



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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Volume 11 Issue 46

December 2, 2012

## The Sabbath Rest

Isaiah 58, “Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. 3 ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? 6 “Is not this the fast that I choose: to

loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 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 him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? 8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, 10 if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. 11 And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. 12 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. 13 "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; 14 then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

A seminary professor used to say, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Now, when it comes to Christianity, what is the main thing? Well, depending upon the passage of Scripture at which one looks, it is tempting to answer this in many ways.

John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."

From this verse, we most definitely would say that the main thing is self-sacrifice for others! But then there are other verses.

1 Timothy 4:14a, "Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you..."  
From this verse we could say that we are to not neglect our spiritual gifts.

Hebrews 13:16, "And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased."-

Obviously we would add to the list that in all things we should endeavor to do good. And as Christians there are many things at which we must labor as Christians, but again the question is this: what is the chief thing? With what ought we to occupy ourselves? To what ought we to give ourselves?

Isaiah 58 addresses this question head-on! God's people have returned from the exile to a miserable existence. The temple was destroyed. Jerusalem, the city of God, was in ruins. The city walls had been devastated such that God's people remained vulnerable and exposed and every attempt to rebuild the city was met with threats and opposition!

It is easy to understand how God's people would have lost their way. Yet to our amazement, they did not! They did not grow weary in doing well! Instead we see that they daily worshipped God (Isaiah 58:2a). Then they devoted themselves to the study of God's word-to knowing "the way of the Lord" (Isaiah 58:2b). And as a corporate people, they prided themselves in doing what was right (Isaiah 58:2c). In fact they did not neglect their daily prayers (Isaiah 58:2d). And then they observed many a fast in which some of the more powerful men amongst those that had returned "humbled themselves before the Lord" (Isaiah 58:5). Clearly these returning exiles kept the main thing the main thing! Or did they?

Isaiah 56-66 was written out of the concern that while God's people looked better than they had for centuries, nevertheless they still were missing the boat when it came to the essence of Christianity and the calling that God has placed upon them! Micah asks the question:

Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you?"

The substance of Godliness brings us to the calling of all to enter the valley of weeping.

Isaiah 58:13-14, "If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your *own* pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy *day* of the Lord honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your *own* ways, from seeking your *own* pleasure, and speaking *your own* word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you *with* the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

This is a most powerful passage! Yet sadly, much of the message has been muted today on account of the preconceptions we bring to this passage and this issue, the Sabbath. We need to consider the Sabbath as God intended it.

Genesis 2:1-3, "Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. And by the seventh day God completed His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day [that is, He pronounced His favor upon it] and sanctified it [that is, set it apart], because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made."

Genesis 2 tells us that God sanctified the seventh day. When the Bible speaks of God "sanctifying" something, the idea is that God has claimed that thing for Himself.

- A Holy City is a city that belongs to God, Matthew 4:5.
- A Holy Angel is an angel that belongs to God, Mark 8:38.
- A Holy Prophet is a prophet that belongs to God, Luke 1:70.
- A Holy Priesthood is a priesthood that belongs to God, 1 Peter 2:5.

- A Holy Nation is a nation that belongs to God, 1 Peter 2:9.

And thus, to say that God “sanctified” the seventh day is to say that God set this day apart as belonging to Himself and thus, it is an entirely unique and special day, different from all others. V. Hamilton explains this:

By virtue of being sanctified, one day of rest is set apart from six days of activity. It is divine designation alone that marks the seventh day as holy. Humanity does not confer sanctity on this day by abstention from work. In the words of Westermann, ‘The sanctification of the Sabbath institutes an order for humankind according to which time is divided into time and holy time... By sanctifying the seventh day God instituted a polarity between the everyday and the solemn, between days of work and days of rest, which was to be determinative for human existence.’ (Hamilton, 1990, p. 143)

God intended the Sabbath to be a day set apart from everyday work because it was on this day that God “ceased from His creative work.”

Genesis 2:2, 3b, “And by the seventh day God completed His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day, BECAUSE in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.”

The Sabbath was the day in which God completed- ceased from- His work of creation. And because we find our purpose as creatures in the emulation of God (Romans 8:29), God’s “cessation” serves as the rationale behind our cessation “then God blessed the seventh day, because in it He rested...” As Christians we are to be people of the Sabbath. But why? What virtue is there in “ceasing” from our six day labor routine? The answer is found in why God “ceased.”

Exodus 31:17, “It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, AND WAS REFRESHED.”

According to this text God ceased in order that He might be refreshed! *Refreshed* *נִפְּשָׁה/naphash* is close to the word in Hebrew for breath or life, *נֶפֶשׁ/nephesh*. It was *nephesh* that God “breathed” into man and so made him alive (Genesis 2:7). Accordingly and from here on out, genuine life or “breath” would be bound up in God!

Psalm 42:1-2, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul [נֶפֶשׁ/nephesh] thirsts for God, for the living God...”

Isaiah 26:8b-9, “Thy name, even Thy memory, is the desire of our souls [נֶפֶשׁ]. At night my soul [נֶפֶשׁ] longs for Thee, indeed, my spirit [רוּחַ] within me seeks Thee diligently.”

In line with this, *נִפְּשָׁה/naphash* was used in terms of being refreshed, of having life breathed

back into one's soul, of being revived, renewed, and so invigorated. Now when used of God it references a self-delight by which God communes with and enjoys Himself, Exodus 31:17. And not surprisingly, the idea of "refreshment" for a person is intimately united with being "revived" by fellowshiping with God!

Acts 3:19, "Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

This is the same word used in the Septuagint for *נָפַח*/*naphash*. From this we see that for the Christian, salvation is one and the same as being "breathed into by God" or being "revived in God." In other words when God saves a person, it is as if God once again "breathes into" that person life! This is the idea behind "refreshment." What does this have to do with the Sabbath?

Exodus 23:12, "Six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor in order that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female slave, as well as your stranger, may REFRESH themselves."

According to this passage, we ought to observe the Sabbath so that we might be refreshed in God! The inspired preface to Psalm 92 says that is "a song for the Sabbath day." It was written to be sung on the Sabbath and is quite instructive as to the place and purpose of the Sabbath in the life of the child of God. Listen to some of the statements.

Psalm 92, "For Thou, O Lord, hast made me glad by what Thou hast done, I will sing for joy at the works of Thy hands."

The Sabbath is all about "being made glad" as we reflect upon what God has done!

Psalm 92:10, "But Thou hast exalted my horn [which means that he was strengthened in the inner man] like that of the wild ox; I have been anointed with fresh oil."

As we engage in the calling of this day, our spirits are lifted up and we are strengthened in the inner man!

Psalm 92:12-15, "The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree, he will grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still yield fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and very green, to declare that the Lord is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him."

From this we see the rationale why God instituted the Sabbath. It originally was intended to be a vehicle of fellowship and refreshment! It is God's will for His people to cease from their six-day activities and spend a day delighting in God, His worship, and His people. Christ put it this way:

Mark 2:27b, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.”

### The Sabbath in the “Kingdom Years”

After man sinned against God while in the Garden of Eden he stood condemned before God and the Lord gave the promise of redemption. Prior to this point, man stood before God on the basis of their works. If they obeyed God, they would continue to remain in paradise. If they disobeyed God, they would be destroyed. We call this the Covenant of Works (Genesis 2:15-17). We know that they did not obey and so stood condemned before God. Yet God was unwilling to destroy mankind. As such, He announced the glorious message that He Himself would become man, uphold the original covenant, and then die in the place of the sinner (Genesis 3:15). We call this the Covenant of Grace (Genesis 3:15).

Under the Covenant of Grace, all in Christ stand before God on the basis of the righteousness and work of Christ. Their salvation is unconditional, not based on anything in man, and unilateral, its establishment did not involve man’s consent. The rest of the Bible- from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22 is an elaboration and explanation of this glorious promise. Each section was given to explain the glories of redemption.

- Grace.
- The cross.
- The Kingdom of God.
- The calling of man.
- The household of faith.
- And much more.

Yet that is not to say that there weren’t conditional elements which God used to teach His people about redemption. For example, when we come to the Kingdom Era, specifically the revelation given to Moses, we note that God organized His people into a Kingdom. As a Kingdom, Israel’s future was predicated upon whether or not the nation proved faithful to God. Moses gave many warnings to the nation at its inception:

Deuteronomy 28:15, “But it shall come about, if you will not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.”

As individuals and the household of faith, they stood before God on the basis of Christ’s work on the cross. Their salvation was unconditional and unilateral. But as a nation, a body politic, they stood before God on the basis of their national fidelity. If they upheld their constitution, they would remain. But if they forsook it, they would be destroyed!

Now during this era, where God’s people enjoyed this dual relationship with God, the Lord added to His teaching on the Sabbath. In fact, the Sabbath played a large role during the Kingdom years. Prior to this time, it wasn’t even referenced by name in the Bible; now it appears throughout God’s revelation to the nation. For example, it is referenced in:

- Exodus 16 before giving of the law in relation with the manna.
- Exodus 20 at Sinai in the giving of the Law.
- Exodus 23 as part of the civil statutes.
- Exodus 31 in connection with the design of the Tabernacle.
- Exodus 32-34 in the restating of the covenant.
- Exodus 35 in connection with the construction of the Tabernacle.
- Leviticus 16:29ff and the Day of Atonement.
- Leviticus 19 as part of the laws of distinction.
- Leviticus 26 as part of the summation of the Levitical Law.
- Numbers 15 in connection with the laws given after the wilderness experience.

It is important to note that under the Mosaic Covenant, the Sabbath did not cease to be what it had been. Rather it became something it had never been before, namely a Sign (a mark) of Israel's National devotion to God! So:

- As a covenant people and individuals, they were given two signs/marks which set them apart as a people: Circumcision and Passover.
- As a nation, they were given one sign/mark which set them apart: the Sabbath!

Now during this era what did the nation do? Israel and Judah both rebelled against God, trampled underfoot the covenant, such that eventually the curses that were announced upon the establishing of the nation were invoked. Israel and Judah lost their sovereignty as a nation! Accordingly in the exile, when God's people began grappling with the question, "How is it that God abandoned His people?" the answer given no doubt was a shock:

- It wasn't that God abandoned His people (to them still belong the glorious promises of the Abrahamic covenant- we see this throughout Isaiah)!
- Rather, it is that God's people had abandoned God!

So what did the people of God do who longed for the restoration of Judah's national sovereignty? So what did the people of God do who wanted God to bless them as He had the nation years before? They became people of the Bible. They became people of obedience and of religious devotion! While no doubt there were many who in the exile rediscovered the glories of genuine devotion, commitment, and trust in God, nevertheless the tendency existed in many a heart to try to impress God with religious devotion that He might be moved to pity!

This brings us to the concern of Isaiah in the latter part of Isaiah 56-66. Consider the example of Isaiah 58 where God said this to His people.

Isaiah 58:2, "...they seek Me day by day, and delight to know My ways, as a nation that has done righteousness, and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God. They ask Me *for* just decisions, they delight in the nearness of God."

As mentioned at the beginning, the devotion and commitment of God's people to God at this

time was unsurpassed! Notice even though Isaiah 58:5 was a criticism, nevertheless it is a reflection of two things:

- (1) God's people were scrupulously fasting, and
- (2) They couldn't have looked better

Isaiah 58:5, "Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself? Is it for bowing one's head like a reed, and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed?"

Clearly God's people were giving themselves to religious service like never before! Yet they had missed the boat when it came to what God really wanted! It was as Christ later would describe it.

Mark 7:6b, "...this people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me..."

Matthew 23:23a, "...you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness..."

2 Timothy 3:5, "...holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power..."

Now you and I know that in such a context, if the Sabbath had been of national importance before, it no doubt would become that and more. And so it did!

- (1) Because the Hebrew word for "work" appears thirty-nine times in the Old Testament and the Jews believed that the Sabbath was all about not working, they multiplied thirty-nine by itself and so came up with 1,521 laws regarding what was lawful/unlawful to do on the Sabbath .
- (2) Now Isaiah wrote this section of Scripture at the genesis of this impulse. By it (Isaiah 56-66), he endeavored to correct the people of God's misunderstanding when it came to the heart and soul of a relationship with God. Listen, the Sabbath is NOT about
  - Religious acts of devotion!
  - How committed you are to sacrifice for His name!
  - How well you can speak "Christianese"!
  - Manipulating God by acts of service.

Truly to live here for any length of time is to begin grumbling when God doesn't hold up His side of the bargain and that is exactly what happened. The people started wondering what was wrong with God.

Isaiah 58:3a, "Why have we fasted and Thou dost not see? *Why* have we humbled ourselves and Thou dost not notice?"



If ever you find yourself disgruntled with the benefits God gives you (or the lack thereof), you know you have fallen into moralism in your walk! Christianity is NOT about what God gives! Well, if Christianity is NOT about what God gives, then what is it about?

## The Appeal of Isaiah

Isaiah 58:13-14, “If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your *own* pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy *day* of the Lord honorable, and shall honor it, desisting from your *own* ways, from seeking your *own* pleasure, and speaking *your own* word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you *with* the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

This passage has three parts to it:

- (1) What God’s people ought to do with regard to the Sabbath (v. 13),
- (2) The personal result that such a focus will have on the child of God (v. 14a), and
- (3) The Spiritual Blessings that Accompany the Result (v. 14b). Let’s consider each section in their order...

The first part answers the question of what God’s people ought to do with regard to the Sabbath.

Isaiah 58:13, “if because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your *own* pleasure on My holy day.”

The irony is that the “pleasure” in mind was NOT only their spending the day doing what they wanted in business or play, it ALSO was their using the Sabbath observance as an attempt to earn God’s blessing! God’s people were to abandon their misuse of the Sabbath by which it had become a vehicle to satisfy their religious pleasures! Instead, they were to “call the sabbath a delight.”

In order to call the Sabbath a “delight” is not simply to say, “It is a delight!”, but genuinely to consider it to be as such! In other words Isaiah is pushing the people of God to realize and rediscover the original purpose of God in giving the Sabbath and all religious activity! Yes, the Sabbath was a mark of the nation! And when that nation went out of existence, so did the mark! But prior to God organizing His people into a nation, God had given the Sabbath to them as a vehicle of fellowship and communion! This is what God’s people were neglecting upon their return from exile.

The phrase “and call... the holy *day* of the Lord honorable” is one and the same as that in Genesis 2 where God had set this day apart unto a holy end. Isaiah is reminding God’s people of the original intent behind this glorious day and therefore all religious activity!

The phrase, “and shall honor it [that is, observing the very reason God gave it!], desisting from your *own* ways, from seeking your *own* pleasure, and speaking *your own* word

[referring to idle or vain talk]” shows that God did not institute the Sabbath ordinance so that religious people could indulge their religious appetite to endeavor to please God. The call here is a strong, “Cease and desist!”

Any suffering disappointment in their walk, the call is NOT to become more religious in the hope that God might be made to act on your behalf RATHER, it is to release one’s hold on self-effort and self-trust, and cling to God in Christ! When this becomes the focus, notice the result is this:

Isaiah 58:14a, “then you will take delight in the Lord.”

To “delight” means that you will have “exquisite joy.” When you and I make proper use of any religious practice, whether it be as in this chapter fasting, the Sabbath, or any means of grace; the result is a rich, deep, abiding communion with God. This is the essence and the power of godliness!

So, what is it that God’s people must do now that they have returned to the Promised Land with the charge to rebuild? They must abandoned concern for self, and direct their efforts to knowing, loving, and serving Christ. This remains our chief business as Christians! In explaining this verse, J. Oswalt began by asking the question:

Why do we engage in these ceremonies? To curry favor with God? To further our own ends, whatever those may be? If so, we are trampling on holy ground with filthy feet (v. 13a; cf. 1:12)... The point is that one should never engage in religious ceremony to further one’s own purposes (*ways*; cf. 55:8) as opposed to God’s. One should engage in these ceremonies, whatever they may be, for the sole purpose of bringing oneself adoringly to the feet of God, where once again one may express joyous surrender to him for the achievement of his purposes in and through oneself in the world. (Oswalt, 1986, p. 508)

Notice, when this becomes our focus, everything else takes care of itself! It reminds me of Matthew 6.

Matthew 6:33, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.”

### **The Spiritual Blessings that Accompany the Result**

That is exactly what we see here notice the blessing that accompany seeking God’s kingdom.

Isaiah 58:14, “and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you *with* the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Who wouldn’t want these in their life? Yet, let me share with you a religious secret; a

principle found throughout Scripture: He who would sit on a throne must give up the crown! Those who would find themselves, must give themselves away! If God's people were going to enjoy these glorious benefits, they must relinquish them and place as their greatest desire; loving, knowing, and serving Christ! If they did this, they would "...be made to ride on the heights of the earth; and ...feed upon the heritage of Jacob"!

Now Christian, take an honest assessment of your life.

- Is that what you have been and are about; loving, knowing, adoring, and serving Christ?
- Is that why you read the word? Come to church? Flee from sin?
- When things aren't going your way, do you resist the temptation to endeavor to manipulate God through religious devotion?

If it isn't, then you and I have fallen into the same trap as did the Pharisees and Sadducees of Christ's day and the people of Isaiah's day! Let me ask you: When is the last time you spent time in prayer and did nothing but adore Christ? There is no higher or greater calling in which you could engage in life. This is the essence of Godliness and the basis for health in one's walk with God. *This is the Main Thing!* Remember the words of Christ:

Matthew 22:37-40, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Let me caution you. What we are talking about is contrary to our fleshly inclinations! Especially in America, we want instant results; instant maturity, growth, Christianity. To labor at cultivating a life of godliness where the focus of our living is on loving, knowing, adoring, and serving Christ is to expect instant results. When we don't get those results instantly, the tendency is to give up. Don't do this. What we are talking about here is a life-long endeavor which begins when a person enters the Kingdom! Accordingly and practically speaking, let me encourage you to spend just five minutes a day this week, appreciating Christ; not making requests or even confessing your sin. Just adore Him, love Him, and praise Him! This truly is the main thing!

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### **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on December 2, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.