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Coping with Loss Part 1

Isaiah 58 “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. 2 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. 3 ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. 4 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. 5 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? 6 “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? 7 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? 8 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. 11 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. 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. 13 "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; 14 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."

There is no question but that Scripture would have us live with a forward look about us (1 Peter 1:13; Philippians 3:13-14). Yet the inclination of our flesh resists this. In our humanness we cling to the present, laboring to maintain that which is most precious to us; our...

- Children.
- Jobs.
- Health.
- World.

How many times have we wanted to freeze the present and place it in a bottle? It is for this reason there is talk about "the good 'ol days"! Yet this can be dangerous, for there are times when the Christian is left to live with the deformities of sin:

- Ill-health.
- Chronic pain.
- Aging.
- The loss of a loved one.
- Soured relationships.
- Diminished capacities.

Clearly in Scripture we are exhorted never to settle when it comes to the bitterness of life. But there are times when the bitterness of life settles upon us, and we are left to live in its aftermath.

- You raise your children to love Christ. But one grows up and forsakes Christ. What are you to do?
- At one point in your career you made a lot of money and enjoyed a lot of power, but those days are gone. What now? What does Christlikeness look like?
- You used to run marathons and enjoy the outdoors. Now you have a hard time walking up a flight of stairs! How would Christ have you to live?

The passage at which we are looking addresses these questions head on! As you know, Isaiah penned this prophecy with three different audiences in mind. His contemporaries were living in the uncertain times following Uzziah's death (Isaiah 1-39). The generation living at the time of the exile and beyond (Isaiah

40-55) approximately 80 years following Isaiah's death lived in uncertain times. Finally, there were those few who later would return to Jerusalem and endeavor to live in the aftermath of the destruction of their land (Isaiah 56-66). So Isaiah's wrote this exhortation to those coping with loss.

The Content and Consequence of the People's Disappointment

Isaiah 58:1, "Cry loudly, do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet, and declare to My people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sins."

In order to understand this exhortation, we need to be familiar with the historical context of this passage. The book of Ezra describes the life in which the intended audience of this text lived.¹

Ezra 1:1-3: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia [539 BC], in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also *put it* in writing, saying, 'Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.'"

Cyrus is a significant figure in Biblical history. In fact, 150 years prior to Cyrus' decree, Isaiah mentioned him by name!!!...

Isaiah 44:28, "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'"

This is exactly what happened. Around 538 B.C. Cyrus sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom saying that God had charged him to build a house for the Lord at Jerusalem. In the proclamation he acknowledged that the Lord, the God of heaven, had given him all the kingdoms of the earth. All therefore who belonged to the people of the Lord should go up to Jerusalem to build that house. At this moment we read an amazing passage:

Ezra 1:4, "And every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem."

What makes this so significant is that just as they once did when they went out of Egypt, the Jews were to depart with the treasures of the people among whom they had been living as strangers!

To make a long story short, events unfolded in accordance with the king's command:

1. The people gave as they were able for the service of the Lord at Jerusalem, and
2. The vessels of gold and silver which Nebuchadnezzar had once carried away from Jerusalem were given to Zerubbabel (a son of Jehoiachin, a descendant of the house of David, and the one who would become the leader of the returning expedition of Jews).

Ezra 3:1, “Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel *were* in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.”

In the seventh month following their arrival, the people of God gathered as one man in Jerusalem. This national assembly was led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the high priest. The first thing they did was to rebuild the altar of burnt offering on its old site so that they could offer sacrifices to the Lord. In fact with the altar restored, the returning remnant celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles!

Yet all of this at best was temporary. For God’s people had not yet to begin with the building the Lord’s temple! And so immediately they took the necessary steps.

1. They had cedar imported from Lebanon.
2. In the second year after their arrival, the foundations of the temple were laid.
3. When this was done, the priests and Levites praised the Lord.
4. The people joined their voices to the priests such that there was a glorious time of worship and celebration.

Ezra 3:12-13, “Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ *households*, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy; so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.”

What an odd scene! The elderly, amongst the young, vibrant shouts of joy, did not rejoice. They instead began to weep bitterly.

Why the sadness? These elderly saints had seen the temple of Solomon before it was destroyed. Accordingly, rather than rejoice, these men could only mourn as once again they were reminded of the “glory days” of old. But then things took a turn for the worse.

Ezra 4:1-2, “Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the Lord God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers’ *households*, and said to them, ‘Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here.’”

Who were these “enemies of Judah and Benjamin”? And why did they want to help in the rebuilding of the temple?

These “enemies of Judah and Benjamin” were Samaritans! After the Northern Kingdom was deported in 722 BC, the Assyrian Empire resettled men and women from other lands into Samaria. This policy helped Assyria keep peace in their conquered territories (2 Kings 17:24-41). Because the ancient world by and large was superstitious, it was quite natural that those transported would worship the local deities in the land in which they were living. As a result, the transplanted Gentiles accepted the teaching and practices of the Jewish underclass that remained in Samaria. They intermarried. And the result was the raising up a new people, called Samaritans, who worshipped the God of the Bible, but in a compromised, syncretistic

manner.

Accordingly on account of their history, it was natural for the Samaritans to want to help in the rebuilding of the temple for they were worshippers of Yahweh! The only problem was that their worship and practices were compromised. So Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the heads of household rejected their offer. This had the net effect of turning the Samaritan population of Palestine against the Jews!

Ezra 4:4-5, "Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia."

In bitterness over the rejection of their offer to help in the rebuilding of the temple, the Samaritans bribed the counselors of Cyrus, with the result that the king withdrew his favor and cooperation. As a result of the opposition of the Samaritans, the work of restoration was no longer patronized from all sides. Consequently the people became disheartened. Their hands became slack, and the work of restoration was suspended (Ezra 4:24)! All of this serves as the context of Isaiah 58 which details one of the many blessings which come as the result of relying upon God. Notice the promise given here:

Isaiah 58:12, "And 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."

Isaiah 58 was written in anticipation of the newly returned exiles to Jerusalem. With that we ask these very important questions: what was the spiritual response to the opposition which arose against God's people on account of their service? How did God's people cope with the disappointments and discouragements of the exile? They risked falling into sin. Isaiah relates the calling he had received from God for this time:

Isaiah 58:1, "Cry loudly [that is, "at the top of your lungs"], do not hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet [שׁוֹפָר (*shophar*) - this is that rams horn which could command the attention of a large crowd (Is. 18:3). IOW, whatever was going on here was a serious thing! Now is not the time for gentleness!], and declare to My people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sins."

The message was one that God wanted His people to hear. Isaiah was not to whisper it or share it with only a few. The entire assembly of those in Jerusalem was to hear it because once again, sin threatened the camp! What specifically was the sin for which Isaiah was warning the people of God? It began with a religious payout to God in the attempt to secure His good pleasure.

Isaiah 58:2, "Yet they seek Me day by day, and delight to know My ways, as a nation that has done righteousness, and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask Me *for* just decisions, they delight in the nearness of God."

On the surface this sounds pretty good. In light of their restoration to Jerusalem and the response to the opposition they received, God's people became super-religious-

1. Worshipping God daily,

2. Studying and upholding God's word,
3. Praying for God's will to be done,
4. Delighting in the "nearness of God."

Again on the surface, this all sounds commendable. Yet there was a crack in their religious devotion a fault which made it all sinful. Isaiah records the sentiment of the people of God who were engaging in the activities of Isaiah 58:2.

Isaiah 58:3a, "Why have we fasted and Thou dost not see [the charge here was that of indifference: God's people were doing all the right things. Why wasn't God]? *Why* have we humbled ourselves and Thou dost not notice?..."

Do you see what ultimately was behind the religious activity of Isaiah 58:2? It was offered in the attempt to manipulate God; to get Him to act and so do the people's bidding! And when God didn't perform for them, they became angry and disheartened! Alec Motyer put it this way:

But there was a fatal flaw: it was all done in the pharisaic spirit of Luke 18:12 [in which the Pharisee boasted about how many times he prayed and fasted]. What seemed like eager devotion was actually aimed at earning benefit. (Motyer, 1993, p. 408)

1. This is a crucial error that many Christians make when disappointment descends upon them. In the attempt to recapture the glory of the past- *the good 'ol days*- they engage in religious activity to force God's hand! "*Surely He will bless us now!*"
2. That was the inclination of our brothers and sister so long ago facing the devastation and destruction of their home, temple, and way of life! In other words, refusing to let go of the past, they opted to placate God if perchance He could be convinced to give them their heart's desire.

Isaiah 58:3b, "...Behold, on the day of your fast you find *your* desire..."

These people weren't enraptured with God. All that they did served their sinful desire! And so they engaged in religion in order to force God's hand! Brothers and sisters, this is an idol that can be found not far from disappointment or struggle.

We have discussed the need during trial to cling to God and to "taste and see that the Lord is good!" (Psalm 34:8). But we must be very careful, for our sinful heart can transform some of the most glorious avenues of fellowship and service into an attempt at manipulation. Look at some of the activities named in Isaiah 58:2 that were used to manipulate:

- Worshipping God daily.
- Studying and upholding His word.
- Praying for the Lord's will to be done, and...
- Delighting in the "nearness of God."

How could these things ever be bad? Shockingly they are when they are done with ulterior motives and with the desire to get God to act on your behalf! This is what Paul meant when he said this:

2 Timothy 3:5, "...holding to a form of godliness, [and yet] denying its power..."

With this we see the natural consequence of disappointment: The Idol of Religious Manipulation fueled by the feeble attempt to reclaim the past. Christian, what is the easiest way to combat this inclination? Let go of the past and embrace the glorious future that awaits us all. Paul put it this way:

Philippians 3:13b-14, "...forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Notice that towards which Paul did NOT press...

- The restoration of the nation.
- The success of his tent-making business.
- The love of a spouse.
- A better job.
- The attention of large crowds.

In contrast, notice that Paul's passion and focus was that to which God is bringing all of us in Redemptive History: the upward call of God! This must remain our highest passion and desire! With that, Isaiah shifted his focus here to contrast with the point of Godly discipline.

Isaiah 58:3b-4a, "...Behold, on the day of your fast you find *your* desire, and drive hard all your workers [the language is of the slavery of God's people in Egypt where task-masters "drove them hard" That's what God's people now were doing with their servants!] Behold, you fast for contention and strife and to strike with a wicked fist..."

In response to the trauma of the exile or the present difficulties which had arisen on account of their attempt to rebuild, God's people's focus was turned inward! They had tried the "way of the Lord" (v. 2), but it didn't give them what they desired! As a result, they abandoned the work of the Lord and began to live for themselves. In fact, if we had continued in our study of Ezra, we would have noted that in response to the opposition of the Samaritans, God's people ceased their building activity for fourteen years during which time they focused on their own comforts, wealth, and conveniences- building their "paneled houses" (cf. Haggai 1:4)!

This resulted in egregious sin in which God's people used religious activity to please themselves at the neglect and harm of others! The particular form of religious devotion mentioned here was "fasting"!

Fasting was given by God as a religious activity in which a meal or a set of meals is abstained from during the time the worshipper is to devote the hours spent eating to praying and the study of God's word. The hunger pangs are to serve as a reminder of their feeble condition and their connection to this fallen world. As they abstain from the food of the world, they confess their desire to abstain from the sin of the world. Through it all, it was a glorious affirmation of the person's need for God. And so through the *deprivation* of food, the Christian is *enriched* toward God! That is what fasting was/is all about.

Yet, what did God's people do here? They missed the entire point. They went without a meal thinking that their "religious devotion" would somehow placate God. And what did they do with the spare time? Many

forced their servants and employees to work all the harder! Instead of spending their meal time communing with God, these religious devotees utilized the extra time afforded by their fasting to advance their business, farm, or family! Notice the three elements of fasting that God's people missed.

Isaiah 58:4b, "...You do not fast like *you do* today to make your voice heard on high."

The fast that God's people offered daily to God did not include prayer/fellowship; a vital part of fasting. As such, it wasn't about communion, getting to know God, appreciating, loving, and so worshipping Him. It wasn't about releasing one's hold on this world to embrace the Lord, His work and will! That was the first reason for fasting, communion with God!

Isaiah 58:5, "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 is critical of the formalism of His people. But notice, this contains a second element which God intended for fasting; a humbling of oneself before God (cf. Leviticus 16:29). Again, the problem amongst God's people at the time is that it was all a religious show! If they truly were reminded of their humble condition before God, it would have affected the way they lived!

Isaiah 58:6-7, "Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke [that is, the cross-bar that held two animals together], and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? 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?"

This represents a third element to fasting and for that matter, all religious activity, the abstaining from sin and the upholding of God's purpose and will! This verse addresses a major problem which existed amongst God's people prior to the exile. Recall the first step any church or body takes toward apostasy is NOT a compromise in their orthodoxy, BUT a compromise in their orthopraxy. God gives the body weak members to prompt the body unto love and good works. To neglect the weak is to neglect God regardless of your religious devotion.

Once again God's people had fallen into this error. They did a great job in abstaining from food, BUT a poor job in abstaining from sin! They lived in uncertain times! And rather than using their position, wealth, education, or spiritual wisdom/maturity to serve others, they focused on themselves!

Now we must see that what Isaiah penned is an exposé NOT just of the purpose and point of fasting, BUT of all religious activity (which is why this chapter closes with an exhortation on the Sabbath [Isaiah 58: 12-13]). So what have we learned.

- God has never been impressed with the amount or the size of a religious act (Psalm 50:10). We need to hear this! Again, the inclination in the face of disappointment is to seek the Lord and become more religious or be more vigilant in worship, the reading of God's word, in giving unto the Lord, in the hopes that God might see our devotion and so change our circumstances!
- What is God after in and through all religious service? What is behind ALL religious activity? What

is implied by Isaiah is explicitly stated in Psalm 51.

Psalm 51:16-17, "For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; Thou art not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."

Do you understand what ought to be behind every sacrifice and offering of the Ceremonial Law? These are but vehicles for the child of God to bow before God, confess their weakness, mourn their sin, and so cling to Christ!

Matthew 15:1-2, 7-11, "Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, 'Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread' [Ironically what the Disciples of Christ were doing here was not a violation of God's word, but the Jewish Mishnah. And so after rebuking the Jews for placing the word of man above the word of God, Christ then commented on the point of all religious ceremony...] You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' And after He called the multitude to Him, He said to them, 'Hear, and understand. Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.'"

Family of God, what is the point of religious washings and ceremony? A pure and undefiled walk with Christ! What was God's word to a group of worshippers who had misunderstood the point and purpose of giving in worship?

Malachi 1:11, "For from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, My name *will be* great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering *that is* pure; for My name *will be* great among the nations,' says the Lord of hosts."

To all notions that religious activity is given to enable us to love, know, and serve Christ, we add this purpose: unto the glory, honor, and praise of God! With that, take in the significance of God's exhortation to His disappointed people who were using "fasting" as a means to secure blessing.

Isaiah 58:6-7, "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? 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?"

What is God after in your religious activity and devotion? The restoration of a love-relationship with you whereby as a covenant community we together serve the Lord! Do you understand that this is what is behind every providence of God, every set-back and every crisis? This is what is behind every ritual, every means of grace, and every command!

When disappointment comes our way, what ought our passion/desire to be? It must NOT be the preservation of the past and the placation of God that He might give back what has been lost. RATHER, it must be that together as a body we grow in our love, passion, and devotion to know and serve Christ!

End Notes

¹ Just as there were three separate exiles when it came to the southern Kingdom of Judah (605 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC) so also there were three returns occurring in 538 BC, 458 BC, and 444 BC. Ezra 1 begins with the first return.

Sources Cited

Motyer, J. A. (1993). *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.

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About the Preacher

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