

ISAIAH 58

THE TRUE FAST THAT PLEASURES THE LORD

In this chapter, the prophet has his commission renewed to reprove the sinners in Zion (particularly the hypocrites), and to show them their transgressions. But the words that we read here are intended for admonition and warning to all hypocrites; they are not to be confined to those of any one particular period in history – although they did prophetically refer, at that time when Isaiah prophesied, to the captive Jews in Babylon. The prophet had told the wicked hypocrites that were among them that there was no peace (chapter 57:21). Against the terror of that word, they thought to shelter themselves underneath their external performances – particularly their fastings, which they kept up even while they were in Babylon. Therefore, the prophet here shows them that their devotions would not entitle them to peace, while their lifestyles did not match up with them. They seemed to take great pleasure in the outward exercises of religion, and they seemed very desirous to obey the Lord and do their duty. And these hypocrites were angry with God for not accepting the services which they themselves had a mighty opinion of. They boasted of themselves, and magnified their own performances; and they thought that God would take great notice of them, and acknowledge Himself a debtor to them for their services! And because He would not, they charged Him with injustice; and they seemed resolved to give up their “religion” altogether, and justify themselves in doing so because they had supposedly found no profit in worshiping God. But the true reason why the Lord did not accept their fastings nor answer their prayers was because they did not fast aright. They fasted indeed, but they also persisted in their sins. Even on the days of their fasts – notwithstanding the professed humiliations and covenants of that day – they went on to do whatever seemed right in their own eyes, whether it was lawful or unlawful. They were as covetous and unmerciful as ever (verse 3); and even in the midst of their fasts, they were contentious and spiteful (verse 4). And while they thus continued in those very sins which were directly contrary to the intentions of a day of fasting, the Lord would not accept their merely external formalities of worship.

The Lord, through the mouth of His prophet, proceeds to give plain instructions concerning the true nature of religious fasting. In general, a fast is intended for the honoring and pleasing of God, and for the humbling and abasing of ourselves. It is not enough to put on a grave and melancholy face, and bow down the head like a withered and broken bulrush. The outward ceremonies of religion may appear very fair in the eyes of the world; but they will not be accepted by God, unless the worshiper has a right relationship with Him. The fast

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ The sin of hypocrisy is reproved – verses 1-2
- ❖ A contrast between false fasting and true worship of the Lord – verses 3-12
- ❖ Promises are extended to those who keep the Lord’s Sabbath – verses 13-14

that pleases the Lord is not confined to one special day that we set aside; it consists in a continual reformation – *semper reformanda* – of our lives, in undoing what we have done amiss, and in untying the heavy burdens that are laid upon the backs of the poor and downtrodden.

Verses 8-12 contain precious promises to those who keep the fast that God has chosen. By faith, they are permitted to freely and cheerfully feast upon them. If a person, a family, a church, or a nation keep the Lord's fast, and do that which is good; let them know, for their comfort, that they shall find the Lord to be their bountiful rewarder! And that which they lay out in works of charity shall be abundantly made up to them. God will surprise them with the return of mercy after great affliction, which shall be as welcome as the light of the morning after a long and dark night (verse 8): "Then shall thy light break forth as the morning," and "then shall thy light rise in obscurity" (verse 10). They shall always be safe under the Divine protection. "Thy righteousness shall go before thee," to secure you from enemies in the front; and "the glory of the Lord" shall bring up the rear, to secure you from enemies behind. Christ is our defense and the Captain of our salvation; upon Him alone, we can depend for safety when our sins pursue us and are ready to take hold upon us.

Another blessing for those who keep the Lord's fast is that God will be always near to them, to hear their prayers (verse 9). He will also direct them in all difficult and doubtful cases. While we are in the wilderness of this world, we need continual direction from heaven; for if we are ever left to ourselves, we shall certainly miss our way. And to the believer, God not only gives wisdom and knowledge, but also joy – thus satisfying him with the testimony of his own conscience and the assurances of Divine favor. Those who do justly and love mercy shall enjoy the comfort thereof, even in this world.

Let us pause over the last few verses of this chapter, and take note of the several expressions enjoined to God's people for the observance of His Day of rest and worship. And surely we will immediately conclude that if the Old Testament Sabbath was to be observed with such sacredness, when it was only a picture and a foreshadow of good things to come; then how much more ought the observance of the Lord's Day to be regarded now, when *Jesus Himself* is the very Sabbath of His redeemed people? How little do people know of the true nature

and blessedness of the Lord's Day when they spend its holy hours and its blessed golden opportunities in any pursuit except that of the "one thing needful!"

All praises to You, Lord Jesus, for all of Your precious ordinances and means of grace, such as the Lord's Day! Help us to find You to be our rest, our joy, and our sole delight upon earth. Amen.

