

the Lord in a return to personal righteousness, which could alone give impetus and power to their prayers and the daily round of their external devotion. So in response to their enquiry, “Wherefore have we fasted...and thou seest not? [wherefore] have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?” (Isa. 58:3), Isaiah began to pinpoint the sinful somewhat that the Lord had against these zealous religionists.

Does the perplexed question of the people sound familiar? How often do men and women wonder why there often seems to be a separation between them and God, which keeps them from sweet communion with Christ and deadens even the most dutiful dedication to religious devotion? How do God’s people examine this and that proposed remedy, or religious help method, only to find after all their searching that they are no closer to a truly satisfying solution! Has this been your sad experience? If so, take heart! You may well find in Isaiah’s response to the people’s perplexity the Divine answer for your dilemma and the missing element in your religious experience.

Pleasure Addicts

Although the religionists of Isaiah’s time were not conscious hypocrites, they seemed to lack a proper sense of what religion actually is and concluded that God was under obligation to them simply because they completed a perfunctory performance of external religious duties. Their primary and glaring need was a true devotion of the heart, that by means of the blood of the covenant (Heb. 13:20), they might be brought into vital contact with God, and thereby experience the manifold blessings of a life of unbroken fellowship (Rom. 15:29; Isa. 29:13,14). Isaiah points out this lack of heart-

devotion when he gives his first response to their question. He says in effect, “Your heart is not in your devotions, for when you fast, your heart still pursues your selfish pleasures!”— “Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours” (Isa. 58:3). The pursuit of self-serving interests had marred their fasting and broken any possible connection with God. The apostle Paul envisioned by the Spirit the rise of a new brand of Christianity in the last days whose devotees would be “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God,” although they sported a “form of godliness” (II Tim. 4:3-5). Today we are witnessing a vivid fulfillment of his inspired prediction. Multitudes of churches today claim allegiance to Jesus Christ, while the focus of their ministry seems to be a desire to cater to the carnal and self-serving interests of men. Their buildings, programs, and messages revolve around amusement, entertainment, and recreation. They have become playgrounds rather than houses of prayer, and true devotion is seldom to be seen. Ping-pong and pool tables, videos, sleight-of-hand magic, ventriloquist performances, pantomime, drama, and choreographic dancing have replaced the once humble scenes of agonizing prayer, simple humility, honest confession, and sincere obedience. Even the preachers have helped forward this attempt to reinvent churchgoing, by making references to their theatre-watching, and drawing spiritual lessons from dramatic stage presentations. What was once considered worldly is now seen to be a winsome way to engage the culture and convince the unsaved that being a Christian is not such a drab affair. Pastors and parishioners alike seem to be revelling in their new-found liberty and basking in the sense of sophistication such activities apparently confer. But the truth is that such churches have apostatized

from Biblical Christianity, and their thin veneer of devotion is just an empty show! Church has become a time of play, rather than a season of Bible teaching, repentance, prayer, and spiritual ministry by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Yes, dear friend, Isaiah’s day is not alone in witnessing the rise of pleasure-mad religion and religionists.

Strife-Ridden Religion

Another feature of eighth-century B.C. worship that prevented genuine communion with God was the underlying current of envy and strife. Isaiah pointed to the problem when he scolded, “Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as [ye do this] day, to make your voice to be heard on high” (Isa. 58:4). The Apostle Paul noted this tendency in the Corinthian church and labelled as carnal and infants in Christ, those that yielded to envy, strife and contention: “For ye are yet carnal: for whereas [there is] among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?” (I Cor. 3:3). And our Lord and Savior informed us that fellowship with God was futile, and prayer meaningless, if matters of strife, contention, and unforgiveness were not settled first: “But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Matt. 5:22-24). Despite, however, these clear warnings, it is amazing to note how often the external rites of religion are car-

ried out with strict precision, for the purpose of proving a religious point or advancing a sectarian cause. Factions within churches seem to receive additional fortification when they band together for prayer and mutual encouragement, little realizing that their inflamed zeal and readiness for bolder measures only fan the flames of kindled controversy. There are times when divisions are necessary for the sake of maintaining a clear testimony to Biblical truth (I Cor. 11:19; Gal. 2:5), but the external duties of Christianity (communion of the bread and cup, witnessing, Bible study, prayer and fasting) should never be used to establish self-righteousness in personal feuds, or to otherwise promote the cause of self-interest. Paul even recognized the possibility of preaching Christ of envy and strife, as some of his opponents did, in order to seek recognition as spiritual leaders, register a point, or improve a position of self-advantage during the period of Paul’s confinement (Phil. 1:15-17). Thus, the missing element that nullifies the effectiveness of external devotion, may at times be the failure to forgive and rid our hearts of strife (Mk. 11:25).

Loosing Bands, Undoing Burdens, and Breaking Yokes

[Is] not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? (Isa. 58:6).

Isaiah further remonstrates with the religionists of his day by pointing to the unresolved issues that littered their personal lives. For one, there were bands of wickedness yet to be loosed. The Hebrew expression “פְּתוּ חַרְצֻבוֹת לְשֵׁעַ” is capable of various levels of application. Its primary sense being that we release men from forms of enslavement and compulsory obligation im-

posed by wicked men in the social, financial, or judicial realms. But there is also a spiritual level of application, calling upon Christians to be ever “loosing” (Hebrew infinitive absolute form of the verb connoting habitual action) ourselves and others from wicked bonds.

For instance, many are yet, to use the language of the Apostle Peter, “in the bond of iniquity” (συνδεσμον αδικιας) in the form of some besetting sin or defiling habit. Perhaps they are wedded to the world-wide-web and its easily accessible pornography. Maybe it is a secret stash of erotic literature that binds them and lures them to repetitive sin. They may be bound to an immoral relationship through the blandishments of a strange woman. Solomon referred to this latter bond of iniquity as being a band of wickedness God-pleasers will escape: “And I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart [is] snares and nets, [and] her hands [as] bands: whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her” (Eccl. 7:26). Still others are bound by addictions to alcohol, nicotine, and gluttony. There is also the bond of physical infirmity (Luke 13:11). Jesus Christ came into this world not only to die a substitutionary death for the removal of the guilt of our sins, but also to release us from the cords of iniquity that hold even believers in bondage (Prov. 5:22,23). He came to bring spiritual emancipation to those held in satanic bondage (Luke 4:18). Unless these wicked bands are loosed, our fasting and praying will not be complete, and may very well prove ineffectual. Surely, the failure to loose from the bondages of besetting sin is a missing element in much contemporary religion, resulting in both hypocrisy and perpetual backsliding (Isa. 10:6; Jer. 8:5).

Then there are the heavy burdens that must

be removed from the lives of the bruised and broken, if we are to fulfill the requirements of real religion. Isaiah said they were to “undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free” (Isa. 58:6). We should not impose unnecessary burdens by selfish, inconsiderate demands on others, but we should point men and women to the Burden-Lifter, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who said that His yoke was easy and His burden light (Matt. 11:28-30). Oh heavy-laden soul, “cast thy burden upon the Lord, and He shall sustain thee” (Ps. 55:22). Are you weighed down (Luke 21:34) with a load of earthly care? Cast it upon the Lord (I Pet. 5:7), and He will carry you through to victory. Is your mind laden (II Tim. 3:6) with the memory of a shameful past? Believe that the blood of Jesus cleanseth you from all sin (I Jn. 1:7) and bathe your soul by faith in the fountain that has been opened at Calvary’s Tree for cleansing (Zech. 13:1). God’s people can never know the glorious liberty of the sons of God until the burdens imposed by the god of this world are removed from their shoulders (Isa. 10:27).

Isaiah’s Jesus, who fulfilled all righteousness and exemplified the higher righteousness (Matt. 5:20) that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, is not only a Bond-Remover and Burden-Lifter; He is also a Yoke-Breaker. Isaiah counseled his generation to “break every yoke.” Yokes speak of a condition of enslavement, oppression, and cruel, compulsory toil. Some religious teachers, who fail to comprehend the emancipating power of saving grace (Titus 2:11; Gal. 5:1), are constantly trying to place the unbearable yoke of the law upon the neck of the disciples (Acts 15:10) by compelling Gentile believers who seek to be justified by grace through faith in Christ to observe Jewish dietary restrictions, keep the sabbath and other Old Testament holy days

(Gal. 4:9), etc. This adoption of Jewish legal forms, however, will avail them nothing. This does not mean that the law is irrelevant to the believer, for its principles of ethical conduct are eternal, although some of its forms had special significance for Israel, and are no longer binding under grace (sabbath, circumcision, etc.).

Another yoke is the unequal one with unbelievers. When believers enter close relationships with unbelievers in marriage, business partnerships, clubs, secret societies, and lodges, they violate the Biblical mandate of separation from sin and sinners (II Cor. 6:14-18). These yokes must be broken if one is to make progress in perfecting holiness (II Cor. 7:1).

When the Spirit of Christ imbues and governs our lives, he will identify these yokes as open doors to satanic oppression and will prompt us to break free into Christ’s freedom as every yoke is destroyed because of the anointing (Isa. 10:27). May Jesus break every yoke from your neck, and let the oppressed go free!



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The Missing **ELEMENT**

Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God. Wherefore have we fasted, [say they], and thou seest not? [wherefore] have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? (Isa. 58:1-3a)

Like a voice crying in a religious wilderness, the prophet Isaiah cried against the religious hypocrisy of his eighth-century B.C. fellow countrymen. Like a shrill siren, his uplifted voice sounded an alarm against the religious complacency and smug self-righteousness that characterized the worship and devotion of his age. The worshippers of his day were taking a superficial delight in the religion of their fathers. Daily seeking of God (Isa. 58:2), temple-attendance (Isa. 1:12), sacrifice (Isa. 1:11), holy day observance (Isa. 1:13,14), multiplied prayer (Isa. 1:15), and even fasting (Isa. 58:3) were common enough, but the people remained perplexed, for it seemed they were no closer to God for all their attendance upon external devotion—there seemed to be a mysterious, missing element.

It was the solemn duty of Isaiah, as Yahweh’s anointed spokesman, to identify that missing element so the nation as a whole, and its individual members in particular, might seek