

Explore the Bible: God Expects

November 3, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible Lesson for Nov. 22 focuses on Isaiah 58:1-12.*

In this lesson, we have entered the final division of Isaiah. Chapters 1-39 address the historical circumstances of the Assyrian threat. Chapters 40-55 offer words of hope to the Judeans exiled in Babylon. Chapters 56-66 are, by most scholars' reckoning, addressed to the people after they have returned from exile.

This final collection of prophecies serves to prepare the people for the coming Day of the Lord, when he will arrive to bring judgment and salvation. Unfortunately, the people still are trapped in many of the same sins that earned them the exile in the first place. The prophet now speaks to confront these sins.

The Silence of God

Our text begins with God calling upon the prophet to cut loose: "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins" (58:1). In the following verses, God proceeds to outline the sins of the people.

The people have been seeking God's will. They have been reaching out to him in prayer, seeking to hear his voice and discern his purposes. We readers might naturally ask, "What could be wrong with that?"

The problem is the people approach God "as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God" (58:2). They have neither recognized nor repented of their sins, yet they approach God as if they have. They continue in rebellion while putting on a façade of

piety. They are deluded and self-deceived.

God proceeds to throw the people's words back in their faces. "'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'" (58:3) The people have fasted as part of their display of piety, seeking God's favor through empty signs of repentance and contrition. But God has not fallen for it.

Empty Fasting

God condemns the people's fasting as pointless and hypocritical. Even as they abstain from food in a show of piety, they continue to exploit their workers (58:3) and quarrel with one another (58:4). God puts it plainly: "You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high" (58:4).

In the following verse, God asks the people a series of rhetorical questions meant to expose the inauthenticity of their fasting. "Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?" (58:5).

The actions of the people are purely for display. The fast is only symbolic, with no real connection to actual repentance. If the people were sincere, they would not persist in their sin and rebellion. No amount of ceremony or false piety can cover for unrepentant wickedness.

We find a very similar principle taught in James 2:14-26. James criticizes Christians who profess faith but do not back it up with concrete action. Anybody can *claim* to believe in Christ. But authentic faith produces fruit. Confessions of faith are worthless without deeds, and displays of contrition are worthless without actual repentance.

True Fasting

After exposing the emptiness of the people's fasting, God describes the fasting he truly desires. God wants his people "to loose the chains of injustice" and "to set the oppressed free" (Isaiah 58:6). God wants his people to "share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter" (58:7).

God doesn't want empty religious ceremony; God wants justice. God wants the people of Israel to obey his Law and uphold justice for the less fortunate. In both Israel's time and ours, it has been incredibly easy for God's people to neglect the work of justice in favor of empty religiosity.

When Jesus confronts the Scribes and Pharisees in the Jerusalem Temple, he condemns them for being fastidious about their tithing yet completely ignoring "the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matthew 23:23). The minor matters are still important, but to emphasize them while neglecting justice is abhorrent to God.

God has zero interest in praise-and-worship concerts, revival services, theology conferences, or whatever else from Christians who neglect or even directly oppress people in need. How much rage must God feel when we hold worship concerts while homeless people starve and sleep on the sidewalks right outside the concert venue?

Promised Restoration

In the final verses of our passage (58:8-12), the tone shifts. Instead of condemnation, God offers restoration and glory to his people if they will seek justice and reject oppression. The people have been seeking God's guidance and presence, and God is more than happy to provide if the people sincerely repent instead of relying on empty rituals.

If the people repent, God will answer when they call for help (58:9). God will guide them (58:11). God will satisfy their every need and strengthen them (58:11). God will even enable them to rebuild the ruins of Jerusalem (58:12).

For Christians, we find the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy not in our rebuilding of a physical city, but in God making all things new (Revelation 21-22). As we await Christ's return, Christ has enabled and empowered us to seek justice for the downtrodden and to oppose oppression in any form. Let us do what he has called us to do.

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