



# Promises, Promises!

## Some Exegetical Reflections on Isaiah 58

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**T**HE BOOK OF ISAIAH, LIKE THE BIBLE AS A WHOLE, PRESENTS PASTORS AND preachers with a difficulty to which there does not seem to be an easy answer: Do God's promises come with strings attached, or can they be proclaimed unconditionally? There can be few of us who on some occasion have not emphasized the latter, only later to have to backtrack and say that actually things are not as simple as they seem, that there are various hoops that we have to jump through before we can expect to see the promise brought to full fruition.

Of course, there are some standard examples of occasions when what looks on the surface to be an unconditional statement is shown by the wider context to be contingent on other unspoken assumptions. None is clearer than the book of

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*An examination of the "if...then" announcements of Isaiah 58 helps us understand the close and complex relationship between condition and promise in prophetic speech. There is a logical (or theological) unity between promise and exhortation.*

Jonah, where the prophet's unqualified announcement of judgment, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4), is itself overthrown by God's mercy in response to the city's repentance, as Jonah suspected all along that it would be (4:1-2). It would be reassuring to think that the same might be true of some of the other categorical prophetic announcements of judgment, such as those in the book of Amos.

While we may be more than happy to water down apparently unconditional promises of doom in this way, we need to realize that logically we ought to do the same with the many promises of salvation and blessing on which so much pastoral ministry to the suffering and oppressed, the sick and the dying is based. Put bluntly like that, however, the matter becomes instinctively less palatable to us.

Although this raises major questions for practical theology which obviously cannot be addressed here in full, it seems to me that Isaiah 58 may give us some clues towards a partial answer that it may be helpful to explore. In order to sharpen the issues in this particular context, let me first sketch out something of the background of the passage as it is normally conceived in critical commentaries, for, perhaps without realizing it, they in fact appeal to the very topic which I have just introduced.

#### I. ISAIAH 58 WITHIN ISAIAH 56-66

The general historical setting of Isaiah 56-66 is agreed to be the period following the return to Jerusalem of some of the Jewish community from the exile in Babylon. Although these chapters are often called "Trito-Isaiah," this is not a very satisfactory label, because it hides the fact that almost certainly more than one author has been at work here. While scholars inevitably disagree about details, the main lines of development are clear, and that is sufficient for our purposes. Chapters 60-62 are closest in content and style to the earlier chapters 40-55, and they seem to continue Deutero-Isaiah's message forward into the new situation. The atmosphere throughout is one of joy and triumph. In verse after verse God reaffirms his promises to the community in completely unconditional terms—there is not an "if" in sight!

From all that we know of the early history of this restored community, however, things did not work out in line with what all this might have led them to expect. In the chapters which surround 60-62, therefore, we begin to find hard questions being raised about them. Had God promised, "Arise, shine; for your light has come" (60:1)? Well, "we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness" (59:9). Had he promised that "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent" (62:1)? Why, then, "will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?" (64:12). There are many examples of such echoes of as yet unfulfilled promises.

Among the moves to resolve this palpable sense of dissonance between promise and reality, scholars are quick to point out that the most prominent is the intro-

duction of various conditions which must first be met. Since the author(s) could not lay the blame for the delay at God's door, they began to hunt for the particular failings in conduct by the people which might be the cause. Among the topics mentioned in this regard are profaning the sabbath (56:2-8; 58:13-14), illicit cult practices (57:3-13; 65:3-7), a wrong attitude to fasting (58:1-9), general forms of iniquity, including injustice, violence, and deceit (59:1-15), dietary offences (65:4; 66:17), and an improper understanding of sacrifice (66:3-4).

In directing attention to some of these failings, the author of our particular chapter, Isaiah 58, is unusually explicit in stating that the correction of these faults is a precondition for the fulfilment of the promises of chapters 60-62. For instance, in verses 9b-10 he writes, "If... if..., then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday," which obviously responds to the promise of 60:1-3, while the continuation in 58:12, "your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations," similarly responds to the promise of 61:4: "They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations." Again, in verses 13-14 we find a similar argument: "If... if... if..., then...I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob." This makes conditional the absolute promise of 62:8-9. Finally, although the structure of verses 6-9a is slightly different (rhetorical questions rather than conditional clauses), the argument remains the same: fulfil certain conditions (6-7) and "then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and...the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard," which again is based on 60:1-2 and 19, and "your righteousness (NRSV: vindicator) will go before you," which is reminiscent of 60:21, 61:3, and especially 62:1. The climactic promise of the earlier 52:12 has also clearly influenced the formulation of this verse.

At first sight, this looks like nothing so much as a complete loss of nerve on the part of our later author, an attempt to introduce so many conditions and excuses that the promises of God are effectively postponed indefinitely and thus emptied of all their substance. It is not just an apparent contradiction which might give rise to a fruitful dialectic. It seems to be more of an outright denial of one passage by another—and that within a single section of the same book.

Before that challenging conclusion is conceded, however, we ought first to look more closely at the relationship between the conditions that are supplied here and the content of the particular promises that are thus recontextualized. Is it possible that there is a more logical connection between them that may enable us to do justice to both sides of the coin without losing faith with either? If there is, then this chapter may offer guidelines for reflection on the wider problem that was introduced at the start of this article. An attempt along these lines will be offered in the following comments. Naturally, these are not intended to provide a full exposition of the chapter; only a few matters relevant to the immediate topic in hand will be addressed.

## II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONDITION AND PROMISE

Isaiah 58 deals with two principal topics, fasting and sabbath observance, of which much fuller attention is given to the first. Although both might be thought to concern religious observance, the first is treated from an ethical standpoint and only the second from a ceremonial point of view. We shall consider them accordingly.

### 1. *Ethical (Isaiah 58:1-12)*

The practice of fasting seems to have been a matter of particular concern to the early post-exilic community. (Zechariah 7-8, which comes from this same period, is also concerned with this issue and indeed treats it in a manner which closely parallels Isaiah 58.) The problem that it raised for our author is immediately made clear by the way in which he reports his audience's sense of bewilderment in verse 3: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" It is almost, he suggests, as though they condemn themselves out of their own mouth, for fasting is here presented as if it were a means for coercing God into activity. It is, as he immediately goes on to comment, a way of "serving their own interests." The irony of this comment should not be overlooked. In the previous verse the people are said to "delight" to know God's ways and to "delight" in drawing near to him, but in a play on words which is not apparent in English translations it is their own "delight" which they are looking for when they fast. This word will recur again twice in the concluding section (verse 13).

As so often in the prophets, not least in the introductory Isa 1:10-20, the response is that God is not moved by such observances alone. They should, rather, be an appropriate aspect only of an attitude which gives expression to a whole way of life. In the matter of fasting, this connection is most easily understood in the repeated thought, "is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?" (verse 7) and "if you offer your food [or pour out your soul] to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted" (verse 10). The other issues of social justice which are mentioned variously throughout verses 3-10 may readily be seen as an extension of this same principle. Fasting, denying oneself food, is of no value in itself; it should be part of an exercise that both voluntarily foregoes those things that others are forced by circumstances to do without and that at the same time gives to those in need that provision that we enjoy in excess. To this point, therefore, it is quite clear that there is an integral connection between the practice being discussed (fasting) and the conditions that are being introduced for the realization of the promises that we have yet to examine. There is nothing arbitrary here, but rather a completely logical (or perhaps better, theological) unity of thought.

Perhaps a modern analogy will help to bring the point home. In our world whose size has been reduced by the immediacy of mass communication, we are sadly all too familiar with television pictures of those afflicted by famine and other

natural disasters. They make us feel uncomfortable. When we make charitable donations to aid agencies as a response, however, are we not also sometimes guilty of “serving our own interests,” in this case putting a disturbed conscience to rest? I do not see how it can be considered anything other than an injustice that in some cases these problems arise because of the crippling debts which we in the west have encouraged poorer countries to enter into by our loans, so that now the payment of interest on those loans exceeds the aid which we appear so generously to give. In other words, we have manipulated the economic system to the extent that resources are still flowing from the poorer to the richer. Again, in order that we can enjoy cheaper sportswear or commodities such as tea and coffee, we turn a blind eye to the exploitative conditions of employment whereby someone else’s poverty effectively subsidizes our purchases. I fully realize that there are other factors, such as corrupt officials and even governments, which have exacerbated the problem, but at bottom it is impossible to escape the conclusion that we who are better off are continuing to benefit at the expense of the poor. And that has to be wrong. Like fasting of old, would not charitable giving today be more acceptable if it were accompanied by a concern for the root causes of poverty in the first place? And this is not addressed only to governments and international banks. We are all responsible for what we buy in the superstores; should we not seek out and support those firms that deal only in fairly-traded goods, those that ensure that their suppliers pay fair wages to all their employees? But perhaps that would be too costly—in time (to find out which they are) and in money (in the marginally more expensive price-tags that inevitably follow).

Having seen, then, that there is a logical connection between practice and condition, we need to turn now to inquire whether the same is true of the relationship of condition to promise. As we saw in the introduction, two sets of condition and promise are laid out in this passage about fasting, and we have also just noted that the conditions in both cases are based on the same principles. The promises that are attached in verses 8-9a and 10b-12 equally start off by making the same point: “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn” and “then your light shall rise in the darkness.” So far, mention has only been made of the similarity of these phrases to the unconditional promise of 60:1-3. Now, however, we must also draw attention to a slight but significant difference. In chapter 60, the “you” is feminine singular, no doubt referring to Zion. In other words, it is the community as a whole that is being addressed. Here in chapter 58, however, it is different. In verses 1-5, which introduce the chapter, the people are addressed in the plural (“they” to start with, and then directly as second person plural “you”). From verse 6 onwards, however, where the “if...then” construction begins, we find that the “you” is an individual—second person masculine singular. It is not so much the community as a whole that is in view, but rather each individual member of it.

Once this is realized, it can be seen immediately that “your light shall rise in the darkness” has a rather different force from the promise of chapter 60. The focus

is not so much on Zion's light shining amidst the darkness of the nations, but of an individual shining amidst the darkness of oppression and exploitation within the community itself. The general promise to the community in chapter 60 is here, so to speak, internalized.

This, of course, makes for an integral connection between the condition and the promise. Those who fast in the terms that have been set out above are effectively being told that they will truly make a difference. Not only will their light be seen as a witness to those still lost in the darkness of despair, but they will be "like a watered garden, like a spring of water" (verse 11) that gives nurture and succour to those in need, and "you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in" (verse 12), as those who contribute effectively to the process of restoration, both physical and metaphorical.

It is easy for people to fall into the trap of thinking that they can do so little on their own that it is really not worth doing anything at all. What the recontextualized promises of this passage assert is that this defeatist way of thinking is false. From God's perspective they are encouraged rather to understand that, however little it may appear on the surface, their efforts are indeed noted and effective. Perhaps we are justified in suggesting that, far from succumbing to a loss of nerve, our author is rather affirming that even though it may be necessary to await the full realization of the promise to the community as a whole, that does not mean that there is not plenty to be undertaken in faithful service in the meanwhile, and that this too is promised its own reward, not in terms of our own interests, but rather of God's.

## *2. Ceremonial (Isaiah 58:13-14)*

This concluding brief paragraph of the chapter deals with sabbath observance, which began at about this time to be one of the distinguishing features of Jewish identity in an increasingly alien world. Even though one of the ten commandments, keeping the sabbath, too, was susceptible of development into an end in itself and a means whereby someone might think that they had a claim on God.

The main thrust of the condition in verse 13 is clear. Negatively, the sabbath should not be observed as a means for pursuing one's own interests. This is repeated twice, and on the second occasion the same idiom is used as in verse 3, thus showing that the same basic principles are involved as in the case of fasting. This is important, because it demonstrates that the point of the chapter is not to set ethical and ceremonial concerns in opposition to one another, but to ensure that the place and practice of both are properly understood and motivated. Just as ceremony can easily degenerate into a purely personal and self-satisfying activity of the ghetto, so the practice of ethics can become an independent goal in itself, divorced from its biblical roots in a proper relationship with God. Neither is correct, according to this chapter. Rather, the point is to establish both on a proper footing.

Positively, the sabbath should be called “a delight” and “honorable,” being regarded as God’s “holy day.” This could never happen so long as the day was viewed from the point of the restrictions which were placed upon normal business activities. Were that the case, it would be merely an irritant, as was expressed already by the merchants in Amos’s day: “When will the sabbath be over, so that we may offer wheat for sale?” (Amos 8:5). This one-sided understanding clearly persisted until well after the time of our author (see Neh 13:15-22). There was, however, a positive approach which had the potential to overcome such negative reactions. As a “holy day,” which was set aside completely for God, it could be regarded as giving expression to a full life devoted to his service, seven days a week. In this light, it was not the one irksome day which distracted from the proper business of life, but rather the reverse—the day when one could truly be oneself, in contrast with the other six that were such a distraction!

From this “condition,” the promise follows seamlessly, and indeed in this case the connection is made clear by word association. “If you call the sabbath a delight (גִּילָה)<sup>\*</sup>...then you shall take delight (גִּילַעֲתֶיךָ) in the Lord.” In such a case, “promise” seems almost to be a misnomer; it is simply a case of stating that the conclusion will follow from the premise. Added to that is the further assurance of success and sustenance, expressed in what are likely traditional terms (see Deut 32:13). The shift in person (from feminine to masculine), as between 62:8-9 and this verse, carries the same implications as it did in the earlier part of the chapter, as discussed above. The passage thus becomes something of an Old Testament adumbration of the New Testament’s “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:33).

### III. SOME CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

It should not be supposed for one moment that our brief study of some aspects of Isaiah 58 can solve all the problems hinted at in the first part of this article. Nevertheless, I believe that it offers some guidelines that are of help in moving towards an answer. They may be summarized under three main headings.

First, we have seen that there is a closer connection between condition and promise than is often realized, and this may encourage us to look for the same even in cases where they do not lie so near to the surface. Put another way, law and gospel need not be implacably opposed, but what is sometimes considered to be “law” may prove to be no more than the necessary conditions for the receipt of the gospel in the first place. “If you do not forgive others, neither will your father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:15) is not a degeneration into justification by works. As the “commentary” on this saying in the story at Matt 18:23-35 makes clear, forgiveness is an inherently two-way process.

<sup>\*</sup>Note that, confusingly, this is not the same verb as that translated “delight” in the NRSV of v. 2 (גִּילַעֲתֶיךָ), whose related noun, גִּילָה, is rendered “interests” both in verse 3 and twice in verse 13.

Secondly, attention has been drawn to the distinction that needs sometimes to be drawn between words addressed to the community of faith as a whole and to individual members of it. There is, we know, both a “now” and a “not yet” included in God’s one promissory word to the world in Jesus Christ. They are integrally related to each other, of course, so that the one may be but a microcosm of the other. Nevertheless, the result in terms of present experience may need to be differentiated if we are not to mislead and so to cause others to stumble.

Finally, the relation of condition to promise was seen not to be simply a matter of making excuses for God’s apparent inactivity. Rather, the rhetoric of the passage is intended to serve as an encouragement to the faithful even in a “day of small things.” The promises are not given merely to be stored away in some smug comfort bank, but to function as a challenge and incentive to faithful service. The extent to which we shall delight now in “the joy of our salvation” is linked to the degree to which we demonstrate those attitudes and activities that are conducive with it. It is an association reflected as much in the New Testament as in the Old: “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58). The author of Isaiah 58 could hardly have put it better himself. ⊕



