

God's Chosen Fast

Isaiah, whose name means, “Yahweh is salvation,” was an Old Testament prophet who was called by God to remind His people of the special relationship they had with God as members of the nation of Israel, His special covenant community.

The book of Isaiah was written around 700BC. During this time, God's people had violated the Mosaic Covenant by not obeying the commands of God and thus were exiled from the land and were being exiled. Isaiah was calling the people of Judah back to a proper covenantal relationship with God. He was reminding his people of the sinful condition in which they were living and of its consequences.

The prophecies of Isaiah are not all “doom and gloom.” While the first part of his book deals with and emphasizes judgment, the second part of his book focuses on the salvation and comfort of God to His people. The judgment emphasized in the first part of his book is the purifying force that leads to the forgiveness and pardoning of sin emphasized in the latter part of the book.

Isaiah was telling his people that one day the grace and the glory of God would be bestowed upon His people—it would only happen as the Messiah comes first to suffer (53:1-6) and then to reign (60:19-21).

But before the glory of the kingdom comes the people would have to be shown their sin so God says to the prophet Isaiah in 58:1:

Isa 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.

Isa 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.

The problem Isaiah was sent to address wasn't simply that God's people were in sin—it was that God's people thought they were very religious but the truth of the matter was that they were bringing shame and dishonor to the Name of the Lord.

They were walking around with cancer and thought they were healthy. When they noticed that God wasn't answering their petitions, they cried out in their prayers (vs. 3a): “*Why have we fasted and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?*”

God answers through the prophet with these words (vs. 3b-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.*”

God says to His people, “*You are only going through the motions...you are being good on the outside but are dirty on the inside...You are good Christians on Sunday but Monday thru Saturday you live like the devil.*”

God's people were saying to God (vs. 2),

We are crying out to you with prayers and fastings yet you have not answered us.

*We are praying to you every day Lord and you do not hear us.
We are studying your Word and enjoy these times in your Word.
We love coming to church and worshipping you and singing your praises*

But when we have fasted it seems like You do not notice. When we have afflicted our souls it seems like You do not care. What's going on Lord!

So God responds and addresses their concerns in verses 5 to 12:

Isa 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?

Isa 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?

Isa 58:7 Is it 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?

Isa 58:8 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.

Isa 58:9 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,

Isa 58:10 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.

Isa 58:11 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.

Isa 58:12 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.

So let's look at the fast that God has chosen. Let's seek to discover what God wants our fast to be like. What kind of fast has God chosen for His people?

1.) *God's chosen fast loosens chains of bondage due to injustice*

In Isaiah 58 we find the Lord rebuking His people because they were following all the rituals of an external worship but had neglected to make sure that things were right with them inwardly.

One of God's points of contention with Judah was that when they had the means to be the solution to the problem of injustice, they were so busy being consumed with themselves, they ignored those around them that had needs, like the poor.

In the New Testament, the apostle James puts it this way:

James 2:14-16, "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?

The person James illustrates is akin to the one who says, “God bless you” or “I’ll pray for you” but doesn’t lift a finger to assist the person in need.

The person James characterizes is also like the church that says it is a Great Commission church and prays for the lost but has to active ministry to reach them.

Some of us may be familiar with the Scripture found at Luke 4:18, where Jesus walks into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and someone hands Him a copy of the scroll of the Book of Isaiah the Prophet.

Jesus begins to read the following words: *“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed...”*

This is the mission of Jesus. He says of Himself in Luke 19:10, *“...for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”*

As followers of Jesus Christ, as His hands and feet, we are commissioned to reach the lost.

- We are sent to preach the Gospel to the poor
- We are sent to bring the healing of Christ to the brokenhearted
- We are sent to proclaim the liberty of Jesus to the captives
- We are sent to bring spiritual sight to the spiritually blind
- We are sent to bring freedom to those who are oppressed

So we fast in order to loosen the shackles of bondage that are due to injustice. During our fast we will examine ourselves to see if we have committed injustices individually and corporately.

- Have we neglected the poor when we’ve had the opportunity to meet needs?¹
- Have we ignored the plight of the unborn?
- Have we turned our face away from the orphan and the widow? (James 1:27).
- Have we neglected our call to take the Gospel to our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world—aka “financially supporting foreign missions.”
- Have we turned a blind eye to our neighbor, effectively saying in our heart of hearts, *“Am I my brother’s keeper?”* or *“Who is my neighbor?”*

Could it be that God hasn’t blessed our personal finances or our church finances to the point of overflowing because we have not been willing to think beyond our own needs?

In Isaiah 58:6 the Lord says, *“Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of injustice...?”*

2.) *God’s chosen fast undoes heavy burdens*

“Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of injustice, To undo the heavy burdens...”

Injustice leaves a person in chains—it makes them its slave. Once a slave, you are loaded with the heavy

¹ Bible verses concerning the poor: <http://www.compassion.com/child-advocacy/find-your-voice/what-the-bible-says/poverty/what-the-bible-says-about-poverty.htm>

burdens of your taskmaster.

The cares of this life will load a person with heavy burdens. Today we call this *stress*. Stress will place a load on our system and that stress usually comes from worry or anxiety.

The word, “worry” –the Greek word translated “anxious” in Philippians 4:6 means, “to be pulled in different directions.”

More often than not we are concerned about ourselves—we make attempts to address the things that are pulling ourselves in different directions. We are consumed with relieving the stress points in our own lives...but...

- When was the last time you reached out to remove a burden from someone other than yourself?
- When was the last you visited someone other than a relative who was in a nursing home?
- When was the last time you visited someone in prison?
- When was the last time you attempted to comfort someone who was sick, like with HIV/AIDS?
- Would you consider adoption or foster care? This would certainly lift the burden from the life of a child or a teenager.

In Galatians 6:2 Paul writes, “*Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*”

Matthew 25 tells us that one day King Jesus “*will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'*”

Let me tell you one more way you can lift someone’s burden—share the Gospel with them. Sharing the Gospel with someone is a sure way to remove their burden.

In that classic Christian allegory, Pilgrim’s Progress written by John Bunyan, we find the main character, *Christian* traveling along. The story tells us that, “*Along his way, Christian sees a highway fenced by a wall called Salvation. He runs towards it with some trouble due to the burden on his back, and finally comes to a cross and sepulcher (stone tomb). Upon his arrival there, his burden miraculously falls off his back. Upon this, Christian cries with relief and joy that "He hath given me... life by his death."*²

One songwriter wrote:

*Burdens are lifted at Calvary, Calvary, Calvary,
Burdens are lifted at Calvary, Jesus is very near.*

*Cast your care on Jesus today, Leave your worry and fear;
Burdens are lifted at Calvary, Jesus is very near.*

*Troubled soul, the Saviour can see, Ev'ry heartache and tear;
Burdens are lifted at Calvary; Jesus is very near.*³

² http://www.bunyanministries.org/pp_commentary/09_com%20christian_arrives%20at_place_of_deliverance.pdf

³ <http://my.homewithgod.com/heavenlymidis2/burdens.html>

Sharing the Gospel with someone is a surefire way to remove their burden but sometimes you've got to take the time to nurture a relationship before a person will trust you enough to consider what you have to say.

Someone has said *"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."*

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3.) *God's chosen fast frees the oppressed*

"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?"

The word oppressed comes from the Hebrew word (*ratsats*, raw-tsats') that means "to crush," "to crack in pieces," to break, bruise, discourage, oppress."

There are many who are oppressed by people and the circumstances of life. We live in an oppressive economy. There are oppressive relationships. Some folk live or work with people who seem to be on a mission to break them and to discourage them.

There are religions that oppress people. They squeeze them for everything they can get out of them and then kick them to the streets.

But sometimes the oppression comes from God. Before you turn me off, let me explain what I am talking about.

In the book of Judges we find the Israelites sinning against the Lord.

Judg 10:6 Then the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the people of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; and they forsook the LORD and did not serve Him.

Judg 10:7 So the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel; and He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and into the hands of the people of Ammon.

Judg 10:8 From that year they harassed and oppressed the children of Israel for eighteen years; all the children of Israel who were on the other side of the Jordan in the land of the Amorites, in Gilead.

The Lord allowed Israel's enemies to oppress them and harass them for eighteen years because they did not do right in the sight of the Lord.

There may be someone you know who has been under the stinging discipline of the Lord for years and problems have plagued them for a long time. If you know someone who has suffered oppression and the hand of the enemy and needs to be delivered—you can fast and pray for them.

There are many in our society today that are oppressed by people. Again the word oppressed means, "to crush," "to crack in pieces," to break, bruise, discourage, oppress."

Today, rather than use the word "oppress," many choose to use the word *abuse*.

Child abuse is rampant in our nation. Elder abuse is increasing at an alarming rate as people live longer.

You don't have to look too far to find someone who is contemplating aborting an unwanted baby—that's oppression and abuse in one of the worst ways—the taking of a life.

Women are told that what is growing in their womb is nothing more than a piece of undeveloped flesh. Yet God says in Psalm 139 that "*He knew us while we were in our mother's womb.*"

When you fast this coming year, plead for the lives of the millions of babies that are aborted each year, some in the most grotesque ways.

Oppression is found in the form of *child* abuse. There are the children who are being allowed to come into this world but are mistreated. There is a market for the sexual exploitation of children. There are sweat shops all over the world and even violations of child labor laws in the United States.

When you fast this coming year, plead for the lives of the millions of children that will be facing abusive situations.

Elder abuse is growing. Every year, tens of thousands of elderly Americans are abused in their own homes, in relatives' homes, and even in facilities responsible for their care. More than half a million reports of abuse against elderly Americans reach authorities every year, and millions more cases go unreported.

When you fast this coming year plead for the lives of the growing population of the elderly that will be facing abusive situations.

A pure or genuine religious commitment to God and people is very important to Him. James 1:27 says, "*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*"

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4.) *God's chosen fast breaks every yoke*

"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?"

A yoke was a crossbar that fit between two animals that worked side by side. To be under the yoke of a taskmaster was to be confined to doing whatever he required. In 2 Timothy 2:26 Paul writes about those who are "*being held captive by the devil to do his will.*"

Many of us know someone who is being held captive by an addiction or a sinful habit. There are those who are being held captive because they have rebelled against the truth of God's Word.

James 5:19-20 says, "*Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.*"

People hold themselves captive to an addiction or sinful habit.
The devil holds people captive but then people hold people captive.

Did you know that *you* can hold a person captive?

- *A bitter or unforgiving spirit.* Bitterness is injured feelings that have not healed. Bitterness is when you feel angry or scorn about actual or perceived mistreatment or injustice. Bitterness constantly afflicts your mind and distorts proper discernment or judgment.
- *An angry spirit.* This person is always “on edge.” He or she is a walking time bomb, ready to explode.
- *A critical spirit.* A “critical spirit,” is an obsessive attitude of criticism and fault-finding, which seeks to tear others down. The person with a critical spirit usually dwells on the negative, seeks for flaws rather than good.
- *A brawling spirit.* This is the person who is looking to start an argument or a fight.

People with these attitudes or tendencies can hold people captive or hostage. Some people just stay out of their way. Other people (out of love or fear) make it their mission to cater to their every mood or demand.

When you fast this coming year, ask God to deliver you from bitterness or anger or a critical spirit. Ask God to help you to forgive people who have offended and hurt you. Do the work of reconciliation if you need to get right with someone. Release them from their offense.

The Scripture says in Ephesians 4:31-32: “*Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.*”

In Matthew 6:15 Jesus says, “*If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*” In Luke 6:37 Jesus says, “*Forgive and you will be forgiven.*”

We are going to share one more point about “God’s Chosen Fast” with you and save the other points for next time.

5.) ***God’s chosen fast opens your eyes and heart to the needs of others*** (vs. 7, 10)

“Is it 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? (family)... 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.”

Again, God is trying to get His people to move away from the religious form and outward acts of worship. Dr. McGee says that Isaiah chapter 58 gets right down to the nitty-gritty, right down to where the rubber meets the road.

God was in effect saying, “*If you want to really fast, stop your sinning. Stop your self-centered ways. Deal with the sin and injustice that is in your hearts. Demonstrate that you honor Me by the way you live—by the way you conduct yourselves. Start being honest in your dealings with people.*”

Listen to what God categorizes as a chosen fast in verses 7 and 10:

- *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry* – This is giving food to people who are in need. It is interesting that most of Jesus miracles met the most basic needs and the most pressing needs of people. i.e., The miracle of the loaves and the fish (Scripture records this occurred at least twice)
- *And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out* – This is inviting people who have no place to live to stay with you. Of course we need to exercise wisdom and not put ourselves in an unsafe situation. But if truth be told, we don't invite people to stay with us not because of safety concerns but because we might be inconvenienced.
- *When you see the naked, that you cover him* – This is providing something to wear to those who have little or nothing to wear to protect them from the elements.
- *And not hide yourself from your own flesh?* – Here God is chastening His people for not even coming to the aid of their own flesh and blood—their own relatives.

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So God tells His people—*“You want to fast? You want me to answer you? Do you want the best I have to offer you? Then get your eyes off yourself and center them on the needs of others.”*

Verse 10 says, *“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.”*

Verse 11 says, *“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.”*

Verse 12 says, *“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.”*

Next time we are going to unpack verses 10-12.