

FASTS AND SACRIFICES

Jon Macon

In Isaiah 58:1, God told Isaiah the prophet, “Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and *show my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.*” Next, God said, “Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways” (Isa 58:2). This “daily seeking” of God and “delighting” to know His ways was insincere and hypocritical. They were passing themselves off “as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God” (Isa 58:2), but in reality, they would “swear by the name of the Lord, and make mention of the God of Israel, but not in truth, nor in righteousness” (Isa 48:2). Isaiah 29:13 spoke of their hypocrisy: “*Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.*”

God's fast

Israel asked God, “Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge (Isa 58:3)?” God answered, “Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labors. 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. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord (Isa 58:4-5)?” Israel’s focus was on their outward, fleshly actions. But God was not impressed with their physical fasting when they were so full of wickedness. There was a spiritual fast that God was expecting from His people Israel (Isa 58:6-7). “*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? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?*” God taught the same principle to the descendants of this generation, the ones who experienced the captivity in Babylon. In Zechariah 7:5-14, the Lord said, “Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me? And when ye did eat, and when ye did drink, did not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves? Should ye not hear the words which the Lord hath cried by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, and the cities thereof round about her, when men inhabited the south and the plain? And the word of the Lord came unto Zechariah, saying, Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and show mercy and compassions every man to his brother: and oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart. But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the Lord of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the Lord of hosts. Therefore it is come to pass, that as he cried, and

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(continued)

they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the Lord of hosts: but I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them, that no man passed through nor returned: for they laid the pleasant land desolate.”

The sacrifices of God

As these Israelites engaged in physical fasting as their outward show of “seeking God,” so they also offered their physical sacrifices with the same wicked hearts. The Lord did not accept these sacrifices any more than He did their fasting. In Isaiah 1:11-17, God said, “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. *Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.*” To the very same people, God said, “*For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings*” (Hos 6:6; see also 1 Sam 15:22; Psa 40:6-8). David understood this principle, as he said, “*For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise*” (Psa 51:16-17). In Joel 2:13, He told the people: “*And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God.*” Are we listening to these teachings or will we repeat the same mistake as Israel of old? To Christians, God says, “*Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world*” (Jas 1:27). James 2:14-17 says, “*What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.*” Romans 12:1 calls for us to be “a living sacrifice.” How do we do that? “*Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth*” (1 John 3:16-18). May we always have an “unfeigned love of the brethren” and “love one another with a pure heart fervently” (1 Pet 1:22)!