

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

Overview

Structurally, two things are going on in this section, which at first appear out of line (chart).

The first is the alternation in speaker between the Lord (vv. 1-7, 13-14) and Isaiah (vv. 8-12, referring to the Lord in the third person).

The second is the alternation of conditions and promises in vv. 6-14.

The Lord gives the first condition. Isaiah gives the corresponding promise, then all of the second condition and promise. The Lord then returns with the third promise. The overall effect is like a round, tightly tying the two voices together and emphasizing that Isaiah is presenting the word of the Lord. We'll see later that the actual structure is a bit more complicated, but this is a good first approximation.

1-5, Jacob's Failed Worship

58:1 Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.--Here is the theme of the first part of this chapter, and indeed of much of these nine chapters (the false worship and indictment sections occupy 103 vv out of 163, nearly 2/3 of the section). Yet as we noted in the previous study, the focal point of these chapters is on the Redeemer and the glory that he brings to Zion. This section promises salvation, yet devotes considerable energy to calling out sin.

There is a deep principle here: salvation begins with repentance, and the offer of salvation must begin by calling people's attention to their sin. In an effort to avoid offense, we naturally try to soft-pedal this part of the message. Just think about how the Four Laws begins: "God loves you, and has a wonderful plan for your life." That's not where Scriptural evangelism begins. People have to recognize that they have sinned against a holy God and are under his wrath before they will ever receive his salvation.

The people's view of themselves is very different, summarized here in a neat little chiasmic verse:

2 Yet they seek me daily,--Every day the priests in the temple carried out the Mosaic ordinances.

and delight to know my ways,--They were careful to follow the sacrificial instructions and the sacred calendar, and to attend to the teaching of the Levites throughout the cities of Israel.

as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God:--"As" here has the sense "as if they were." To all outward appearances, they are a godly, obedient nation. This is the central couplet in the chiasm, giving the conclusion to which the outward activities lead.

they ask of me the ordinances of justice;--Like "delight to know my ways," this clause emphasizes their apparent openness to the teachings of God's word.

they take delight in approaching to God.--Like "seek me daily," this clause emphasizes their participation in corporate worship.

To get the full impact of these verses, we might consider their analog in our modern society: "I attend

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

all the meetings of the church, I memorize large portions of the Bible, and read it every day. What more could God want?"

3 Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?--The phrase "afflict one's soul" is used in Lev 16:29, 31 to describe the attitude required on the Day of Atonement, the only fast commanded in the Torah. Other ceremonial fasts were imposed during the captivity, commemorating the events of the destruction of the Temple (see Zech 7:5; 8:19). But there were other occasional fasts before then, occasioned by times of national disaster:

Defeat of Israel by Benjamin: Jdg 20:26 Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came unto the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the LORD, and **fasted** that day until even, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD.

Threat from the Philistines: 1Sa 7:6 And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the LORD, and **fasted** on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the LORD.

After the death of Saul and his sons: 1Sa 31:13 And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and **fasted** seven days.

David, seeking the healing of his son: 2Sa 12:22 And he said, While the child was yet alive, I **fasted** and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? 23 But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.

Ahab, when Elijah told him of coming judgment: 1Ki 21:27 And it came to pass, when Ahab heard those words, that he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and **fasted**, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly.

There is a difference between these fasts and that of the Day of Atonement. The latter was intended to show the people's awareness of their sin and their rejection of it. These other fasts are all done in order to get something from God, to solicit some protection or favor. Many time he graciously granted what they asked. But they came to see the fast as a magic wand to get God to act. These words reflect their frustration when they wave their wand and he doesn't act.¹

Now the Lord answers their question. Why doesn't God accept their fast? Isaiah outlines two problems with their fasting: it is superficial, and it is self-seeking.

Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours.--The first problem with their fast is that it is *superficial*. Food is so essential to us that ordinarily it is the last thing we will give up. Fasting ought to be the pinnacle of self-denial, the final mark of a period when one devotes oneself entirely to seeking the Lord. Instead, they continue to please themselves. They claim to "afflict our soul," 3a, but in fact they go about business as usual.

"Exact your labors" is more literally "oppress your laborers." We hear again the emphasis on social

¹ In discussion, we realized that a fast for a petition can rest on the logic of the penitential fast, if the suppliant recognizes his sin before the Lord as the reason that he is having problems, and fasts to deal with this sin so that it will no longer block God's blessing.

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

justice that permeates the seventh-century prophets. How can you think that God will receive your fasting as a sincere emblem of humbling yourself before him, when you continue to behave haughtily toward your fellow creatures?

4 Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness:--The second problem is that it is *self-seeking*. They fast in order to get God to support their desire in ungodly competition with others.

Two NT parallels illustrate this ungodly approach to God.

James describes the futility of selfish prayer:

Jam 4:1-3 From whence *come* wars and fightings among you? *come they* not hence, *even* of your lusts that war in your members? 2 Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. 3 Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume *it* upon your lusts.

When Paul was arrested, a group of Pharisees undertook a fast as part of their plan to assassinate him, perhaps to seek God's support:

Act 23:12 And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.

ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high.--Such a fast will not be effective in attracting God's attention.

5 Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul?--The sense may be clearer if we replace the first question mark with a comma. God did decree a fast, the day of atonement, in Lev. 16. He decreed that the people were to "afflict your souls," Lev 16:29, 31, emphasizing the inward attitude of self-denial that he required. We might paraphrase, "Is what you're doing really the exercise in afflicting the soul that I commanded?"

is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?--Instead of starting with inward self-denial, their fast consists only of outward display, hanging down their heads and making a show of sackcloth and ashes. Our Lord rebuked the Pharisees of his day for ostentatious fasting, addressed to men rather than God:

Mat 6:16-18 Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. 17 But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; 18 That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

Fasting is good, if it leads to humility before God. But it is bad if it serves only as a badge of piety. This warning is of broad applicability. Every legitimate spiritual act can be perverted to serve our pride.

- Faithfulness in meeting with God's people is good, but not if it feeds a sense of superiority over other believers.
- Bible memory is good, but not if it leads us to disparage those with whom we think ourselves in

competition.

- The Lord's Table is precious, but not if we think that we earn God's favor by remembering him.

6-14, True Worship

From this condemnation of false worship, we now turn to three descriptions of true worship, each followed by a promise that will follow if the people change their behavior.

The three "thens" in vv. 9, 10b, and 14 suggest the three conditions that we outlined on the initial slide. However, several observations suggest a slightly different structure (chart).

1. The first "condition" really isn't a condition. The Lord is simply describing the fast that he desires. There is no "if," as there is in vv. 9b and 13.
2. The second condition doesn't add anything to the Lord's description of a godly fast, but simply summarizes the Lord's command to release the oppressed and care for the poor. Thus it deals with the same religious practice, fasting, that the first one does.
3. The first and second promises are highly parallel. Both promise the Lord's light and his guidance. In fact, only the first begins with a Hebrew word corresponding to "then." The second is unmarked.
4. The third condition and promise are spoken by the Lord, and deal with another aspect of worship, the Sabbath day.

The Massoretic punctuation supports the integration of the first and second promises with the condition that lies between them. Verse breaks separate the Lord's first statement from the promise-condition-promise spoken by Isaiah, and also the Lord's second condition and promise from Isaiah's words, but do not divide Isaiah's promises and conditions from one another.

Thus the passage is really dealing with two issues, not three: misguided fasting and overlooking the Sabbath day.

6-12, True Fasting

6-7, The Lord's Solution to False Fasting

6 *Is not this the fast that I have chosen?*

to loose the bands of wickedness,--This can be understood in at least two ways. Some teachers understand "bands" as a metaphor for wickedness, and explain that fasting is a way to break the hold that sin has over us. In the context, it is more likely that "wickedness" characterizes the bonds that they put on their laborers, "wicked bands," as already suggested at the end of v. 3. They have oppressed others economically to gain advantage for themselves. Now the Lord insists, "If you want to deprive yourselves in a way that pleases me, deprive yourself by being kind to your fellows."

The following series of clauses describes this process of loosing the wicked bands in three steps. The imagery is drawn from the primitive yokes used in the Near East. The yoke consisted of a bar across

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

the neck of the animals, with a rope tied around each animal's neck (chart).

to undo the heavy burdens [lit. bands of the yoke],--Step one is to untie the rope that goes around the neck.

and to let the oppressed go free,--Step two, with the rope untied, is to remove the yoke from the neck, thus freeing the animal.

and that ye break every yoke?--Step three is to destroy the yoke, so that you do not engage in this behavior in the future.

Not only are the righteous to stop oppressing the poor, but they are to provide positive relief to them. Isaiah considers each of four basic needs of life:

7 Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry,--They are to provide food for those who are hungry.

and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house?--They are to provide shelter to those who are homeless.

when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him;--They are to provide clothing to those who have none.

and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?--These obligations are particularly strong toward those to whom we have a familial bond. Israel's first responsibility was toward other Israelites, the orphan and widow, though they also had a duty to the stranger who dwelt among them.

This description lies behind our Lord's commendation to the righteous at the last judgment, Matt 25:35-40 (chart). He touches each of these categories of need, plus some others, and emphasizes the family responsibility, this time in the context of a spiritual family.

If we would be pleasing to the Lord, following both Old Covenant and New Covenant teaching, we must take seriously our responsibility to the poor, especially those who name the name of Christ.

8-9a, Isaiah's Promise

Isaiah responds to this description of godly fasting by promising God's favor. This promise has three parts, expressed as poetic couplets, which give three answers to the people's desire to attract God's attention by their fasting.

8 Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily:--

The first motive for fasting might be to have God deliver them from a problem that already besets them. The first part of the promise is that God will remove existing problems, depicted here under two metaphors: being in darkness, and being ill.

- The Lord promises dawn to those in darkness, a metaphor that will permeate these nine chapters.
- He promises health to the ill, "spring[ing] forth speedily." The verb is agricultural, and refers to a plant that sprouts out of the ground after a rain.

The conjunction of these two metaphors reminds us of the last words of David in 2 Sam 23 (chart),

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

2Sa 23:3-4 The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men *must be* just, ruling in the fear of God. 4 And *he shall be* as the **light of the morning, when the sun riseth**, *even* a morning without clouds; **as the tender grass springing out of the earth** by clear shining after rain.

David's statement looks forward to his descendant, the Messiah, as the next verse shows:

5 Although my house *be* not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all *things*, and sure: for *this is* all my salvation, and all *my* desire, although he make *it* not to grow.

As we saw with the Servant passages in the previous section of Isaiah, after his coming, many of the promises made to him are available to us (chart), and here Isaiah appears to transfer one of them to us.

and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy reward.--A second motive for fasting might be to protect us against something bad that hasn't happened yet, but might happen. The second part of the promise deals with this case. The picture is of a caravan moving through hostile territory. They need protection both from the threats that they can see and from those that lie in ambush, to spring out behind them.

Those who observe the fast that God has chosen are protected in both direction.

- Their righteous conduct defends them from things that lie before them. If we respond to every circumstance by obeying God's instructions, we will be secure.
- How about the threats we can't see? The Lord will post his glory behind us, and no one will be able to sneak up on us.

We have an example of this principle in Daniel (chart). As a high government official, he had many enemies, who sought to attack him. They were hindered in two ways.

First, his righteousness was impeccable. His righteousness went before him.

Dan 6:4 Then the presidents and princes sought to find occasion against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find none occasion nor fault; forasmuch as he *was* faithful, neither was there any error or fault found in him.

His adversaries devised a plan to condemn him for his faithfulness to God. They persuaded the king to forbid prayer to anyone other than the king for 30 days, or be cast into a den of lions. Daniel refused to be cowed, and the king had to carry out the sentence.

Usually, nights at the Persian palace were a time for merriment, for music and feasting. That night was different. It was a dreary, gloomy evening:

Dan 6:18 Then the king went to his palace, and passed the night fasting: neither were instruments of musick brought before him: and his sleep went from him.

Where was the party? In the lion's den, which should have been a place of terror.

Dan 6:21-22 Then said Daniel unto the king, O king, live for ever. 22 My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt.

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

Daniel did not compromise his righteousness, and the Lord protected him from attack behind.

The Lord Jesus is another example (chart). He did not compromise the work God had for him to do. Even his enemies had to admit his righteousness: Pilate declared, “I find no fault in this man” (Luke 23:4), and even the Jews had to suborn false witnesses to get an accusation against him. Like Daniel, his faith was tried: God’s purpose required him to suffer for his righteousness, but afterward God raised him in glory, and in glory he will return to set up his kingdom.

Daniel lived about 70 years after Isaiah, and may well have known this verse. His conduct demonstrates the power of this principle. We must never compromise our righteousness for fear of the consequences. God in his glorious power is ready to protect our back.

9 Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am.-- The third part of the promise (chart) deals with all other possible motives: it is a general promise that the Lord will be attentive to our prayers.

9b-10a, Isaiah’s Repetition of the Condition

Now Isaiah repeats the twofold condition that the Lord laid down in vv. 6-7 (chart).

The first condition was putting an end to oppressing the weak.

If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke,--The Lord mentioned the “yoke,” strictly the bar of the yoke, twice already in v. 6, and that is our clue to the theme of oppression here. The Lord told the people to loose it, remove, it, and destroy it. Isaiah’s statement here puts the “amen” to that requirement.

the putting forth of the finger,--The exact meaning is unclear, but the context shows that this action is sinful. Note that this gesture is paired with sinful speech:

and speaking vanity;--The phrase appears elsewhere only in Zech 10:2, of the false oracles of an idol:

Zec 10:2 For the idols have spoken vanity, and the diviners have seen a lie, and have told false dreams;

This combination of gestures and sinful speech is also found in Prov 6, the description of the man of בליעל (chart):

Pro 6:12-13 A naughty person, a wicked man, walketh with a froward mouth. 13 He winketh with his eyes, he speaketh with his feet, **he teacheth with his fingers;**

Many modern translations (RSV, ESV, NET, NASV) agree in rendering the last clause, “he points with his fingers,” linking it with Isa 58:9. The KJV reflects the meaning of the verb more literally. The idea of Prov 6 is that the wicked man’s word is not sufficient. It is twisted, coming from a “mouth of perversity” עקשות פה. His gestures with his eyes, feet, and fingers communicate to his wicked partners that his words are not to be taken at face value.

So here, the prophet does not condemn simple pointing, but use of gestures to qualify words. Our word should be clear, simple, and straightforward, without any qualifying gestures, crossed fingers, or winks. Anything else is an attempt to oppress our fellows.

10 And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul;--The second condition of the true fast was to care for the hungry, naked, and homeless, and Isaiah also summarizes this condition.

10b-12, Isaiah's Promise

Like the first promise, the second has three parts, which deal with the same three broad categories (chart). As we review these, it is profitable to contemplate how each of them is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus.

10b, Light in the Darkness

then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday:--The first part repeats the promise from v. 8 of a remedy for their current problems. There, he compared the nation's deliverance to the dawn after a long night; here the sun has risen to noon-day strength.

In both the OT and the NT, the Messiah is depicted as the dawn of a new day (chart).

We saw this earlier in Isaiah. First the prophet poses the problem of spiritual darkness:

Isa 50:10 Who *is* among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh *in* darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God.

Then the Servant warns of seeking our own light:

50:11 Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass *yourselves* about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks *that* ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow.

In our study of v. 8, we saw Isaiah's echo of David's last words, speaking of the Messiah as a new dawn. Malachi, the last prophet of the OT, foretold,

Mal 4:2 But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.

By associating sunrise and healing, he recalls Isaiah's dual promise,

Isa 58:8 Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily:

Our Lord claims this position when he proclaims

Joh 8:12 Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, **I am the light of the world:** he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

11, Provision for the Journey

11 And the LORD shall guide thee continually,--The second part of the promise in 8-9a dealt with the Lord's protection for them on the march. So here, he envisions them on the move, enjoying the Lord's provision.

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

As often in this book, Isaiah draws on the imagery of the Exodus. “Guide” נָהַג is a common verb for God’s leadership of the people through the wilderness, where he fed them and gave them drink in a desert land.² It also recalls Psa 23, where (as here) it is combined with physical provision. Isaiah echoes each of the four clauses of Ps 23:2-3 (chart):

Psa 23:2-3 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

and satisfy thy soul in drought,-- “Drought” means a period without water, but the Hebrew word, which appears only here, more likely means a *region* without water, as a related term does in Ps 68:6. That passage, in turn, has the Exodus in view, when God provided for Israel as they journeyed through a dry land.

God provided for his people during the Exodus, when they went through “a dry and thirsty land, where no water is” (Ps 63:1). So on future journeys, he will protect them from the sun’s blazing heat.

Note the repetition of “satisfy” from the previous verse. God satisfies those who “satisfy the afflicted soul” (v. 10) (chart). Solomon recognized this principle:

Pro 11:25 The liberal soul shall be made fat: and he that watereth shall be watered also himself.

There were two aspects to God’s provision for the nation during the Exodus: food and water. Isaiah now recalls these (chart).

and make fat thy bones:--God fed them with manna and the quail.

Exo 16:11-15 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 12 I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel: speak unto them, saying, At even ye shall eat flesh, and in the morning ye shall be filled with bread; and ye shall know that I *am* the LORD your God. 13 And it came to pass, that at even the quails came up, and covered the camp: and in the morning the dew lay round about the host. 14 And when the dew that lay was gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness *there lay* a small round thing, *as* small as the hoar frost on the ground. 15 And when the children of Israel saw *it*, they said one to another, *It is* manna: for they wist not what it *was*. And Moses said unto them, *This is* the bread which the LORD hath given you to eat.

and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.--He sent a spring to follow them through the desert, water from the rock. They were like a moving oasis.

Again, these promises, echoing the Exodus, in turn anticipate our Lord’s ministry (chart). He both feeds his people and gives them to drink. He demonstrates this in feeding the 4000 and the 5000 (along with the resurrection, the only miracle in all four gospels), and in providing wine at Cana of Galilee. And he promises it by identifying himself as the bread of life, and the one who gives living water.

12, Rebuilding the Ruins

The third part of the promise envisions the nation’s return to the land of Judah, which was ravished by Nebuchadnezzar’s army and now lies waste. The third part of the first promise was very general: they will be able to call on the Lord for anything, and he will answer them. In this second cycle, his future

² Eleven out of the forty instances of the verb (Exod. 13:17, 21; 15:13; 32:34; Deut. 32:12; Neh. 9:12, 19; Ps. 77:21; Ps. 78:14, 53, 72) describe how the people were led during the Exodus. Note in particular the concentrations

provision is much more specific.

12 And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places [ruins]: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations;--Like many other prophecies, this one has multiple layers.

Isaiah anticipates in the first place the mission of Nehemiah in rebuilding Jerusalem. The first of Nebuchadnezzar's three waves of conquest of Jerusalem was 606 BC, and the return under Cyrus was thirty years later, 536 BC. But the vast majority of the Jews never returned. 90 years later, we find Nehemiah serving as the cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes (chart). He received visitors from Jerusalem, who reported that

Neh 1:3 the wall of Jerusalem also *is* broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

Those who returned had settled in villages where they could farm, not in the city. Ezra had rebuilt the temple, but the rest of the capital remained in ruins. God moved his heart to return and rebuild the ruined city.

and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.--In the first instance, this promise also seems to take us back to the days of Nehemiah, who repaired the broken-down walls of Jerusalem (ch. 3). But that doesn't explain "the restorer of paths to dwell in." In the context of Nehemiah, that would have to be a reference to the streets of the city, which would be cleared of rubble in the process of rebuilding. But a city street in Hebrew is רחוב, while the word used here, נתיבה, refers to a footpath (contrasted with highway in Jud 5:6).

The reference may take us beyond the work of Nehemiah. "Repair" גדר and "breach" פרץ appear together in only three other verses in the OT. All of them go beyond physical restoration to spiritual revival.

Amos, Isaiah's contemporary, cites them in a prophecy of the day of the Lord that James quotes in Acts 15 as anticipating the salvation of the Gentiles (chart):

Amo 9:11-12 In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and **close up the breaches** thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: 12 That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this.

This recalls the vision of Isa 2, when many nations come to the restored house of the Lord to learn to walk in his paths, and physical restoration leads to spiritual renewal:

Isa 2:1 The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. 2 And it shall come to pass in the last days, *that* the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. 3 And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

Ezekiel, 70 years after Isaiah, also uses the words close together (though he does not apply the verb to the noun), again with a focus on ethical conduct (chart):

Eze 13:3-5 3Thus saith the Lord GOD; Woe unto the foolish prophets, that follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! 4 O Israel, thy prophets are like the foxes in the deserts. 5 Ye

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

have not gone up into the **gaps**, neither **made up** the hedge for the house of Israel to stand in the battle in the day of the LORD.

Eze 22:29-30 The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy: yea, they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully. 30 And I sought for a man among them, that should **make up** the hedge, and stand in the **gap** before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none.

Thus Targum Jonathan, an Aramaic translation of the prophets, renders the passage,

they shall call thee one that confirms the right way, and converts the ungodly to the law.

Israel's mission is not just to rebuild physical Zion, but to restore the ungodly. She failed mightily, as Paul points out in Rom 2 (chart),

Rom 2:17-24 Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, 18 And knowest *his* will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; 19 And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, 20 An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law. 21 Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? 22 Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege? 23 Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? 24 For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written.

Once more, this promise anticipates our Lord. The perfect Servant of the Lord carried out this ministry (chart). He corrected the Pharisees for their distortion of the law (Matt 5), repeatedly urged the two tables upon his hearers (Matt 22:37-40; Luke 10:25-28), and then sent his followers out to all, "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt 28:20). We now continue this work as we call people to repentance and faith. And one day, our Lord will send out the law from Zion.

13-14, The Sabbath

Now the speaker changes again, and once more we hear the voice of the Lord.

The subject of this chapter is false vs. true worship. The first part of the chapter focused on false vs. true fasting. The second focuses on false vs. true sabbath keeping (chart). The choice of these two reflects the ten commandments (chart).

- The sabbath is the subject of the fourth commandment, the final commandment of the four that concern our relation to the Lord.
- Fasting is depriving ourselves so as to please the Lord. It demonstrates our adherence to the tenth commandment, "Thou shalt not covet." In addition, this chapter teaches that the right way to deprive ourselves is to care for the poor and not oppress them. True fasting addresses the six commandments that concern our relation to our fellow humans.

Let's first study the text, then consider the relevance of the Sabbath to today.

The Text

The condition is formulated as a chiasm (chart), with prohibitions on the outside and the positive statement of duty at the center. We'll work from the outside in.

13 If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, ... not doing thine own ways,--The first prohibition on each side is expressed through the metaphor of walking ("foot," "ways"). The possessive pronouns emphasize the pursuit of one's own objectives.

from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; ... nor finding thine own pleasure,--The second clause in each of the outer panels moves from action (walking) to intent, the pursuit of one's own desires.

nor speaking thine own words:--The second panel adds an element not found in the first. At first glance, it seems extreme. Are people not to say anything on the Sabbath? Probably, the meaning is more restricted.

Recall that the work from which God rested on the first Sabbath consisted in speaking. Repeatedly, Gen 1 records, "God said," and things happened. Then on the seventh day he ceased from his creative speech.³

The expression, "to speak words," often has in the OT a sense of carrying out a task or making a business deal (chart). For example:

When Eliezer, Abraham's servant, comes to Haran, Laban offers him hospitality, but Eliezer insists on putting business before pleasure:

Gen 24:33 And there was set *meat* before him to eat: but he said, I will not eat, until I have **told mine errand דברתי דברי**.

Isaiah proclaims the futility of coalitions against the people of the Lord:

Isa 8:10 Take counsel together, and it shall come to nought; **speak the word דברו דבר**, and it shall not stand: for God *is* with us.

Isaiah's contemporary Hosea also uses the expression, in reference to a false commitment to a covenant:

Hos 10:4 They have **spoken words דברו דברים**, swearing falsely in making a covenant: thus judgment springeth up as hemlock in the furrows of the field.

So the prohibition against speaking focuses on making deals, forming covenants, and other such business uses of speech.⁴

and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable;--There are two phrases here, not three. We are to call the Sabbath a delight, and call the holy [day] of the Lord honorable.

and shalt honour him,--or "it," that is, the Sabbath.

14 Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD;--We encountered this expression in 57:4, where we noted its origins in Ps 37,

³ The expression "speak a word" is used of the Lord's effective speech at Ezek 12:25, 28, linking it to the creative speech in Genesis.

⁴ The expression is also used of the work of a prophet: Deut 18:20; Jer 23:28; 29:23; Ezek 14:9

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

Psa 37:4 **Delight thyself** also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.

We know that we are to delight ourselves in the Lord. Here, Isaiah tells us how to do that: by subordinating our own pleasures to his commands (in this case, the Sabbath).

We can gain further insight by comparing this with some sayings of our Lord (chart). He suggests that love for him leads to obedience:

Joh 14:15 If ye love me, keep my commandments.

At first glance, this is the reverse order from Isa 58:14. However, consider

Joh 15:10 If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.

Here obedience leads to abiding in the Lord's love. The love that the Spirit gives us for the Lord, and our obedience to him, feed on one another.

and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth,--The promise echoes Moses' song (chart),

Deu 32:13 He made him **ride on the high places of the earth**, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and he made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock;

and his last blessing on Israel,

Deu 33:29-1 Happy *art* thou, O Israel: who *is* like unto thee, O people saved by the LORD, the shield of thy help, and who *is* the sword of thy excellency! and thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee; and **thou shalt tread upon their high places.**

The idiom is always positive, and appears to reflect the military advantage enjoyed by a force that occupies the heights. In Moses' words, the expression reflects Israel's victory over Egypt and Canaan. Isaiah uses it to remind the people that in spite of the captivity that lies ahead of them, God will once again raise them to a place of power over the nations. We should note that this never happened during the restoration. They were always a subject nation, whether to Persia, Greece, or Rome.

and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father:--That is, they will enjoy the fruit of the land that God gave to the patriarchs. Again, the picture is of Israel's political sovereignty over their own land, free from foreign oppression.

for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.--Isaiah is the only Bible writer who uses this phrase. This is the third instance, the other two being at 1:20 and 40:5. Compare the similar phrase at 24:3.

The Sabbath and the Believer

The Sabbath is a continuing source of confusion to believers. On one hand, it is enshrined in the ten commandments, and Isaiah repeatedly invokes it as characteristic of the day of the Lord. We read about its importance in ch. 56,

Isa 56:2, 6-7 Blessed *is* the man *that* doeth this, and the son of man *that* layeth hold on it; that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil. . . . 6 Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the LORD, to serve him, and to love the name of the

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

LORD, to be his servants, every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant; 7 Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices *shall be* accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people.

At the end of the book, we read,

Isa 66:23 And it shall come to pass, *that* from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD.

Yet Paul instructs the Colossians,⁵

Col 2:16-17 Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: 17 Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ.

To sort this out, we should observe three things.

The Sabbath is Israel's Sign

God often marks his covenants with distinctive signs or seals:⁶

Noah: Gen 9:12-13 And God said, This *is* the **token אֵיט** of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that *is* with you, for perpetual generations: 13 I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a **token אֵיט** of a covenant between me and the earth.

Abraham: Gen 17:11 ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a **token אֵיט** of the covenant betwixt me and you.

New Covenant: Eph 1:13 in whom also after that ye believed, ye were **sealed** with that holy Spirit of promise...

First, the Sabbath is distinctly Israelite. God describes it as a sign of his covenant with Israel:

Exo 31:12-17 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 13 Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my **sabbaths** ye shall keep: for **it is a sign אֵיט** between me and you throughout your generations; that *ye* may know that I *am* the LORD that doth sanctify you. 14 Ye shall keep the **sabbath** therefore; for it *is* holy unto you: ... 17 **It is a sign** between me and the children of Israel for ever: ...

So the Sabbath is distinctively Israelite.

The Sabbath is a Civil Ordinance

Second, Israel's purview extends over civil as well as spiritual life, and the Sabbath is part of that civil structure. It regulates the social calendar, and presumes that the whole society observes it.

We can see the relation between the civil government and the calendar in the names of months in the

⁵ Paul does not rule out observance of special days, but makes it a matter of individual conscience, Rom 14:5-6

⁶ Rom 4:11 shows the interchangeability of the terms, using "sign" and "seal" in parallel to describe circumcision: "And he received the **sign** of circumcision, a **seal** of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised"

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

OT. Before the Babylonian exile, the Hebrews designate the months by numbers (“first month, second month,” etc., e.g., Lev 23:5, 24), or occasionally by specific names (e.g., Abib, Zib, Ethanim, Bul, e.g., Exod 13:4). After the exile, and to this day, they use the Babylonian names for months. As a people without a government, they adopted the calendar of the land where they lived.

Our Lord taught us that during this present evil age, his people do not form a civil society:

Joh 18:36 Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.

Instead, we are to live as strangers and pilgrims, submitting ourselves to whatever government is in effect where we live (Rom 13). But when the Lord returns, he will rule with a rod of iron (Rev 19:15), from Zion (Isa 2, 4).

At that time, it is entirely reasonable to expect that the pattern of civil rule will be the one that God gave Israel, and not only the Sabbath, but other elements of the Israelite calendar, will be reinstated. Zechariah, for example, anticipates the international celebration of the feast of tabernacles (Zech 14:16). Recall from the promises in v. 14 that the Lord has this period in view in our passage in Isaiah.

The Sabbath holds lessons for us today

Third, like all of Scripture, the Sabbath law is “profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16), even today. God did not design his creatures to work non-stop. In his perfect social structure, he ordained one day in seven for rest. Our Savior captured this intent when he told the Pharisees,

Mar 2:27 And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath:

We should respect that pattern, in our own lives and in what we ask of one another. And ultimately, Heb 4 teaches us that our Savior’s rest from his work gives us the Sabbath-hope of one day entering into the rest that he now enjoys:

Heb 4:9-11 There remaineth therefore a [sabbath-]rest to the people of God. 10 For he that is entered into his rest [our Lord], he also hath ceased from his own works, as God *did* from his. 11 Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest [that our Savior now enjoys], lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.

Notes

For the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it

v. 14b is the third instance of this phrase in Isaiah, the other two being at 1:20 and 40:5, and this is the only place it appears in the Bible. But there are other places where a similar explanation appears, כִּי ה' דִּבֶּר. Delitzsch (on 24:3) lists

1Ki 14:11 Him that dieth of Jeroboam in the city shall the dogs eat; and him that dieth in the field shall the fowls of the air eat: for the LORD hath spoken *it*. *Follows IF in v. 7, and first*

Isaiah 58, False and True Worship

person words of the Lord

Isa 21:17 And the residue of the number of archers, the mighty men of the children of Kedar, shall be diminished: for the LORD God of Israel hath spoken it. *Follows words of the Lord; IF in v. 16*

Isa 22:25-1 In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, shall the nail that is fastened in the sure place be removed, and be cut down, and fall; and the burden that *was* upon it shall be cut off: for the LORD hath spoken *it*.

Isa 25:8 He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken *it*. *Words of the prophet*

Isa 24:3 The land shall be utterly emptied, and utterly spoiled: for the LORD hath spoken this word. *Follows words of the prophet, cf. v. 1, "Behold, the Lord maketh ..."*

Joe 3:8 And I will sell your sons and your daughters into the hand of the children of Judah, and they shall sell them to the Sabean, to a people far off: for the LORD hath spoken *it*. *Follows first person words of the Lord, without IF; Joel alternates between prophet and the Lord, often without IF*

Oba 1:18 And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be *any* remaining of the house of Esau; for the LORD hath spoken *it*. *Follows Lord in first person, after IF in v. 1*

Mic 4:4 But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make *them* afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken *it*. *Words of the prophet*

The common feature in each case is that the expression follows a prediction. You can be sure this will happen, because the Lord has said so.

It's difficult to know what the scope of the expression is in Isa 58:14. Is it only the third promise, or all three promises? It probably does not include vv. 1-5, since they are not predictions.