

The Fast

Isaiah 58:1-12

The Bible speaks of fasting, but it never exhaustively describes it. The only fast that the Law of Moses required of the Hebrews was on the Day of Atonement when one sacrifice was made for the sins of the entire nation. This was a fast of repentance. On other occasions, a king or a high priest might be instructed by God to proclaim a fast. At times, a leader might declare a fast of his own initiative. Most other fasts were typically self-imposed by individuals who were either mourning over personal sin or intently seeking God's help or leading in some specific matter.

Fasting is not a common fixture on the Christian landscape today. I am neither suggesting that it ought to be nor that it ought not to be. My burden today is simply to help you to understand one chapter of the Old Testament that revolved around a fast and, in a broader sense, worship.

In Hollywood circles, fasting is chic, not merely for dietary purposes, but to allegedly cleanse the body, mind and spirit. Today, it is more often a discipline of New Age than of Christianity. Some Christians do fast and they testify to a variety of benefits. Others might try fasting out of curiosity or a sense of adventure. For most, fasting is not a very attractive proposition at all.

Isaiah prophesied before the southern kingdom of Judah was carried off to exile in Babylon, but his recorded words would address different audiences in different times; before, during and after the captivity. The audience of chapter 58 had returned from Babylon. They were committed to worshipping JEHOVAH only. There was no idolatry in this bunch. They were seeking God. They were praying for good things like justice and divine guidance. Heck, they were even fasting.

Unfortunately, there was a disconnect between the loyal worship of JEHOVAH that they were attempting to render and the transformed lives of true worship that God expects of a covenant people. They thought that if they went through certain prescribed worship mechanics that God would bless them, but it was not working. The reason it was not working was that disconnect. They needed to be taught anew that their worship could never be solely a matter of ritual. God sees through that. In every age, God desires that worship reflect merciful, kind and holy hearts.

¹Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.

JEHOVAH laid a heavy burden on Isaiah: "This is really important, Isaiah. My people must learn to worship authentically. Teach them with passion. Make it sink in!" As I read and re-read this text I began to appreciate the sense of urgency. That worship must be rendered from the heart and not simply as so many rituals is one of the most crucial truths of scripture. And, the measure of whether or not worship is rendered from the heart is not our feelings, experiences, sorrow or good intentions. It is measured by repentance and obedience. Anything less is religious pretense.

I. The Pretense of a Fast (verses 1-5)

A. A Fine Line Exists between Hypocrisy and Religious Delusion verses 2-3a

²For 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.

³Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'

I suppose we have to call it “hypocrisy” whenever outward expressions of worship do not reflect the heart, but this was not the blatant hypocrisy of the Pharisee of Jesus’ day that put on pious fronts for show. These folks were genuinely perplexed. They were trying to seek God. They were performing the prescribed worship rituals. They really believed that they had a legitimate complaint against JEHOVAH. “We are fasting, Lord, and You’re not paying attention!”

What difference did their fasting really make? What difference today does the minor inconvenience of going without food for a single day really make if our basic lifestyle is unaltered during the day of fasting and beyond? That was the issue that needed to be addressed in Isaiah 58. A fast was not just a “thing” that God required so that a man’s obedience might be measured. It was an opportunity for His people to examine their lives; their obedience, their values and their affections – and in repentance, to align them with the holiness of JEHOVAH.

B. A Selfish Man Can Only Pretend to Fast verse 3b

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.

Is it possible that the powerful persons of the land took time off for this fast, but did not grant time off? Did they treat it as a personal holiday from labor but make additional demands on their underlings so that the total production of their enterprise, whatever that might be, would not skip a beat. A national fast was not a time to highlight the differences between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” When the community was called to a time of fasting, everyone was in it together.

A spiritually isolationist mindset abounds in many quarters of Christianity today. Rightly, it pursues intimacy with God and an effective prayer life. But, the satisfaction of these pursuits is measured by discovering ways to escape the stuff of life that is common to every man rather than to bear up under it. This mindset longs for circumstances that are conducive to preconceived notions of contentment rather than longing for contentment in whatever circumstance a sovereign God places a man. Despite the rhetoric of humble spirituality, this mindset is quite self-absorbed, and a self-absorbed Christian won’t spend much time bettering the plight of his brothers.

C. An Angry Man Can Only Pretend to Fast verse 4

⁴Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists.
You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

To merely observe a fast imposed by Law or by a ruler could never have been regarded as an outstanding expression of worship. If the heart is not in the fast, irritability soars. Hungry people are cranky people. Tensions only escalated among those already at odds with one another.

“You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.” We cannot pretend that broken fellowship with others in the faith community has no negative impact on our communion with God. Some Christians do not think twice about writing off fellow believers. Once a person is on their “list” he is on it for life. They are unforgiving yet, they go through the motions of worship as if nothing is impaired. The truth is that there may be nothing more repugnant to God than the mechanics of worship devoid of a spirit of peacemaking and a yearning for reconciliation with other Christians. And, the Scripture is not vague in addressing the matter. Jesus spoke of reconciliation as a prerequisite to authentic worship in the *Sermon on the Mount*:

²³Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. – Matthew 5:23, 24

A fast that ignores strife or severed relationships between brothers is no fast at all. It is religious pretense and the same goes for any other mechanical expression of worship you can think of. God is not interested in your fasting, prayers or other expressions of worship that are merely attempts to circumvent you dealing with the areas of your life that He cares most about repairing.

D. An Unrepentant Man Can Only Pretend to Fast verse 5

⁵Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

The people were crediting themselves for observing a fast. As God sees things, they were not fasting at all. Is a fast nothing more than a break of a single day in the routine of life? If nothing is different tomorrow, what difference does a prayerful posture today make? Sackcloth and ashes were an ancient symbol of deep anguish in Job's day. To this people, it was just something to dress up the empty ritual that they called a fast, for they were not thoroughly examining the ongoing sins in their lives of mercilessness, materialism, hostility and unforgiveness.

The New Year is a time when we resolve to make fresh starts in various areas of our lives, but often, our resolutions fail before January is over. Could one reason be that our resolutions are little more than good intentions that are not undergirded with deep repentance? Christianity is a faith that calls us to forget what is behind and to press on toward what is ahead, but what is the big miracle in forgetting something at which we've never really taken a good hard look. True repentance demands that we face our lives and the damage our sin has wrought. That is the only way we can ever chart a course away from the past. Otherwise, we will never take our sin seriously and hence, never truly repent, for we will inevitably revisit the same sins again.

When we repent, we receive God's forgiveness. He does not want us to wallow in the mire of past guilt. That said, if you have never really faced the damage that your sins have left on the landscape of your relationships, can it really be said that you have repented at all? Can you just flit away from one of your own sinful fiascos without doing what you can to put things right? Are there apologies to be made? Is there repair work to do? God does not expect you to work miracles of restoration. That's His job. He does expect you to do what you can and ought to do.

II. The Practice of a Fast (verses 6, 7)

⁶Is 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?
⁷Is 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?

A. A True Fast Is Never Simply about “You and Me, God”

Israel was a nation, a community under God’s care. The faithful Israelite cared deeply about the integrity of the nation before God as measured by social justice. If anyone had been victimized by injustice, a proper fast should awaken the community “to loose the chains of injustice.” Moses called for a periodic liberation of slaves, forgiveness of debts and restoration of ancestral lands. In their pursuit of wealth and stability, the powerful become indifferent to the needy all around them. Preoccupied with gain, they even neglected the needs of their “own flesh and blood.” If the nation persisted in ignoring God in these matters, what could a fast accomplish?

The church is a community, one body and one bride of Christ. It is not a collection of individuals who care only about their “personal God” or how to cope with their personal baggage or attend to their personal needs. The religion that God looks for in us cares. It can never be severed from social duty. Jesus said that when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned, we have done the same for Him. The principle is echoed repeatedly in scripture:

... ¹⁷If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. – 1 John 3:17, 18

B. A True Fast Is much like a Pencil Sketch of an Envisioned Life

In our Children’s Worship Room, one of the effects we were looking for was that the screen on the wall looks like a stage with a silhouetted audience in the foreground. Delene Parmer did some work on that project over the holidays. In fact, I left her down there working all day one day unaware that she didn’t know how to turn on the heat. Sorry about that. I noticed that she uses a basic technique that even no talent artists like me use. Lightly, with a pencil, she sketched the basic shape and placement of the silhouetted figures. Only then, did she pull out the paint and fill in the various colors she had chosen. When I thought perhaps she was done, I noticed that she was not done, but only because I noticed a few more of those lightly penciled outlines.

What if she had never pulled out the paint? Weak eyes might miss the pencil marks. To slightly stronger eyes, the wall might look dirty. Perfect eyes would see a project, but an unfinished one. A few marks on a wall are really all that a fast can accomplish. It’s a pencil drawing never to be mistaken for the final product. It identifies what one needs to do and where one needs to go with the paint, but apart from the follow-up, it leaves the canvas of a man’s life a bit empty. Isaiah’s audience mistook their fast for the real deal of authentic worship. A fast should have been an invaluable time to sketch a general idea of what their lives needed to look like, but they made no such connection between the authentic worship of their lives and their religious disciplines.

III. The Promises of a Fast (verses 8-12)

A. You Can Expect a More Blessed Life verse 8

⁸Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

Life is much less complicated when God's will is truly our own rather than something that we merely attempt to balance with our own pursuits, our own interests, our own goals, our own recreations and our own affections. A godly life is an uncluttered life. Why are we so reluctant to choose the quiet, cheerful simplicity of life in harmony with the will of God over the striving, grasping, discontented life of those who do not dwell in His light? Loving the things He loves, working for the things He declares important, caring for the people He cares about – these things give us credibility as His witnesses. This is what Jesus was speaking of from the mountain:

¹⁴"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. – Matthew 5:14-16

B. You Can Expect a More Satisfied Life verses 9-11

⁹Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

¹⁰If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

¹⁰and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

¹¹The 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.

This is not a promise of material prosperity. It is a promise of delight in the Lord. Tending to God's all-important matters will produce in us contentment and godly perspective. We can appropriately assess the true value of things. Our prayer lives will be more rewarding, not because God delivers on demand, but because our minds will be in greater harmony with His.

C. You Can Expect a More Meaningful Life verse 12

¹²Your 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.

During the siege of Jerusalem, the Babylonians were brutally destructive. The greatest privilege that the post-exilic Israelites would ever know was to put Jerusalem back together again. It was not just about building things, but about restoring a covenant nation, its worship of JEHOVAH and its witness to Him in the world. What greater joy could they ever know than to be such a source of gladness for others in their own generation and for generations to come?

The fast God calls us to is not a temporal denial of ourselves to no particular end. Jesus spoke of daily self-denial, for there is more to pleasing God than going to church. He desires worship without pretense where Sunday reflects Monday through Saturday. We are not called to a fast or a prayer closet or a worship hour which is little more than a schizophrenic episode that fails to reflect the real us. God desires worship without pretense. He desires the worship of our lives.