



The Delight of the Sabbath: An Exegetical/Homiletical Study of Isaiah 58

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In Minnesota (as well as several other states) people cannot buy alcoholic beverages on Sunday, a remnant of the “blue laws” once prevalent in the United States.¹ The laws prohibiting alcohol and other pleasures on Sunday were a result of the convoluted process of transferring the Jewish Sabbath to the Christian Sunday. In the Bible, Sabbath was a day of rest but not a day to be “blue.” Sabbath was a day of joy, as Ps 92 (“A Song for the Sabbath”) proclaims: “It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High” (Ps 92:1). The psalm’s title may not have been original, but, if added later, it shows the nature of the Sabbath in the song and worship of a later Israel that found the psalm appropriate for the day. Those who sang the song apparently did not need to work, “For you, O LORD, have made me glad by *your* work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy” (Ps 92:4, emphasis added). Not working on the Sabbath is to enter into and rely on the work of God.

Sabbath was meant to be a “delight” (Isa 58:13), even if in that same text Sabbath could be abused. Similarly, in the first instance of Sabbath, the day was meant as gift (Exod 16:29), but some refused to believe or accept it and tried to take things

¹Although the origin of the term blue laws is uncertain, there are now “Sunday closing laws” in many states that prohibit the sale of identified items and various other activities on Sunday.

In Isaiah, both Sabbath keeping and fasting are related to justice. They are not legalistic demands, but invitations to a life of delight.

into their own hands, thinking that if we don't work, how will we be able to eat (Exod 16:27–28). Actually, that is still the case for many, so maintaining Sabbath rest—a holy day of the Lord (Isa 58:13)—even if on Sunday, becomes a sign to the world that life is not defined by the never-ending quest for “more.”

Eventually, in Jesus' day, some of the Jews accused him of breaking the Sabbath when he healed a man with a withered hand on that day (Mark 3:1–2), which the Pharisees and the Herodians then used as a basis to “destroy him” (Mark 3:6).² Jesus, returning to the original sense of Sabbath as gift and rejecting a legalistic rigidity, insisted that “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). This was, of course, not just a return to yesteryear, it was an announcement of the messianic age: “For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath” (Matt 12:8). While this text ascribes a unique role to Jesus, the Sabbath was long before seen as “a glimpse of the world to come.”³

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By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus related the Sabbath to justice and human well-being, which placed him in the tradition of the prophets. At least since the eighth century BCE, the Sabbath rest was related to justice, if honored only in the breach (Isa 1:10–17; Amos 8:5–10). Who can rest in the face of injustice? This connection between Sabbath and justice became codified in Deuteronomy's preaching on the Sabbath commandment, probably in the seventh century BCE:⁴

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut 5:12–15)

In Deuteronomy, the Sabbath provides rest not only for the people of Israel, but also for slaves, aliens, and even the livestock. Everybody and every thing needs and gets a day off, a time of refreshment—and, as Jesus showed, a day of healing. It's a matter of justice.

²According to the more and more detailed laws of that time, healing on the Sabbath was allowed only if it were a matter of life and death (*Mishnah Yoma* 8.6), which obviously a withered hand would not be.

³Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox) 166.

⁴Recalling that “you were a slave in Egypt” often becomes the rationale for the call to do justice in Deuteronomy. See especially Deut 24:17–22. See also Rolf Jacobson's essay in this issue.

The Sabbath as a day of justice seems to be the form of the Sabbath commandment that informs the prophets. Isaiah 56:1–2 makes a similar connection between “keeping” (*shamar*) Sabbath and “maintaining” (*shamar*) justice. Further, in Isa 56 keeping the Sabbath would require refraining “from doing any evil” (56:2). In 56:4, to “keep my sabbaths” and “hold fast my covenant” are not so much two things as one thing. One is sign of the other. Both distinctly identify the follower of Yahweh, even if that person is a foreigner or a eunuch.⁵

So also Isa 58, with its strong emphasis on justice, ends with Israel’s delight in the Sabbath (58:14). Sabbath was meant to be a “delight,” not a burden, as we have seen, but sometimes things got in the way of that, including apparently “going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs” (Isa 58:13). Given the poetic parallelism of this passage, such activities would constitute “trampling on the sabbath” (58:13), that is, despising the gift of Sabbath that God has given, rejecting “the most precious present mankind has received from the treasure house of God.”⁶ Such a thing would hardly be taken lightly by God.

SABBATH AND FASTING IN ISAIAH 58

In this article, I will examine Isa 58’s reference to Sabbath, especially as it relates to fasting (*tsum*, to fast—Isa 58:3 [twice]; 58:4; 58:5 [twice]; 58:6). In Israel, fasting was regularly practiced in times of mourning (for example, 2 Sam 1:12) or special danger (for example, 1 Sam 7:6), but apparently it too, like Sabbath, could become a matter of rote, losing its original sense. We see that happening in Isa 58.

The chapter begins with words that sound quite familiar to the hearers, words that raise their hopes in a difficult time, that is, the disappointment of those returning from exile to find not renewal but disaster: “Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people. . . .”

With this introduction, people might expect to hear an announcement of good news, as they have heard before in the Isaiahic tradition:

“Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’” (Isa 40:9)

“Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it. Send it out to the ends of the earth; say, ‘The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob.’” (Isa 48:20 NIV)

“Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.” (Isa 52:8–9 NIV)

But then comes the shock: “Announce to my people *their rebellion, to the*

⁵See Walter Brueggemann’s essay in this issue. “It is noteworthy that Sabbath-keeping is the only specific requirement [in Isa 56:4, 6–7], suggesting that it is this disciplined act that most distinguishes the community of covenant from the dominant economy of that time” (p. 250 below).

⁶Abraham Heschel, “A Palace in Time,” in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithfulness*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 217.

house of Jacob their sins” (58:1, emphasis added). It’s a rhetorically brilliant, yet theologically devastating move. The prophet gets the people’s attention and raises their hopes but then crushes them with this strong word of judgment. Why?

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Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. (Isa 58:2–4)⁷

To “seek” the Lord is surely a good thing, especially appropriate when God is “near.” It follows God’s own invitation: “Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near” (Isa 55:6). The psalmist prays that God might “show me your ways” (Ps 25:4). All good. But in the midst of all this comes the awful “as if”—*as if* they were a nation that practiced righteousness.

With v. 3, we hear the lament of the people, still reeling from the rebuke of v. 1 and asking “Why?”—as in a lament psalm. “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” (58:3a).

But instead of the oracle of salvation generally found at this point in a psalm, the people hear instead this disputation: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist” (Isa 58:3b–4a)—once again a surprise. And God continues with this word of judgment: “Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high” (58:4b).

The back and forth between God and the people continues with surprise after surprise: “Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?” (58:5).

Well, yes! With our fasting in this manner we’re just modeling our lives after longstanding tradition (for example, 1 Kings 21:27; Pss 35:13; 69:10, and often). But God has something altogether different in mind:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷God’s diatribe is continued in even harsher terms in Isa 59:1–19.

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 them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isa 58:7–8)

Westermann points out what is happening here: "Action directed towards God is replaced by action directed towards human beings."⁸ This is an essential feature of biblical religion and ethics. In the Babylonian creation myth, Marduk (god) created humans in order to serve the gods.⁹ Not so in Genesis. There the human task is directed not upward but downward and outward—to supervise the animals and tend the garden. God does not require human servitude or human fasting, but humanity and the earth itself do.

NEW DEFINITIONS

So, a new definition of fasting, relating fasting to justice, even as Isa 56 had done with Sabbath. In other places we have heard new definitions of sacrifice, so doing the same with fasting is not altogether without precedent:

And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams." (1 Sam 15:22)

For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Ps 51:16–17)

I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. (Ps 50:1)¹⁰

In these texts, obedience, contrition, and thanksgiving are God's preferred offerings, not animal sacrifice. Sacrifice is retained, of course, in the worship of Israel, but these texts stress the spiritual background of sacrifice, without which the physical act is without meaning.

In the same sense, Isa 58 moves from the physical act of fasting to a more profound definition—yet one more surprise in this text. We seem to have entered a

⁸Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 336.

⁹*Enuma elish* VI.5–10: "Blood I will amass and cause bones to be. / I will establish a savage, 'man' shall be his name. / Verily, savage-man I will create. / He shall be charged with the service of the gods / That they may be at ease!" Translation by E. A. Speiser in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed., ed. James Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 68, at http://rbedrosian.com/Mespot/Pritchard_1950_ANET.pdf (accessed April 7, 2016).

¹⁰On the relation between Pss 50 and 51 in this regard, see Frederick J. Gaiser, "The David of Psalm 51: Reading Psalm 51 in Light of Psalm 50," *Word & World* 23/4 (Fall 2003) 382–394.

new and better place here. But then come a series of “if...thens”—once again paralleling acts of justice and mercy (vv. 6–12) with keeping the Sabbath (vv. 13–14). The “if” is implied in vv. 6–7, and the “then” spoken directly in vv. 8 and 9. The “if...then” comes full force in vv. 9b–12 and again in vv. 13–14. What will we make of this? Is our relationship with God some kind of “let’s make a deal” arrangement? Are the divine promises conditional, requiring the good behavior of the hearers? Would this be truly “healing” (v. 8)? Such conditional promises are like fingernails on a blackboard, perhaps especially for those of us who call ourselves Lutheran. Divine grace is free, is it not? So, what does this mean?

There is a place, of course, for “if...then” conditionality in our relationship with God and one another. Lutherans, among others, would call that the “law.” In its simplest form, *if* you drive on the right side of the street, *then* you are less likely to kill or be killed. Conditional, but clear and true. Unless, of course, you are in England or Zimbabwe, then you have to drive on the left. Conditionality. It’s all conditional. It’s the law. But do we have to do x in order for God to do y to gain God’s promises? Do we have to offer our food to the hungry in order for God to satisfy our needs and “make [our] bones strong” (v. 11)? Do we have to “refrain from trampling on the sabbath” (v. 13) in order for God to make us “ride upon the heights of the earth” (v. 14)? Is the divine *promise* conditional?

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Here I have drawn the contrast too sharply. Free grace is not to be equated with cheap grace. Certainly, there is an inherent connection between human action and divine response, but this is not to be taken as “a hard-nosed ‘legalistic’ requirement, that is, as a ‘work.’”¹¹ As we shall see below, the condition and the consequence merge such that they become virtually one thing. Human ethical behavior is called for not to curry God’s favor, but to enter into God’s own work of service and love. Such behavior, as we learned from Bonhoeffer, might well be “costly.”¹²

THE (THEO)LOGIC OF ISAIAH 58

Isaiah 58 stands near the theological center of what scholars have come to call Third Isaiah—the material that comes after the glorious promises of Second Isaiah that God would open the doors and let those Jews held captive in Babylon return home. And that happened, unbelievable as it seemed. But once the people were back in Jerusalem, they realized all was still not well. Where was the temple? Where

¹¹Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 190.

¹²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959) 43.

were the promised singing mountains? Had they known it, they might have sung Peggy Lee's song instead, "Is that all there is?"¹³ Fine, we're free, they might say, but the economy and the city are in ruins. Where's the promised glory that we thought was in store for us, having heard the promises of Second Isaiah? Perhaps it is a question all readers might raise. If God has kept God's promises, why does the world look like it does? Couldn't God make things right?

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And then our text. Announce to my people their rebellion. Wonder why things are messed up? Look in the mirror! The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves!¹⁴ And so, the people try to fix things by fixing their relationship with God. Do the rites, perform the rituals, practice fasting, lie in sackcloth—surely, they think, if we do religion right, God will notice. And God does notice, but God doesn't like what God sees. Thus the accusations of our text. Ritual and religion will not suffice—especially if these are done to obtain some kind of merit.¹⁵

What then? "Is not this the fast that I choose," says the Lord, "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free?" Learn from your own freedom from captivity, and do what I did. Free the oppressed, feed the poor, satisfy the needs of the other. Then your light shall rise.

But that brings us back to the "if...then." How shall we hear this? Here we must pay close attention to the poetic parallelism of the text, and we will need something other than the NRSV's: "If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong" (Isa 58:10–11). But this translation fails us here. There are no "needs" to be satisfied in the Hebrew, nor is there "food." Just *nephesh*—soul, self—three times. Thus, in a more literal translation:

If you pour out your *nephesh* [your soul, your self] for the hungry,
and satisfy the *nephesh* [the soul, the self] of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your *nephesh* [your soul, your self] in scorched places... (vv.
10–11)

So, pour out your self to satisfy the self of the other, and the Lord will satisfy

¹³Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, "Is That All There Is?" sung by Peggy Lee, August, 1969.

¹⁴William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (I, ii, 140–141).

¹⁵In First Isaiah, as already noted, God makes a very similar connection between justice and the rituals of Israelite religion, including the Sabbath, denying the validity of the latter without the former (Isa 1:10–17). See also Lam 2:6–9; Amos 8:5–10. Again, as we have seen, Jesus too refutes a legalistic definition of Sabbath.

your self. The Hebrew is clear. It uses the same term three times, one following the other, which, given the care with which this whole chapter is put together and the careful poetic structure of this and other Isaianic texts, is almost certainly deliberate. A faithful translation should not overlook this: pour out your self for the self of the other, and the Lord will give you your self.¹⁶ Here Third Isaiah begins to sound like Jesus: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matt 10:39). To pour out the self for the sake of God and the neighbor is to find the self. To lose oneself is to find oneself. Nothing less than that is the promise of our prophet. And now, of course, there is no conditionality in the text, no temporal disconnect between the action and the result. To lose the self *is* to find the self. It’s one thing. The receiving is in the giving—gift at its best, grace at its most complete. Perhaps we might read all this chapter’s “if...then” in this same light.¹⁷ This does not deny the force of God’s command—especially since the giving of self may be far more “costly” than the giving of food—but it does make the “if...then” less like a contract and more like a way, even a gracious way, to satisfy the needs of God, self, and neighbor.¹⁸

The hungry still need food, of course, and they will receive it, just as God requires in v. 7. But now, the food for the hungry will be more than any threat would compel, for in receiving everything we are freed to give everything. No measures, no quid pro quo. Just this promise: give and you will receive. In the one is the other.

But then we are faced with another dilemma: If we truly are to make ourselves vulnerable in order fully to give and receive, fully to know grace, how can we pull that off? What will give us the needed spiritual strength?

A SURPRISING GIFT

Happily, our text provides an answer to our need for strength: “Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am” (v. 9). “Here I am”—Hebrew *hinnenî*—is the answer one gives when God calls, from Abraham to Moses, to Samuel, to Isaiah, and to Mary, “Here I am, God, I am at your disposal, use me as you will.” Mary said it best, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). I am your hum-

¹⁶Of the several standard English translations, only the KJV passes this test: “And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness *be* as the noonday: And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.” (The New KJV follows suit.) The “food” in the NRSV seems to have come into the text in the Septuagint, which speaks of giving the hungry “the food [or bread—Greek: *artos*] from your soul”—probably paralleling sharing “your bread [Greek: *artos*] with the hungry” in v. 7. Still, the NRSV errs in omitting “self” (*nephesh*) from these verses.

¹⁷To be clear, there are other texts that state or imply an “if...then” connection between Sabbath keeping (or not) and divine favor or disfavor, especially Jer 17:21–27. To complete this study, one would have to look carefully at that text to find its relation to Isa 58 (whether positive or negative).

¹⁸The divine displeasure with complacency and injustice is emphasized by the parallelism of Isa 59 and 63, which serve as a judgmental inclusion around the positive center of Third Isaiah in chapters 60–62, the latter echoing the glorious promises of Second Isaiah.

ble servant, I am yours. This is the best, the fullest human answer to God's call. But, again, this text surprises. Three times in the second part of the book of Isaiah—and only there—that response is turned around and taken into God's own mouth, including the use in our text: You shall call and *the Lord* will answer: *Hinneni*, Here I am—I, God, am your humble servant, I am at your disposal (Isa 52:6; 58:9; 65:1). This changes everything. Now, what looked like conditional statements become possibilities. What looked like law becomes promise. The spiritual strength to serve the other is given directly by God. Now, the Sabbath becomes a delight, not a legalistic requirement.¹⁹ In fact, delight in the Sabbath is directly paralleled with delight in the Lord (vv. 13–14).

Two twentieth-century authors echo Isaiah here—that is, in the fact that caring for others is not something to gain favor with God or others. First, Ignazio Silone in his 1937 anti-Fascist novel *Bread and Wine*. There, Silone's character Marta says:

The gifts that life has given us are. . . strange and precious. He who wants to enjoy them, and strives to enjoy them, does not enjoy them at all, but burns them up and consumes them rapidly. But he who forgets them, and forgets himself, and gives himself entirely and devotedly to somebody or something, receives a thousand times more than he gives, and at the end of his life the gifts nature has bestowed upon him are still flourishing in him, like May roses.²⁰

Second, hear Minnesota author Bill Holm reflecting on his gifts one memorable Christmas:

Gifts are your teachers, not your obligation or the fulfillment of a bargain. They are supposed to disconnect you from your own life for a few minutes, so you can see it more clearly. A good gift delivers a brisk shock. A good gift cannot be reciprocated without damage to the soul. You must take it and live.²¹

Isaiah might have said, "Exactly. That's just what I meant! Find yourself in your giving to others." And to return to where we began, the Sabbath provides just such an unexpected gift, a gift in which we find ourselves. ⊕

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¹⁹Similarly, Hans Walter Wolff: "These admonitions [in Isa 58] do not derive their force from the fear of punishment but from the desire for joy." In *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 140.

²⁰Ignazio Silone, *Bread and Wine*, trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher (New York: Penguin, 1937) 13–14. (Note: this speech is unfortunately missing in the rewritten 1955 version of the novel.)

²¹Bill Holm, "Christmas Unbound," *Minnesota Monthly*, December 1989, 61.