

Lesson 38 Isaiah 58 A True Fast – Desiring God and Loving People

Introduction

Isaiah 56-66, the Book of the Anointed Conqueror, has three parts. We are in the first part. This first part has three sections. The first section, 56:1-8, described an ideal picture of God's people, inclusive of foreigners and eunuchs who have joined themselves to the Lord, obeying from the heart. They love the name of the Lord. They hold fast to His Covenant. They find joy in His Temple.

Our second section, 56:9-57:21, shifted from this ideal picture of God's people to the actual state of Judah at the time of Isaiah's writing. A remnant of believers is oppressed in a society given over to idolatry and to the selfish pursuits and unjust gain reflective of the idol-gods they worship.

It is too simple, however, to say that Judah's problem is all in their false worship of pagan gods. The beginning of our third section, Isaiah 58, exposes hollow worship of Yahweh. Two kinds of idolatry exists in Judah. These two kinds of idolatry can be painted with broad strokes as an idolatry of the left and an idolatry of the right. The idolatry of the left is progressive. It is a turning away from the conservative religion of Israel to embrace the gods of the nations, whether they are the regional Canaanite gods of the land, or the gods further afield in the cultural centers of Mesopotamia and Egypt. These gods are pragmatic and powerful, promising to fulfill the lust of our eyes and the lust of our flesh. They are not so concerned with morality. They offer a formula for success and satisfaction. They are malleable. They are numerous, you can find one to fit whatever cause drives you. They allow for self-definition. You set the agenda by choosing your gods according to your own plans. That is the idolatry of the left.

Chapter 58 addresses what I am calling the idolatry of the right. This is the use of conservative religion to bless one's own agenda, to guarantee your own success. Ritual worship of Yahweh continues. He is the God of the nation. People continue to observe some of the feasts. They continue to offer sacrifice. They continue to pray in the Temple. This ritualistic holding on to the forms of Biblical religion is in truth another form of idolatry. It is an attempt to get God on the side of Israel. Yahweh is being treated as a god of the land as though He will reward those who conserve the form of Mosaic religion even if it's a means of accomplishing their own agenda.

The angel of the Lord told Joshua, long ago, He is not on anyone's side. God is on His own side. He does not exist to fulfill our desires. We exist to delight in Him and His ways. God desires worshipers who worship Him in spirit and in truth, pursuing His desires, His agenda, not their own. That's the first warning sign we recognize in this chapter. Isaiah is asking, "Whose desires are you really pursuing when you claim to pursue Yahweh?" The second warning sign Isaiah highlights is the failure of this conservative right to act on behalf of the oppressed. True worship of God will be revealed by a humble heart whose love for God is manifested in acts of love for people. This is the theme of chapter 58, "Religious ritual honors God when God's desires are put first in both ritual and life. Blessing follows, not as a reward, but as the right outcome of God-honoring relationship."

I'm going to start by considering this critique in Isaiah 58:1-14, and then I'm going to ask our third big-picture interpretation question to help us think about this chapter from a New Covenant perspective.

I. A critique of religion (58:1-14)

Motyer identifies a chiastic structure for Isaiah's critique in chapter 58.

- A The voice of rebuke (1)
- B A fast without a blessing: the false exposed, the afflictive emphasis (2-5)
- C Contrast: the Lord's chosen fast and its blessings (6-12)
- B' A feast with a blessing: the true commended, the joy emphasis (13-14a)¹
- A' The voice of promise (14b-d)

¹ M J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 478-479

Isaiah begins and ends with a voice. 58:1 is a voice of rebuke and 58:14 a voice of promise. The inner frame of the passage contrasts a fast with a feast. 6-12 is a fast without blessing. 13-14a is a feast with blessing. The center of the passage describes the kind of fast that God does bless.

I will repeat our theme, “Religious ritual honors God when God’s desires are put first in both ritual and life. Blessing follows, not as a reward, but as the right outcome of God-honoring relationship.”

We start with the voice of rebuke and the kind of fast that brings no blessing. This is Isaiah 58:1-5.

A. and B. A voice of rebuke followed by a fast with no blessing (1–5)

¹ Cry loudly, do not hold back; And declare to My people their transgression	Raise your voice like a trumpet, And to the house of Jacob their sins.
² Yet they seek Me day by day As a nation that has done righteousness They ask Me for just decisions,	and delight to know My ways, And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They delight in the nearness of God.
³ ‘Why have we fasted and You do not see?’	Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?’
Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire,	And drive hard all your workers.
⁴ Behold, you fast for contention and strife You do not fast like you do today	and to strike with a wicked fist. to make your voice heard on high.
⁵ Is it a fast like this which I choose, Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed Will you call this a fast,	a day for a man to humble himself? And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed? even an acceptable day to the LORD?

The voices of rebuke sets the tone for the chapter.

¹ “Cry loudly, do not hold back; And declare to My people their transgression	Raise your voice like a trumpet, And to the house of Jacob their sins.
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This passage is going to be about the transgression of Judah. Notice also the reference to Jacob. This is a rebuke for all the Jews living in Judah, no matter what tribe they are from. The reference to Jacob is a reminder that we are dealing with all God’s Covenant people, and Isaiah is performing the role of a covenant lawsuit prophet. He is calling the children of Jacob to come back to the kind of worship and obedience God enjoys. Isaiah is going to end chapter 58 with a repeat reference to Jacob that ties the whole section together.

After that initial rebuke, the three lines of verse 2 seem to describe a people earnestly seeking God through their religious rituals.

² Yet they seek Me day by day As a nation that has done righteousness They ask Me for just decisions,	and delight to know My ways, And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They delight in the nearness of God.
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Isaiah is setting us up here for an immediate reversal. These people may be going through the motions of seeking God day by day. They may appear to delight in knowing God’s ways. They may act like a nation that has done righteousness and not forsaken God’s laws. They may ask for just decisions and even show some kind of delight in feeling like they are close to God.

But is there a way for us to determine the sincerity of this religious behavior? Are they really good people who love God? How can we know the heart behind the ritual?

The question that follows in 3a starts to show us the heart.

³ ‘Why have we fasted and You do not see?’	Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?’
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That’s an interesting question. Is that the cry of a sincere heart, struggling with the silence of God? “God, why don’t you answer us? We love you! We want to hear from you!” Or is that the complaint of a religious people who have done their part and now expect God to do His part? “We’ve fasted. We’ve humbled. Why aren’t you holding up to your end of the agreement, God? Why haven’t you blessed us in return?”

Why indeed? Do you want to know why you are not getting the results you were hoping for? Let me tell you why! Verses 3b-4.

Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, And drive hard all your workers.
4 Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist.
You do not fast like you do today to make your voice heard on high.

Delight and desire are key words throughout this chapter. Two questions have to be considered. “Whose desire are you seeking to meet when you fast?” And, “What is it that you really desire?”

“On the day of your fast you find your desire.” The key word there is “your.” On the day of your fast you find YOUR desire. The point of a fast is to put aside what you desire to focus on something that is more important. Fasting is not a formula for gain. Fasting does not earn points with God. If I give up food, it’s not a deal where, if I give up food, God gives me success in my business. The point is not to gain your desire, but to bring your desires in line with God’s desires, to give up food to remind yourself that God’s and His Word are more important to life than food.

The first problem then is that even though they fast, they fast to accomplish their own desires. The second problem is what they desire, “on the day of your fast you find your desire, and drive hard all your workers.” They desire business success. That’s obvious in how they treat their workers and conduct their business. “You fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist.” They are ruthless in business. This kind of fasting is not going to “make your voice heard on high.” What does God care that you gave up eating, or that spend your whole day in church, or that you drop a wad of money in the offering box, or you sing with a happy face, or you’ve served on three committees? God sees your heart. God sees your behavior.

God asks in verse 5 whether they really believe their ritual actions of fasting pleases Him.

5 Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed And for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?
Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to the LORD?

God does approve of this kind of fast when it expresses a contrite and broken heart. Genuine humility pleases God. “Blessed are the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3).” But God takes no joy at all from the ritual act of humility when that act is simply an attempt to manipulate a desired response from God.

By way of contrast, the kind of fast God blesses is described in the center of our passage in 58:6-12.

C. Contrast: the Lord’s chosen fast and its blessings (6–12)

6 Is this not the fast which I choose, To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
And to let the oppressed go free And break every yoke?
7 Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry And bring the homeless poor into the house;
When you see the naked, to cover him; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
8 Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your recovery will speedily spring forth;
And your righteousness will go before you; The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; You will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’
If you remove the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,
10 And if you give yourself to the hungry And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness, And your gloom will become like midday.
11 And the LORD will continually guide you, And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones; And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.
12 Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the breach, The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

True worship of Yahweh moves the worshiper to social action. Love for God with heart, mind, and strength flows naturally into love for neighbor. We are right to question whether the one who professes to love God in church is rightly interpreting their religious experience if their commitment to God does not lead to care for the oppressed and the afflicted. That's the logic taught here by Isaiah.

The social action described here is a concrete expression of the command that began the Book of the Conqueror back in 56:1, "preserve justice and do righteousness." What does that look like? Isaiah's giving us examples of what that looks like. This text follows an, "a-b, a-b" pattern, where, "a," is the concrete expression of social action and, "b," is a description of spiritual blessing that follows.

a. social action (6-7)

The first emphasis of social action is in verses 6 and 7.

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| 6 Is this not the fast which I choose, | To loosen the bonds of wickedness, |
| And to let the oppressed go free | To undo the bands of the yoke, |
| 7 Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry | And break every yoke? |
| When you see the naked, to cover him; | And bring the homeless poor into the house; |
| | And not to hide yourself from your own flesh? |

Self-abasement for selfish reasons does not impress God at all. But self-denial for the benefit of others, especially for the powerless, that is the kind of fast God chooses. In this context, loosening the bonds of wickedness means working in society to free people who are economically oppressed. The emphasis is not on the psychological sense of oppression, not on being a victim, but on the practical problem of poverty. Isaiah addresses the essentials necessary for human life: food, shelter, and clothing. God says, "Fast in this way." Do without some of your time and some of your money to share bread with the hungry, to provide homes for the homeless and to cover those who are naked.

Verse 7 ends with the admonishment, "Do not hide yourself from your own flesh." What does that mean? Do not hide yourself? Do not hide yourself from your own flesh. Isaiah just said, "When you see the naked, cover him." "Do not hide" means, "Do not turn your eyes away. Do not retreat into your comfortable home in your comfortable neighborhood." "Do not hide" because that poor person "is your own flesh." You share a human bond with every person you see. We are all created in God's image. We are all His. Remember the good Samaritan. He did not turn and hide when he saw the hurting Jew.

The motive for this kind of fast is love for God and love for those God loves. We do not fast to seek our own desires. We fast to seek His desire, to seek what pleases Him. And there is right reward, a right outcome, when we seek the desire of God. That right outcome is the blessing described in 8-9a.

b. Personal and spiritual rewards (8-9a)

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| 8 Then your light will break out like the dawn, | And your recovery will speedily spring forth; |
| And your righteousness will go before you; | The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. |
| 9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; | You will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' |

The restoration of society is the reward for pursuing God and caring for the poor and oppressed. Judah will then be a light to the nations. Her own recovery will be speedy. Righteousness going before and the glory of God as a rear guard communicates protection. The blessings here are blessings for the whole society. So, we should also think of the social action in the previous section as a communal effort. We do not address the needs of the poor all on our own. We do so as members of a body. We come together to provide food, and clothing, and shelter.

At the beginning of the chapter, the stable and wealthy in society fasted together for protection from enemies and for economic provision. They want a growing, expanding, strong, fruitful Judah. And they want it for their selfish interests. That's why they engage in religious ritual to Yahweh. Yahweh is a means to an end. They fast to Him, so that He will bless their agenda. But their lack of social care

for the needy reveals a self-centeredness at the heart of their political, economic, and religious agenda that God will not bless.

But those who truly draw near to God with a sincere desire to know God do not pray in order to convince God to give them what they want. They pray so that they might participate in achieving what God wants, His desires. They keep the commands of God out of love for God with a heart that seeks God's glory, His agenda for Judah. Keeping God's ceremonial commands goes hand in hand with keeping God's social commands. They do not want society purely to benefit them. They want a society that glorifies God. And so, that is their reward. Because they have engaged in social care for the needy, they have become a light that represents God Himself. The result of pursuing God's agenda for society is restoration and protection.

And to make sure we do not side-step the importance of loving our neighbor, Isaiah repeats the emphasis on social action. We love our neighbor because we love God. This is God's desire. Blessing follows when it is set in the right order. Social action is repeated in 9b-10a.

a' Social action (9b-10a)

If you remove the yoke from your midst,	The pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness,
¹⁰ And if you give yourself to the hungry	And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,

If you will engage in care for the needy, then you will experience God's blessing in your society. The blessing is repeated in 10b-12.

b' Personal and spiritual rewards (10c-12)

Then your light will rise in darkness	And your gloom will become like midday.
¹¹ And the LORD will continually guide you,	And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;	And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water	whose waters do not fail.
¹² Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins;	You will raise up the age-old foundations;
And you will be called the repairer of the breach,	The restorer of the streets in which to dwell.

Though spoken to Judah in Isaiah's own time, the blessing suggested here looks ahead to fulfillment at, at least, two different points of time in the future. The end of the passage with the rebuilding of the ruins and repairing the breach looks ahead to the people's return from exile. But they have not even gone into exile, yet. It is as though Isaiah knows this generation will not turn from its mix of pagan idolatry and hypocritical Yahweh worship. They will continue in the pursuit of their own pleasure in their own way. Knowing that, this passage is a promise for a future generation that will acknowledge their sin and turn to God in a real way that results in love for the downtrodden. They are the ones who will experience God's light shine on them. They will experience God's guidance and provision of fresh water, literally and spiritually. They will rebuild the ancient ruins of a conquered Jerusalem. They will raise up the foundations, repair the breach, and restore the streets in which to dwell. This is Nehemiah and Ezra and all those who return with them, if they will love God by loving all of God's people. And yet, we know how that story is going to turn out. Ezra and Nehemiah both lead a people struggling against waywardness, who don't persist in pagan idolatry, but do fail to faithfully live according to the Covenant of God.

There is a second context alluded to here, one even further in the future. "Then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like a midday." That kind of language takes us all the way back to Isaiah chapter 9, "There will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish...The people who walk in darkness will see a great light...a child will be born to us...and his name will be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, eternal father, prince of peace." That language speaks of both the first and second comings of Jesus Christ, first to initiate His Kingdom on Earth, and finally to establish His Kingdom in a New Heaven and New Earth. I have not developed that idea because Isaiah is going to in upcoming chapters.

The emphasis here in chapter 58 is not on the coming blessing, but on the kind of fast God desires that will result in such a blessing. This call to sincere worship is not new in Isaiah. This passage

parallels the exhortation that was made all the way back in 1:10-20. There Isaiah accused the people of bringing to God worthless sacrifices (1:13) and lifting bloody hands of oppression in prayer (1:15). Isaiah exhorted the people, “learn to do good; seek justice; reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan; plead for the widow (1:17).” Genuine love for God leads to a genuine care for God’s people. This active moral vision that God expects of His people remains true even after having recognized that those people will be declared righteous not by what they do, but through the grace of the Suffering Servant. His atoning death is not a reason to ignore what is right. His atoning death provides a new kind of motivation for doing what is right.

God calls His people, who are in true relationship with Him to fast. He calls us at times to put aside what we desire and to pursue what He desires. He also calls his people to feast. We began this chapter with a voice of rebuke followed by a fast that brought no blessing. We end the chapter with a feast that brings blessing followed by a voice of promise. This is 58:13-14.

B’ and A’ A feast with a blessing followed by a voice of blessing (13–14)

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| <p>¹³ If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot
And call the sabbath a delight,
And honor it, desisting from your own ways,</p> <p>¹⁴ Then you will take delight in the LORD,
And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob
your father,</p> | <p>From doing your own pleasure on My holy day,
the holy day of the LORD honorable,
From seeking your own pleasure and speaking
your own word,
And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.</p> |
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The Sabbath was not considered a day of fasting in Israel. It was a holy day, a feast day. The words used for, “delight,” back in verses 2 and 3 are the same Hebrew word group as the word, “pleasure,” repeated here in verse 13 and the word, “delight,” in verse 14. We can seek to take delight in the Lord in a way that keeps our own experience and blessings as primary, or we can seek to delight in the Lord in a way that recognizes Him as the primary object of our delight. Isaiah urges us here to set aside our own ways, our own pleasure, and our own word. Instead, seek the Lord. The Sabbath will become a delight when knowing and honoring God is your heart’s desire.

Isaiah says here, “when you learn to turn your foot aside from your own pleasures and your own words, then you will take delight in the Lord.” The joy is not the goal of the Sabbath. God is the goal of the Sabbath. God is the reward, and joy follows.

The passage ends with a voice of promise in 14b. The voice is not the voice of the prophet. It is the voice of God. When we turn from our pleasure and treat the Sabbath with honor as a time to seek God and His will, then we will enter into genuine relationship with God. Having come to know God and delight in Him, He makes this promise,

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| <p>¹⁴ [...] And I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob
your father,</p> | <p>And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.</p> |
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This is not blessing as a reward for religious behavior. This is the blessing that comes from truly knowing God. That’s Isaiah 58, and that’s the first half of this lesson. You could pause here and take a break before we get into the second half of this lesson. In the second half I’m addressing the third interpretation question, “How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me understand this text?”

II. A Third Interpretation Question – “How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me understand this text?”

I introduced two big picture interpretation questions in each of our first two lessons on the Book of the Conqueror. I have this one more major interpretation question, “How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me understand this text?” I am going to explain that. But before I do, here is a quick reminder of our first two big-picture interpretation questions.

1. What further theological development is Isaiah making in chapters 56-66?

The first question we asked was the question of theological development. “What further theological development do we see in Isaiah 56-66?” Isaiah could have stopped after the climactic revelation of the Suffering Servant in chapter 53, followed by the double invitation to come to the table in chapters 54 and 5. He could have stopped. He did not. This question assumes that Isaiah does not stop because he has something to say that he has not yet said. Something new to add or some theme to further develop.

I suggested in our first lesson two major themes Isaiah further develops in these chapters; the theme of the Messiah and the theme of righteousness. In the first book we recognize our need for an ideal king. In the second book we find out that we also need an ideal servant. The Servant dies in our place. Does the story end there? No. We see in this third book that the king who dies is also the king who conquers. That’s the development of the Messiah theme.

Isaiah also has more to say about righteousness. In the first book, the people of God are called to be righteous even though they consistently fail. In the second book, God exerts His own righteousness to save through the death of the Servant. Is that the end of righteousness? Is there now no motive or obligation for God’s people to pursue righteousness? No! The story does not end. The obligation remains, as we here in chapter 58. Submitting in right relationship to God and desiring what God desires is going to lead to righteous behavior in social action. So that’s our first big-picture interpretation question. We are asking, “What further theological development do we see in Isaiah 56-66?”.

2. Who is Isaiah’s audience?

And to rightly interpret what Isaiah is communicating theologically, we need to ask our second big-picture interpretation question, “Who is Isaiah speaking to?”, or, “Who is Isaiah’s audience?” The primary meaning of Isaiah’s words are what they meant for the original audience. Was that original audience a 21st century community? Of course not. Was that audience a gathered church made up of people professing faith in the Messiah? No. That audience to whom Isaiah was speaking was the nation of Judah. And as a theocratic country governed by the laws of Moses, all of the Jews in that society owed Covenant allegiance to Yahweh. But, as we have already seen, the majority of those who worship God do so in ritual only. They are also pursuing the gods of the land. They are a nation of believers but only in a culturally religious sense of believers. There is just a remnant in the society that has a saving faith, the true faith in Yahweh. And understanding that this is the audience helps us interpret texts like chapter 58 accurately.

3. How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me to understand this text?

Now for our third big-picture interpretation question, “How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me to understand this text?”

The goal in asking this question is not to reinterpret the text to fit the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Full knowledge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ comes progressively in Scripture. Though some things are made known by the prophets, like the details we get in Isaiah 53, even great prophets like Isaiah saw only in part and longed for the full revelation of the Messiah. A much more full revelation is not going to come until the Word is made flesh and born as a child in Bethlehem. Even then, Jesus did not explain everything about Himself and about the salvation He brings while He was on Earth. After His death and resurrection, He continued to make truth known through the Holy Spirit, speaking through men like Matthew, and John, and Peter, and Paul.

God has progressively revealed truth about Jesus Christ and the salvation He brings in Scripture. And with the end of Scripture, that progressive revelation is now closed. Isaiah was able to say in his day,

I proclaim to you new things from this time, even hidden things which you have not known.
They are created now and not long ago and before today you have not heard them. (48:6-7)

Isaiah is revealing new revelation. These are things that were not spoken of before. In the same way, though much later, Paul says in his day, “[Glory forever be to the only wise God] who is able to

establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested...(Romans 16:25)."

So there were some things that were not made known before. They were kept secret until Jesus came; before His life, and His death on the cross, and His resurrection. And Paul can say these things that were secret have now been made manifest. So, we are not supposed to force all the details of this new revelation back onto the older prophecies. That is not the goal by asking, "How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help us to interpret the text?" But we are recognizing that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of Old Testament text and thus, the key to rightly understanding truths these prophecies pointed towards.

My assertion that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the central truth by which we understand all of Scripture is grounded in these four presuppositions.

First, Jesus Christ is fully God. He existed before the creation of the world as God the Son. (John 1:1).

Second, the plan of salvation was determined before creation with full knowledge by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit that humankind would fall into sin and be redeemed by the sacrificial death of God the Son (Ephesians 1:4).

Third, though God knows all that has happened or will happen, He has chosen to reveal truth to us in the Bible progressively, over time (Deuteronomy 29:29; Ephesians 3:9).

Fourth, salvation history is consistent with and finds fulfillment in the first and second comings of Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:17; Luke 24:44, and Romans 3:31).

A lot more can be said about the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the center of our worldview and how it's been revealed progressively from Genesis through to Revelation, but I'm going to leave it at that for now. Remember, the reason I am bringing this up is to support my claim that good interpretation of any section of Scripture has this big-picture question in mind, "How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ help me understand this text?" not as an attempt to read later details back into previous ages, but as a recognition that the Gospel of Jesus Christ fulfills and makes sense of all the truths in Scripture.

We can use the two questions of covenant to apply a Gospel lens to the Old Testament.

To use the Gospel as a lens for helping us understand the Old Testament, we do have the difficulty of recognizing what remains consistent throughout the Bible and what changes? That's the issue of the new wineskin. We cannot treat the New Covenant as Old Covenant 2.0. It is not just a new version. That would be putting new wine into an old wineskin, and it would burst. It doesn't work. So we need some way to organize in our mind what stays the same and what changes: to recognize both continuity and discontinuity.

I'd like to use the two questions of Covenant to help me organize my Gospel thinking. I've taught on the two questions in other places, so I will not go into a big explanation here. Instead, I'll refer you to my Pentateuch podcast on Genesis 12-15, where Abraham is reckoned righteous by faith, and to my Romans podcast on 7:1-6, "The New Way of the Spirit." Both of those go in depth into the two questions. You can also go back to our third lesson in Isaiah, when we cover chapters 1:10-31. I mentioned the two questions there. Or you could download the article at observetheword.com posted on the homepage about the two questions of Covenant.

The two questions essentially address the issues of justification and sanctification using Covenant language. And that is helpful for two reasons. First, the language of Covenant is used consistently from the beginning of the Bible to the end of the Bible. And second, the language of Covenant is relational.

The first question of Covenant asks, "What makes me righteous enough to be accepted into relationship with holy God?" We can answer that question in terms of grace, what God does for you, and Law, what you must do. Most people want to answer that as 60/40 or 90/10. The Biblical answer is 100/0. The only way for a human being to be righteous enough to be in relationship with God is if that

human being stands 100% on the grace of God and 0% on their own obedience. Jesus hammers this truth home in the Sermon on the Mount when he says our righteousness must exceed the Pharisees, that we must be perfect as God is perfect. Murder, He says, is not only when you kill someone. It is not only outward action. It is also words of hate. In fact, it is thoughts of hate. When you disdain another life in your mind, you break the moral law of God. Likewise adultery. When you engage in sexual desire in your mind, you break the moral law of God. Jesus teaches that the just result of breaking the moral law in your mind is Hell. You have this guarantee: you will sin. If there is a way for you to break Covenant faithfulness with God, you will do it. The only way you can exist in relationship with holy God is if holy God takes it on Himself 100% responsibility for the relationship: 100% grace, 0% your obedience. In this answer we see complete continuity from Genesis to Revelation. The only way for human beings to be in relationship with God is through grace received by faith. That is Genesis 15. That is Isaiah 53. That is Romans 3:19-30. The basis for our relationship does not change, even though our understanding of how this grace is provided is progressively revealed over time.

This brings us to the second question of Covenant. "Now that I am in relationship with holy God by grace through faith, how then ought I live?" Answering again in terms of God's part and my part, I give it 100% grace and 100% Law. I call that, "the marriage conference answer." It's bad math, but it's good relationship. God always gives 100% of Himself to relationship with us. We never give 100% of ourselves to Him, but that does not stop us from recognizing it is right to do so. We believe it is right to love God with all our heart, and all our mind, and all our strength every moment, even if we do consistently fall short of that moral vision. Thank the Lord that we are not judged by that standard to be made acceptable. He takes care of the first question of Covenant for us, so that we no longer live under a standard of Law. We are freed to pursue a vision of righteousness. When we fall short, we get up again and keep going. We live life as a response to God's grace, not a pursuit of God's acceptance.

Now, regarding the second question, I'll mention a couple of things in the area of continuity, and a couple of things in the area of discontinuity. (1) First, the call to heart obedience as a response to salvation by grace is continuous. The call of loving obedience is not new with John 14. It is a major theme of Deuteronomy. Consider Deuteronomy 10:12. "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul."

(2) The moral nature of God is a second area of continuity. Ritual requirements may change from covenant to covenant. Sabbath observance, food regulations, circumcision, other rituals may or may not be required under any given covenant. But the moral law of God remain consistent because the moral law of God is an expression of the nature of who God is. And God's moral nature never changes.

Speaking of the continuity of moral commands brings up an area of major discontinuity. A lot of the ceremonial and civil law in the Old Covenant is not necessarily moral law. If God says to do something, it would be immoral not to obey God as our right authority if He said, "Do it!" You know, if He says, "Don't eat chocolate!", then we should not eat chocolate, not because chocolate is bad or sinful, but because God gave us a direct command. So, circumcision: there is nothing moral about circumcising or not circumcising, it's just, did God tell you to do it? And so, under one covenant we might have a certain set of ritual, or ceremonies, or civil requirements that then are not re-instituted under a new covenant. And if they are not re-instituted under the new covenant, there is no moral obligation to obey those ceremonies or rituals. There is discontinuity.

Two additional areas of discontinuity that we see from Old Covenant to New Covenant are the definition of God's Covenant people – there is a significant change there - and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That's something really new about the New Covenant. So, under the Old Covenant, God's people are defined geographically and politically with a spiritual remnant existing within the nation. Under the New Covenant, God's people are defined as a Church, and it's given us spiritual definition as those who believe in Jesus Christ. So there is change there. And a major newness that marks this

New Covenant people is that God now indwells as His temple in a way that was not fully present in the Old Covenant. So this is one of the challenges with the second question of Covenant: how, then, shall I live? Because there is continuity to that answer in some things from Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, to the New Covenant, but there is also discontinuity from one covenant to the other.

Okay, so now going back to interpreting the Old Covenant through a Gospel lens. With any biblical text, I can ask, “do I see the first question of Covenant under consideration here?” And, “do I see the second question of Covenant under consideration here?” And if I see the second question of Covenant under consideration, I can ask, “what here is specific to the Covenant this particular audience is under, whether it’s Abrahamic, Mosaic, or the New Covenant; and what is not specific to the Covenant but it always true?”

Okay. So now, let me give you an example of how I use the two questions of Covenant to apply a Gospel lens to a chapter like Isaiah 58.

Let’s apply the two questions of covenant to Isaiah 58.

1) First, I am wondering how the first question of Covenant is in play here. Is Isaiah is speaking to Jews who have believed in God as Lord and Savior but are failing to live in a way that is honoring to God? Verse 2 sounds like true believers.

² Yet they seek Me day by day As a nation that has done righteousness They ask Me for just decisions,	and delight to know My ways, And has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They delight in the nearness of God.
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That sounds like a people who know and enjoy God. And if so, the next line is the genuine, searching question of the believer who does not understand why life with God is not abundant.

³ ‘Why have we fasted and You do not see?’	Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?’
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But the next line immediately points us toward a significant problem.

Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire, And drive hard all your workers.

Now we have reason to wonder about the initial language of delighting in the nearness of God. Did they really delight in the nearness of God, or were they motivated by the fulfillment of their own desires? As we go through the passage, we are going to see that those verses are full of irony. We are going to learn that the outward religious appearance of seeking God in reality masks the self-centered motives and ungodly behavior of these people. Their harshness towards a weakened society shows that they have not understood the first question of Covenant. These are not those who truly believe in God. Isaiah is describing the hypocrisy of religious formality.

2) Understanding the two questions of Covenant also helps me interpret Isaiah’s answer for this religious hypocrisy. This people fails to experience God’s protection and provision because they go through ritual motions to get blessed, while oppressing and ignoring the less fortunate. Is the answer, to be better? If we are loving of our neighbor, then God will have to bless us. The right formula is not ritual alone. The right formula is ritual plus love for the weak and needy. That’s how we, as God’s people, are going to get our prayers answered.

And we could come up with that interpretation from verse 6-8.

⁶ Is this not the fast which I choose, And to let the oppressed go free	To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, And break every yoke?
⁷ Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry When you see the naked, to cover him;	And bring the homeless poor into the house; And not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
⁸ Then your light will break out like the dawn, And your righteousness will go before you;	And your recovery will speedily spring forth; The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

If the Israelites care for the oppressed and poor, God will go before and behind them. He will protect them and the recovery of their society will be swift. That is what the text says. But our correct understanding of the text is helped by our understanding of the Gospel. God's people are not blessed as a formulaic reward for good behavior. Jews are accepted completely by God's grace, 1st question. Having been accepted by God's grace, they respond from the heart in loving obedience, seeking the desire of God that the weak and needy be cared for, 2nd question.

Loving their neighbor as a heart response comes from relationship with God, and that is consistent with Deuteronomy 10 and later with John 14. And it is, in fact, the truth that we see Isaiah communicating when we take in the whole passage.

Isaiah tells his audience that they need a heart change. They need God to take central place in their lives. They do not do good to earn God's blessing. They do good because they have recognized God as central. They truly delight in Him and now they want to serve Him, and blessing is naturally going to follow. That is the solution in verses 13 and 14a.

<p>¹³ If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot And call the sabbath a delight, And honor it, desisting from your own ways,</p>	<p>From doing your own pleasure on My holy day, the holy day of the LORD honorable, From seeking your own pleasure and speaking your own word,</p>
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¹⁴ Then you will take delight in the LORD,

A change of heart towards God in religious practices will manifest in a change of heart towards other people, and that will result in blessing on society.

3) Okay, now third, having applied the two questions of Covenant as a lens for reflection on what Isaiah is teaching his original audience, we can consider how this passage applies to us, who live under the New Covenant. We have to consider the issues of continuity and discontinuity.

Continuity may be the easier question because it comes naturally. What here is true to my New Covenant relationship with God? And I see this basic principle for them is the same for me, "Seek first to delight in God." His desires are central, not my desires. Seeking His desires is going to direct me to love and care for people. And this truth flows out of my security in Christ.

It flows out of the answer to the first question of the Covenant. I am not seeking God first as a means of salvation. My ability to love God's people well enough is not what saves me and brings me blessing. I have relationship with God by grace through faith. I seek Him first as the right response to this grace, to His love for me. I want to love Him in return because He is kind and awesome. I want to give Him the proper place in my life. And because He is God, that proper place is right at the center. This message to the Old Covenant people of Judah fits right into the New Covenant. It's the same message.

Recognizing that, I also see some discontinuity in the passage, but maybe not a lot in this particular passage.

Under the New Covenant fasting may be present, but there is not a requirement that I fast. Also, Sabbath observance is not the same. The Israelites had very concrete directions on how to obey the Sabbath. We have less. Technically, we do not have any commands at all to keep the Sabbath in a ritual or a ceremonial way. We worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day of Christ's resurrection, not on Saturday, the Sabbath, the last day of the week, the day God rested from work.

I'm not going to go more into the Sabbath. That's kind of a tricky question. I'm just pointing out that Sabbath regulation is changed in the New Covenant, however you understand that. And we can see that there is discontinuity between the expectations placed on them, and the expectations placed on us. And we are going to resolve that by looking to the New Covenant and trying to understand what does it mean that Jesus Christ is our Sabbath, and what is God calling us to do under our Covenant.

And though we do not apply the specific Old Covenant requirements of Sabbath each week, I think we can easily see how the principle of Sabbath here applies to our worship on Sunday. We come

together weekly in corporate worship, and our goal should be to turn our hearts and our minds, our words away from our own desires, and to seek God's desire as central. That applies quite well to our New Covenant experience, even if it's on Sunday instead of Saturday.

This thinking in terms of covenant continuity and discontinuity is going to be helpful as we finish out the book of Isaiah. This vision of the Anointed Conqueror is a future vision, and it's a vision that is going to be communicated using the Old Covenant terms of Sabbath, and sacrifice, and priesthood even if it does apply to New Covenant reality. We will have to keep interpreting some of those references from a New Covenant perspective, and it's a perspective that Isaiah saw only dimly, but we see with greater clarity, because we live now in between the first and second coming of the Messiah.

What I hope we see clearly in Isaiah 58 is that, even though Isaiah is speaking to an audience very different from us, under a different covenant than us, the central message applies quite forcefully to us. God does not desire formal religious ritual that we use to get what we want. When God calls us into right relationship with Him, He is calling us to yield to Him as the center of our lives. He is calling us to yield our desires to His desires. True religion seeks the things that God delights in. God's words, God's desires come first. And when we truly yield to His desires, we will begin to do the things that He desires, like caring for the people in society who need help with the basic needs of food, and clothing, and shelter. That's a God desire. The reward of yielding to God's desires comes personally in a growing sense of delight in God. And to love the people He loves becomes our joy. And we don't just experience a personal blessing from putting God's desires first, but when we do that as a community, and as a community we're seeking God, and seeking His desires, and we are caring for those who are in need, then the light of Christ shines among us. And we become like a watered garden. We raise up age-old foundations. We repair the breach and we restore the streets in which to dwell.