history to the time of Abraham, through the line of David, to Jesus Christ Himself and then to us the church. As always, the one thing that distinguishes us from the rest of the world, then as now, is the expression of Truth. The words of truth that were spoken first to Abraham, and reaffirmed to David, manifested in Jesus Christ, and now entrusted to us are the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. First found in Genesis 17, He has pledged to be our God and the God of a people who are dedicated to Him. He then promised to forgive the sins of a rebellious people by writing His law on our hearts, so that we can today and for eternity enjoy the fullness of life through Him.