

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

Harry A. Ironside, Litt.D.

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ISAIAH CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

FASTS AND SABBATHS PLEASING TO GOD

THIS chapter begins the last section of this book. In chapters fifty-eight through sixty-six we have - in the main - visions of the coming glory, the prophet setting before us the wonderful things that will take place at the coming of the Lord. But God still deals with practical things. A call to the nation to heed the voice of God and get right with Him that judgment may be averted and blessing ensured.

“Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God. Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours” (verses 1-3).

So chapter fifty-eight commences with the words, **“Cry aloud, spare not, . . . shew my people their transgression,”** and then the prophet goes on to emphasize the sins of Israel. The great sin that he stresses is their reliance upon a mere formal observance of ritual and ceremony when the heart was far from God.

Isaiah takes up particularly the question of fasting. The Jews had a great number of fasts which they observed punctiliously, and there was a definite fast set forth in Leviticus 23 in connection with the appointed times of the Lord. But in addition to these, they brought in other things and added other fasts. They boasted in abstention from food and drink at certain hours and on certain days, taking it for granted that this pleased God, whereas He commends those who fasted from far different motives in order that their minds, taken away from other things, might be able to give attention to the things of the Spirit. So there is no praise but reproof for these merely formal fasts.

“Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high” (verse 4).

They used the fast to cover up other offenses. Some people today misuse that text: **“Charity shall cover the multitude of sins.”** “Well,” they say, “if I give some money to charity that makes up for other things.” That is not what the Lord meant at all.

Israel fasted for strife and debate, to cover up other sins, and thought they were doing it by the careful observance of the fasts.

“Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? 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? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?” (verses 5-7).

In His fasts God called upon them to recognize the importance of self-judgment. The fasts gave them opportunity to come before Him to meditate upon His dealings with them, and upon their own failures and sins, to confess them, and then carry out practically the compassions of God toward those who are needy.

In other words, the mind of God was not simply that they should deny themselves a little food but that they should be constantly living lives of self-denial, dividing what God gave them with others, and sharing with the poor and the needy.

The Lord Jesus speaks of the same thing. He says, **“Moreover when ye fast, be not. . . of a sad countenance . . . That thou appear not unto men to fast”** (Matthew 6:16-18).

The people would look at them and say, “That’s a godly man - he hasn’t eaten anything since three o’clock yesterday afternoon.” But the Lord says, “When you fast, let it be between you and God, and have a cheerful, bright and happy countenance among the people.”

The Lord Jesus really is in full harmony with Isaiah; the same Spirit spoke through both. And then the Lord promises, both through Isaiah and Matthew, that if there is reality, He will reward.

“Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy rereward. Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am . . . then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday: And the Lord shall guide thee continually” (verses 8-11).

What a reward is this!

Then the subject of the sabbath is continued. We have seen that for the Christian the first day of the week has voluntarily taken the place of the sabbath, the covenant sign for the Jew. But the blessing attending their appointed day may be ours abundantly.

“If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” (verses 13, 14).

It is of all importance to realize that men are more to God than forms and ceremonies, even of His own devising.

“The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). He who is **“Lord. . . of the sabbath”** is pleased when we use His holy day to bless and help those in trouble, and to relieve the afflicted, so far as we are able to do so. Truly to keep the first day of the week holy to the Lord is to use it for rest, worship, and ministry to others. To think only of relaxation, and spend this day in pleasure-seeking, is to misuse it and fail to enter into the purpose God has had in mind in preserving its privileges for us.

“I get so weary with all the burdens of business throughout the week,” said a Christian, “that I must have rest and exercise on Sunday. So I use the Lord’s Day afternoons visiting in the hospital and seeking to comfort and help the friendless.” He returned to work on Monday refreshed and ready for another six days of toil.

Let us cherish our privileges and neither despise them, on the one hand, nor hedge them about with legal enactments, on the other, for which there is no biblical authorization.

~ end of chapter 58 ~

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