

An Acceptable Fast

A Reflection on Isaiah 58

40 Days of Mission | Westover Church

Introduction

Using **Isaiah 58:1-14** as our context, we invite you to go deeper into God's heart for local missions – particularly God's heart for the marginalized, the vulnerable, the poor, the needy, those have been pushed to the edges of society, and those who cannot speak up for themselves. As you walk through this study, you will discover/re-discover the connection between *fasting* (commonly associated with Lent) and the missional opportunities of our everyday lives that serve to bring life, relief, help, healing and hope to the world right around us.

This study is organized into 7 parts, with each part followed by a list of reflection and discussion questions. You may consider moving through one part per week, or a few pages per day. We encourage you to move at a pace that works best for you between the dates of March 2—April 15, 2022 (Season of Lent).

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PART 1:

To begin, we encourage you to read and reflect on [Isaiah 58:1-14](#).

What words or thoughts stand out to you?

What questions does this passage raise for you?

What encouragement or hope do you find in these words?

What is Lent?

Lent is one of the five major seasons observed historically in many liturgical church traditions. It is preceded by the season of Epiphany, and followed by the seasons of Easter, Pentecost and Advent (for further explanation on the church seasons, [click here](#)).

However, almost regardless of one's church background – whether 'churched,' unchurched or de-churched – **there seems to be somewhat of a common familiarity with *Lent*, at least in many parts of American/Western culture.**



For the sake of *both* a refresher, and/or for the person unfamiliar with the tradition of Lent, here are a few facts compiled from various sources. Keep in mind there are varying *differences* of opinion concerning the origins of Lent, how/why it is observed, and so forth; some slight, some significant. However, most traditions will agree that the observance of Lent is *not* an obligation on the part of the Christian. In other words, it is not implicitly commanded in Scripture, but rather serving as a helpful tradition handed down over the centuries in the Church.

1. **Lent is short for *Lenten*.** It derives its name from the Latin *quadragesima*, meaning “40,” implying ‘to lengthen,’ and from the Old English *lencten*, meaning ‘spring,’ denoting the season in which it is celebrated.
2. Some of the oldest observances are believed to date back as early as 200 A.D./C.E., with evidence of more official/normative observation beginning in 325 A.D./C.E.
3. Lent is a “40-day” season, ushered in by Ash Wednesday* [see below] (February 17, 2021), traditionally marking **46 days until Easter Sunday** (April 4, 2021), although in the Roman Catholic tradition, Lent concludes on Maundy Thursday (April 1, 2021); but putting the Catholic calendar aside, it begs the question, *why do we call it a 40-day season when it’s actually 46 days?* Good question! That is because Sundays are not counted, and meant to be treated as ‘mini-Easter’s’ along with way – days of renewal and celebration in anticipation of Resurrection, or Easter, Sunday – resulting in 40 days. More on the significance of “40” in a moment.
4. Lent is traditionally treated as a season of intentional personal examination and reflection for Christians, oftentimes demonstrated in various acts of self-denial, fasting and penitence, leading up to Holy Week, and with it, the looming Cross of Good Friday. **It is at the Cross where God’s pure, perfect, and One and Only Son and the far reaching effects of human sin come crashing into one another, where Jesus willingly offers Himself as the ultimate sacrifice to satisfy God’s wrath against sin.** Jesus’ death atones for sin once and for all, while making holy and acceptable those who claim God’s offer of forgiveness and justification (right-standing) through faith.¹

The significance of “40” is evident throughout the Scriptures, typically a time representing trial, testing and/or preparation – the forty days of rain endured by Noah on the ark during the great flood (Gen.7:17-8:19); Moses’ forty years in the wilderness shepherding flocks in preparation for the Exodus (Ex. 3:1; Acts 7:23-30), and Israel’s 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and preparation for the Promised Land (Deut. 8:2). But it is often Jesus’ 40-day fast in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-2ff), which concluded with Satan’s temptation(s) of Jesus – all prior to the beginning of his public ministry, which would culminate some three years later with the *passion* events commemorated during Holy Week – that seems to best reflect the overall purpose behind the season. Hence the additional significance behind the 40-day observance of Lent.

Self-Denial & Lent

While this brief overview of Lent might provide some helpful perspective, the details only provide a bit of context for the assumption of the familiarity of Lent across lines of faith, denomination, culture, background, etc.

¹ *Journey to the Cross: Devotions for Lent*, Will Walker and Kendal Haug, (Greensboro NC, New Growth Press, 2017)

Think about it this way: **How many times have you heard someone say, “I’m giving up ____ for Lent?”** Have you ever practiced this yourself? While in the Christian context, a desire to deepen and grow in faith generally serve as the motivating reason for the practice of self-denial, a vague or shallow understanding of the origins and true spiritual purposes of Lent do not deter people from participating in this annual *cultural challenge* of *giving-up* or *fasting* from something over the 40+ day observance. In other words, Lent can lend itself to being a bit *faddish* and *trendy*.

The point here is that Lent is generally associated with ***fasting – the general act of voluntarily abstaining from something for a period of time for some particular benefit – spiritual or physical***. In religious terms, fasting is typically associated with (but certainly not limited to) food, and can even go so far as including abstaining from sexual relations for a period of time, as was one of the specific restrictions on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur in the Jewish tradition). Biblically speaking, fasts were both ***commanded*** and ***voluntary***; however, regardless of which it was, the purposes these fasts generally had in common had to do with the narrowing of focus and deepening of dependence on God. Other reasons would include doing so for purposes of penitence (mourning/repenting) and/or petition (beseeching/pleading with God for something, or interceding).

Of course, beyond the spiritual reasons, there seem to be as many benefits to fasting as there are types of fasting, whether it be ‘absolute,’ ‘partial,’ ‘alternating,’ daylight-only, juice-fasts, media-fasts, and so forth. In other words, **regardless of reasons, fasting undoubtedly has its benefits.**

With that being said, if you are planning or giving consideration to *fasting* something for Lent, there are plenty of good reasons for doing so.

Why Lent?

At the same time, for those who identify as followers of Jesus, it is always important to examine the *why* and the *motivation* behind our fasting and observances, and what it may or may not say about the genuineness of our faith. With Lent specifically in mind here, our hope is that this study might provide some unique perspective into this tradition, including the benefits it offers in our observance of it. But it is our ultimate hope that these insights might encourage us to take a more thoughtful and intentional approach to Lent whereby we experience the depth of what this antiquated practice has to offer. As a result, it is our prayer that we might be further edified in our identification with Christ, his suffering (passion) and the victorious life he has secured for us.

Isaiah 58 & Lent

To do this, we will be journeying through **Isaiah 58** as we consider how God is drawing us into a deeper, richer, more intentional approach to a life of worship, joy and sacrifice, which are often the spiritual goals of Lent. Part of our goal is to use this time as a season of spiritual preparation in hopes of experiencing a fuller celebration of the victorious resurrection of Jesus that is annually commemorated at Easter. But to get there, we need to *first* traverse through death, which is essentially what Lent represents.

In Isaiah 58, we find an interesting exchange between God and his people as dictated by the prophet. It specifically deals with the futility of fasting and religious observances of the people that are far from the purposes God ever had in mind. Sounds kind of harsh, but hang in there, because after studying this ancient passage of Scripture, you will see it has a lot to say to us today, just as every part of Scripture does.

God is helping the people distinguish here between *true, beneficial* fasting and *false, unhelpful, even cheap and blasphemous* forms of fasting. Because apparently there is a WRONG way to fast, which we certainly want to avoid,

God begins by commanding Isaiah with the following words:

“Cry aloud; do not hold back;
lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

Isaiah 58:1 ESV

“Cry aloud” is translated from the Hebrew, *qara’*, which describes a loud, *throaty* call; a vehement and passionate plea. In verse 2, God begins to describe the transgression...

Yet they seek me daily
and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness
and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments;
they delight to draw near to God.

Isaiah 58:2 ESV

That last sentence, by the way, should not be understood literally, but might be better understood as, *they do not delight in the coming ‘to’ or the coming ‘of’ God.* There is a distinct difference as we’ll see in just a moment.

Now, this is certainly not the first time in Isaiah that we find this type of accusation being levied against the people. In addition to Isaiah 1:15-20, consider Isaiah 29:13:

And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,

Isaiah 29:13 ESV

(If those words happen to sound familiar, see Jesus words recorded in Matthew 15:1-9.)

In other words, **people have *long* had a way of approaching God in a way that reveals the selfish, sinful ambitions of the heart – to get *from* God instead of getting *God***, through whom all blessings flow. The picture painted here in the first two verses of Isaiah 58 is of a people who appear to have it together, who appear to be pious, devoted and righteous; the people who represent God, who speak for Him, who are in right-standing with Him and who are standing right with Him, on God's side.

Their outward appearances and rituals seemed to reflect they were in alignment with God; but their inner motives made it clear that their hearts were far from God.

Let all that sink in for a moment.

When God Doesn't Deliver

Think of a time when you have found yourself asking God desperately for something, a time where you found yourself praying constantly through the course of the day, through what we might call 'breath prayers,' pleading before God to hear the cry of your heart by answering affirmatively to the desire of your heart. There have been plenty of those moments for me; too many to count honestly. Perhaps, if you're like me, its been your experience in those moments to more decisively confess, repent of, and abandon any obvious sin in your life – because we know that those who are pure in heart will see (and hear) God (Matthew 5:8); that a broken and contrite heart God will not despise (Psalm 51:17); and that if we ask for anything in Jesus' name (John 14:13-14) while delighting ourselves in God, He will give us the desire of our hearts (Psalm 37:4).

And while there is nothing blatantly wrong with such an approach to God in the posture of our hearts, if we're not careful, these acts of contrition can become shallow, especially if/when it feels like God isn't delivering. In other words: *God, I did everything I thought you wanted me to do! What did I do wrong? God, I did my part, but you didn't do yours!* Ever been there? Of course you have, in some way at least.

This may help describe the motives of the kind of people God is addressing in Isaiah 58. Look at the people's response in verse 3:

'Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'

Isaiah 58:3 ESV

Right here, the motives are exposed. The people are clearly wanting something *from* God, but when God didn't deliver how they wanted, when the *return* didn't yield what had been invested, the people rant against God, going so far as to accuse God of being indifferent to their requests.

Ever been guilty of that? I sure have.

Or think about it this way: **When God doesn't come through, it is absolutely possible to fall into a way of thinking that convinces us that our 'religion doesn't work'** (which, to be clear, is truer than we could know!); that something is broken, that something must either be wrong with us, with God, or with both. Which means we find ourselves questioning God, ourselves or both (which in itself, isn't necessarily a bad thing, mainly because God invites the questions and the questions can bring us to the truth of God in ways we otherwise wouldn't arrive).

Quid Pro Quo Faith

What we're describing here could be understood as what we might call a ***Quid Pro Quo Faith***. *Quid Pro Quo* meaning *something given or received for something else*. In the context of verse 3a, it could be taken that the people are trying to somehow buy or earn God's blessing, favor, acceptance, etc. through their righteous, pious acts of fasting and religious observance. Of course, Isaiah will point out later that all of our righteous acts are but *filthy rags* before God (Isaiah 64:6, NIV). And the basis of the Gospel is that it is by grace we have been saved and accepted before God, and not by any of our works (Ephesians 2:4-9). Therefore, the righteousness, blessing, acceptance, favor, or anything else from God, cannot be bought nor earned by our good behavior and through our own righteous acts.

And yet, sometimes we still try.

Honestly, sometimes the motivation behind our abandonment of sin in moments of distressfully petitioning God for something actually reveals how we are still convinced that there is a measure of righteousness that we feel we can muster up that God might find pleasing enough to grant our requests; that somehow, God can be persuaded and bought through our righteousness. But so often, it's not our sin that's keeping God from answering; it's our sin that's preventing us from seeing, hearing and having our hearts in alignment with what God is doing, saying and revealing. Please don't misunderstand: this in no way should deter us from opportunities to fast before God in a way that involves an intense and demonstrative repenting of sin. The problem is when we think that by doing so we can somehow buy God off.

Where have you been guilty of *Quid Pro Quo* Faith, where you're still living as if you can somehow buy or earn God's blessing? Where do you need to repent? Because here's the truth, and it may be a hard truth for some of us...

God cannot be bought!

Reflection:

[Read Ephesians 2:1-10.](#)

Take a few moments to reflect on the grace of God. Where do you find yourself uneasy, unsettled, struggling to believe, and even accept, the measure of God's grace over your life?

Where have your practices of worship and coming before God become too ritualistic? In other words where do you find yourself coming before God out of obligation or petition, rather than delight?

Are there any places in your life where you feel God is holding out on you, where God has somehow failed to deliver? What has led you to feel this way? From what do you specifically need to repent?

PART 2:

False Fasting:

I find it interesting that when it comes to most people's understanding of fasting, people are convinced that somehow God finds pleasure in our discomforts, abstinences and sufferings. (No pain, no gain, right?) And yet, the simple truth is that God takes no pleasure at all in our discomforts any more than He despises our happiness.

In other words, if man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever,² then it seems safe to say that God wants, even invites our enjoyment of Him, which includes enjoying (properly) what He has given us. It's when those things get in the way of God and our enjoyment of Him that it would only seem right that eventually, and from time to time, that either we or He should take them away in order to recenter on God, where our worship and enjoyment is properly focused on the Creator and NOT the Creation (see Romans 1:25 and 1 Timothy 6:17). Of course, it isn't always that simple, is it?

While there can certainly be many personal reasons for fasting which are perfectly acceptable and right, there are also just as many wrong ways of going about it, specifically when we're primarily doing so for reasons of what God might give in return. God confronts the people precisely about this in Isaiah 58:3-4:

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.
Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.

Isaiah 58:3-4 ESV

There is actually a fasting that is done under 'religious pretense,' that is only for selfish-gain and self-gratification.

There is a fasting where we can be so preoccupied with ourselves and what we want from God that we end up missing the very heart of God in the process.

Consider just how twisted the fasting of this people was. The people were oppressing their workers (3b). In other words, fasting was being done as a 'class affair,' where only those who could afford to fast could so do. And even more tragically, it was being done at the expense of those to whom they were responsible.

When has your fasting, or some other form of religious sacrifice, created a burden on others? This is far from the kind of fasting God wants.

² [Westminster Shorter Catechism](#). See also [5 Reasons You Need the Westminster Shorter Catechism](#).

'Fast' Fighting



The people were also quarreling and fighting with one another; we even get the picture of someone punching someone else. Think about it this way: *Have you ever been **'hangry'**?* (it's an actual word, by the way!) I tried a *juice fast* one time, and about 2 days into it, I was just angry. I needed something to chew on! This might give us a picture of what was going on here. People were probably *hangry*, and to make matters worse, their willful and uncomfortable abstaining from food was only being met with disappointment that God wasn't coming through the way they wanted. That's a formula for misery. James 4:1-3 adds some perspective here as to why the people's fasting could actually result in fighting:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

James 4:1-3

Fasting resulted in fighting (with themselves and each other) because their fasting wasn't about God; it was about themselves. Sisters and brothers...**fasting and fighting simply don't go together!**

God sets the record straight: That kind of fasting isn't going to get you anywhere (v.4b). Don't think that kind of fasting is going to get your voice heard on high. God will not be bought, and God will not be used!

True Fasting

Now that we have a better idea of what fasting *isn't* meant to be, the remainder of Isaiah 58 turns our attention to what a true, acceptable fast is to look like. I suppose if we could drive this one simple truth into our hearts, it could make all the difference:

**Fasting isn't about us;
Fasting is about God!
It's not for us; it's for God.**

Here's how God begins to lay it out:

Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a person to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a reed,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the Lord?

Isaiah 58:5 ESV

Reflection:

[Read Galatians 5:16-26.](#)

Are there places in your life where your acts of worshiping God are failing to produce the fruit of the Spirit? Where has your worship become self-consuming rather than God-consuming?

How is your worship, or preferences of worship, potentially keeping others from God? In other words, where are the needs of others being overlooked in our acts of worship?

Where is God showing me that I need to humble myself?

PART 3:

Ash Wednesday as *'a Day Acceptable to the Lord'*

The season of Lent is inaugurated with a day known as **Ash Wednesday**. It gets its name from the tradition where a cross is marked on the foreheads of Christians with ashes, in most cases, by a priest. Having something marked on one's forehead is symbolic of a submission of ownership over the person's life. In some traditions, the ashes come from the palm branches used the year before to commemorate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem; the very first event commemorated during Holy Week.

Ashes are symbolic throughout Scripture, oftentimes accompanying times of mourning and repentance, which seems an appropriately symbolic way to inaugurate the Lenten season: with ***mourning***, in remembrance of the suffering (or passion) of Christ caused by our sin; and in ***repentance***, as we commit to turn from ourselves and the many sinful thoughts/acts in which we can become so easily entangled, fixing/readjusting our eyes on Jesus who is the Author, Perfecter, Giver and Owner of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2).



By receiving the mark of the Cross on our foreheads, we proclaim to ourselves and the world Jesus' ownership over our lives. We surrender ourselves afresh to the One who purchased us through the shedding of His blood. We receive the symbol of the cross as a reminder of Jesus' call to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Him. And we do so with the substance of **ash**, reminding us that we have died with Christ, and that it is no

longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Once more I am reminded that my life is not found in gaining it for myself, but in losing it for the sake of Christ.



It is this posture of humility before God, exemplified in symbolic practices like those on Ash Wednesday, that serves as such a vivid reminder concerning what acceptable fasting to the Lord is to reflect.

*True fasting is not about what is acceptable to me;
true fasting is about that which is acceptable to God.*

Formula for an Acceptable Fast

Fasting is meant to humble us before God, but it is also meant to humble us before others. It is meant to center/recenter us in reverence of God, but it is also meant to produce a reverence of/for others. Starting in verse 6 (through 9), God moves into a formula for what an acceptable fast to the Lord specifically looks like...something radically different from the fasting to which many are accustomed.

Beginning with humility, according to the Word of the Lord in Isaiah 58:6-9, there are at least **three characteristics of a godly, acceptable fast** worthy of considering, especially as we step into this Lenten season.

- 1. Fasting that contributes to the proclamation and working-out of God's justice and righteousness in the world (Isaiah 58:6)**

The fasting that God deems as worthy and acceptable to Him involves outward evidences of an inward righteousness, the overflow of spending time humbly and quiet before the heart of God, where we become an extension of God's heart to the world. God emphasizes His supreme concern for justice and kindness to flow out from humble hearts – an echo of one of the greatest mission statements in all of scripture, Micah 6:8:

*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to **do justice**, and to **love kindness**, and to **walk humbly** with your God?*

Micah 6:8 ESV

Isaiah 58:6 includes four specific directives (with one of these repeated in verse 9).

*“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

Isaiah 58:5 ESV

This is the fruit of the fasting God has in mind for us – to loosen bonds, to undo and break heavy yokes forced on people's shoulders, and to set the oppressed free. This is the work of Gospel-centric social reform, sometimes referred to as 'biblical justice.' And while the work of biblical justice is part of the imperative fruit of the Gospel, it is always driven by the Gospel and never secondary to it. Biblical justice is compelled by and centered in the Gospel, and serves to somehow bring heaven to earth in the lives of individuals, communities and cultures that allows them to see God more clearly and know His love. It is work that sets people free from wicked systems of this world, while focusing on proclaiming freedom for the captives held in spiritual darkness.

2. Fasting that leads to merciful, loving care (Isaiah 58:7)

Considering the words of Micah 6:8 mentioned above, God commands His people to **do justice**; but when it comes to kindness, God commands us to **love kindness** – and there is a difference. We become the things we love; and so if we love kindness, that means that we should be ever-growing to become some of the kindest people in the world. It is the kindness of God that is one of the more striking attributes of the Gospel. Romans 2:4 explains:

Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

Romans 2:4 ESV

It is God's kindness – demonstrated in His forbearance and patience with us, not wanting any to perish (2 Pet. 3:9), but who desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth (1 Tim. 2:4), and not His pending wrath – that draws us to Him. It is out of such

immeasurable grace and kindness that God desires our kindness to be demonstrated to all. Verse 7 shows us more specifically how.

Is not this the fast that I choose (v.6b)

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

Isaiah 58:6b-7 ESV

To feed the hungry, to provide shelter for the vagrant and the refugees, to clothe the naked, or perhaps more relevantly, to protect and provide for the dignity of those impoverished, beaten down and marginalized, and to see the light of the image of God (the imago Dei) restored in the lives of those in the shadows – these are practical, ‘ready’ acts of kindness before us.

Jesus tells us, “...you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me” (Mark 14:7), and adds in Matthew 25:31-45 how God Himself actually identifies with the poor. In other words, baked into our existence as followers of Jesus called to glorify His Name, a central part of our mission as the local church and the people of God is to serve the poor, and organizations like those we are partnered with through Westover Church Local Missions, highlighted in our *40 Days on Mission* focus, make engagement with the ‘poor’ through volunteer acts of kindness and loving care ready available.

Let’s take this a step further. When it comes to serving the poor, we as Christians and the local church are simply without excuse. **Too often, I’ve heard churches and leaders say they have to do what’s best for their church, but too much of that kind of thinking is laden in fallacies.**

Instead, the church is called to do what’s best for its neighbors and the community, to the glory of God.

Are acts of loving kindness and care the fruit, the result of our fasting before God? If not, I believe we have no choice but to question whether our fast has brought us closer to the heart of God, and instead, satisfied our own heart. This overlaps a bit into the third characteristic of an acceptable fast to God.

3. Fasting that moves us to Take Responsibility for the needs arounds us (Isaiah 58:9-10)

Skipping down to Isaiah 58:9b-10a, we find a repeat of some of the social reforms already mentioned, along with some additional instruction.

If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,

¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,

Isaiah 58:9b-10a ESV



Pointing Fingers

In many ancient cultures in the near-east (and even in some cases in modern culture), pointing a finger at someone was a sign of contempt, scorn and cursing. Not only did it imply evil and harm on the other, it was (and is) a rejection of taking responsibility for both the self and the other. This happens all the time in conflict, where healing and reconciliation most often begin when we take personal responsibility for how we've wronged or offended another, regardless of who seems to carry the brunt of the blame. It's always easier to push blame when I feel that either part or none of it is my fault; therefore, *why should I be the one to do something? Why is it on me?*

But as the people of God, we embrace the brokenness of the world around us as a missional responsibility that God has invited us into. We care because God cares. In our sin and waywardness, God owed us nothing, and yet took the initiative to restore us to Himself. He has not just stood by and idly watched us destroy ourselves while drifting further away from Him, but has taken the initiative, the responsibility to redeem His creation, even at the risk of its rejection of Him.

Therefore, it is out of God's love for the world that we willingly engage ourselves in the Gospel mission of God by taking responsibility for the world around us. Instead of pointing fingers, we open our hands and embrace it with our arms.

Reflection:

[Read Romans 12:1-21.](#)

What/how is God leading me to fast?

Where and to whom is God calling me to take missional responsibility?

What areas of my life need to be marked anew, under the Lordship of Christ?

PART 4:

If...Then

Here's what God promises as a result of *true* fasting. Isaiah 58:8-10:

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
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,
10 if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.

Isaiah 58:8-10 ESV

Promises of an Acceptable Fast

God promises at least three things:

1. **His Guidance:** He lights our paths as we give light to the world. He turns the light on, changing darkness into day as we are willing to go into dark places with His light.
2. **His Healing:** Sometimes we can make the mistake that our healing is found in isolation from the world. And yet, God reminds us that *our* healing is often found in bringing healing to others.
3. **His Protective Escort:** The end of verse 8 says that *the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard*. The phrase "rear guard" is translated from the Hebrew, '*acaph*', which appears in the King James Version as the word *rereward*. an obsolete use of the word *rearward*. 'Acaph means *to gather* or *to bring up the rear*. In other words, moving forward with God's mission brings protection to our 'back side,' giving cover to our most vulnerable side! God has our back when we keep moving with Him, protecting us from tripping over the same things that have tripped us up in the past.

God says, *if* you will fast this way, *then* you can know that He hears when we call, when we cry, and God says, *Here I am!* You see, God is ours for the asking. And that's the point. We get God, because we need God more than God's stuff!

We get God! God is always ours for the asking.

Even in Scorched Places



Over a year ago, a friend prayed the words of Isaiah 58:11 over me. It was in the middle of a season where the world felt like scorched earth. And while things would continue to feel that way for some time, I am amazed, to the point of tears, to see how God has proven Himself faithful, good and present, even at times it has been so indescribably difficult to make sense of what's been going on around and even within us. Isaiah 58:11 says this:

And the Lord will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters do not fail.

Isaiah 58:11 ESV

Not only does God promise to guide, heal and protect us as our hearts are moved by and with His heart, God even promises to satisfy our desires, even IN scorched places. Oh, how we want God to bring us instead to wide-open spaces in order to satisfy our desires there. But God promises to also do so even in scorched places.

God further promises to make our bones strong, referring to our inner stabilities (emotional, mental health perhaps), and to make us springs of water, whose Source is the Living Water, and whose purpose includes watering/refreshing others. In fact, it is these

verses that Jesus is most likely referencing in John 7:38 when He says, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

Gospel Legacy

To wrap up this passage and this study, God provides a glimpse of what greatness looks like at the hands of the righteous who have denied themselves, while at the same time, experiencing, tasting and seeing that the Lord is good. Isaiah 58:12:

And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.

Isaiah 58:12 ESV

This is the legacy of the people of God. How refreshing to be known as a rebuilders of the wall, a repairer of the breach, a restorer of the streets. This is a picture of making habitable what was once uninhabitable.

To be what in the Hebrew is often referred to as **‘Tikkun Olam’ – Repairers of Creation.**

At Rest in the Lord (Sabbath)

Isaiah 58 concludes with these words:

“If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath,
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,
and call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;
then you shall take delight in the Lord,
and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Isaiah 58:13-14 ESV

Interestingly, God takes His people back to the observance of Sabbath, a full 24-hour period of rest, reflection and worship. Sabbath was (and is) a ‘fast’ from work and production, an intentional ‘stop-time’ to be reminded that it is God, not us, that makes the world go round; a time to be reminded that it is not TO God we are working, but it is FROM His love we do our work. Instead of working TO rest in God, God invites us to work FROM our rest in Him.

Which leads to this conclusion: Lent, and any other form of an acceptable fast for God, will not deplete us. The paradoxical truth of the Gospel is that it is those who are willing to empty themselves who are the ones who live full. (On the contrary, it is those who seek to

fill their lives with the things of this world who inevitably experience more emptiness). Lent teaches us that by emptying ourselves, we are filled with more of God.

Because it is God, not what we can get from God, that our souls need most.

Reflection:

Where are your *scorched places*?

What are some of your deepest desires?

How have you experienced God satisfying your desires in some of the most unlikely places? What was happening? What did God do? How did it grow your faith?

What is God calling/leading you to rebuild, renew, restore? What does it mean to be a “repairer of the breach” and a “restorer of streets?” What would this specifically look like in your life?

What would it look like for you to work *from* God’s rest, instead of trying to work *to* God’s rest? What changes would you need to make?