

Session 2

January 19, 2020

HOW CAN GOD USE ME WHEN OTHERS SUFFER?

Isaiah 58:3-11

There is a big difference between noticing someone's suffering and actually doing something about it. Interestingly enough, this passage reminds us that our failure to act is not simply a failure of *compassion*...but a failure in our *worship*.

The problem of false worship (vv. 3-5). In words reminiscent of the prophet Malachi, the Lord asks rhetorical questions here to make His point. Verse 3 comes from the perspective of God's people. They are portrayed as saying to Him, "We are worshipping (or in this case, fasting), so why God, are you not responding? We are making bitter sacrifices, so why, God, are you not paying attention to us?" And like in the book of Malachi, the answer is the same: "because you are simply going through the motions." Isaiah then mentions several ways that the fasting of God's people was actually *false worship*. First, they were guilty of ignoring the meaning of the fast they were participating in. Seventeenth-century commentator Matthew Henry said, "A fast is a day to afflict the soul; if it does not express true sorrow for sin, and does not promote the putting away of sin, it is not a fast." Rather than afflicting their souls, God's people "did as they pleased" (v. 3). Second, they were guilty of "oppressing their workers" (v. 3). The original language generally relates to exacting payment. In other words, while humbly fasting, they were harshly charging full payment from those who owed them. Third, their fasting was ruined by selfish and confrontational demands (v. 4). While these demands may have been aimed at others, the context allows them to be aimed at God. In other words, they selfishly demanded (rather than selflessly pled) that God respond to them. How could such anger and strife be acceptable to God? Finally, their fast was empty because the people were drawing attention to themselves (v. 5). They were going through the motions on the outside, but there was no purity or holiness showing up on the inside (see Jesus' warnings about this in Matt. 6:1-5). Again, the question is asked, "Is this acceptable to the Lord?"

The pattern for faithful worship (vv. 6-7). In these verses, the Lord expresses the purpose of the fast in question. Notice how this act of *personal worship* translates into acts of *public works*. All of the verbs in verse 6—*break, untie, set free, tear off*—depict intentional acts that provide relief. *Wickedness* refers to cruel treatment of others in general. Those cruelties are to be cut off. The *ropes of the yoke* are the leather thongs that attached the yoke to the oxen's neck and shoulders. These are to be loosed. The *oppressed* are those enslaved to heavy burdens. They are to be released. The *yoke* refers to the continuous struggles themselves. Every one of them is to be relieved. While the verbs in verse 6 are emphasized, the pronouns in verse 7 are the important words: *your* bread; into *your* house; when *you* see him; *your* own flesh and blood. Notice the sequence of events in the passage: false worship is to be replaced with faithful worship, which translates into faithful (and personal) works. And not only are burdens to be removed, but blessings are to be added! (see also James 2:15-17).

The product of faithful worship (vv. 8-11). So, what happens when everybody moves into faithful worship and faithful works? The entire nation is blessed! Look at the words used now: *light like the dawn; righteousness; glory* (v. 8); *a shining light; noonday* (v. 10); *satisfy*;

strengthen; watered garden; spring of water in a parched, dry land (v. 11). The contrast is great, because the difference made by true worship is great. The lessons? First, simply going through the motions of worship is not enough. God desires those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Second, worship alone is not enough. Faith that does not manifest itself in good works (especially in obvious situations of suffering and need) is a dead faith (James 2:17-18).