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True Fasting

58: 1-14

True fasting DIG: In what ways did God's people seem to do the right thing? How did they spoil it? How did their view of fastings differ from the LORD's? If their fasting were sincere, what would be different about their relationships with others? Their concern for the poor? What did ADONAI bless instead? What separated the two time periods? Why the change when the faithful remnant came back to the Land?

REFLECT: Do you ever find yourself just going through the motions with your faith? How can you know that you are in such a rut? What can you do about it? When should God's people fast today? Who should observe the Sabbath today (see the commentary on **Exodus**, to see link click [Dn](#) - Remember the Sabbath by Keeping It Holy)? How do you get through the dry places in your spiritual journey?

In this section Isaiah gives two near-historical prophecies. Before the Babylonian Captivity (58:1-8), the prophet warned the Jews that their abuse of fasting had exposed their wicked hearts and spiritual adultery. After the Babylonian Captivity (58:9-14), he directs their attention to the true fast of the Sabbath rest.



With a heavy irony, **Isaiah** declared publicly that although **the Israelites** thought **their** behavior should win **them** special favor with **the LORD**, its real purpose was

to gain ground in the merciless struggle for power, position and possessions. Why did **ADONAI** establish the outward forms of Temple worship? As ends in themselves? No, but as symbols of an attitude of submission, surrender and trust that would reveal itself in changed behavior. Without that attitude, however, those outward forms of worship did not please **God**, but disgusted Him. We can see a slow gradual decay in the religious fabric of the nation from the ministry of **Isaiah** down to the ministry of **Jeremiah**. While it is true that many of the contemporaries of **Isaiah** brought sacrifices that were unacceptable to **the LORD** because of an unseen condition of the heart (see [Aj - Stop Bringing Meaningless Offerings](#)), nonetheless, they still brought sacrifices ordained by **ADONAI**. However, over a hundred years later, the nation had descended into the pit of more extreme forms of idolatry even in the Temple itself (**Ezekiel 8**). In reality, **they** were playing **God** and making stuff up. It had gotten so bad that **Jeremiah** could not find a single righteous person in all of **Jerusalem (Jeremiah 5:1-9)**.

First, Isaiah depicts the false fast of those Jews living in Jerusalem before the Babylonian Captivity. The prophet is commanded to **shout aloud** a message that is always unpopular; that is, to point out the **sins** of people who think they are very religious. **Sin** is a fatal disease if not treated and **the LORD** wanted **the Israelites** to know that unless something changed, it would lead to spiritual death and eternal separation from **Him**. Therefore, **Isaiah** declared: **Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet or shofar (58:1a)**. **Isaiah** begins his commission by declaring a specific **sin** in the southern kingdom of Judah. **Shout out loud** in Hebrew means *to cry or call out loud with the throat; to cry or to call out loud at the top of one's lungs with a loud and clear voice*. The *shofar* was the primary means used to gain attention in ancient **Isra'el (18:3, 27:3)**. Its piercing blast was a sign to stop everything and pay attention. And that which they were to pay attention to was to Judah's **sins**.

Declare to My people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins (58:1b). **Their** self-serving religion had become nothing short of **rebellion**. The sad commentary on their spiritual condition was that **Jeremiah** would search all over Jerusalem and could not find one honest person who would seek after justice and truth (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Ba - Not One Is Upright](#)). That call to acknowledge **their sin** looked back to **57:18-19**, where **the LORD** said that **He** would **comfort, guide and restore** them back to a relationship with **Him** if **they** would only turn from **their** wicked ways, and it looks forward to **59:1-13**, where they acknowledge **their** national wickedness.

Who were those rebels? **They** were people who sought after **God!** **They** were meticulous in following the forms of worship; yet **their** lives bore no resemblance to those of believers. The clearest example of this contradiction would be the Pharisees during the life of **Messiah**, who even tithed the spices in their cupboards, and yet had no qualms about throwing a widow who could not pay her debts out onto the street (**Matthew 23:23; Luke 20:47**), or ignoring the fifth commandment (see the commentary on **Exodus Do - Honor Your Father and Your Mother**) by refusing to help **their** parents by declaring **their** property **Corban, that is, a gift devoted to God (Mark 7:9-13)**.

For day after day they seek Me out (in public worship); **they seem eager to know My ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and have not forsaken the commands of their God (58:2a)**. **Me** is in the emphatic position and could be translated, "**Me** they seek. Of all things, they seek **Me!**" Basically, **they** were hypocrites, and this **sin** called for the most dramatic action (**Matthew 21:12-13**). **They seem** like **they** want a relationship with **ADONAI**, it is **as if they want to know His ways**. But **they** really didn't. Actions always speak louder than words.

They ask Me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them (58:2b). **He** points out what hypocrites they were. **Isra'el** was acting as if they had **not forsaken the commandments of the LORD**. They kept the letter of the Torah and loved the ritual of Temple worship. But like **the Oral Law** (see my commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei - The Oral Law**) that their descendants would invent after coming back from the Babylonian Captivity, those religious rulers of **Jeremiah's** day also made up **fasts** that were supposedly ordained by **ADONAI**. And just as Rabbi Sha'ul said that he **was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:14)**, those **Jews** during the ministry of **Jeremiah** were **extremely zealous for their fasts**. But they had no substance, and like the Oral Law, they elevated the importance of fasting to a position that **God** never intended.

They were merely observing the outward forms of their religion (**Luke 18:12**), but dared to question **the LORD's** actions towards **them**. **They** sat in judgment of **ADONAI** and **His** methods. Complaining, **they** said: **Why have we fasted if You have not seen it (58:3a)?** **They** had kept the letter of the Torah. **They** had been very conscientious in **their** Temple worship. **They** loved the ritual of it all. **They** had even fasted "religiously." But **they** begin to notice that none of it was doing anything for **them**. It wasn't fair! **The LORD** needed to honor **their** sacrifices. In

other words, **their** manipulation of **God** wasn't working! So they started to grumble.

Why have we humbled ourselves, and You have not noticed (58:3b)? They criticized **the LORD** for not blessing **them**, and it was as if **they** were saying, "Can you not see, look how religious **we** are!" **They** dutifully went up to the Temple and made **their** sacrifices. But the veneer of godliness was, and is, nauseating to **ADONAI**. The only reason **they** wanted an answer to **their fasting** was for **their** own personal gain. Without realizing it, **they** were playing **God**.

Fasting had become the centerpiece of **their** "religion." The only problem was that **the LORD** never gave **them fasting** days. The TaNaKh commanded only one **fast** - the annual Day of Atonement (**Leviticus 16:29-31, 23:27** and **32**). Only after the fall of Jerusalem were additional **fast** days added (**Zechariah 7:3** and **5, 8:19**). But **He** did give **them** feast days (**Leviticus 23:1-44**). **Fasting** is supposed to be an outward expression of the soul, but **they** had turned it into something that only ministered to **their** ego. **They** probably *boasted* of the fact that **they fasted**, and made a private matter public. About seven hundred years later **Yeshua** would say: **When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you (Matthew 6:16-18).**

ADONAI's evaluation of **their** self-serving motives was confirmed in **His** response: **Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers (58:3c).** In spite of **their** outward observance of religion **they** indulged in **their** own wicked ways. How could **they**? Because **they** had no real relationship with **the LORD**. And **the hearers** of this prophecy by **Isaiah** were probably offended by this accusation. A lot of people still do this today.

Then **God** gave a practical example of the bad fruit **their** counterfeit religion produced. **He** said: **Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists (58:4a).** Every **fast day** ended in a fight. **Fasting** was intended to bring people *closer* to **ADONAI**, but unfortunately for **them** it brought out the worst - not surprising really, when a godless family was forced to spend a hungry day together! However, **they** kept expecting spiritual favors from unspiritual behavior. So **the LORD** let **them** in on some spiritual reality: **You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high**

(58:4b). They didn't realize that all **their** pious acts were for nothing because of **their** wicked hearts and evil actions. As far as **ADONAI** was concerned, **their** mistreatment of others revealed so much about **them** that it blotted out all of **their** phony **fasting**.

Therefore, **the prophet** explained why **the LORD** could not accept **their** phony **fasting**. They thought it gained **them** special favor with **God**, but **He** asked: **Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day on the Sabbath for a man to humble himself.** They had only been focusing on **their** external behavior rather than internal change, so **ADONAI** asked **them** if **the Sabbath** was really only for **bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes (58:5a)?** The very act of **their fasting** was exposed as meaningless as a reed nodding in the wind. **Is this what you call a day of fasting acceptable to the LORD (58:5b)?** If **they** were **fasting** for the wrong reasons, **ADONAI** didn't want **their fasting** at all (**Revelation 3:16**). King David said it like this: **You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise (Psalm 58:16-17).**

In **58:6-7** there is a change from the infinitive absolute that answers the question, to the second person verbs of command. It is difficult to see the dramatic effect this has in the English, but its forcefulness in the Hebrew needs to be recognized. **The LORD** was not merely offering suggestions here. The Ten Commandments were *not* the Ten Suggestions, and neither were these.

What kind of **fast** did **God** want to see? **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 (58:6)?** **ADONAI's** nature is to give **Himself** away to **those** who can never repay **Him**; there is no clearer evidence of **His** presence in a person's life than the duplication of that same behavior. Unfortunately, it just wasn't there in **Jeremiah's** day. It's as if **the LORD** was saying, "Do you *really* want to **fast**? Instead of going around with distorted faces, stop your sinning. Stop your gossiping. The kind of **fast** I am looking for is to **fast** from doing evil, to **fast** from oppressing, to **fast** from afflicting the poor." Later, **James** would say it this way: **Get rid of all the moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent . . . do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says (James 1:21-22).**

Continuing with the kind of **fast** **ADONAI** wanted to see, **Isaiah** said: **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 him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood (58:7)? They were turning **their** backs on **the poor**. But more than that, **the Israelites** were to consider **themselves** members of one family who at one time had been slaves in Egypt. As a result, **they** were not to neglect each other. **Those** who know the compassion of **God** in **their** own lives will be unable to deny it to others. However, **they** even refused to show kindness and love to **their own flesh and blood**. **They** didn't have a heart for **the LORD** because **they** didn't have a heart for others. It was the same concept in the Torah: **Love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18)**.

Had **they** really exercised pure worship instead of mundane ritual, then **58:8** would have spoken of **their** healing. **Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you (Exodus 13:21-22, 14:19-20), and the Sh'khinah glory of the LORD will be your rear guard (58:8)**. They would have been declared righteous. **They** would have experienced **God's** glory, and **ADONAI** would have answered their every call. Those would have been the results of true worship. These were the results **Isra'el** was looking for. But because the motivation behind the rituals of the Temple and fasting was improper, **they** did not experience the results of true worship. If only **they** would have abandoned **their sin** and returned to **Him**, **they** could have been forgiven.

This is the same for us today as it was in **Jeremiah's** day. We are still just as tempted to use religious behavior as a way of manipulating **the LORD** for our selfish ends as our **Israelite** forebears were. It is interesting that **Isaiah** points to **fasting**, because that continues to be a practice of believers today who seek a more disciplined life. Other activities, however, have replaced **Israelite** religious activities, such as church or messianic synagogue attendance, daily devotions, prayer, tithing and so on. These are all susceptible to the same danger.

The risk for us, is that we might engage in merely outward religious behavior in order to receive blessings from **God**, who we feel is not inclined to give us blessings unless we manipulate Him in some way. Insofar as these attitudes, either consciously or unconsciously, govern our behavior, then our religion is nothing more than idolatry. By contrast, to the extent that our religious life is characterized by selfless service, freely given with no return expected, to that extent it is mirroring the life of **ADONAI**. And for those who are in the flow of **God's** life, **His** blessing is a natural and abundant by-product. In this kind of behavior we show that we know

the LORD and are not in a relationship with **Him** for what we can get out of it, but because we love **Him**.²³⁶

In the second near historical prophecy, Isaiah then gives a description of the true fast of Sabbath rest practiced by those Jews returning from the Babylonian Captivity. God desperately wanted to hear the prayers of **His people** so **He** could bless **them**, but **their** hearts weren't open to receive it because of **their** spiritual adultery. Divine discipline was in order. Therefore, in 587 BC **the LORD** allowed King Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem and take the best and the brightest back to **Babylon** (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule](#)). It was an extremely difficult and painful period of time for the nation. They would later remember: **By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion (Psalm 137:1)**. Many times in life it seems like we have to undergo our own "Babylon Captivity" to really learn our lesson, and that was true of **the Israelites**.

The faithful remnant who returned to **the Land** after the decree of Cyrus (see [la - The Deliverance of Cyrus the Great](#)) were noticeably different than the generation that preceded **them** there. It is not that **they** were perfect, but **they** were teachable. **Their** hearts had changed. **They** repented, sought after **the LORD** and **their** spiritual adultery had ended.

Then you will call, and ADONAI will answer; you will cry for help, and He will say: Here am I (58:9a). ADONAI is emphatic, **ADONAI Himself** will answer! **Here am I** is the response of a waiting, obedient servant (**Genesis 22:1** and **11, Second Samuel 3:4**). Answered prayer is not like sending a care box, it is like a home visit by the doctor. Then **God** emphasizes the rewards for repentance in both its negative and positive aspects. The negative aspect was to **do away with the yoke [of oppression]**, stop doing evil, or **pointing the finger** of scorn against the poor and the weak with **malicious talk, and if they spent themselves in behalf of, or literally grant your soul to, the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then** there would be external evidence of an internal transformation (**58:9b-10a**). The positive aspect was a change of heart. **They** had to turn from **their sin** and bring **their** hearts back toward **God**. And if **they** truly repented and sought after **the LORD, three specific results would follow:**

The first result was divine reflection. Then your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like the noonday (58:10b). The first blessing is clarity in life's **darkness**. In those situations where we don't know what

to do, or which way to go when troubles close in around us. **Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you (Psalm 139:12).** ADONAI promises that even the gloom of His people will be as **light**. Why? **John** says: **God is light, in Him there is no darkness at all (First John 1:5)** and we **reflect the Lord's glory (Second Corinthians 3:18)**. As children of **God**, we reflect our **Father's** likeness to the world. We walk in **His light** when we help others, not **hiding our light under a bucket (Matthew 5:15)**.

The second result was divine guidance and provision. The Ruach ha-Kodesh says: **The LORD will guide you always (58:11a)**. Our experience may well continue into **the darkness**, and we step hesitatingly into it as best we know how. But the reality is that **the Spirit of God guides us. He will not let your foot slip - He who watches over you will not slumber (Psalm 212:3)**.

*You've been there. You've escaped the sandy foundations of the valley and ascended His grand outcropping of granite. You've turned your back on the noise and sought His **voice**. You've stepped away from the masses and followed **the Master** as **He** led you up the winding path to the summit . . . Gently your **Guide** invites you to sit on the rock above the tree line and look out with **Him** at the ancient peaks that will never erode. "What is necessary is still what is sure," **He** confides. "Just remember that you'll go no where tomorrow that I haven't already been." The truth is still triumph . . . the victory is yours. The sacred summit. A place of permanence in a world of transition.*

The LORD will lead you continually, and in the dry places He will satisfy your soul and make your bones strong (58:11b). We all hit **dry places** in our spiritual journey. But the Good News is that **ADONAI** will be there to meet us, and to **satisfy** our souls. **He** will strengthen us spiritually. **The Jews** in Dachau, Auschwitz and Treblinka could not be protected physically. But **God** was in those Nazi concentration camps with them, strengthening **their** souls. We do not have to be a spiritual thornbush in the desert, all of our energy consumed with mere survival, but will have the fruits and flowers to give from the overflow of their abundance. The idea of making **bones strong** is in contrast to all those places in the Bible where terror makes the **bones tremble** and shake (**Job 4:14; Psalm 6:2; Jeremiah 23:9 and Habakkuk 3:16**). This is the truth that all doctors know, when the spirit is healthy the body has a better chance of being healthy also.

You will be like a well-watered garden (Jeremiah 31:12), like a spring

whose waters never fail (58:11c). Yeshua referred to **the Holy Spirit** when he said: **If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.** By this He meant the Holy Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were later to receive (John 7:37-39). In the TaNaKh, the Ruach ha-Kodesh would come and go. After his affair with Bathsheba, King David would plead with **God**, saying: **Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me (Psalm 51:11).** As a result of conversion, we have the permanent indwelling of **the Ruach ha-Kodesh** to guide and teach us into all truth. **He** is like a fountain that will not stop pouring out of us.

A third result was divine restoration. **ADONAI** promises that we do not have to live in the mess that we have made of our lives. It is true that we are deeply **sinful**, and our **sin** destroys everything that it touches. Nevertheless, **God** is stronger than our **sin**. **He** is able to give us the power to restore and renew that which was destroyed. **Isaiah** said that one day **your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations** when they return from the Babylonian Captivity; **you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets and Dwellings (58:12).** **Haggai, Zechariah, Zerubbabel, Joshua, Ezra, Nehemiah** and **Malachi** led the way, but they were just the tip of the ice-burg. If it was **the people's sin** that destroyed the City, it will be **their** righteousness, through the grace of **God** that will rebuild it. **The LORD** always allows us the dignity of being involved in putting back together what we have broken. We cannot do it apart from **Him**, but **He** will not do it apart from us.²³⁷

Sabbath observance was one barometer of one's faithfulness to the Torah (see the commentary on **Exodus Dn - Remember the Sabbath by Keeping It Holy**). If a man, for example, followed the Sabbath commands and thereby acknowledged the importance of worshipping **ADONAI**, and showed that he depended upon **the LORD** to bless him materially for that time he took off from work by putting **God** first and not seeking to do **as he pleased**, then he would have **joy**, not only in a spiritual sense (**ride on the heights**), but also in a material sense (**feast on the inheritance**).

The Sabbath is **the feast with a blessing (58:13-14a)**, which is antithetical to **the fast without a blessing (28:2-5)**. **ADONAI** said: **If you keep your feet from breaking**, literally *turn back your foot from*, the equivalent in today's vernacular would be to *watch your step*. So we could translate this, "If you *watch your step on the Sabbath,*" and **keep from doing as you please on My holy**

day . . . (58:13a). The Sabbath is viewed as **holy** ground that should not be desecrated. The phrase **doing as you please** means doing business on **the Sabbath**. There was a lot of business going on during the worship service. **Their** place of business was officially closed, but business was still conducted verbally.

If you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then the blessings of the next verse would be **theirs (58:13b)**. The phrase **speaking idle words** is also seen in **Hosea 10:4**, where **the prophet** says: **They make many promises and take false oaths to God. He is speaking** of using **words** that are empty and have no meaning to anyone. Three things were spelled out negatively concerning **Sabbath** observance; do not desecrate **the Sabbath**, do not do business on **the Sabbath**, and do not speak **idle words** on **the Sabbath**.

Opposed to the phony **feasts**, they should have a positive attitude toward **the Sabbath**. In the concept of the prophets, keeping **the Sabbath** was symbolic of keeping the whole Torah (**Ezeki'el 20:10-17** and **Ezeki'el 22:8 and 26**). **They** would only experience the results of true worship by **Sabbath** observance. That's what it was designed for. **Then ADONAI** said: **You will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the Land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob (58:14a)**. The phrase **to ride on the heights of the Land** is a figure of speech used by the prophets in reference to reaching spiritual **heights** in one's relationship to **God**. And those who have this positive attitude will inherit and possess **the Land** that was promised to **their father Jacob**. This is a wonderful promise to **the people of Isra'el**. But **Isra'el** did not even attempt to pursue it. In the next section we will see how **Isra'el** retained **her** separation from **the LORD** and deals with the **sin** that caused that separation.

Shabbat observance was one barometer of faithfulness to the Torah. By following the rules for **the Sabbath** a man, for example, acknowledged the importance of worshiping **God** and showed that he depended upon **ADONAI** to bless him materially for that time he took off from work. By putting **the LORD** first and not seeking to do **as he pleased**, he would have **joy**, not only in a spiritual sense (**ride on the heights**), but also in a material sense (**feast on the inheritance**). The **holy Sabbath** was **God's** answer to the so-called fasting feasts made up by wicked men.

All this was certain because **the mouth of the LORD** had **spoken** it (**58:14b**).



Here is the golden key to understanding the Bible: those who give themselves away find themselves; and those who surrender the throne receive a crown of righteousness.