

Isaiah 58:13-14

“Calling the Sabbath a Delight”

“If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your *own* pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy *day* of the LORD honorable, and honor it, desisting from your *own* ways, from seeking your *own* pleasure and speaking *your own* word, then you will take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you *with* the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

The themes expressed in Isaiah 58:13-14, as well as in the verses preceding—in particular the emphasis, “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” (58:12)—tend to be appealed to in a wide selection of Messianic teaching and preaching. However, while Isaiah 58:13-14 are appreciated verses, there is some room for improvement, as we examine the significance of the statements issued, and how the institution of the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is held by God to be just as important as caring for the poor and destitute. Placing the Sabbath at the same level of what many would classify as social justice issues, is not often weighed by readers. Many of us may indeed be friendly to God’s people in the post-resurrection era keeping *Shabbat*, but we need more refinement so we can recognize how important the Sabbath is as far more than a “religious” observance.

There is disagreement for sure, as to whether this prophetic oracle was issued from a pre-exilic Isaiah son of Amoz (1:1), or some other figure. Liberal interpreters tend to be those who posit a post-exilic setting for this word, tending to conclude that the Jewish returnees from Babylon needed to not be dismissive of the Sabbath. In the estimation of Benjamin D. Sommer in *The Jewish Study Bible*, “Deutero-Isaiah does not reject ritual in favor of ethical action but calls on the nation to attend to both, and focuses especially on the observance of the Sabbath. Cf. 56.6. These vv. borrow vocabulary from Deut. 32.9-13.”¹ Some have even thought that Isaiah 58:13-14 may be addressing a similar situation as seen in Nehemiah 13:15-22.² Furthermore, searching for a more historically-rooted setting for Isaiah ch. 58, some have even interpreted the subject of v. 12 preceding to be the Persian King Artaxerxes, who is to rebuild the city of Jerusalem.³ While the following analysis will be considering the thoughts of those who hold to critical presuppositions surrounding the Book of Isaiah, nothing in the oracle requires it to have been composed after the Babylonian exile, as it indeed does have wider reaching implications for those who are to correct mistakes of the past, and properly keep the Sabbath for the future.

58:13 The NKJV offers a fairly literal rendering of Isaiah 58:13: “If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, *from* doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy *day* of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking *your own* words.” Each one of the statements made here, bears a level of importance for those seeking to evaluate how significant the institution of the Sabbath is. Keeping the Sabbath properly, often requires a complete reorganization of one’s priorities, and with it a steadfast focus *not* on what a man or woman thinks is important, but instead on what the Creator God thinks is important. Brevard S. Childs directs, “In contrast to pursuing one’s own business, the essence of the faithful observance of the Sabbath is that one explicitly refrains from one’s normal, daily occupation and honors the day as sacred to God.”⁴ John D.W. Watts further states, though, “Sabbath observance, like anything else, could become a habit performed because one likes to do it...but here it is seen as a test by which one restrains common desires in order to conform to God’s expressed will.”⁵

¹ Sommer, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 900.

² Cf. Margaret Barker, “Isaiah,” in *ECB*, 537.

³ Watts, 846.

⁴ Childs, *Isaiah*, 481.

⁵ Watts, 844.

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The Sabbath is to bring God's people into a fuller and deeper communion with Him, as normal actions during the six working days find themselves altered. How people walk and what they transport themselves to, is to be much different on the Sabbath than on normal days, seen in the statement *im-tashiv m'Shabbat ragelkha* (אַם־תָּשִׁיב מִשַּׁבָּת רַגְלְךָ), taken by ATS to be "If you restrain your foot because it is the Sabbath." Watts concludes that this "refers to restrictions on travel on the Sabbath (Exod 16:29). Unnecessary travel was thought of as a kind of labor that was prohibited on the Sabbath (Exod 20:8-11; Deut 5:12-15). Conforming to Sabbath restrictions was interpreted as symbolic denial of 'doing your pleasure' on the day that is YHWH's 'holy day.'"⁶ Even with differences of opinion present in Judaism today, between an Orthodox Judaism which will prohibit driving on *Shabbat* and a Conservative Judaism which will permit driving but only to synagogue, transportation is to be something brought into the will and intention of God. A failure to do this could lead, as the NEB paraphrases, "to tread[ing] the sabbath underfoot." As Ecclesiastes 5:1 might further remind some of us, "Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil."

The Sabbath is to be a time when God's people "refrain from accomplishing your own needs on My holy day" (b, ATS). The terminology *chafetzkha* (חֶפְצְךָ) is often rendered as either "your pleasure" (RSV), "your own interests" (NRSV), or even "as you please" (NIV). The orientation of God's people is to surely be a delight or pleasure in God (Psalm 37:4) and in His Instruction (Psalm 1:2). John N. Oswalt notes how there is some divergence on how to approach the Hebrew *cheifeitz* (חֶפֶץ), "delight, pleasure" (BDB),⁷ describing,

"The frequent suggestion...that *hāpēš* should be translated as 'business' here misses the point. But 'pleasure,' as though people were not to smile on the Sabbath day, misses it as well. The point is that one should never engage in religious ceremony to further one's own purposes (*ways*; cf. 55:8) as opposed to God's. One should engage in these ceremonies, whatever they may be, for the sole purpose of bringing oneself adoringly to the feet of God, where once again one may express joyous surrender to him for the achievement of his purposes in and through oneself in the world."⁸

The Sabbath is to be called a delight by those who keep it: *v'qarata l'Shabbat oneg* (וְשָׂבַח עֲנִי), "if you proclaim the Sabbath 'a delight'" (c, ATS). The Sabbath is to also be declared as an honored holy day: *liqdosh ADONAI mekubad* (לִקְדוֹשׁ יְהוָה מְקֻבָּד), "and the holy [day] of HASHEM 'honored'" (d, ATS), with the verb *kaveid* (קָבַד) notably appearing in the Piel stem (intensive action, active voice), often involving "make honourable, honour, glorify" (BDB).⁹ It sits within the realm of lexical possibilities to say, "the holy day of the LORD glorified."

While a reappraisal of the weekly *Shabbat* is taking place in our day among many in the contemporary Messianic movement, there are broader themes in view in Isaiah ch. 56 which place it alongside of concern for others. Watts' observations on people calling the Sabbath holy and honored, need to be well taken:

"Doing 'YHWH's holy thing' and calling it 'a thing to be honored' is depicted as a joyful, festive act, the very opposite of 'seeking your pleasure,' your own will, or speaking your own word. The issue is not joy or mourning. It is rather YHWH's day or our day, YHWH's will or our will. Sabbath can be no excuse for not helping others. Here it is ranked with feeding the hungry and clothing the naked as being YHWH's will."¹⁰

Childs further observes,

"The observance of the Sabbath by God's faithful is only pleasing as an act of worship that takes delight in God. As such it is fully congruent with the stipulation for the obedient response of

⁶ Ibid., 845.

⁷ BDB, 343.

⁸ Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 508.

⁹ BDB, 457.

¹⁰ Watts, 845.

feeding the hungry and caring for the poor. It should come as no surprise that this connection has always been seen by rabbinic Judaism in its continued affirmation of the centrality of the Sabbath.¹¹

In our ministry's own experience in probing some of the contemporary Christian rejection of a day of rest—even a "Sunday Sabbath" of sorts akin to that followed by pietists several centuries ago—some have said that it is far more important for Believers to focus on feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and standing against the oppression of the destitute. *These are all important works.* However, the God who expects His people to stand up to defend the orphan, the widow, and the poor—also expects His people to keep the Sabbath, and facilitate a counter-culture of rest to a world of laborious toil. What kind of effectiveness might some be robbing themselves of, *in rightly opposing the machinations of the world*, but in failing to implement a Sabbath ethos for their activities? Just from a physical standpoint, how many people in important ministries are bordering on severe exhaustion, because they do not observe a weekly Sabbath rest?

The Sabbath is to be a time when people are seen not "going your own ways (e, RSV), *mei'asot derakhekha* (מֵעֲשׂוֹת דְּרַכְיֶיךָ). Thoughts of Amos 8:4-6 should register true, given how many in Ancient Israel were ready for the Sabbath to be over, so they could open their business and shortchange the people. With the clause *v'dabeir davar* (וְדַבֵּר דָּבָר) literally rendered as "or-to-speak word" (Kohlenberger),¹² it should not be too surprising to detect value judgments present in translations that have: "talking idly" (f, RSV), "speaking idle words" (NIV), "talking too much" (HCSB), or "discussing the forbidden" (ATS)—all of which though are understandable. As Isaiah 58:9 has previously stated, "Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness."

The details of Isaiah 58:13 should necessarily cause Bible readers to think through how they observe the weekly Sabbath, and whether or not their activities and routines are honoring of the intentions of the day, and most importantly of God. J.A. Motyer astutely concludes, "In a word, the Sabbath calls for careful, thoughtful living...It is a day, therefore, for reverential, thoughtful use coupled with sweet joy. The determining factor is whether this or that activity defiles or honours the holiness of the day, whether it is a mere indulgence of a personal pleasure (*doing as you please*) or preference (*going your own way*) or whether it conduces to 'sweet delight' in the Lord and his ordinances."¹³ Many of us have enacted appropriate disciplines and routines where we can make the most of *Shabbat*, and others of us need to redouble our efforts in how we make *Shabbat* the centerpiece of our week.

58:14 The benefits of God's own keeping the weekly Sabbath as He intended, are certainly quite substantial: "then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken" (NRSV). What necessarily should grab our attention is the assertion *v'hirkavtikha al-(bamotei) [bamatei] eretz* (וְהִרְכַבְתִּיךָ עַל-בְּמוֹתַי [בְּמֹתַי] אֶרֶץ), "and I will mount you astride the heights of the world" (ATS), "and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land" (NIV), or "I will set you astride the heights of the earth" (NJPS). As it says of Israel in Deuteronomy 32:13, "He made him ride on the high places of the earth, and he ate the produce of the field; and He made him suck honey from the rock, and oil from the flinty rock."¹⁴ A high and lofty condition of blessing will be experienced by those who remember *Shabbat*.

Isaiah 58:13-14 application The statements of Isaiah 58:13-14 have a certain influence on how people not just approach a theology of Sabbath and rest, but also how they internalize the significance of the Sabbath, and whether or not the Sabbath as an institution bears any importance

¹¹ Childs, *Isaiah*, 481.

¹² Kohlenberger, 4:118.

¹³ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 483.

¹⁴ Also to be considered, can be: Deuteronomy 26:16-19; 28:1; 33:29; Jeremiah 4:13; Psalm 68:4; 104:3.

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for them. The weekly *Shabbat* is something which is to be regarded as a pleasure and delight for the people of God, and it is to be held on an equal platform with good works such as feeding the hungry or providing shelter to the homeless. A selection of thoughts from evangelical Christian commentators, on the importance of the Sabbath, need not be overlooked:

- Barry G. Webb: “[T]he call for true Sabbath observance, like the call for true fasting, is a call for a changed heart and life, not just the more meticulous observance of a ritual. There is no shortcut to joy and victory (14); they come through repentance, and a willingness to live God’s way.”¹⁵
- J.A. Motyer: “A true use of the Sabbath brings delight in the Lord himself...The Lord’s ordinances, truly used, are a means of grace, avenues to the Lord himself.”¹⁶
- John N. Oswalt: “God has said that if they will surrender their desires to him, and let their ethical behavior and their ceremonial behavior be dominated by self-forgetfulness, they will find him, they will experience the exultation of being partners with him.”¹⁷

There is no detection among any of these commentators that the institution of the Sabbath is to be viewed as something that sincere Christian people should eschew. And, it is to be fairly recognized how many Protestant Christians throughout history have applied Isaiah 58:13-14 to their Sunday worship activities—which can be appreciated in a time when the seventh-day Sabbath is indeed being restored to God’s people, and we move forward. But, it can be admittedly difficult for many contemporary Christians to see the importance of the Sabbath or *Shabbat*, set right alongside of other issues such as caring for the disenfranchised and the need for God’s people to fast. Even various Messianics today have difficulty giving the Sabbath is proper due, as Isaiah 58:6-12 have indeed previously emphasized,

“Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ 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, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. 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” (Isaiah 58:6-12).

In the estimation of Christopher R. Seitz, “As the chapter closes, it is clear that issues of social justice, religious observance, daily relations, and sabbath obedience are woven together, and together they constitute what the poet understands as practicing true righteousness (58:2).”¹⁸ There are many important actions to be performed—and which are being performed—by people within today’s broad Body of Messiah, which are humanitarian related, and which surely find support from Isaiah 58:6-12. But Isaiah 58:13-14 emphasizes how God’s own are also to take delight in the institution of the Sabbath. Interestingly enough, and even with a few critical presuppositions, John Goldingay draws out how while it might be more natural to associate the Sabbath as being a means of rest for the weary here, the significance of the Sabbath is to instead emphasize the holiness and sacredness of the God we are to serve:

“It is tempting to reckon that the principle behind verses 13-14 is that observing the sabbath can be a direct means of contributing to the well-being of ordinary working people (cf. Deut. 6:12-

¹⁵ Webb, 227.

¹⁶ Motyer, *Isaiah*, 483.

¹⁷ Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 509.

¹⁸ Christopher R. Seitz, in *NIB*, 6:500.

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15 and the fiftieth-year rule in Lev. 25), that same well-being with which the comments on fasting have been concerned. Doing as they please then means turning the sabbath into an ordinary business day (cf. Neh. 10:31; 13:15-22). But the overt focus (as in Nehemiah) does not lie on the well-being of people. Rather, it lies on the significance the sabbath plays in developing proper attitudes to Yahweh. The sabbath is **holy** ground and the people are to keep off it. It is no time for doing business, as the temple is holy ground and is no place for doing business (cf. Mark 11:15-17—quoting 56:7).¹⁹

Many people in today's Messianic movement—including Jewish Believers who are committed to appreciating their Biblical and ethnic heritage, and non-Jewish Believers who want to obey God more fully—can all testify to how much of a delight and blessing it is to observe *Shabbat*! For the first time for many people, they are finally getting the weekly rest they need to not be exhausted. Others are able to spend a day not just in fellowship with other Believers, but in abstaining from work and commerce, use it to focus on the Lord in a special time of prayer and Bible study. And still others, use *Shabbat* as a time to meet with their families and extended families in special ways. Many of us, myself included, can definitely identify with the thoughts of Abraham Joshua Heschel in his famed work, *The Sabbath*, in how he waxes heavily on how a world without the Sabbath is a world that cannot fully know of its Creator:

“...The Jewish contribution to the idea of love is the conception of love of Sabbath, the love of a day, of spirit in the form of time.

“What is so luminous about a day? What is so precious to captivate the hearts? It is because the seventh day is a mine where spirit's precious metal can be found with which to construct the palace in time, a dimension in which the human is at home with the divine; a dimension in which man aspires to approach the likeness of the divine.

“For where shall the likeness of God be found? There is no quality that space has in common with the essence of God. There is not enough freedom on the top of the mountain; there is not enough glory in the silence of the sea. Yet the likeness of God can be found in time, which is eternity in disguise.

“The art of keeping the seventh day is the art of painting on the canvas of time the mysterious grandeur of the climax of creation: as He sanctified the seventh day, so shall we. The love of the Sabbath is the love of man for what he and God have in common. Our keeping the Sabbath day is a paraphrase of His sanctification of the seventh day.

“What would be a world without Sabbath? It would be a world that knew only itself or God distorted as a thing or the abyss separating Him from the world; a world without the vision of a window in eternity that opens into time.”²⁰

¹⁹ Goldingay, *Isaiah*, pp 327-328.

²⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 16.