

Isaiah 58 - The Fast that God Requires

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If you are seeking a passage of scripture that contrasts formal religiosity with God-pleasing spirituality, you need look no further than Isaiah 58. There, in that chapter of the Bible, the prophet serves as an intermediary between God and the people of Israel. What the people want to know is why, after they had performed the solemn rituals which the priests had prescribed for them, observed the ordained feasts and kept the commanded Sabbaths which supposedly were to be pleasing to God, they had not received the blessings God had promised. With zeal and sincerity they had kept their part of the covenant which they had assumed assured them of God's good favor and benefits, and they wanted to know why God had not kept His side of the bargain. Why, they were asking, had there not been a fulfillment of the promise that they thought God had made to those who would be faithful in observing these religious rites?

Their rituals were expected to lead them to commitments to care for the poor and minister to the aliens who were living in their midst. Instead, their rituals had become little more than attempts to manipulate God into pouring out benefits upon the worshipers. The prophet declared to the people that the fast that God really desired was a fast that was connected to loving sacrifices to meet the needs of the homeless, the hungry and the naked.

The prophet wept over what the people had become. Prophets always weep. There was no standing aloof from them as he pronounced God's judgment. Instead, Isaiah was so empathetic with God that the disappointments of God became his disappointments, and the emotional pathos of Yahweh became his own. Simultaneously, Isaiah was so connected spiritually and emotionally with his people that he also wept because he knew that he too would share in the consequences for their failure to live out love and justice, and that their plight would be his own.

A prophet of God, however, does more than just weep. The true prophet also offers an alternative vision of what the future can be, if only the people would repent of their indifference to the needs of the poor and again commit themselves to seeking justice for the oppressed.