

Isaiah 58:1-14

Your light refers to the clarity of insight that fasting is a spiritual resource for social action. This clarity rests on the authority of the speaker (the Lord) and not merely on human insight. Your healing indicates restoration of social health as an accompaniment of spiritual healing. Your righteousness (vindication, NRSV note) means right behavior as the van guard of God's people. Your rear guard is none other than the Lord's glory itself, guarantee of safety and security. God is in the front and at the back, protecting the one who seeks him.

The second sign of this fulfillment, also introduced by then, comes in the form of the age-old promise of God's presence when his people call on him in their time of need (58:9a),

Conditions of the Lord's Guidance 58:9b-12

In the NRSV and NIV, the if-clause that opens this segment is taken, a new thought (58:9b-10; note the gap in the text between the two parts of v. 9). It is clear that the removal of the yoke, already mentioned in 58:6, means the yoke of injustice, particularly accusation and slavery (Brueggemann, 1998b:191). The if-clause is completed in 58:10. No, the theme returns to the satisfaction of the hungry. In 58:7 sharing bread with the hungry constitutes a fast acceptable to the Lord. Offering yourself to the hungry constitutes the appropriate response, God's presence. Satisfying the needs of the oppressed lies alongside offering. When such selfless giving occurs, God's people experience illumination and the dissipation of gloom.

It is no accident that the promise of guidance and restoration follows the forging of the people's spirituality and social consciousness (Sg: II d. Hanson: 207). Guidance, satisfaction of needs, and strength sent blessings, although probably not in order of ascending importance as Young suggests (1972:424). The pictures of a watered garden, a spring of water portray the prosperity of a people that receives your guidance.

Reconstruction of ruins flows from the Lord's continual guidance (58:12). The ancient ruins may refer in general to the results of the Babylonian military campaign in Judah at the beginning of the sixth century B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar's army ravaged the land (Walters, 217). The titles Repairer of Broken Walls and Restorer of Sinners Dwelling (NIV) applaud the process of reconstruction.

Nourished on the Heritage of Jacob 58:13-14

A conditional sentence commending Sabbath keeping opens the last two stanzas of the chapter. The first stanza includes the promise of

nate clauses, each beginning with the conjunction if to introduce the conditional sentence (58: 13):

If you keep your feet from breaking ...
from doing . . .
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the LORD's holy day. . .
if you honor it by not going, ..
not doing, .. or speaking ... (NIV)

The theme of Sabbath-keeping departs from the chapter's focus on fasting. But the deeper intention of the chapter unites the two themes. At the beginning of the chapter, false piety is fasting alongside exploitation (doing as you please, 58:3 NIV). Here at the end of the chapter, true piety is Sabbath-keeping in order to honor the Lord's holy day (not doing as you please, 58: 13 NIV), Bona fide piety includes spiritual disciplines. These disciplines attest to faith that embraces the form of piety (fasting, Sabbath-keeping) without abandoning the substance of piety (justice).

The adverb then opens the main clause of the conditional sentence (58: 14). Having engaged in the spiritual discipline of Sabbath-keeping, the result is a wondrous relationship with the Lord. The Lord, in turn, honors the discipline and relationship with promises of well-being (Whybray: 219).

These promises echo the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32. There Jacob is described as the Lord's "allotted inheritance" (32:9), whom he made to "ride on the heights of the land" (32: 13 NIV). Riding on the heights of the land in Isaiah 58 serves as a metaphor of prosperity. Such prosperity cannot be separated from the source of Israel's life, the faith of Jacob. The inheritance of your father Jacob (NIV) stands in contrast to the sins of the house of Jacob at the beginning of the chapter. The heritage continues to confront the sin. A final "signature," indicating the Lord's authority as speaker, closes the stanza (58: 14).

THE TEXT IN BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Food, Shelter, Clothing

The Bible often exhibits the principle that a person's relationship to others reveals that person's relationship to God. In Isaiah 58:7 the principle is expressed in the call to distribute the resources of food, shelter, and clothing to those in need. Here, as Brueggemann says, is "a clear, radical ethic of social ethics that is at the heart of Judaism" (1998b: 189).