

# God's Chosen Fast

*Book of Isaiah*

By Ken Wimer

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**Bible Text:** Isaiah 58:6-14

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## **Shreveport Grace Church**

2970 Baird Road

Shreveport, LA 71118

**Website:** [www.shrevegrace.org](http://www.shrevegrace.org)

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If you will, look with me in your Bibles to Isaiah 58 and we're going to consider from verse 6 down to verse 14 today and I want to speak with you about "God's Chosen Fast." I know that this is a very popular subject for many people that we know that are in professing Christendom, organized fasts, fasting. You may even have some friends and acquaintances that have at one time or another asked you, "Do you fast?" Whenever I'm asked that, I always tell them, "Well, if I did, I wouldn't tell you because then it wouldn't be any good anyway because the Lord says don't do your alms before men." But we want to consider what God considers true fasting and here in verse 6, we have very specific instruction. Isaiah 58:6, "Is not this the fast that I have chosen?" In other words, in contrast to what was declared of them in verse 4, "Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high." So if the question is, "What fast does God require? Is not this the fast that I have chosen?" Here's the answer,

6 to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? 7 Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? 8 Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward. 9 Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; 10 And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday: 11 And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. 12 And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in. 13 If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a

delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: 14 Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

So here we want to, first of all, consider an overview of fasting as taught in Scripture and the question that is raised is: is there a place for fasting among the Lord's people? Well, the first thing that we note is that fasting was not required of the disciples by our Lord Jesus Christ. It was not something that he taught his disciples to do and we know that all that pertains to the church, all that pertains to the way we order our lives, is to be found in the clear instruction of Scripture and Bob just read it for us. If you go back to Mark 2 in the portion of Scripture that he read, this was the complaint that the Pharisees had of the disciples but, in reality, the complain was addressed to our Lord. Any time that religious self-righteous people take exception with us over how the Lord has taught us in his grace, they're really expressing a rebellion against Christ himself.

We see this question about fasting in Mark 2:18, it says, "And the disciples of John and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him, Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?" Isn't it interesting that when men have a grievance against the word or against the Lord, that they will try to use examples of those that are close to those that they are opposing, such as John the Baptist here, and saying, "John taught his disciples to fast and the Pharisees do." They were trying to draw John to their side. You say, "Why would John have taught his disciples to fast?" The fasting that he taught was a way of worship. He himself set himself apart unto that ministry of preaching the Gospel, of setting Christ forth. He was a man that had very little in this life and spent his time preaching, "Behold the Lamb." Such was the way in which the Lord had led him and obviously if people followed him and went out to hear him preach, he wasn't handing out food to those that came to hear him. It wasn't like in our day where you can walk down the street to a convenience store and find food and we know that even of those that the Lord taught where they would spend two or three days in a place to hear him preach and became weary, became hungry. In that sense, they were fasting; they were not eating as they normally would out of a desire to hear the word of Christ.

But I like the answer that our Lord gave. He did not require of his disciples to fast. In fact, in verse 19, "Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridegroom fast?" He gives us a little inkling of what fasting is about and I would say that as you look back in your life, there may well be times that you can look at to where the Lord has completely taken away any appetite. Even if someone calls you and says, "Dinner is ready," you tell them, "Go ahead and eat. I'm just not disposed to eat right now." It may be some way that the Lord is dealing in your heart and this world or material things or physical things, the Lord has completely taken away that appetite. Your heart is being drawn to him. Our Lord said, "Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast."

So our Lord wasn't teaching his disciples what preachers do today with their people in setting aside times of fasting where they're obliged or obligated to fast as a sign or show of spirituality. The Lord said, "So long as I'm with them, there's no need to fast." And I believe that that reason is because their attention and their thoughts were to be toward him and it was to be a time of rejoicing. Typically when you think of fasting, it's a crying out unto the Lord, a time of mourning and a time of need and yearning.

But he says in verse 20, "But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away," there he is speaking of his death, "from them, and then shall they fast in those days." In other words, the Lord would so direct and we know that was the case. When the Lord was taken from their midst, they locked themselves up in a room. They weren't out there in the normal sea of life going about to the marketplace as if nothing was. Their lives were changed and they were completely shut up to the Lord.

But the point is, coming back here to Isaiah 58, that those times and seasons are ordered of the Lord here when it says in Isaiah 58:6, "Is not this the fast that I have chosen?" You see, fasting is to be something that is the affect or the outworking of the Lord's instruction in how he teaches his own. We know that in Matthew 6, if you want to look there specifically, our Lord instructed his followers not to do these things to be seen of men and that's the one problem of how it is taught is that men like to do these things to be seen of men. Here in Matthew 6:5, the Lord said, "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward." What is their reward? Well, they've been seen of men.

That's what they were after anyway and that's the strife and the debate that Isaiah wrote of in Isaiah 58:4. Men are fickle. They'll pretend. They have this pretense of setting themselves apart unto the Lord but they do it to put themselves over somebody else, to appear to be more spiritual than another and yet our Lord says here in Matthew 6:6, "But thou, when thou prayest," and that certainly is what fasting is. When you read about in in Scripture, it speaks of fasting and praying. It's not just trying to make it through the day without eating, but there is a prayerful spirit that the Lord gives his own that is above any desire or appetite for food. In Scripture there is no instruction you're going to find as to how long you're to fast. Those are men's rules and regulations. But I'll tell you this: if the Lord ever burdens your soul for yourself or for those about you and shows you the nature of your sin and who you are as a worthless creature before a holy God, all appetite goes. I don't know if you understand what it is to be lost, but a person that is lost means that they have no way of ever hoping to get back and the last thing on their mind is sitting down and eating a giant steak dinner with potatoes and hee-hawing. That weight, that burden of what it is to be lost, when the Lord strips you of all self-righteousness and lays you low at Christ's feet, the last thing on your mind is sitting down at a table and having a meal or acting like nothing was. I'll tell you that such is the case of Saul when the Lord sent Ananias to him. He found him praying and fasting. He was totally laid low, in fact, his eyesight taken away. Such was the darkness and it wasn't until the Lord gave him light and showed him of Christ that he got up and washed himself and began to eat.

That's the kind of fast, I believe, which is truly of the Lord. Just like prayer, it's not just pronouncing words and I know it's difficult that we pray that the Lord give us constantly a prayerful spirit even in worship. We don't want to just go through the mechanics. When we lead, those of us that lead this congregation and read the Scripture in prayer, it's a solemn thing. It shouldn't be just like hitting a recorder and here come the words out and, "In Jesus' name, amen," stop. That's vain worship, but to truly have a heart that yearns after Christ and is taught of him.

This is something that takes place not in public view, but in the heart and that's why here in Matthew 6, the Lord says, "But thou, when thou prayest," to truly pray, "enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." Again, we're not thinking of being rewarded openly but there is a blessing that comes to those whom the Lord so teaches of their need of Christ and lays them low that when he raises them up, that blessing is spiritual and we're going to see that coming back to Isaiah 58 here in a little bit.

But he says, "When ye pray," verse 7, "use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do," as the nations do, "for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him." Then he gives them this model prayer, "After this manner therefore pray ye." Again, that was never designed of the Lord just as a rote and regurgitate as men use it, but you think about what instruction is given here on how to pray. Addressed to the Father, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed," or truly sanctified, "be thy name. Thy kingdom come." That's acknowledging his sovereignty. "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." Whatever you have decreed and purposed in heaven, Lord, may that so be acknowledged here on this earth. "Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation," that shows God's sovereignty even over our temptations. If he were to leave us to ourselves and let us go the way that we would go, we would most certainly fall. So the prayer is, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen."

Verse 14, "For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Moreover when ye fast," there it is, "be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face," that means take a bath. "That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."

So that fits this God ordained fast that we read about here in Isaiah 58:6. So what is God's chosen fast? Well, simply put: 1. it's the one that God himself has ordained and works in the heart of the sinner by his grace. "Is not this the fast that I have chosen?" The truth is, dear friends, none of us would humble ourselves were it not that God himself humbled us. That's the first thing I have to acknowledge. Such is my nature that I would never be

brought low myself. I know we tell our kids, "Go and sit in your room until you're sorry." Well, they know that if they don't hurry up and say, "I'm sorry," they've got to stay in there a while so they give a little bit of time and then, "Mommy, Daddy, I'm sorry," because they know kids are out there waiting.

That's how men treat God in their religion but the difference is he knows the heart and the reality is that unless God humbles our heart, we would be always playing the hypocrite. When I just read that in Matthew 6, we always take the side of the non-hypocrite, but in reality if God ever shows us who we are, we have to say, "Lord, I'm that hypocrite. Lord, I'm that sinner because I know my nature."

In Jeremiah 31:18, I don't know if you've ever seen this prayer. I love the prayers of Scripture. Jeremiah 31:18, the Lord said, "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus," you think about Ephraim when you study the Scriptures, they were just hardened against the Lord and yet here the Lord said, "I have heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God." I believe if the Lord ever teaches you something of yourself, that's going to be your prayer, "Lord, if I'm ever to be turned, turn thou me."

That's the fast which the Lord himself has chosen and look at the connection here in verse 6 and 7 with what we've just read in Matthew 6 about forgiving others. When the heart has been tendered by the mercy and grace of the Lord, it affects how we deal with others. It would be our nature, even as Isaiah 58:4, to strife and to debate and to smite with the fist of wickedness. I know my heart as well as yours and I know yours because I know my heart and that is when people deal with us in a way that we feel unjust, we react, and given the right opportunity and time, we'd probably kill some people. I don't think we ought to be surprised when we hear of people left to themselves actually murdering and killing because we have the same nature within us. Yet the Lord says here in Isaiah 58:6, "to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?" of one of your kind, is the way that that's put. So the call here is that if the Lord has dealt mercifully and graciously with you, then why wouldn't you deal mercifully and graciously with others? Others that are just like you?

Just as I read over here in Matthew 6:12, what is the prayer that the Lord taught his disciples to pray? "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." Now, it's not saying that God's forgiving us is conditional on how we forgive others, if that were the case, there would be no forgiveness. But what it's saying is, "Let your prayer be this, Lord, grant me that spirit of forgiveness in the same way that you have forgiven me." Now, when you think of it in those terms, it removes all pretense for even being right to be angry or being right in imputing to another in anger their sin when you know very well that God has not imputed to your account your sin if Christ paid your debt.

So it tempers our attitude and heart. That's what repentance is, it's a change of heart. It's a change of attitude. It's an attitude adjustment. When the Lord truly grants repentance, it's because we see ourselves as we are before a holy God and our mouth is shut and so when others would mistreat us or oppose us or do something that we feel is unjust, it tempers our attitude as well toward them. How would I not forgive that one when I know how it is that God has forgiven me? So these are times and seasons that the Lord brings us through to cause us to reflect upon our need, first of all, and also upon the needs of others.

If I come back here to Isaiah 58:6 and 7 that I've just read for you, I have to say that the only one who has really truly ever fasted according to God's chosen fast is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. That's why my mouth is shut. It's like that old preacher, someone asked him one time and said, "When did you actually start preaching to the glory of Christ?" And he said, "I'd like to begin. I'd like to begin." I can't stand up here today and tell you I've ever repented. I can't tell you today that I've ever had faith. I can't tell you today I've ever turned to the Lord. If there is any turning to the Lord, it's been the Lord. If there is any understanding of my need before a holy God, it's only because Christ has given me that sense. If I were left to myself, I'd be among the worst of them out there, running headstrong into hell and splitting it wide open.

God gives us these times and seasons of his chosen fast to bring us low and to see our need, but I will tell you one that has faithfully fulfilled God's chosen fast and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. When I read this when it says "to loose the bands of wickedness," is that not what the Lord Jesus Christ did by his obedience unto death when he came and set himself apart? It was to, by his obedience, work out all righteousness on behalf of sinners such as we are. You see, when I read Isaiah 58:6-7, I don't see myself as the one doing the loosing. I don't see myself as the one undoing the heavy burden. I see myself as the one being loosed and needing that burden of my guilt and sin taken away. I need to be that one who is being acted upon and not doing the acting and if I've got that backwards, I'm telling you what, I still don't know the Lord and neither do you.

Here it is, "Who is it that has loosed the bands of wickedness?" It's only the Lord. "Who is it that has undone the heavy burden, the burden of the curse of the law that I could not bear?" He has. "Who is it that has so fasted to let the oppressed go free?" That word "free" is the word "justified." How is it that sinners are justified except through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone that he accomplished there at Calvary and how is it that any could be broken from their yoke? Well, the Lord did it. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Now, if I am one of his and that is my testimony of what he has done for me, why would I ever want to burden someone else? Why would I ever want to put upon them their sin and their guilt and point my finger in their face and say, "You've done me wrong, you have no right"? That's just one worm raising its head against another worm and yet such is our nature we do it all the time and that's why I say sin has killed its thousands but self-righteousness its ten thousand. That's what sends sinners to hell, they are blind toward their own sin.

"Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry?" There, again, Christ the bread of life. I'm the needy one. He has dealt himself, the bread of life, to this hungry sinner. "And that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house?" "Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall see God." What has he done but taken a poor, needy and naked sinner such as I am and brought me into his house, his house of love. His banner over me, his love. He is my abiding place.

It says there, "that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?" We know how it is. Somebody comes and knocks once at your door for a need and you think, "Okay, I can help you this time, but just this once." The next time you see them coming and they ask again, what do you do? You think, "Oh well, alright." But the next time you see them coming, "Don't answer the door! Don't answer the phone! I'm not here." That's how we deal with others but never the Lord. Never the Lord. He has not hidden himself from the needy, in fact, he who was rich, the Scriptures say, became poor that we might become the very riches of God in him. I can't see any other way of looking at this other than Christ's work for me, the sinner.

But, again, we see the blessings in the Lord's dealing graciously in this way. You see in verse 8 all the way down to verse 12, it says and I've noted here 12 different blessings. We sing that song, "Count your blessings, name them one by one," they are listed here. What are the blessings of those with whom the Lord has so graciously dealt? Well, verse 8 says, "Then shall thy light break forth as the morning." Isn't that what we need as sinners, light in the darkness to show us the face of the Lord Jesus Christ? That light of his grace shining forth in the heart?

Then the second blessing, "thine health shall spring forth speedily." I don't believe that's just talking about physical health but it's talking about mental, it's talking about spiritual, emotional rest. When all about is trouble, yet rest that comes from the graciousness of God in so dealing with us as sinners for Christ's sake. Health springing forth. Then the Scriptures say, "by whose stripes ye are healed." All that flows to us by way of blessing and peace and rest come from the cross, comes from what Christ has done for needy sinners such as we are.

Then, thirdly, in verse 8, "thy righteousness shall go before thee." Now, if a works righteousness person reads this, they're going to say, "Aha, there it is! Our righteousness." No, this is speaking to sinners whom God has chosen and whom Christ has redeemed. Who is their righteousness? It's Christ. Christ. You can read that where it says, "and thy righteousness shall go before thee," Christ shall go before thee. He says, "I am the shepherd." He's the great shepherd. He goes before his sheep. He is their righteousness. We have none.

Then fourthly there in verse 8, "the glory of the LORD shall be thy reward." That word "reward" means "the rear guard; coming up from behind." So he goes before, he's our righteousness that goes before. He is the forerunner that has gone before into glory and represents his own before the Father, but he has not left us orphans. "The glory of the LORD shall be thy reward." In other words, even as the Psalmist said in Psalm 23,

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Why? Because of that mercy and grace. It's not me. What are sheep but defenseless animals prone to wander, "Lord, I feel it." But it's the Lord that has so directed to be the shepherd, to be that righteousness that we could never furnish and to be that mercy and goodness that follows behind so that all about us, there is none that can lay their hand upon us. What a blessing that is.

Then, sixthly, in verse 9, "Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am." Now, that's true prayer. When the Lord causes you to see that it's not in ourselves but in him, he gives you the cry and then he answers the cry. Such is the merciful God that he is, otherwise I could never expect to hear him answer me were it not that he is the substitute, he is the Redeemer. He is the Redeemer.

Verses 9 and 10, we see a seventh blessing and that is, I've written down here: joy fulfilled when he says, "If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday." People that are satisfied, they don't have grudges to hold. In a workaday world, when you run into people who have an ax to grind, it's one of the questions I ask when I interview, "Do you feel fortunate in life?" I've had some think, they'll come right back and say, "Yeah, I believe I've been blessed." But I've had others come back and say, "Well, you know, I've had kind of a rough upbringing," and the next thing you know, they're just spilling the beans on you and they've got an ax to grind. I had one like that in my office the other day and you're thinking, "Such darkness."

We have no reason to complain, none of us, if we're the Lord's. Our joy and our satisfaction is in him and that's what he's talking about there in verse 9, "If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke." In other words, don't be a burden to people around you. Don't be always going around and yoking them with your problems.

"Putting forth of the finger." That's pointing the finger and letting people know, "No, the blame is not here, it's on you." Or "speaking vanity," speaking in a puffed up manner as if we're somebody. All of that is taken away. We have no reason to complain. We have no reason to boast. All that we are and have is in him and that's why there is that fulfillment and that joy.

But eighth, down in verse 11: the blessing of continual moment-by-moment guidance of the Lord and his Spirit when it says, "And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not." Such is the blessing that we have as the Lord's.

The ninth blessing there in verse 11, again: soul satisfaction, "satisfy thy soul in drought." These aren't just temporal blessings, but by the Spirit drawing out our hearts to Christ.



In verse 12 is a tenth blessing: you'll be known as a peacemaker, "And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in." How does a sinner do that? Well, a redeemed sinner does it by pointing other sinners to Christ. That's what it is to be a peacemaker. Notice I didn't say a peacekeeper. Scripture doesn't say, "Blessed are the peacekeepers." Peace at all cost. No, peacemakers. Wherever the conflict is, wherever the trouble is, we know the answer. To repair the breach is to point sinners to Christ just as we, by the Spirit, have been pointed to him.

Then the eleventh blessing down in verse 13: enjoying and resting in Christ the true Sabbath. When it talks there about delighting in the Sabbath, that's forward looking to Christ who is our Sabbath, not begrudging the Sabbath, but delighting in it because of who he is.

Then the twelfth blessing there in verse 14 and I know I'm rushing through these, but the Lord is able to take these thoughts and bring them home to your heart. The twelfth blessing is: delighting in the Lord and those promises fulfilled in Christ. He says, "Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it." All the promises of God in Scripture, yea and amen.

You know, if the Lord ever teaches us of those blessings and sometimes he has to lay us low to do it, we're like children, but whom the Lord loves, he chastens. But when he does, it's always a mercy to cause us to come back again and to count those blessings of who we are in Christ and be thankful for it.