

Breaking Yokes & Sharing Bread

Thomas Robinson, *Faith & Works* 2, August 18, 2019

Isaiah 58:1-14 Translation NRSV adapted.

Israel's very Piety is Transgression

¹ Cry aloud; don't hold back;
lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

² How is it they seek me daily
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that did righteousness
not forsaking the judgment of their God.

Their Fasting shows they Don't know God

They ask me for righteous judgments;
they delight to draw near to God.

³ "Why have we fasted, and you don't see it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you don't notice?"

Look, in the day of your fast
you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to lash out with a wicked fist.

Fasting like you do today
won't make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for people to show off a humble life?
bowing down their head like a reed,
spreading sackcloth and ashes under them?
Will you really call this a fast,
a day that's pleasing to Yahweh?

For God, A Fast is Deeds of Justice & Love

⁶ This the fast that I choose:
to take off fetters put on by injustice,
to untie the straps of the heavy yoke,
to send out the oppressed in freedom,
and to break every yoke!

⁷ Isn't it to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor
into your house;

when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to hide from your own kin?

It brings Healing and God's Presence

⁸ Then you'll shine like the breaking dawn,
your renewed health will sprout quickly.

Your righteousness will go in front of you;
Yahweh's glory will protect behind you.

⁹ Then you'll call, and Yahweh will answer;
you'll cry out, and he'll say, "I'm right here."

If you get rid of debt's heavy yoke among you,
everyone pointing accusing fingers
and slandering each other,

¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and make the life of the afflicted satisfying,
then your light will rise to dispel the darkness;
awful gloom will be like noonday.

¹¹ Yahweh will guide you step by step,
and satisfy your life in scorched places.
He'll make you strong down to the bones.
You'll be like a watered garden,
like a flowing spring; its waters never fail.

¹² Your buildings long in ruins will be rebuilt;
you'll rebuild foundations destroyed
generations ago.

You'll be called "Rebuilder of broken walls,"
One who make streets livable again.

God's Sabbath is a Sign of Changed Life

¹³ If you refuse to trample the Sabbath rest,
or to pursue selfish interests on my holy day;

if you count Sabbath rest a delight
and you honor the day as holy to Yahweh;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving personal interests, business as usual;

¹⁴ then you'll discover how delightful Yahweh is.
I'll make you ride the heights of the earth;
I'll feed you from the vast heritage
of Jacob your father,
for Yahweh himself has promised it.

Isaiah 56:1-7 (Cf. Acts 8:26-38; Mark 11:17)

¹Yahweh says: Act with justice, and do what's right, for ... my deliverance will soon be revealed. ²The person who does this is blessed ... who keeps Sabbath rest, and refuses to do any evil. ³Don't let a foreign immigrant who follows Yahweh say, "Yahweh will separate me from his people." Don't let the eunuch say, "I'm just a dry tree." ⁴For Yahweh says: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath rest, who choose what I desire, loyal to my covenant, ⁵I'll give, within my house, a monument and a name better than children; I'll give them an everlasting name. ⁶I'll make them all ... ⁷... joyful in my house of prayer; and accept their sacrifices; ... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Isaiah 61:1-4 (Cf. Luke 4:16-21)

¹The Spirit of my Lord Yahweh is upon me, because Yahweh anointed me; he sent me to bring good news to the poor, to heal those whose hearts are broken, to cry liberty for the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the Jubilee year of Yahweh's favor, the day of our God's recompense; to comfort all who mourn. ³... They'll be called oaks of righteousness, planted by Yahweh to reveal his glory. ⁴They'll rebuild the ancient ruins ... the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Living out Faith in a Broken Society

We began with Faith & Works in James 2: "works" as actions of generosity, reconciliation & justice, embodying faith & God's love. (Not "works of law" marking out pure community.)

Isaiah of the Return from Babylon (ch 56-66), 500+ years earlier, is a major source of reflection for Jesus, Paul, & James. Israel's hopes are challenged. David's kingdom is lost. Political identity is as province of Persia. Exile brought focus on religious identity. Rebuilding temple & ruins. Faith as regular practice: sacrifice & fasting for restoration.

Isaiah points to the irony of shared / personal religious practice that's misdirected. The problem is Yahweh – a distinct, personal God of covenant and intention. God is not an object of general personal religious aspiration. God calls people to respond to and embody his own distinct character of self-giving love in costly, self-giving actions. A demanding regimen of personal piety is not the same as genuinely serving those in need.

"The Fast that I Choose..."

The people had faith in God and found religious discipline of humble fasting to express their grief at loss and suffering. But God failed to respond. God says, They show a humility, but act self-serving & create hurt. They haven't been transformed by God's character.

For God, a fast isn't defined by abstinence or asceticism, but by eating bread with the poor, breaking yokes of debt slavery, oppression, injustice. They couldn't control Persian policy but they could change their own practices in their society. In the NT, they create a community across ethnic boundaries, slave / free, and gender divisions. God's world.

Real Healing and Faithful Practice

Isaiah's prophecy points to real transformation from God. Exodus renewed. Old wounds healed. Past devastation restored. God's character of justice, love, service, that bears our burdens, makes a great difference when embodied in life. Light shines. Nourishment satisfies. Loving, diverse community. Self-focus limits life. God-focus creates life.

God urges them to shift from a focus on fasting because of pain, to giving themselves and their workers Sabbath rest. Though the world of Persian empire was distorted, they could find their way into delight in Yahweh shared with a whole and healing community.