

## Prayer

God and Father of all, who gives His children what they need, help and sustain those who find it hard to live with the little they have. Prompt us to use our gifts in the service of others, just as You have helped us through Jesus Christ our Lord. May we who have the good things of life be content to sacrifice everything for the good of others, and be content with our reward in heaven. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

*(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)*

### Prayer ideas

*As you think about what is ahead of you this day, imagine what this looks like from the point of view of Jesus, in heaven. How important are the things you face to your eternal destiny?*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for God to forgive his people their sins.** *Pray for any people you know who are troubled by persistent personal difficulties and sins, and pray for them. Pray that they will find a solution to their personal problems by trusting all to Christ.*
- *Pray for the world in the fall out from the killing of Bin Laden. It is a complex issue, but one that God can help us with if we submit it to Him*
- *Give thanks to God for the gifts of life, love and joy*

## Meditation

*speaking to oneself about priorities)*

Forge ahead, my soul, keep pressing on:

When temptation feeds desire and sin is advanced by Satan,  
Fall back on the Word, God's grace, and faith.

When others seek more of you than you can reasonably give,  
Prioritise each step of life; Christ and family first.

When the church of God seems dull, and uninvitingly slow,  
Remember it is Christ's Bride, preparing for her Lord.

When Christ challenges you to do more than ever before,  
Fear nothing, pray in faith, just trust and obey.

When you are blessed by the glories of earthly success  
Give everything back to the Lord; no tithe will do, give it all.

Forge ahead, my soul, for the future will come;  
It lies in God's hands; He is good, He is love

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 58:1-9a

- <sup>1</sup> Shout aloud!  
do not hold back!  
Raise your voice like a trumpet!  
Make known to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.
- <sup>2</sup> They seek me day after day  
and they want to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that did righteousness

- and did not forsake the justice of their God!  
 They ask me for right judgments,  
 they want to come near to God.
- 3 'Why have we fasted,  
 but you have not seen?  
 Why have we humbled ourselves,  
 but you have not noticed?'
- Look, it is you who take enjoyment  
 from your day of fasting,  
 and exploit all your labourers!
- 4 Look, your fasting  
 leads you to quarrel and fight  
 and to strike a foe with a fist!  
 You do not fast as you do today  
 To make your voice heard on high!
- 5 Is the fast I choose like this?  
 A day of affliction of the soul,  
 To bow the head down like a bulrush,  
 and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?  
 Will you call this a fast?  
 an acceptable day for the LORD?
- 6 Is not this the fast I would choose:  
 to loose the bonds of wickedness,  
 to undo the bindings of the yoke,  
 to send the oppressed to freedom?  
 and to break every yoke!
- 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
 To give hospitality to the poor and homeless;  
 To cover those you can see have no clothes,  
 and not to conceal your deeds from your family?
- 8 Then your light will break out like the dawn,  
 and your healing will spring up quickly;  
 your righteous One will go before you,  
 the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
- 9 Then you will call,  
 and the LORD will answer;  
 you will cry for help,  
 and He will say; 'Here I am!'

## Bible Study

### Review

Isaiah's prophecies reach further heights of expressive and spiritual power as he delivers a speech that begins to teach God's people what He wants of them. Now that the Servant has done His work and there is a new people of God for Lord to work with, the lessons of the past must be learned and God's will must replace the sinful ways of the past. This passage is not just another prophecy tacked on to the end of Isaiah which merely chastises Israel for continued injustice (58:2), and for a wrong interpretation of spiritual duties, specifically fasting (58:3-5); it is far more than this. Moreover, some scholars think that the last four verses are a vision of God's perfect Kingdom sent to inspire the people of Israel; but whilst this may be true, it has a far more pressing message for God's people than this. The whole prophecy seeks to teach all those who have been redeemed by the Servant the difference between right religion and wrong religion, and it is directly applicable to us today.

This is a prophecy that uses a standard teaching technique of Old Testament wisdom, comparing the wrong with the right, the old with the new, the human way with God's way; and after identifying the wrongs of the past, the specific new teaching comes in verses 6 to 9. In addition, Isaiah's teaching is not about what

people do, as if this was something different from their spiritual experience; Isaiah speaks about how redemption and salvation through the Servant makes a difference to the way people behave. This is; not because they have been made any better, but because His presence has become real to them, as real as the glory of the Lord going with them every step of the way; 'your righteous One will go before you, the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard' (58:8)!

The comparison between the first five verses of our text and the last four is remarkable and inspiring, and Isaiah uses the religious practice of fasting as a focus and starting point for what he has to say. His critique here of Israel's fasting practices is as sharp as any of his prophecies written when he first identified Israel's problems (see Is. 1,2,3). He is sarcastic, saying of Israel's apparent desire for justice; 'as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the justice of their God!' (58:2); and he is cutting; 'you who take enjoyment ... and exploit all your labourers!' (58:3). Lastly, Isaiah's critique mocks Israel for its lack of internal peace, for they 'quarrel and fight' on fast days (58:4)!

Then, Isaiah declares a new vision of a new 'fast', a new spiritual order and a new religious system; 'to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bindings of the yoke, to send the oppressed to freedom ... to break every yoke!' (58:6). All of the last four verses are exciting, because there is no doubt that they influenced Jesus. He taught about fasting (58:6), dealing with injustice (58:6), feeding the poor and needy, and entertaining the homeless (58:7), and liberating the oppressed and enslaved (58:6) using almost the same words! Why would he not? Jesus knew these words because they were the Father's heart for all people waiting to be revealed once the work of the Servant made it possible. The Lord had acted as the personal liberator of Israel for centuries, but through the Servant, the time had come for the whole world to benefit from God's graciousness, but it was to be ministered to the world through His redeemed people!

As we read on, we will find more in Isaiah that builds on verses 6 and 7. You may already know Isaiah 61:1; 'He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners ...'. What we read today is important, because it is the beginning of a theme that will run through the whole Bible from here to the ministry of Jesus!

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

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## Notes on the text and translation

### **V1 'Shout aloud!'**

The Hebrew says 'call from the throat!', and most translators reasonably assume that this is a colloquialism for shouting out as hard as possible!

### **V2 'they want to know my ways ...'**

The Hebrew is usually translated 'they delight to know my ways', but the Hebrew verb simply expresses desire, and can quite properly be translated as 'want to ...'. This is not normally reckoned to be 'good' English, but it is certainly common English.

### **V4 'to strike a foe with a fist'**

The Hebrew appears to read 'to strike (hit) with a fist of wickedness. However, there is some evidence for the use of the word for 'wicked' as meaning one who is at odds with you, that is, an opponent

### **V6 'You will break every yoke!'**

Most translations present this as the fourth of a sequence of actions; however, it is an all-embracing expression covering everything.

### **V7 'hide yourself from your own relatives.'**

The Hebrew says 'not hide yourself from your own flesh', and this refers to not holding back from assisting one's own family and relatives if they are in need.

## Going Deeper

There are clearly two halves to this prophecy and we will look at each in turn; but the one leads into the other, and the two are interdependent. The whole vision, as we will see is carefully constructed to make sure that we remain focussed on the essential mission of the Lord to bring justice and deliverance to His whole world.

### **Who is speaking in verse 1?**

In the review, I briefly alluded to some of the difficulties in trying interpret this prophecy. The main problem is clear right at the start of the passage, for we quite reasonably ask, who is it who is speaking in verse 1? Some reckon that this is the call of the people, urging the prophet to speak out and say more. It has been suggested that 'my people' as in the phrase 'make known to my people their rebellion' (58:1) was a phrase the Israelites used about themselves. This may be the case, but I still prefer to read the whole of this prophecy as the reported speech of God through the mouth of Isaiah; and in this case, verse 1 is the Lord's instruction to Isaiah to speak out again. It was the Lord's intention not to speak about Israel's sins once more merely to condemn her for them, but to describe her sins for what they were, so that His new redeemed people could learn what the difference was between right religion and wrong religion.

### **Fasting – a mockery of right religion**

The prophecy accuses Israel of making a mockery of true religion; religion being those things people do both individually and together to reflect their relationship with God. In order to illustrate Israel's lack of understanding of true religion, the words of verses 1 and 2 take the form of a debate, which we can see if we separate out the phrases said 'for' Israel and 'against' Israel.

Voice 'against': 'Make known to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.'

Voice 'for': *'They seek me day after day and they want to know my ways.'*

Voice 'against': 'as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the justice of their God!'

Voice 'for': *'They ask me for right judgements, they want to come near to God.'*

This brief dialogue, internal to the prophecy and not representing any human voices, expresses Israel's continuing dilemma once the Servant has done God's work of redemption. In truth, the Lord had finished debating the nature of Israel's sins and the punishment for them, and as we found out many chapters ago, Israel's punishment for her sins was not that she would endure expulsion from God's presence and obliteration from the face of the world, but the 'furnace of affliction' (48:10). The reason for dragging up the whole issue is not to further define how to deal with Israel for her continued misunderstanding, but to provide a starting point for teaching the new people of God.

Verse 3 and 4 continue with the prophecy using a picture of a conversation which is now between God and Israel, and it is Israel who complains first:

Israel: *'Why have we fasted, but You have not seen? Why have we humbled ourselves but You have not noticed?'*

The Lord: 'Look, it is you who take enjoyment from your day of fasting and exploit all your labourers! Look, your fasting leads you to quarrel and fight and to hit the foe with a fist! You do not fast as you do today to make your voice heard on high!

You will find that when you read the passage in this way, it all becomes clearer. Israel is still insistent that she has done what is right through attempting to serve the Lord, as do Jewish people to this day. However, the details of the Lord's criticisms become clearer. Apart from their general disobedience in times past referred to in verse 2, the following verses suggest a series of specific religious failures.

Firstly, if religious duties (here, fasting) become something which is done merely for personal enjoyment, or perhaps in order to feel good about doing the 'right thing', then proper motive for religious duty has been lost. Secondly, if fasting has caused the exploitation of people, then it is a mockery of justice and religion. We may not understand what is spoken of here, but there is some evidence that more and more official 'fasts' were declared, on which people could not eat from dawn until dusk. This of course was hard for ordinary working people, but less of a burden for the higher classes and religious authorities whose work was less strenuous and whose ample food was given to them as tithe by the people. Institutional injustice was barely a step away. Thirdly, the tensions and divisions between religious factions concerning rules for every aspect of religious observance (including fasting) constantly broke out. Even in Jesus' day, the divisions between Sadducees, Pharisees, the Chief Priests and other religious sects such as the Zealots lie behind many of the Gospel stories. The people of Israel were not united by their faith in God, they were divided, and this could sometimes spill over into fighting between factions.

None of this was a fast 'acceptable to the Lord' (58:5), and yet it gave the background for the Lord's proclamation of right fasting; that is right religion.

### **A new vision of fasting; liberation!**

The first thing we notice as soon as the counter-vision in verse 6 begins is that true religion, according to the Lord, is liberation! Freedom from wickedness and sin, because the Servant had taken away the penalty of sin and death; release from bondage because the Servant had drawn all the penalty of sin; and freedom for

the oppressed because the Servant made God's love available for all the world. All of these themes have already featured in one or other of our studies since the great chapter 53 of Isaiah, but it is only here that they come together in verse 6 as a declaration of God's good news! Indeed, the Lord said that 'every yoke' would be broken!

Then, in verse 7, we read words which have subsequently been made more famous, through Jesus parable of the 'sheep and the goats' (Matt 25:31-46). Isaiah's original picture of 'right religion' is not the performance of some particular acts of charity, but things that people of ancient times would have done out of normal courtesy. This includes sharing food with those who need it, offering the sacred duty of hospitality to the poor and the homeless, giving clothes those who had none, and meeting the needs of one's relatives (which is what is meant by 'and not hide yourself from your own relatives' – 58:7). It is easy to see how these charitable acts are reflected accurately in Jesus' parable (though he adds one or two more), but the important things for us to notice is that what Isaiah called for was not some special effort of 'good works', but that people should do what they already knew to be right. The great tragedy of the way in which people interpret the parable of the sheep and the goats today is that in a materialistic age when most of these actions are regarded as 'social extras' rather than 'social norms', the meaning of the parable has been skewed by our fear of not having 'done the right thing'. We struggle to accept that those who enter the Kingdom are unaware they have done what is right, and many people feel bound by the parable rather than liberated by it.

Perhaps reading Isaiah will help us in our own liberation. When people first heard Isaiah's message, they would have been liberated to discover that the 'fast I choose' according to the Lord God, was a religion of doing what was just and right by ones neighbours friends and families, a common moral call not to some theological ideal or specialist religious practice, but to meeting human need.

### ***The presence of the Lord God***

'Then', says the Lord, 'your light will break out like the dawn and your healing will spring up quickly!' (58:8). Remember, the last time Isaiah mentioned light, he said that Israel was to be a 'light to the nations' but He had taken this role from her and given it to the Servant (49:6) so that the light could shine for all the nations. The prophecy therefore indicates that the new redeemed people of God would bring this light into the world, the light of God's love and redeeming power, accompanied by His healing power. It is worth noting that from the very beginning of the announcement of God's redeeming and saving work through the Servant and through the new people of God, here in Isaiah, the ministry of healing is significant. This is because God's purpose is always to overcome problems, to heal relationships, to mend bodies and to bring purpose and meaning to life through renewal.

All of this, says the Lord in this prophecy, will happen because the Lord God will be with His people. The picture presented in the last two lines of verse 8 reflects the ancient picture of the cloud of God's presence going before the people of Israel and after them as they went through the Red Sea (Ex 14:19). This is a dynamic representation of God's presence with His people, instead of the static one with which they had lived for years as represented by the Temple in Jerusalem. Instead of people needing to go to God, God would be with them where they were! As the last verse in our text says; 'then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and He will say "Here I am"!'

## Application

As we read through this passage and study it, it tells us a number of essential truths about the nature of religion and religious practice. None of us who believe in God and work together with others who make up the church, the 'body of Christ', can avoid 'being religious, even though many would like to think they can ditch the image of 'religion' today. All of us do things to express our faith, and our testimony to the power of the living God will always bring down the label of 'religion' on us from the rest of the world, whether we like it or not. The questions we must ask ourselves are about how we put our faith into practice and demonstrate the love of God in the world; how do we perform the function of being God's 'light' within the world.

According to this prophecy it will not be by selecting our religious practice because we enjoy it (58:3), and we will not give an example of the Kingdom to the world if the church as a whole exploits people, whether this be its employees or the people it purports to help. Neither will we show the Gospel to the world if we fight (58:4) amongst ourselves! The 'true fast' of religious practice appropriate for all God's people remains the guidance found in this text; to open our hearts, our homes, our pockets and our whole lives for the sake of those who need the love of God in any spiritual or practical form. This is a high calling, and each of us has to put flesh on this according to the Lord's call on our lives, but Isaiah 58:6,7 remains a standard by which we must measure ourselves. The glorious truth is that when we act in this way to fulfil our call, the Lord is truly with us!

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group whether you think this passage is 'anti-Jewish'. Are Christians today generally anti-Semitic, and how can this be avoided?
2. How can the church learn from this passage of scripture and what does it say about our mission priorities today?
3. How can the exercise of hospitality help God's people demonstrate God's Gospel of liberation, as found in this passage?

### **Personal comments by author**

*This text is very challenging, and even though the idea of open hospitality was one which may have been less threatening in days gone by, it certainly is for many people today. Because of the complexities of our society, we need to be careful to both fulfil God's call, and also to protect our own need for rest (Sabbath) and family responsibilities, which are very different today than they were in Jesus' day or Isaiah's day. However, the challenge never goes away, and the greatest danger is that because of the troubled nature of the complex world in which we live, many cut themselves off to the extent that some Christian people have little contact with the way in which most people live their lives. It is when this happens that our mission is lost; but it can be revived!*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- **Something to do:** Discuss with those in your family the benefits and difficulties of being hospitable. How can you offer more love and hospitality in your home, and how can this become a means of bringing light to the world?
- **Something to pray about:** Pray for a renewal of desire amongst God's people to be outgoing in mission, so that God's great work of justice and mercy may be made evident in the world.

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## Final Prayer

If you were to show us the full consequences of the things we do, Lord Jesus, we would never understand. We do not see the full effects of what goes wrong, and we can never see the implications of all that works well. Help us therefore to make sense of our lives as we place all we do into Your hands. Thank You Lord Jesus; AMEN

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