

The Acceptable Fast – a meditation on Isaiah 58

This passage is from the word of Allah given in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah ^(PBUH) addressed to the Ban-i Isra'il (*house of Yaqub*) around 700 BC.

The challenge of this prophecy to Muslims in the month of Ramadhan is obvious, as fasting is to the fore. However, the principles described here apply just as much to Christians, Jews and people (particularly religious people) of any tradition.

Taurat - Isaiah 58

¹ Shout it loud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the house of Yaqub their sin.

² Yet day after day they seek me
and they seem eager to know my ways
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and does not abandon the judgements of their God.

They ask me for righteous judgements.

They seem eager to draw near to Allah.

³ “Why have we fasted,” they say, “and you have not seen it?
We have humbled ourselves and you have not noticed.”

Look! In the day of your fasting you do as you please
and you exploit all your labourers.

⁴ You fast only to quarrel and fight
and you strike people with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

⁵ Is this the kind of fast that I choose;
only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is this what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ Is this not the fast that I choose;
to take off the chains of injustice,
to untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free,
to tear apart every yoke.

⁷ Is it not to break your bread for the hungry,
to bring the poor homeless into your home,
when you see the naked, to clothe them

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Religious Sinners (v1-2)

This prophecy is the word of the LORD given through the prophet Isaiah addressed to the Ban-i Isra'il (*house of Yaqub*) c 700 BC.

What gives rise to this prophecy is the rebellion and sin of the ban-i Isra'il.

But these are not the kind of sinners you might expect.

² *Yet day after day they seek me and they seem eager to know my ways as if they were a nation that does what is right and does not abandon the judgements of their God.*

They ask me for righteous judgements. They seem eager to draw near to Allah.

These are very religious people, they seek Allah and want to know his ways; they pray and, as we will see, they fast. It all sounds really good.

So what is wrong? Why are they accused of rebellion and sin against Allah?

The Motivation for their Religion (v3a)

The next ayat (v3) gives a hint of what might be wrong. The problem lies in the motivation for their religion.

³ *"Why have we fasted," they say, "and you have not seen it? We have humbled ourselves and you have not noticed."*

It seems they want to manipulate Allah, to put Allah in their debt by fasting. It is very easy for us to fall into the same attitude: "I'll fast and pray and do other religious deeds and then Allah will owe me the blessing I'm asking for and give me what I want."

This is really a 'slot machine' kind of religion: if you put enough coins in the machine, out comes the thing you want. It is using Allah as a means to an end, whether that end be success, wealth, health, children, honour, status or whatever else. And if you do that, then that end has become the most important thing to you – you have committed *shirk* – when something in your life becomes as important, or more important, than Allah.

But Allah owes us nothing. Everything we have is a gift. And there is absolutely nothing we can do to put Allah in our debt.

What their Sin is (v3b-4a)

But the problem was not just their motives, it was their actions.

Look! In the day of your fasting you do as you please and you exploit all your labourers.

Even while they were engaged in fasting, their aim was to please themselves rather than Allah. They also exploited their workers.

Today also it is possible to be very religious, to keep every fast, while at the same time exploiting others. It might be,

- employing asylum seekers to work long hours for very low pay,
- doing business in a way that cheats others and takes advantage of their ignorance
- lying and spreading malicious rumours about others so that we are promoted at work instead of them.
- selling goods for high profits which we know have been made by people working in unsafe conditions for exploitative pay, or whose environment is being polluted by that industry
- or buying such goods at prices that are cheap for us because the workers who produce them are being exploited
- cheating society by tax evasion or lying to claim benefits we are not entitled to...

⁴ *You fast only to quarrel and fight and you strike people with wicked fists.*

A result of going hungry for these people was that they became short-tempered. Fighting, both verbal and physical is also all too common among the religious (of every religion).

The Unacceptable Fast (v4b-5)

You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

⁵ *Is this the kind of fast that I choose; only a day for people to humble themselves?*

Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

This is not saying that we should not fast. Fasting is good, but it is useless if we are living in disobedience to Allah.

Allah demands far more from us than mere outward religious acts. It is no good going through a religious ritual if in the rest of our lives we disobey Allah's commands.

The Acceptable Fast (v6-7,13)

⁶ *Is this not the fast that I choose; to take off the chains of injustice, to untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, to tear apart every yoke.*

⁷ *Is it not to break your bread for the hungry, to bring the poor homeless into your home, when you see the naked, to clothe them and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

These things can be summarised in two words: justice and mercy.

Notice that doing these things is described as a fast – the fast that Allah chooses. Why is the practise of justice and mercy described as a fast? Because fasting involves denying yourself, and practicing justice and mercy involve denying yourself for the good of others. Doing this stuff is costly.

A few ayat later the prophecy adds:

¹³ *If you turn back your foot from trampling on the Sabbath and doing as you please on my holy day,*

If you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honourable...

¹⁴ *Then you will find your delight in the LORD*

The Sabbath was one day rest in seven. This command was also concerned with social justice as servants, slaves and even animals had to rest from work.

It was also a day set aside for the worship of Allah. The Ban-i Isra'il were to remember how the LORD had rescued them from Pharaoh and the Egyptians (Taurat, Deuteronomy 5:15).

Perhaps the really significant thing here is the words *If you call the Sabbath a delight*. The Sabbath is a delight because of whose day it is – the LORD's.

So two kinds of fasting and two kinds of religion are presented here:

- To try and pressure Allah into doing what we want by our religious acts – this is unacceptable to Allah
OR
- To love Allah and delight in Allah so that we want to obey and worship Him

So Allah's demands are justice, mercy and the worship of Allah. Here is a clear call to *tauba*, to repentance, to turn from our sins to Allah.

May Allah have mercy on us all for our failure.

The Results of the Acceptable Fast (v8-14)

The second half of the prophecy describes the blessings that are the result of the acceptable fast.

⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn
and your healing will quickly appear.

Then your righteousness will go before you,
the glory of the LORD will be your rearguard.

⁹ Then you will call and the LORD will answer.
You will cry for help and he will say, 'Here I am.'

If you remove the yoke of oppression
with the pointing finger and malicious talk

¹⁰ If you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry
and if you satisfy the needs of the oppressed
Then your light will shine in the darkness
and your darkness will be like the noon.

¹¹ And the LORD will lead you continually,
he will satisfy you in a sun-scorched land,
he will strengthen your bones.

And you will be like a watered garden
and like a spring whose waters never fail.

¹² Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins,

you will raise up the age old foundations.
You will be called repairer of broken walls,
restorer of streets to dwell in.

¹³ If you turn back your foot from trampling on the Sabbath
and doing as you please on my holy day,
If you call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honourable
And if you honour it by not going your own way
or pursuing your own pleasure
or speaking idle words

¹⁴ Then you will find your delight in the LORD
and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of your father, Yaqub.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

A member of the Mahabba Network