

Explore the Bible: November 22

God Expects • Isaiah 58:1-12

By Don Hicks



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Do you believe America is in need of revival? Many Baptist and other Christian leaders have worked hard to encourage Americans to seek revival. They have often used 2 Chronicles 7:14 (NIV), “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

I believe we must turn from our wicked ways. Unfortunately, our society has lost clarity as to what wicked ways are. The psalmist reminds us we are not on our own to determine what wicked ways are: “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the everlasting way” Psalm 139:23-24 (CSB). If we are seeking to learn what God expects of us, we are seeking that everlasting way.

The bold and outspoken prophet, Isaiah, tells leaders to, “Cry out loudly, don’t hold back! Raise your voice like a trumpet. Tell my people their transgressions and the house of Jacob their sins” Isaiah 58:1 (CSB). These are the sins referred to in 2 Chronicles 7:14.

In verse two, God says the people seek Him daily, delight to know His ways, and delight in their closeness to God, but the people are complaining about a problem with God hearing their prayers and recognizing their fasting.

Those of us who are active in our churches (regularly attending two or three times every week when there is no pandemic, maybe even tithing) should realize this passage refers directly to us like the Old Testament folks who seek Him daily, delight to know His ways, and delight in their closeness to God. 2 Chronicles 7:14 is identifying the same group when it says "If my people, who are called by my name..." These passages clearly apply to the same group and to 21st century Christians. Don't you identify yourself as a Christian, one who is "called by My Name?"

These active religious leaders ask, "Why do we fast, if thou doest not see it? Why mortify ourselves, if thou payest no heed" Isaiah 58:3a (The New English Bible)? The second half of verse three begins to answer this question and the 21st century version of the question. The 21st century version might be worded like this: "Why do we get up early on Sunday morning and not sleep in like so many other people, and how can we afford our new boat and lake cabin if we give a tithe to the church?"

God inspires Isaiah to answer the why question when he says, "Since you serve your own interest only on your fast-day and make all your men work harder, since your fasting leads only to wrangling and strife... on such a day you are keeping no fast that will carry your cry to heaven. Is it a fast like this that I require" Isaiah 58:3b-5a (The New English Bible)?

Let's see if we can identify why God tells them that a fast like this does not meet God's requirements. First, the passage says: "Since you serve your own interest only on your fast-day." When God wants us to do anything, motive is important –

and guess what? God sees clearly and knows our motives. Isaiah says one of the main problems with their illegitimate fasts is, "You serve your own interest only on your fast-day and make all your men work harder." Selfish motive shows when those around you are not considered at all.

One of the proofs of consistency and motive in following God's teaching is how what you do affects those around you, especially in your family and the whole household for which you are responsible. Let's look in the Ten Commandments to the commandment to observe the Sabbath: "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy... On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant... so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do" Deuteronomy 5:12-14 (NIV).

Back in Isaiah 58:3, the prophet stressed that a person was only serving his own interests when his actions made all his men work harder. Isaiah quoted God: "Isn't this the fast I choose: To break the chains of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free" Isaiah 58:6 (CSB)?

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