

Don't Forget the IF...

(August 17, 2022)

Verses like the following are uplifting because they point to God's promises to His children.

*The Lord will guide you continually,
And satisfy your soul in drought,
And strengthen your bones;
You shall be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.*

That verse - **Isaiah 58:11** (NKJV) - highlights promises from God. He clearly states He will

- guide us continually
- satisfy our souls in drought
- strengthen our bones
- make us like a watered garden

Who among us Christians does not want that? We all want to be guided continually by our Lord. Moreover, we want our souls satisfied in times of spiritual drought and we want to be strengthened from within despite pressures from the world. We want to experience being a watered garden that spiritually refreshes us over and over again, knowing that this spiritual refreshment never fails.

The question then becomes *how* do we come to the place where these things exist within us on a continual basis? The answer is simple to understand but it is not found in the above verse. The answer is actually found in the verses *before* **verse 11**.

*If you extend your soul to the hungry
And satisfy the afflicted soul,
Then your light shall dawn in the darkness,
And your darkness shall be as the noonday. (Isaiah 58:10)*

Interesting isn't it? God actually delights to provide nourishment to our souls, strengthening our bones and causing living waters to flow up from within us. But there is a bit of a "catch" or an "if" regarding these things. It is found in the way we treat other people, especially those within Christendom.

Let's be clear here that no amount of works will provide salvation (eternal life), to us. That's not the way it works. However, once we have *received* salvation, then our outlook on life and attitude toward other people should change immeasurably. This is what our "sanctification" is all about. Salvation granted to us is instantaneous once we express faith in the sinless life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. The process of being changed into His likeness (character), is *ongoing* until the day we die. That is our sanctification.

What God is telling us in the above verses is when we see the needs of the hungry and feed them and see those who are afflicted and do what we can to alleviate their affliction, it is then that we will begin

to reflect God's truth, goodness and light. As we do this in increasing measure, the promises of **verse 11** will take shape in our lives. As we continue to live as Jesus lived by helping to meet the needs of the hungry and oppressed, the greater will we experience His guidance, strength and blessing.

Folks, if all we do is read and memorize verses like **Isaiah 58:11** without seeing the context in which that verse was written, we are missing a great deal that God wants us to know. In fact, the first nine verses of **Isaiah 58** very clearly delineate how the Israelites were *supposed* to live before God. Yet, they continually failed to do what God wanted them to do. God wanted them to love their brothers within Israel and that could be extended to those non-Israelites who wanted to become part of Israel.

The first nine verses of **Isaiah 58** calls out the hypocrisy within Israel. Israelites lived as they wanted to live and didn't care if their brothers were mistreated, were hungry or experiencing injustice. They ignored these things and did not reach out to them to help them, yet they would be faithful to observe the fasts and other ceremonial parts of the Law given by Moses.

The Israelites never saw their own hypocrisy and shallowness and complained that God hadn't heard them even though they had observed the fasts and "*afflicted their souls*" by going without food so they could appear outwardly holy and righteous (**Isaiah 58:3**). Even though they observed these ceremonies as prescribed by Moses, here is how they lived.

*3 "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure,
And exploit all your laborers.*

*4 Indeed you fast for strife and debate,
And to strike with the fist of wickedness.*

*You will not fast as you do this day,
To make your voice heard on high.*

*5 Is it a fast that I have chosen,
A day for a man to afflict his soul?
Is it to bow down his head like a bulrush,
And to spread out sackcloth and ashes?*

*Would you call this a fast,
And an acceptable day to the Lord?*

*6 "Is this not the fast that I have chosen:
To loose the bonds of wickedness,*

*To undo the heavy burdens,
To let the oppressed go free,*

And that you break every yoke?

*7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out;*

*When you see the naked, that you cover him,
And not hide yourself from your own flesh?*

It seems clear enough as far as God is concerned, that the Israelites did things outwardly to appear holy and righteous while they actually called into contempt man and God. They fasted, but they completely ignored the heavy burdens that some Israelites were carrying. Some Israelites were forced to beg and no other Israelites would come to their aid, ignoring them (**v 7b**).

So after all this, we get to **verses 8-9** in which God promises good things - spiritual health and even physical healing - for those who lived their faith and did what was good in God's eyes. The "IF" is that they were to obey God from the heart and actually look for ways to help relieve burdens of those less fortunate. However, more often than not, religious leaders and priests either took advantage of the less fortunate in Israel or brutally used them for their own selfish gain.

Jeremiah 34 has some interesting words that the Lord gives to Jeremiah to tell the people and again, it emphasizes Israel's hypocrisy.

8 This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people who were at Jerusalem to proclaim liberty to them: 9 that every man should set free his male and female slave—a Hebrew man or woman—that no one should keep a Jewish brother in bondage. 10 Now when all the princes and all the people, who had entered into the covenant, heard that everyone should set free his male and female slaves, that no one should keep them in bondage anymore, they obeyed and let them go. (Jeremiah 34:8-10 NKJV)

In the above verses, it actually appears as though they did in fact, obey God, doesn't it? **Verse 10** tells us that "...they obeyed and let them go," speaking of their slaves. The Israelites released their fellow Israelites from slavery as the Lord commanded. All good, right?

11 But afterward they changed their minds and made the male and female slaves return, whom they had set free, and brought them into subjection as male and female slaves.

So they released them from bondage and then immediately took them back as slaves. What? The level of hypocrisy is alarming, but they could say, "Hey, we obeyed the Lord and let them go, didn't we?" I'd say this was severely childish of them but it's actually worse than that because it was an attempt to deceive God by following the *letter* of the Law while ignoring the *spirit* of the same Law.

In **Jeremiah 34:17** and following, God proclaims to them what was going to happen. It's not pretty.

17 Behold, I proclaim liberty to you,' says the Lord—'to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine! And I will deliver you to trouble among all the kingdoms of the earth. 18 And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it— 19 the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf— 20 I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth.

It seems clear enough that people who try to play games with God lose much in the process. What, if any application is there for Christians today? Several.

First, if you want to know God and understand Him on a growing basis and if you want to experience being guided by Him, being spiritually refreshed by Him and firmly "planted" so that spiritual growth is ongoing, we must do certain things from the heart. We must be willing to help our brothers and sisters in the Lord (in our church, our community), who are struggling. We may have to share food, help them over the rough places or come alongside them and help buoy them up spiritually. We can also help those outside the church but that is more difficult. You have to decide if all those homeless people who stand on corners asking for money is something that you can or should do. Does your town have food kitchens for such purposes? If so, why have they not availed themselves of them? It is very difficult sometimes to determine the truth when we see a person holding up a sign that says, "Hungry." Will they take unopened fresh food from you? If not, why not?

Second, we should be willing to help others from a pure heart, without selfish motivations. There should be nothing hypocritical in us. We shouldn't be helping to appear "good" outwardly while inwardly we would like to be anywhere else. God wants and expects us to reach out to others because we truly want to help them even if no one else ever sees.

If we do these things, then God will reward our efforts by fulfilling [Isaiah 58:11](#) and other portions of God's Word that are based on "if" clauses: *If we do this, He will do that*. I have unfortunately, spent too much time focusing on wanting to "draw" close to God emotionally/spiritually but without realizing that the only real way to achieve this is by putting our hand to the plow as it were and doing the very things that God commands us to do. Yes, He *is* a rewarder of those who seek Him and we seek Him not through our emotions or thoughts. We seek Him by fulfilling the things He wants us to do.

Jesus became righteously exasperated with the crowds one day when He said, "*Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?*" ([Luke 6:46](#); emphasis added). Is it safe to say the average Christians does that a lot? Conversely, when we commit ourselves to doing the works that He wants us to do, our eyes are off ourselves and onto others. Is this why He can then bless us with spiritual blessings? His Word indicates *yes*.