

Isaiah 58 And Fasting

How to Fast

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One of the most striking and obvious characteristics about the Day of Atonement is, of course, *fasting*. It is especially remarkable in this country today, because it is not at all customary for people to fast. People just do not particularly fast a whole lot, especially the kind of fast that we do—where it is no food and no water for a twenty-four hour period.

In fact, the word "fast" is quickly becoming archaic in this way of looking at it. And if it is not that, then at least it is specialized in the area of health. Most people think of fasting in terms of a hunger strike that some prisoner or political person might do to get some sort of action accomplished; or, as I mentioned before, as a health measure—as in a juice fast. That is, somebody going on a fast to make sure that he gets a good body cleanse and can then go on with a healthy body. It is more seen as those types of things, than as a religious activity. So, if you want to put it in just a few words, fasting is not in vogue these days. It is just not a thing that people want to do.

God was, indeed, foresighted to have us rehearse the meaning of His holy days every year, because it would not take long for us to lose the significance of fasting if we were not frequently reminded of its purpose. It seems to me that it would not take very long before we would be fasting simply because that is what this day requires. We would totally lose the significance of fasting. We would think of it merely as not eating and drinking for twenty-four hours to accomplish what is commanded of us. It would become a legalistic religious requirement if we did not rehearse (at least once a year) what fasting is all about.

Fasting is a lot more than just abstaining from food and drink. However, that abstaining from food and drink is its "letter of the law" significance. When we, as New Testament Christians, try to look at it in a more spiritual way, then the fast that we keep once a year is ratcheted up a few notches in significance. It has deep spiritual meaning. That is, fasting, not just on the Day of Atonement, but throughout the year. Both have deep spiritual meaning. So, I want to look into this "spirit of the law" type of fasting today; and later on we will focus primarily on Isaiah 58. However, we will look at a few other things before we get there. Let's start with Leviticus 23 and the command to keep the day (in the famous "Holy Day Chapter").

Leviticus 23:26-32 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of Atonement. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. [Now, listen to these requirements.] And you shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God. For any person who is not afflicted in soul on that same day shall be cut off from his people. [That is pretty dire consequences for not afflicting the soul.] And any person who does any work on that same day, that person I will destroy from among his people. [So it is pretty much the same punishment if you do not afflict your soul, or if you do work. Either you will be cut off, or destroyed. So, it is pretty much the same thing.] You shall do no manner of work; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. It shall be

to you a Sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict your souls; on the ninth day of the month at evening [meaning "at day's end"], from evening to evening, you shall celebrate your Sabbath."

Just so there is no confusion about that last verse, what God means is that, when the sun is going down on the ninth, that is when you begin your fast. Then it goes from that evening to the next evening, on the tenth. So it covers the entire day of the tenth—which day this is [today].

Having looked at those six or seven verses there, it is no wonder that the Jews consider *Yom Kippur*—the Day of Atonement—the most solemn day of the year. There are three pronouncements of death in there, if you do not keep it properly. That is pretty solemn, if you ask me. That is pretty serious business.

God goes to great lengths to impress its seriousness on us. We have to afflict our souls. We have to do no work. We will be cut off, if we do. We will be destroyed by God. And it just seems to go on and on. But God says, "You have to do this, this day. And, if you don't, there are dire consequences for it." God takes this day very seriously.

And the whole idea of the Day of Atonement, from this section, all revolves around three basic things. The first thing is *fasting*. The second thing is *doing no work*. And the third thing is *the offering* that was made on this day. That is the ritual that is in Leviticus 16. (This is the one about the two goats that are offered on this day.)

The two goats show the two aspects of the Day of Atonement. The one goat represents Christ. This is the one that is brought and killed, and offered as a sin offering. This is the payment for our sins. This is the price for our sins. The Creator God had to come here, as a man, and be offered as a sinless offering so that our sins could be forgiven and wiped out.

The other aspect is the Azazel goat. This goat was brought before Aaron, and all of the sins of the people were confessed over it and placed on its head. A fit man then led it out into the wilderness. Then that man had to wash his clothes before he could come back into camp. This goat depicts our sins being removed completely.

So we have these two parts of Atonement. Before you can have unity with God, two things have to be done. First, sin has to be paid for. The second thing is that the sins must be removed so far away that they are, in essence, forgotten—"as far as east is from the west."

As far as our sins go, we cannot say, "*The devil made me do it*"—because, when it comes down to it, we all make the decision to sin. Certainly, Satan is the one who, predominantly, influences us to sin. It is his attitude that is out there, which makes our human nature so rotten. And his influence is all the time on us. We cannot get away from it. And if we are weak and we give in to it, then we sin. But the choice is ours, and we have to pay for that wrong choice. Satan will pay for his own sins. So the Atonement ritual shows these two aspects of atonement being done—being worked out for us. We have, on one hand, the sin offering given for us in the person of Jesus Christ. And, on the other hand, we have our sins removed to a far-away place, something else Christ did for us.

Let us look at Leviticus 16:29. It is kind of interesting that God does not even mention the Day of Atonement until this point in the chapter.

Leviticus 16:29-31 This shall be a statute forever for you: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether a native of your own country or a stranger who dwells [sojourns] among you. For on that day the priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the LORD. It is a Sabbath of solemn rest for you, and you shall afflict your souls. It is a statute forever.

Notice that as this ritual was completed and God gave some instruction just after it, He mentions these three aspects again: (1) *fasting*, (2) *doing no work*, and (3) *the offering* for atonement that is made for us.

I want to key in a little bit on this *doing no work*, because it is very interesting. In the holy day list, back in Leviticus 23, God says "no customary work"—or, in some Bibles it will say "no servile work" or "no occupational work" shall be done on the other holy days. But on Atonement, it is like a Sabbath day. I do not know if you ever noticed this before; but on the [weekly] Sabbath day and on Atonement it says "*no work shall be done.*" That is pretty absolute. And here in Leviticus 16, it says no work at all! The difference is very significant.

The other holy days say "no customary work," "no servile work," "no occupational work." But on the Day of Atonement it says, "*No work shall be done.*" Why is this difference significant? I will give it to you in just a few words. On the Day of Atonement, we do **no work**. I am not trying to be cute, or witty, or smart. That is the answer. That is why it is significant. Because on the Day of Atonement we do not do a thing! Think about it. We have little, or nothing, to do with the work of atonement with God.

Who is the One who gave His life for our atonement? Christ. What work did we do? None. (Except, if you want to say that we sinned. We were the cause of why He had to do it.) In the work of removing our sin, how much effort are we going to have in that? None. Think about it. On the Day of Atonement, we do *no work*—because most of the work of atonement (of unity, of "at-one-ment" with God) is done for us by Him. And we rehearse that each year, on the Day of Atonement.

What is *our work* on the Day of Atonement? To afflict your soul. To fast. To be humble. To be contrite. To get yourself in the proper attitude—so that you can have a right relationship with God. That is the work we do in atonement. Think about it. How do we have unity with God?

Micah 6:8 What does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

What does it say in Isaiah 59, keeps God away from us?

Isaiah 59:2 Your iniquities [your sins] have separated you from your God.

So the Day of Atonement shows our humbling ourselves, our repenting before God, and coming into the proper attitude so that we can be "one" with Him. God says, "You shall do *no work* on the Day of Atonement." It is a type of showing us that we do so little in this work of atonement with Him. The only part that we have to play in it is to be humble, and to understand our place before God.

We go without the life-sustaining food and drink to remind ourselves how much we *depend* on God. He provides us with life, with all of our sustenance, with everything we have, everything we own,

and everything we use. Every opportunity we have comes from Him. Eventually, even eternal life itself comes from Him. Our job is to understand that and to be humble before Him. This is one day in the year when we can really focus on God's providence. He makes us focus on it. We can go one day without food, but what if it was longer? How long could we last without what He can provide? Not very long!

Then, think of this spiritually. If we were not given what He provides spiritually—His Word, His Spirit, forgiveness, mercy, grace, kindness, love, etc., etc.—how long would we last? How long before we would reject Him and go back to the vomit [of this world]? If God did not give us all the things that He does spiritually, we would die. We would wither on the vine and die, just as we would if we did not have the physical food to eat every day.

Do not get me wrong, there are things that we can do on this day. Those things will surface, when we get to Isaiah 58. But the point here is that any work that we do (work for a living, work for our maintenance, work on our possessions, and any kind of work that we might do around the house) is strictly "off limits" for this day—and for good reason. If we did these things, they would declare our self-sufficiency before God. We would be declaring to God that we want to *work* for our salvation—that we do not want His help, but we want to do it ourselves. That is the exact opposite of one of the meanings of this day—which is that God has done so much for us. Working would just tell Him that we do not care about what He has done for us.

Before we get to Isaiah 58, I want to show you a few things from the Bible about the Day of Atonement. So let us go to Acts 27. I want to show you that they did keep Atonement in the New Testament. Paul is on his way to Rome here, as a prisoner.

Acts 27:9 Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying. . .

He prophesies that there is going to be a disaster not too long in the future, because they are sailing on the Mediterranean Sea during the time when storms are approaching. But it is very interesting that Luke, when he wrote Acts, uses "the Fast" as a time marker. Obviously, there can only be one "*the* Fast," and that is the Day of Atonement. You and I would probably say, "*the* Feast," would not we [in speaking about the Feast of Tabernacles]? That is the big time of the year for us. In fact, we would probably pick Trumpets over Atonement as a time marker; but Luke does not. I would imagine that Luke has Paul's influence in this. It was "*the* Fast" that was important, because it got the peoples' minds back on God in a big way.

It is "*the* Fast." And it is the time marker that Luke uses. Other than this, the Day of Atonement is not mentioned at all in the New Testament. This is the one and only time. Instruction on fasting is very scarce in the New Testament also. In fact, the one we will go to next is just about the only occurrence of instruction on fasting. There are other places where it instructs us *to* fast, but it does not instruct us on *how* to fast. This is the one spot, here in Matthew 6:16-18, where it is mentioned; and it comes directly from our Savior.

Matthew 6:16-18 Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting, Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your

head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Like I said, this is the New Testament's only extended section on fasting—and it deals primarily with hypocrisy, rather than any spiritual attitude that we should have. Notice that Jesus says, "*When* you fast" (and not "*if* you fast"). This is a general command that is talking about the fasting that you would do throughout the year.

This is not necessarily the fast that you would do on the Day of Atonement. Normally, when we fast on the Day of Atonement, everybody knows—because everybody in our "community" here is also fasting; and it is simply expected. So this extended instruction on fasting really does not have to do with the Day of Atonement. It does not apply very well [in regard to these specific instructions].

So it is more pointed toward our personal fasts throughout the year. Those are private—between you and God, for whatever reasons you would do a fast. And what He says here, basically, is that no one outside your family needs to know. It is between you and God. It is a good idea, if you are going to fast, to let your wife know—so that she does not make you breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But it really does not need to go much beyond that. Only those who are on a "need to know" basis need to know.

Since Jesus and the apostles do not leave us any real, big chunks of information on fasting, our primary source is the Old Testament. I could go to several scriptures that define fasting physically, but let us just go to one that will suffice as representative of the instructions. We will look at Esther 4. (If you want to write down another one, put down Exodus 34:28, which is how Moses fasted when he went up into the Mount.) But here in Esther 4:16, Esther asks Mordecai to tell all the Jews there in Shushan to fast for three days before she went before the king to make her request and save the nation.

Esther 4:16 Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law, and if I perish, I perish!

This is very straightforward. It does not leave much room for negotiation. Godly fasting, as Esther says here, is going without food or drink for a period of time. Notice too that she says "neither night nor day." (That means that we do not fast like the Muslims do—who fast during the day and then binge during the night, during Ramadan.) Normally, it is a twenty-four-hour period that you would choose to fast.

Now, it does not necessarily have to be a twenty-four-hour period, but it is most effective when it is done for a whole day or more. I have heard of people fasting for a meal in order to do something good, let us say. That would be perfectly all right and acceptable. But a normal fast is a twenty-four hour period. Especially on the Day of Atonement, we are given strict instructions that it is from the evening (as the sun is going down on the ninth) through the tenth. That is pretty straightforward.

If you think about it, eating and drinking are inherently selfish. Have you ever thought about that? You are feeding your body. You are doing it for your own life. When we sacrifice eating, we are telling God how serious and selfless we are about whatever the matter is at hand.

Certainly what was happening here in Esther 4 was quite serious. It was pretty high on the list of disasters that might have happened. Here were the Jews of whom the Messiah would come. And what was going to happen was that, if things did not change, there was a decree out there that said that anybody who wanted to could kill all the Jews, wherever they lived, within the Persian Empire. That would definitely have been Judea, as well as in Persia. So this particular event effected the line of the Messiah. If they had killed all of the line of David, then where would Messiah have come from?

Of course, God could not have allowed that. In effect, they were fasting for something that God would not allow anyway. But it certainly showed God their desire. It showed God their selflessness. And it showed God how serious they were about this. Also, the act of fasting itself humbled them for His decision—so that they would have the proper relationship with God, as His people, and allow Him to do whatever it was that He would do. That is reflected in Esther's attitude, when she says that she was going to go to the king, even though it was a death sentence for her to do so. Unless the king himself called you, you died if you appeared before the king like that. But she said, "Whatever happens. . . if I perish, I perish. My life is in God's hands." That was a very fitting attitude for her to have.

We still have not particularly answered the question of *why* we fast. Obviously we do not fast to be seen as "righteous" by others. That is what Jesus covered. We certainly do not fast for the fun of it. It is not something that we do for entertainment, or for our pleasure. What is its purpose? What does it do for us? What effect does it have on God? This is where the instruction in Isaiah 58 comes into play. However, we are going to begin in Isaiah 57, because Isaiah 57 is a run up into Isaiah 58. It kind of sets the theme for why God discusses what He does there in chapter 58. The themes that are mentioned here in chapter 57 are what come up in Isaiah 58. And it is very interesting to look at it from that perspective.

Isaiah 57:14 And one shall say, "Heap it up! Heap it up! Prepare the way, take the stumbling block out of the way of My people."

This is pretty well translated from the Hebrew. It is interesting that it starts out "and one shall say;" but it is very evident from the end of the verse that it is God Himself that's talking. He says, "Take the stumbling block out of the way of My people." What He is saying is, "Build a highway." That is what "heap it up" means. When you take the earth and you are making a causeway of sorts, to build a highway on the top of it.

"Prepare the way. Take the stumbling block out of the way of My people." He is saying, "Make everything smooth, and straightforward, and easily accessible"—so that His people can do what is right. So the first little theme that we have here is that God Himself is the One who prepares and smooths the way for His people.

Isaiah 57:15 For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones."

This sets up a dichotomy. Notice the difference here between God and the people. God is the one who high and lofty. He is the one who inhabits eternity. He dwells in the high and holy place. But who does He dwell with? He dwells with those who are lowly, who are contrite, who are humble.

And why does He do that? To revive them—to revive the spirit of the humble, and revive the heart of the contrite ones. To *revive* means "to give life again."

Is that not what our relationship is all about? God is so much more than we are. Here we are, lowly and humble, of nothing—just dust that He scooped out of the ground and made into a man. And He says, "I want to dwell with these forever, and give them life. And I will dwell with those who are contrite and humble."

This sets up the proper relationship. God is *everything*; and we are nothing. But [even though we are 'nothing'] God accepts us—when we understand that we are nothing and that all the cards are in His hands. If we want to live again, that's how we have to be—humble, lowly, and contrite.

Isaiah 57:16 For I will not contend forever. . .

God says, "There's an end to all of this. I'm not going to go on and on and on—fighting you."

Isaiah 57:16 Nor will I always be angry: for the spirit would fail before Me, and the souls which I have made.

God says that He does not want an adversarial relationship—because *we* would lose. We would die! He says, "Not only would your spirit fail, but your soul would fail as well." This takes up everything that we are—our bodies and our spirits. God would just put us out like a light—if we would contend forever with Him, or if He Himself could contend forever with us. We cannot go fifteen rounds with God! So He says, "Make up your mind. Do the right thing."—because there is a finite time limit on all of this.

Isaiah 57:17 For the iniquity of his covetousness I was angry and struck him; I hid and was angry, and he went on backsliding in the way of his heart.

God does correct. That is part of His character. If He never corrected us, He would not be able to make us into what He wants us to be. And so He says that He does correct us for sin. He will be angry and strike us when we sin. But He also says that the carnal person keeps on backsliding. Thus, if we do not have the humble and contrite attitude, we are going to take the correction and keep on sinning. That is not what God wants. God wants a humble and contrite people that will, yes, take the correction but also learn from it—so that He does not have to contend with them anymore. That He does not have to be angry and strike us. That He does not have to go hide, because of our sin (as He says, here in verse 17).

Isaiah 57:18 I have seen his ways, and will heal him [Look at the positive way that He puts that.]; I will also lead him, and restore comforts to him and to his mourners.

God says that if we will just give Him a chance, He *will* heal us spiritually. He will lead us to salvation. But He is still looking for the humble and contrite person here. These are the only kinds of people that will do this. But He is willing. He will do it! All we have to do is have the proper relationship with Him—which is that He is up high and we are down low.

Isaiah 57:19 I create the fruit of the lips: Peace, peace to him who is far off and to him who is near." says the LORD, "and I will heal him.

God wants peace with us. It is interesting to whom He says that He wants to give *peace*—(1) to the one who is far off, and (2) to the one who is near. One commentary said that the one who is *far off* is a penitent person. That is, the one who is ready to repent and who has begun to repent, meaning the one who has been far from God, but sees the error of his ways and wants to come near. Also, God says He wants peace with those who are already near—which would be us. He doesn't want to fight with us either. He wants peace with us—that is, a proper relationship. But, if we are not careful, even those who are "near" can regress. So we have to be careful.

Kind of as an aside, this "I create *the fruit of the lips*"—in the first clause here—means that God is the one that makes the situation and the events, the ideas, or what have you that will make us praise Him. The idea is that God does everything for us. He even creates all of the situations to which we respond to Him by praise. If you look in Hebrews 13, the fruit of the lips is praise. So, God says, "*I even create the reasons why you praise Me. I want peace with you*"—which is something that we should be praising Him for every day (both those who are far off and those who are near). God says that IF that happens, THEN He'll heal. It says that twice in this one section—"and I will heal him."

Next we will take verses 20 and 21 together because this describes "the wicked"—those who won't humble themselves and be contrite before God.

Isaiah 57:20-21 But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. [God is very definite in His pronouncement here.] "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."

The figure here is of a sea in a tempest, in a storm, that is being tossed. It is dirty water, and there is froth all over. It is just going back and forth, and there is no stability to it. "It cannot rest," He says. This says something about the wicked one's mind. It is constantly going about and probably looking for more evil. And it casts up mire and dirt on the beach. That is the result of it. The "fruit" of this kind of mind, unsettled and wicked, is one of dirt and evil.

This is the lead-in for the chapter on fasting. It is very interesting that He would put these back to back. So let us go right into Isaiah 58. Immediately after He says all of this [in Isaiah 57], He says:

Isaiah 58:1 Cry aloud, spare not. Lift up your voice like a trumpet; tell My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.

This is the first step in *healing*. Isaiah 58 is all about the healing that He says He will give. He mentions it again in Isaiah 58:8. That is one of the great themes that link chapters 57 and 58. But the first step that you must have (so that healing can begin) is that you *recognize* sin. People can go for years and years doing the wrong thing and never realize that they are doing it wrong. So God commands the ministry to cry aloud and spare not, so that people *know* what sin is and so that they *know* what they have to change to have this *peace* with God—to have this healing. Until that happens, no progress is made.

People get upset at us [in the ministry] for constantly talking about negative things—talking about sin and about how "bad" we are. Well, that is part of our commission, to expose sin. I know that the ministry tries its best not to be personal about it. We do not say, "John Smith, we know that you did this and this this week, and you should stop that." Rather, we do it in a more general way. We "cry aloud and spare not" in a more general way, so that people can understand what they need to change.

And do not ever think that we [in the ministry] think that we are above it, because we are in this game with you. We have just been given the job of crying aloud. It is often that we give these sermons to ourselves, just as much as to you. There are things that we see that we need to change. And the best way for us to funnel that understanding is through a sermon. Then it gets a broader audience and hopefully, helps more people. But this is something that we have been ordained to do. And it is not fun to do!

Oftentimes, I do not enjoy Monday mornings, when I go to look at my e-mail. I get letters from people saying that I stepped on their toes, that I offended them somehow, or that I was just plain wrong. But I just have to shrug my shoulders and say, "I did what I felt that God wanted me to do. And I gave the sermon that God inspired me to give." So I ask you to please be patient with us, and please do not be so critical. That is what Israel was condemned for in the wilderness—murmuring, being critical. We are just doing our jobs. And we try to do it humbly. We try not to offend, but sometimes, if the shoe fits, it has to be worn.

Now back to Isaiah 58. This is the response of the people, and in verse 2, He begins to describe the way they are.

Isaiah 58:2 Yet they seek Me daily, and delight to know My ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and did not forsake the ordinance of their God. They ask of Me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching God.

This is really interesting. God just told them that He was going to send His messengers to tell them their transgressions and their sins. But the way they looked at things was, "It's not for *me*!" What He is saying here is that the people are very religious, and they think that they are doing the right thing. They think they have not forsaken God and that they are a nation that did righteousness (like they are not the people who have forsaken the covenant). In a way, they would say, "God, you have no right to send those people to us, to tell us our sins—because we do things by the book." And they loved religious practices—like going to the Feast and worshipping before God. "They love to approach God," He says.

I mean, they could really get into this religious thing. "It's fun! We get six feasts throughout a year. Boy, we have a good time, don't we? We get to go and take a trip—be away for a little more than a week. We get to have one-tenth of our yearly income to blow on whatever we want. Boy, this religious stuff is fun and enjoyable. We're good people too. We do everything that God says. We're righteous, dude" (to put it into the vernacular). That is basically what they are saying here. Then, in verse 3, they ask God a question.

Isaiah 58:3 "Why have we fasted," they say, "and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?"

"Look God, we've done all this—just like You told us to do. And You don't seem to hear us. You don't seem to react to us. You don't do anything for us." That is what they are saying. They *complain*, when God does not respond to them. "It's His fault. We've done everything right. Why don't You heal us? Why don't You give us these things that we need? Why don't You protect us from our enemies? Why didn't you keep that robber out of my house?" (Or whatever it happens to be.)

When you ask such a question of God, there is no humility there. There is no contrite spirit. There is no lowliness about it. It is all pride! "Look what I've done, God. Why haven't You responded to me?"

It's all Your fault. You owe me!" There is a lot of self-righteousness and pride in such statements. "I've done everything right; and now You need to do Your part, God." That is totally the opposite of the kind of attitude that God wants us to have as Christians. It is a totally wrong attitude from what we are supposed to be building on a fast.

Let us read the part of verse 3 that we did not read before. This is God's response.

Isaiah 58:3-4 "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers. Indeed you fast for strife and debate, and to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as you do this day, to make your voice heard on high.

What we see here is a wide difference between what they considered a good fast and what God considered a good fast. In a way, you could say that *the fasting* was just one illustration of how they approached their spiritual life, and it was totally 180 degrees away from the way that God wanted it to be. So you could say, in a way, that fasting is just an example here, to show the wider context of improper religion. But it is very instructive for us about fasting, nonetheless.

The way that they conducted their fast was rather negative, maybe not from their point of view, but from the outside looking in, it was very negative. First of all, He says that they find "pleasure" in their fast days. Now, that is kind of odd. They had a good time on their fast days. What this actually means is that they went about their business on their fast days. It does not necessarily mean that they had great entertainment or what have you. But on their fast days, they did what they normally do. They went about their normal, every day business. It is the same thing as in verse 13, where it talks about "doing your own pleasure" on the Sabbath day—meaning that they did whatever they wanted to do. They did not confine themselves to what *God* wanted them to do.

Another thing that they did was that they oppressed their employees, their laborers. They drove them to work harder on these fast days. They did not give their employees time off to fast themselves. They made them work. Like I said, this is a parallel to the other phrase—where they do their pleasure or they find pleasure. This means that they went ahead and went to work, and they did whatever they wanted to do. It is just another way of saying it. The Hebrew does that quite often. It will take one phrase, and then restate it in a second phrase. So "finding pleasure" in the fast and "exploiting all your laborers" are basically talking about the same situation. They went to work. They did what they wanted to do. They made their money. They grind their employee's nose on the millstone. And God says, "The fast should teach you something totally opposite to this."

The third thing it says, "You fast for strife and debate, and to strike with the fist of wickedness." They fasted to win arguments. They fasted to win conflicts. What they were trying to do was get God on their side. "If I fast this week, maybe I can get the contract on that bit of business that Joe Blow down the street is also trying to get a contract on. Maybe, if I fast, God will have good thoughts for me, and He will let me have it, instead of Joe Blow." That's the idea. They were fasting in order to make God choose sides on areas, arguments, or even conflicts that came to blows. It says, "to strike with the fist of wickedness."

They wanted God to condone their sin, just because they went without some food and water for a short period of time. They thought this would sway God's mind in their favor. But God says, "This is *not* the kind of fast that is going to get My attention."

Isaiah 58:5 Is it a fast that I have chosen, a day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?

This is what Jesus picked up on, in Matthew 6. It's the same sort of thing that He was talking about there. He was talking about hypocrisy. The fast—that is, actually going without food and water—is not the end-all of fasting. There is something more to it than that. He said, "Did I tell you to fast, just so you can be seen by others—holding your stomach, wailing, and making a big show about how much you are afflicting yourself?" That's NOT the way He wants us to fast. There's no godliness inherent in suffering without food and water—not unless you are doing it for the right reasons. If you are doing it just to go without food and water, you are just going through the motions. And it is not going to do you a bit of good, except maybe whatever the health benefits of fasting are. That's it. You won't gain a bit, spiritually.

There's no merit, either, in looking humble and mournful. That's just plain hypocrisy, because it is only skin deep. A person, who "acts" humble and mournful, is *proud* in his heart. He just wants to be seen. He's doing it for his own glory. So Christ says, "Wash your face, brush your teeth, comb your hair, put on your duds so that nobody else knows that you are fasting—except God in heaven, who sees your proper attitude, and He'll reward you openly." Jesus just expanded on this verse 5.

Beginning with verse 6, God gets into what He says a correct fast is.

Isaiah 58:6 Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke?

We could go on to verse 7, but I want to stay here in verse 6 for just a moment. There are two different concepts that are addressed in these two verses. (Verse 6 speaks of one concept, and verse 7 speaks of another.) Verse 6 covers freeing, loosing, and unburdening other people. It can also be applied personally as well, because you pretty much have to start with yourself.

What it is is that when you do your fast, it involves taking steps to lighten loads that have resulted from sin and oppression. So when you fast, you are trying to figure out ways to make other people's lives—and your own—free from sin. When you free yourself from sin, you become humble. It's all part of that process. You are yielding to God. And that's the kind of action that He is going to look kindly upon.

It should begin with getting free of sin and wickedness *in ourselves*—as in the parable that Jesus gave about the beam in one's own eye and the speck in the other person's. Well, He says that you have to get rid of the beam that is in your own eye before you can see the speck that is in the other person's eye. And this applies here. First, free yourself from sin. Obviously, you cannot free yourself from sin without the help of Jesus Christ. What I mean is that you seek forgiveness and then pursue repentance first yourself. That should be among the first things that we do when we fast—because it is in this way that we are then free to do the same for others (to lift their burdens and lighten their loads and to help them along in this way).

In John 8, Jesus had a little bit to say about this, as well. If you look in the commentaries, they'll say that Isaiah 58:6 is about slavery. That is, that you fast in order to free people from slavery. And that's

well and good, but the New Testament emphasis is on freedom from *sin*. And I should go beyond that to say freedom to live righteously.

John 8:30-36 As He spoke these words, many believed in Him. Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

We can be freed from sin by Christ's sacrifice for us. But, as He says here, continuing in *the truth* is what enables us to stay free. "You shall know the truth, and the truth can make you free." We need the truth to even come to the first step—that is, knowing that Christ Himself can free us by His sacrifice. The truth, then, as we learn it and grow in it, keeps us free and makes us even freer.

A proper godly fast helps to free us from sin because it puts us in the proper frame of mind, that is, the humble, dependent, contrite attitude to submit to God and be "one" with Him. Once we come to that point, we are free. We know the right way to live, and we know the wrong way to live. We are free to choose the right way because we are not shackled by sin. How many times does that image come up throughout the Bible? Paul says in Hebrews 12 that we are to throw off the weight that so easily besets us and run towards Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith.

So when we are "one" with God—when we are in this proper attitude and our perspective is right (that He's way up there and we are way down here)—if we reach that point, then we are free. And we are free from sin.

Once we are in this proper attitude, then we are prepared to help others to become free. This is one reason why this church has said that going to the world is *not* our primary work at this time. Notice that I said "primary" work. There is a greater work that needs to be done—so that we can be free to go to the world. As a whole, the church in general (that is, the greater church of God)—we are not free enough from sin to be effective in bringing others to freedom.

It's the old plank-and-speck thing. Would God want us, with our planks, to go out and help people in the world who may only have specks by comparison? I say it that way because here we are, we've known the truth for such a long time, and we might think something is minor because somebody out in the world would never think that it was a sin. But with our increased knowledge, to us it's more worrisome (detrimental, destructive) to our character than a sin that somebody in the world may have (that may be entirely physical in nature).

And so I say that what we have to do is get the planks out of our own eyes. Then, when we reach the point that God is satisfied that we are going in the right direction, and doing what is proper, and that we'll be good witnesses before Him, He will certainly open the doors. But we have to make sure that God is the One who gives the judgment that we are ready and not we ourselves because we (mankind) tend to be very hypocritical when we look at ourselves, our own unrighteousness, and our own preparedness for what God wants us to do. But God will open the doors of evangelism for the church when the church itself is ready.

Back in Isaiah 58, verse 7 gives the second part of this. God says:

Isaiah 58:7 Is it [this fast] not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?

The other major activity that we do during a fast is **good works**. As I said before, this isn't necessarily something that we would do on the Day of Atonement. But it is a general admonition about what we would do during a normal fast. But we can get the spiritual principles out of this. We should be doing things that benefit others—[such as] feed, shelter, and clothe those who are in need.

However, we should look at the more spiritual side of this—especially today. What does feeding the hungry parallel, spiritually? I would say that is a pretty fair way of saying "preach the gospel," teach God's Word. That's one of the things that fasting helps to do. It puts us in the proper attitude to do.

Sheltering the poor and the outcast—what spiritual parallel might that have? Could that be expanding our fellowship—including those who are maybe cast out from our midst or needy in other ways spiritually? That is, those who have been excluded somehow. How about covering the naked? What could that have a parallel with? Doesn't it say, in Revelation 3, that the Laodiceans are naked? What do you do when you clothe a person spiritually? You help them to become righteous. You strengthen them. You give them what spiritual help they need to become clothed in white linen. We exhort one another daily. Isn't that what Paul says that we should do?

Maybe you won't find somebody in the street who is naked, needs shelter, or is hungry. But there are certainly spiritual things that you could do, and a fast day is a good day to do them. Yes, the physical is important, but the spiritual application of this—to us, right now—is paramount.

You might want to jot down Matthew 25:31-40, because Jesus picks up on this once more. This is the parable of the sheep and the goats. Remember that the sheep, on His right hand, did all these things. They fed the hungry. They visited those in prison. They clothed the naked. They gave shelter, etc. And they said, "When did we do all these things? We don't remember doing these things." And He said, "Enter into My kingdom and be on My right hand." And then there's the goats, who didn't do any of those things, and He cast them into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. These things are very important, and there are spiritual parallels that we can apply every time we fast.

Let's finish here in Isaiah 58:8-12. This is the result of proper fasting. God says:

Isaiah 58:8-12 Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you. The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. Those from among you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Dwell in.

Did you notice how many blessings there were? If we fast properly, God's blessings will just cascade upon us—like a waterfall. This is really an inspiring section. Think about things like light. It says in verse 8, "Your light shall break forth like the morning." We normally think of this in terms of "glory" or maybe "understanding." But in the Hebrew, the image is of "prosperity." Remember that He is speaking to physical people here. So we have to sort of juxtapose the physical and the spiritual here. Light is an image of prosperity, but it does represent glory and attractive goodness that will spring from us.

Healing can be both physical and spiritual. And God is willing to do both abundantly. Did Jesus ever turn anybody away? Not those who had faith, not if they believed in Him, and He commends those who keep at it, who keep coming to Him—in faith—knowing that He will heal.

Verse 8 is very interesting. "Your righteousness shall go before you"—meaning that righteousness will lead you. It's your vanguard. It's what goes out front. It's a witness, as well as a clearer of the way. That's what happens when a vanguard goes out. They make way for the rest of the army to come behind. And our righteousness will do that for us.

And what is it that watches our backs? God Himself! He is our rear guard. He gives us security. He props us up. He lifts us up. And sometimes He even propels us forward, from behind. And He's willing to do all of these things for us.

So, if we fast properly—putting us in the proper attitude—we see here that God will be with us. He will respond to us, and He will be very happy to guide us into His Kingdom and into His Family.