



BETHEL  
PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## Coping with Loss Part 2

Isaiah 58 “Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. 3 ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? 6 “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? 8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. 9 Then you shall call, and the LORD will

answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, 10 if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. 11 And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. 12 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. 13 "If you turn back your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; 14 then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

In this world, trials bring many blessings. William Secker described it this way:

Beloved, it is sometimes a mercy to us that God removes outward mercies from us! He never wounds a saint to kill him but to heal him! (Secker, 2012)

Samuel Rutherford described it this way:

Nay, whether God come to His children with a rod or a crown, if He come Himself with it, it is well. (Samuel Rutherford, 2010, pp. XI, 52)

Anonymous wrote this:

God will take nothing from the believer that He doesn't in Christ restore a hundredfold!

Do any of you have any idea what these men are talking about? They speak of trial and difficulty as if they somehow were blessings, when earthly blessings are gone, nevertheless spiritual blessings are in abundance! Why do they speak this way? Clearly it is because Scripture speaks this way.

Psalm 84:5-7, "How blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee; in whose heart are the highways to Zion! Passing through the valley of Baca [the Valley of Weeping], they make it a spring, the early rain also covers it with blessings. They go from strength to strength, *every one of them* appears before God in Zion."

David wrote:

Psalm 119:71, "It is good for me that I was afflicted..."

James wrote:

James 1:2, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials."

Paul joined the chorus:

Romans 5:3, “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations...”

How is it that trial and difficulty can be spoken about with such kind words? It is NOT because there is anything inherently good about suffering. RATHER it is because of what God gives when trial takes! The Psalmist reiterates this promise:

Psalm 84:6, “Passing through the valley of Baca, they make it a spring...”

Trial, difficulty, persecution, and disappointment cannot “separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). Accompanying any trial through which a Christian may pass is glorious blessing! And what are these blessings? What are the benefits that can be found when trouble settles upon us?

Isaiah 56-66 addresses these questions. The latter part of Isaiah was written to the generation that returned from the exile and was given the calling to rebuild Jerusalem. Theirs most certainly was a life of disappointment. Many could remember “the good ‘ol days” when Jerusalem and the Temple were in their glory. To gaze upon the city now was to be moved to tears (Ezra 3:12-13). And of those who couldn’t remember the former glory, they were left to live in light of failed expectations and dreams when the “enemies of the Lord” effectively hindered the rebuilding project (Ezra 4:4-5). Truly, theirs was a life of bitterness, disappointment, and sorrow! Yet the message of Isaiah was message: in this valley of weeping, there is much that makes it a spring!

What are those blessings that make it a spring? What does God offer in Christ when He has removed His outward mercies? Consider with me the never too late blessings that can be found in disappointment.

Isaiah 58:8, “Then your light will break out like the dawn...”

In the book of Isaiah, the term “light” is used broadly in reference to the blessings that come from a covenant relationship with God; e.g., spiritual vitality, protection, and communion.

Isaiah 59:9, “Therefore, justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us; we hope for light, but behold, darkness; for brightness, but we walk in gloom.”

In this passage, justice, righteousness, walking in joy and not gloom are all synonyms of “light.”

Isaiah 60:1-3, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

In this context, “light” refers to a leap forward in one’s spiritual maturation, when “the glory of the Lord” is manifested in and through us! When this happens, what comes of the sorrow of disappointment?

Isaiah 9:1a, 2, “But there will be no *more* gloom for her who was in anguish... [Why?] The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.”

“Light” is used throughout Isaiah as a reference to the graces that accompany a love-relationship with God: justice, righteousness, joy, fellowship, growth. It was this that still was available to any and all God’s people travelling in the Valley of Baca! And so though their father’s sinned and that cost them their

sovereignty as a nation, God had not nor would He ever forsake His people. No matter how bad they had been, grace was still available! And though they lived in the Valley of Baca/weeping/disappointment, nevertheless a fresh beginning when it came to their relationship with God was always available!

In this context, notice how this fresh could come; the text says, "...it breaks out like the dawn." The Bible has much to say about the "dawn" that is, the new day/this fresh beginning. In fact when we read of the "dawn" or "morning" in Scripture, there are at least two emphases, the first being that of suddenness. On account of the geography of the Near East, the change from night to day was somewhat dramatic. C. L. Feinberg said this:

In [Palestine] the light does not fade gradually after twilight. Sunset is preceded by brightness, which is soon changed with the disappearance of the sun. Within an hour, sunset has given way to the darkness of night." - and so it is at dawn! (Gaebelein, Grogan, Feinberg, Ellison, & Alexander, 1986, p. 64)

E. J. Young put it this way:

In these first two clauses the emphasis falls upon speed. Elsewhere Isaiah uses the verb *break forth* of the hatching of eggs (59:5) and of water gushing forth (35:6). The word seems to suggest suddenness, swiftness, and novelty. In the Near East the light of day follows almost immediately upon the darkness of night. (Young, 1965, pp. Vol 3, 431)

That's the emphasis here; the *suddenness of God's blessing* that can be enjoyed by God's people in sorrow. Yet there is another emphasis when it comes to the word for "dawn," and that is the renewal of God's covenant commitment to bless and so keep His people.

Lamentations 3:22-23a, "The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. *They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness.*"

In Scripture, the new day/dawn brings the opportunity to be reminded of the love, compassion, and faithfulness of God. Accordingly each morning we are called to renew our faith in God! That is what the morning brings!

Isaiah 33:2a, "O Lord, be gracious to us; we have waited for Thee. Be Thou their strength every morning..."

Again, the emphasis is on the renewal of faith and the recognition that God is the basis of our strength this day! Taken together, the idea here is that spiritual renewal, comfort, and encouragement can be ours in the darkest of places provided we let go of the past and/or our feeble attempts at building our Kingdom, and so take God on His terms. You do that and to you belongs a sudden and dramatic fresh beginning no matter how dark your road. Notice the blessing that can be found in disappointment.

Personal Restoration

Isaiah 58:8b, "...and your recovery will speedily spring forth..."

The word “recovery” is used of new flesh growing over a wound (Jeremiah 8:22; 30:17). This is incredible! Think of it! As a person ages, their body becomes hard, inflexible, and even brittle. Compare yourself to a child. Notice your skin, tone, flexibility, recoverability. There is a huge difference, isn’t there? This is the way of the flesh! Yet spiritually we need not go the way of the flesh. Amazingly, if we avail ourselves of the grace of God, the Valley of Baca can bring with it restoration so that we once again are supple, bendable, young, and fresh in our spirits. That is the idea here! If in the darkness we turn anew to Christ, our walk with God will be as it was in the beginning, where we not only remember our first love, Jesus Christ but enjoy Him! Remember the testimony of David who was no stranger to gross rebellion against God. What did he discover in the valley of the shadow of death?

Psalm 23:3, “He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.”

This can be your testimony brothers and sisters. No matter how bad the storm raging in your life! Think of Isaiah 40:31 where Isaiah put it this way:

Isaiah 40:31, “...those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up *with* wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.”

This is not talking about a pie in the sky Christianity, but the spiritual renewal that comes from a heart given over to the Lord. This the “spring” that can be enjoyed in the Valley of Baca!

## Security

Notice a third blessing, security.

Isaiah 58:8c, “...and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.”

In this passage Isaiah utilizes military language, referencing both an “advance guard” and a “rear guard.”

Think back to when God’s people were wandering in the wilderness. In such an assembly, typically the young and healthy headed up the parade with the weak, infirmed, and elderly at the back. Now as a commander what would you do to ensure the protection of the entire group? You would divide your army placing soldiers both at front and at the rear. It is these “guards”, the advance guard and the rear guard, that are being referenced here.

In light of the language, we conclude that the Valley of Baca brings with it a sense of insecurity! And so it was with God’s people in our passage. The moment they set about doing right, they were opposed by the world! Yet theirs wasn’t the only generation that was attacked for doing right. Peter wrote this of the persecuted church.

1 Peter 4:4, “And in *all* this, they are surprised that you do not run with *them* into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign *you*.”

How grateful we ought to be that in those times of humility, God sends two “guards” to protect us. The text says that they are “righteousness” at the front and “God’s glory” at the back. What is the significance

of these?

The Advance Guard is NOT the people's moral superiority (for they had none). Rather, it must be the righteousness of "The Servant" (Isaiah 53) who gave His life on account of His people's sin. In other words, it was the assurance of forgiveness that goes before the Christian struggling in the Valley of Baca (cf. Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16; Isaiah 54:17)! The Rear Guard gathers up the stragglers. It is nothing less than the weightiness of God's being, and so the assurance that a strong and powerful God can and will make good on all His promises! Christian, seek the Lord in the disappointments of life, cling to Christ, and in and through all things you will "from strength to strength" know truly that it is well with your soul!

Romans 8:33b-34a, "...God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?"

1 Peter 4:19, "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right."

### **Depth in One's Walk**

And this brings us to the fourth blessing, depth in one's walk with Christ.

Isaiah 58:9a, "Then you will call, and the Lord will answer<sup>1</sup>; you will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.'"

The language of this passage suggests prayer, which is a natural response on the part of God's people suffering in the Valley of Weeping. And yet notice, the answer to all prayer offered in faith to God in the valley of the shadow of death involves a house call on the part of God! Truly, before the Lord grants you anything, He has deigned to give you Himself and so a deeper, more intimate walk with Him!

This is the idea in this passage. Isaiah utilizes intimate language. The blessings that arise in the Valley of Baca are met out by a Lord who is quite near to the wounded and brokenhearted. In fact, listen to the effects of a Lord who draws near to His children in the valley of weeping with John speaking of the Last Day.

Revelation 21:3b-4a, "...God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes..."

Such intimacy! Such closeness! And yet it is this what waits all of God's children in the Valley of Baca who will trust the Lord! Truly, set Christ as your chief desire, and want and deprivation will become a portal into some of the most intimate times of fellowship!

### **Clarity in Life's Darkness and Perplexities**

Another blessing is clarity in life's darkness and perplexities. Isaiah adds this to the call of fidelity in fasting.

Isaiah 58:9b-11a, "...if you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness. And if you give yourself to the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, THEN your

light will rise in darkness, and your gloom *will become* like midday. And the Lord will continually guide you...”

It is important to note that the “light” referenced here is NOT related to the “dawn” or “new morning” of Isaiah 58:8. Here it is used to contrast “darkness” which means that it has reference to direction! Notice the words:

- darkness: חֹשֶׁק (*hōšek*); is a common word for “darkness” in Scripture referencing the absence of light and so lostness!
- gloom: אֶפְלַיִם (*’ăpēlâ*); references a darkness that literally can be felt; it too is used to describe the plague of death that came upon Egypt (cf., Exodus 10:21-22)! It is a darkness which brings with it irrepressible despair which overwhelms any and all natural coping mechanisms which might be thrown against it by man.

Together these speak of those times in life where the believer doesn’t know up from down. At those times, when sin and misery settles upon a person, despair usually comes with it. It is this sense of despondency/depression which is transformed by faith. The man or woman who is brought to the end of themselves and clings to God in their despair will be as one who goes from the darkness of night into the blaring light of midday; in a moment!

That is the fifth blessing that is promised to any and all in the Valley of Baca! One moment there is gloom and doom as the sinner realizes that their most cherished hope will not come to pass. Much of what they have lived for is a sham! But then God enters in and redirects our hopes and dreams to the Kingdom of Christ. Suddenly we behold the world and God’s plan as never before. It all makes sense now! That is the clarity referenced here!

## Timely Supply

Another blessing is timely supply.

Isaiah 58:11b, “And the Lord will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones...”

The word for “scorched places” is only used here in the Bible. However, it is related to a term which means “to be white” (Lamentations 4:7). Now in Isaiah 58, the focus isn’t on the color white, but that which remains after intense, prolonged heat!

Years back when my good friend was seeking to downsize, he gave me his very large grill. Those of you who remember it know it was huge. It literally could cook 50 hamburgers at a time! Toward the end of this grill’s cooking day, I had two boys cooking hamburgers on that grill almost every day. The result was that a lot of grease accumulated on the grill. After my boys left for college, I went out to grill some hamburgers (Paul was our griller and so I literally hadn’t seen the inside of the grill for a couple of years). Needless to say, it was rather dirty; grease was caked on everywhere.

So I did what only an idiot could do. After scrubbing the thing for quite some time and getting nowhere, I

decided I'd burn the grease off. I lit both sides, set the grill to cook on its highest setting, and walked away. Ten minutes later I had a grease fire in my backyard. The entire grill was engulfed in flames. It was quite spectacular.

After I put the inferno out and the grill cooled, I discovered that I had melted the grill and on all the remaining surfaces was a white powder, the remains of a hot burn! That is what is in mind here. The devastation of life at times can be so intense that all that is left is the white powder which results from being scorched! It is this powder that is left on our plans, idols, and most cherished possessions. Yet do you know what God gives at these times to the man or woman of faith? This text says two things: "satisfaction" and "the strengthening of our bones!"

- Satisfaction: שָׂבַע (*śābēa*): is to be satisfied by nourishment. In other words, it is to have ones physical needs met on account of manna from heaven (which is how the word is used in Exodus 16:8). In other words, whatever satisfaction we used to derive from our false-idols now is enjoyed as we draw near to God in His word.
- Strengthening of our bones is the idea of making the bones strong in contrast to all those references where terror makes the bones tremble and shake<sup>2</sup> or where sorrow or guilt make them waste away.<sup>3</sup> This is the result of walking through the Valley of Baca! Yet when in the crucible the Christian cries out to God, the Lord strengthens them in the inner man granting stability when formerly there was none.

Together the idea is the provision of that which is needed in order to attain health and be nourished. What an incredible blessing! Again when difficulty descends upon us, much of our lives become scorched! The temperature is so hot for so long; all that is left is that white powder that results from intense, prolonged heat. Now in such an environment, what is there on this earth to "satisfy us"? Very little! But if we look to God, what will He do? At these times, He will strengthen our bones and satisfy our souls with nourishment!

## Fresh Resource and Vitality

Another blessing is fresh, incoming resource and vitality.

Isaiah 58:11c, "...and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail"

This is a vivid description. In the ancient Near East, "well watered" gardens were few and far between! With this, this promise reminds us of the words of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 17:7-8, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted [literally, "transplanted"] by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit."

Why is it that this transplanted tree doesn't fear when the heat comes? It doesn't fear because its roots have grown deep into the earth where they have discovered an underground stream. And so, though on



the surface the land may be in a drought, nevertheless the tree is lush and green because it has an unseen water supply.

That is the idea here. In the Valley of Weeping when Providence brings drought in your surroundings so that everything is scorched; nevertheless if you will trust the Lord, you will always be renewed in the inner man. You will appear to be “well watered garden” for beneath the surface there is a “spring of water whose water does not fail!” What a contrast to Isaiah 1:30 which describes the effect of serving a false god, “[they are as]... an oak whose leaf fades away, or as a garden that has no water”!

## Restoration, Continuance, and Recovery

Notice the final blessing referenced is that of restoration, continuance and recovery.

Isaiah 58:12, “And those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; and you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell”

The first reference obviously is the ruin of Jerusalem together with its temple following the destruction that occurred in 586 B.C. However, we need not limit it to this. Truly, God continues to build His Kingdom, a process which will be consummated when the Lord renews this earth and takes up residence in it! I love how J. Oswalt put it:

If it was their sin that destroyed the city, it will be their righteousness through the grace of God that will rebuild it. God always gives us the dignity of being involved in putting back together what we have broken. We cannot do it apart from him, but he will not do it apart from us. (Oswalt, 1986)

The final blessing referenced is participating in the rebuilding process, but not that of an earthly kingdom; BUT the building up of the Kingdom of God! As we look at this list of blessings, it is easy to think that it is “pie in the sky” religion. It sounds too good; it could never happen! Yet you must see that what Isaiah has written here is NOT beyond the grasp of any one of us it truly is what is promised to any in the Valley of Baca. Yet the context brings with it a condition that is shown by a very important word that introduces this section:

Isaiah 58:8a, “Then your light will break out like the dawn...”

The opening verses of this chapter have God’s people reeling from disappointment. Not only have they just spent seventy years in exile, but upon their return any and all good that they could do was being opposed at every turn. The result, typical of many on whom disappointment has settled was a turning of one’s focus inward:

- *I no longer will be concerned with anything or anyone that might add to my disappointment.*
- *Rather, I will live for myself, do my thing, and so look out for number one!*

We see this progression in Isaiah 58:1-7 in which God’s people used the religion of God to gratify themselves! When this focus persists, darkness, disease, and sorrow settle upon the believer. But if the

child of God at these times is brought to the end of themselves and so relinquishes their plans and desires as it relates to their kingdom, good, and glory; if in repentance and brokenness they are brought to confess that all they want is Christ, His will, and so His glory (that is the focus and substance of Isaiah 58:6-7), THEN your light will break out like the dawn and all of the blessings referenced in this section will be ours! But first there must be humility, brokenness, and repentance. Then will come the glorious blessings that accompany a love-relationship with Christ! J. Oswalt said this:

When we choose to make ourselves and our religion and our control of our destinies the focus of our lives, the result is darkness (cf. 5:20; 8:20; 47:5; 60:2), disease (cf. 1:5), defeat (cf. 1:7), and separation (cf. 1:4). We have chosen falsehood instead of truth, creation instead of the Creator, and these can be the only results for us. (Oswalt, 1986, p. 504)

What do you suppose is the direction of all God's providences in your life? Is it to make you more religious? Is it to increase the show? No! It is to bring us to the point of self-renunciation whereby we say with Paul that the only thing I want from this point forward is to know Christ! Give me this, and I'll be satisfied!

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> No doubt, Isaiah 58:3 was in mind here!

<sup>2</sup> Job 4:14; Psalm 6:2; Jeremiah 23:9; Habakkuk 3:16.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 31:10; 32:3; 38:3; 102:3, 5.

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## About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on November 25, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.