

August 20

Scriptures: Read Isaiah 58 & 59

Key Verse: “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save...” (Isaiah 59:1)

Overview

Isaiah begins chapter 58 by exclaiming one of the duties of the true prophet of God: to boldly and loudly rebuke the people for their sins and transgression, thus showing the seriousness of sin and the importance of his message from the Lord. Isaiah describes Judah’s self-righteousness and hypocrisy (cf. Matt. 23:25-28). The pious of Judah thought they could manipulate God and others by performing outward observances of religion and praying the “right way” to God, such as through fasting (58:4), but God, who sees the heart, knew their motivations and sin (29:13; 2 Tim. 3:5) He was not impressed with their religiosity. He is impressed by the “contrite and humble spirit” (57:15) of those who truly seek Him with their whole heart.

The only fast the Law required was for the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29ff; Num. 29:7), and the purpose was to repent, humble yourself, and draw closer to God through prayer and focusing on Him. Fasting is a legitimate expression of worship, but these people ignored true repentance and did not draw closer to God. Rather, they used fasting for their selfish interests, pursuing their own pleasure, even on the Sabbath day. They oppressed their servants and aroused debates and strife, even to the point of violence (58:3-4). They also criticized and judged by pointing their finger at others with a facade of spiritual superiority (58:9).

By raising questions, Isaiah teaches the characteristics of true fasting. Having the external signs of fasting (e.g. 1 Kings 21:27-29) does not necessarily mean that one is truly fasting (cf. Matt. 6:16-18). True fasting can be experienced only in the liberty God gives from those sins which are heavy burdens that hold us under the power of the enemy. This type of fast should also help to break, the yoke that stops others from having liberty (both spiritually and physically; 58:6). True fasting involves having a sincere compassion for and a showing of practical love to others, such as giving food, hospitality, and clothing to the needy; for in so doing, it is done as unto the Lord (58:7; Matt. 25:34-40; Neh. 5:5; Job 31:13-22; Ezek. 18:7-9, 16-17). True fasting, then, is in pleasing God and doing His will, which results in promised rewards and blessings. The light of God’s favour will shine upon you and joy will follow your sorrow (59:8a, 10). God will protect and guide you continually, answer your prayers, give you satisfaction and strength, make you fruitful (Matt. 7:15-20), restore you, and give you your inheritance of eternal life (58:11-12).

The opposite is true for sinners, however. They will experience only God’s wrath, not His blessings. This is what Isaiah sets out to explain at the start of chapter 59. He tells of the terrible moral breakdown and depravity of life in Judah, describing the various members of the body as being used for instruments of sin, instead of being used to glorify God (59:3, 7; cf. 1:5-6; Rom. 6:13; 1 Cor. 6:15; Matt. 5:29-30). He sets forth their sinful condition in order to explain why God did not give them deliverance from the Assyrian oppression. However, Isaiah stresses that God was able to save them at any time He may have chosen, but because of their iniquity, which separated them from Him, He purposely did not respond to them (59:1-2; Prov. 15:8, 29; Ps.

66:18). Since God was far from them, the blessings of God, such as justice, righteousness, peace, light, salvation, truth, and equity, would also be far from them.

The root problem was universal depravity (compare Rom. 3:10-18). Isaiah and the righteous remnant with him recognized this condition and confessed their sin, thus showing themselves to be of “a contrite and humble spirit” (57:15); and because they departed from evil, they were preyed upon by the wicked. When the Lord saw this, He was displeased that there was no justice for these few and that He had no man with authority to intercede for them. Therefore, the only One who could comfort and revive them by His Spirit, in fulfillment of His promises, was the Messiah, their Redeemer, whom He Himself would send in the person of Jesus Christ (59:15-16). He came clad with righteousness and salvation (an armour He also gave to His followers — Eph. 6:11-17), and one day He will come again clad with vengeance and zeal to repel the attacks of the enemy against His people. He will judge all the nations, who will then come to reverence and respect Him for who He is — God. The children of Israel, who repented while there was still time (God’s grace extended; cf. 55:6), and who turned from “transgression” (a word coming from the Hebrew root meaning “to rebel”), will dwell with Him forever in Zion and become a part of the true (spiritual) Israel with whom God will make an everlasting covenant (cf. Rom. 11:23, 26-27; 9:6-8).

Prayer

Lord, once again Your prophet Isaiah reminds us that Your Hand is big enough to reach us, pick us up, and save us from things that would destroy us. As little children can be rescued from things that hurt by a father’s hand, even so when we trust Your gnat hand with child-like faith, You save us.