

## EXPLANATORY NOTES

The contrasting themes of delighting in self-interest or in God's nearness bind the chapter together. *To delight* in (the) knowing God's ways is the motive for lasting in 58:3. At the end of the chapter, abstaining from the pursuit of self-interest serves as the motive for Sabbath observance (58:13).

Isaiah 58:1-4 warns God's people collectively (using plural verbs) about rebellion in the form of bogus piety. Isaiah 58:5-14, on the other hand, exhorts God's people individually (using Singular verbs) about substance of bona fide piety.

## Sins of the House of Jacob 58: 1-4-

An announcement of the sins of God's people is compared to a trumpet using a ram's horn, raising the alarm of impending danger. An inventory of sins, however, does not immediately follow the command to announce them (cf. Joel 2: 15, where the sound of the trumpet horn announces a fast).

What appears to be a register of the people's faithfulness is stashed in the next three stanzas (58:2ab, 2c-3a, 3b-4). They seek the Lord (58:2). The RSV and NIV understand the text as irony and add as *if they were a nation* (as a nation, Heb.) practicing justice. The NIV also adds *they seem eager* (they are eager, Heb.). It is not necessary to read this stanza an accusation of hypocrisy against the people. Rather, the prophet sketches a picture of the people honestly seeking to know God's ways, oblivious to their own rebellion (Whitcomb: 212).

They are eager, they inquire, they long for God's nearness (58:2c). The reality of their rebellion surfaces quite innocently, it seems, in a set of parallel questions formed as a complaint addressed to God:

*Why do we fast, but you do not see?*

*Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?* (58:3-4)

Should not God at least observe with appreciation the form that piety takes? No doubt the form that piety takes is noticed on high. But in design, form and substance belong together.

The separation of form and substance lies at the center of God's rebuke (58:3b-4). The accusation opens with the interjection *hen* (III, 'I' ~RSV; ~eh. old, RSV), calling the people to attention. The pursuit of rest in the exploitation of workers. The Hebrew word for workers is *qasabim*, sufferers. Workers are exploited as those who

## Isaiah 58:1-14

material capital exhibit a piety separated from justice and

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The same interjection (*hen*) continues the accusation, giving additional detail to this bogus piety. It is not clear whether fasting in which *quarreling and strife* (NN) occur is internecine (among the owners) or directed by the owners to the workers, creating and extending their suffering. In any case, God does not sanction such quarrelsome behavior.

## The Lord's Purpose for Fasting 58:5-6

Three rhetorical questions [*Literary Perspective*, p. 446] dominate the next stanza (58:5). The first two are dearily rhetorical; this means that the answer (No!) is already implied in the question. At issue is self-denial as an end in itself rather than as a means toward an end. Fasting as a means of calling attention primarily to the form of piety (*to humble oneself*) fails to address the substance of piety. The second question develops the theme of form to include three recognizable acts of piety: bowing down, wearing sackcloth, and applying ashes. Each of these calls attention to form and, by itself, does not meet the standard of fasting chosen by the Lord. The third question employs sarcasm, again calling into question fasting centered on form.

A new rhetorical question, this one inviting a positive response, is now put forward (58:6). The question begins on the first line and continues with a sequence of three infinitive clauses stating liberation from social oppression on lines 2 through 4 (*to loose, to undo, to let go free*). The various translations usually include the last line of the stanza (*and to break every yoke*) as part of the sequence, although its form is different in the Hebrew text. The stanza as a whole declares the soul of bona fide piety to be in implementing God's just order; What characterizes genuine fasting is not the pursuit of self-interest, but concern for the well-being of others.

## Sharing Bread with the Hungry 58:7-9.

Another rhetorical question inviting a positive response begins the next segment (58: 7). The specifics of liberation now emerge as caring for the impoverished and the destitute. The poor are not strangers and aliens but *your own kin*. Fasting as a spiritual resource for a social ethic that 'ncklesses the problems of poverty lies at the center of God's intention for his people.

Two uses of an adverb of time (*then*), signifying a fulfillment of the rhetorical question in 58:7, conclude the segment (58:8-9a). The first sign of this fulfillment comes in four parallel phrases (*your light, your healing,*

*your righteousness*, and *your rear guard*, NIV), each phrase linked to a  
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