

Lesson 7

Is 58:1-14

That remarkable eighteenth-century character Dean Swift — he of *Gulliver's Travels* — said of the fashionable ladies of his day that 'they were so busy being religious they had no time to say their prayers'. Isaiah would have identified with that. He saw the sort of punctiliousness in sabbath-keeping that forgot what the Sabbath was all about. Very different from our day when the world — and how many Christians? — have devised a week ending with two Saturdays and a 'Lord's Day' observed between 10.30 a.m. and 12.00 noon. Jeremiah (17:24-25) would have joined Isaiah in making the Sabbath a test case of spiritual reality and a divinely intended means of blessing. How many of us today would come with good marks out of that test? And Isaiah did not mean 'old-style' Sabbatarianism with its negativity, a no-work day of often boring idleness. He looked for a day of concern for the welfare of those we influence (v. 3), making sure that we do not exploit others so that we may 'keep the Sabbath': a day so kept that it excludes family strife (but, on the contrary, encourages family harmony [v. 4]); a day to care for the needy, the homeless, the underdogs — including our needy relatives (v. 7); a day to work for social amelioration and reformation (v. 6). Quite a busy day, you might well say! So we had better recall, for example, the work-free day of rest and refreshment in Exodus 23:12 and so many other verses. If we end the Lord's Day tired out we have not kept the Lord's Day. So then, Isaiah is not writing a programme but indicating preferences and possibilities, offering typical diary entries, and we do well to listen. Sunday is not a second Saturday, nor is it a day of penal boredom. It is one of the Lord's intended 'means of grace', bringing 'renewal' (v. 8), a cure for depression (v. 10), promoting spiritual refreshment (v. 11) and elation (v. 14), and bringing the promise of security (v. 8) and answered prayer (v. 9).

1. List all the attributes of God found in Isaiah 57:15. Then use this verse to explain to an unbeliever in your own words what God is like.

2. What is the good news and the bad news of Isaiah 57:18-21?

3. Isaiah 58:2 says the people seek the Lord daily and that they delight to know His ways as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgments of their God. So what's the problem in 58:1-5?

4. Describe the sort of "fast" that pleases God and its results (58:6-12). Any personal applications here?

5. How do you think Christians should honor the Sabbath as the holy day of the Lord (58:13-14)?