

Isaiah 58:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?

Analysis

Through rhetorical questions, God defines what fasting is NOT: "Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul?" The Hebrew *anah nephesh* (afflict soul) describes self-denial—the external actions of fasting. "Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?" These were traditional signs of mourning and repentance (Jonah 3:5-6, Daniel 9:3, Esther 4:3). Bulrushes bend easily with the wind—a metaphor for temporary, superficial humility. The penetrating question follows: "Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD?" God rejects mere external ritual divorced from internal reality and ethical transformation. This connects to the consistent prophetic critique of ritualism (1 Samuel 15:22, Psalm 51:16-17, Hosea 6:6, Amos 5:21-24, Micah 6:6-8). From a Reformed perspective, this illustrates that God requires truth in the inward parts (Psalm 51:6). The heart's condition, not external religious performance, determines acceptability before God. True fasting flows from genuine repentance and produces justice and mercy.

Historical Context

Sackcloth and ashes were ancient Near Eastern mourning customs adopted by Israel. These public displays of contrition were commanded for certain occasions (Joel 1:13-14, Jonah 3:5-9) but could become empty performance when hearts

remained unchanged. Even in the New Testament era, Jesus encountered similar external religiosity among the Pharisees who paraded their fasting (Matthew 6:16-18) while neglecting the weightier matters of the law (Matthew 23:23).

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What contemporary religious practices might parallel the 'bowing like a bulrush'—outwardly religious but lacking substance?
2. How do we discern between genuine repentance and merely going through religious motions?
3. What does God's rejection of empty ritual teach us about acceptable worship in the New Covenant?

Interlinear Text

הַלְזָה this H2088	יְהִיָּה H1961	צֹם Is it such a fast H6685	אֲבָחֶרְהוּ that I have chosen H977	יּוֹם a day H3117	עַנּוֹת to afflict H6031	אֶדָּם for a man H120
נַפְשׁוֹ his soul H5315	הִלָּךְ is it to bow down H3721	כְּאַגֹּמֶן as a bulrush H100	רֹאשׁוֹ his head H7218	וְשָׁק sackcloth H8242	וְאַפֵּי and ashes H665	
וַיִּצָּרֶם and to spread H3331	הַלְזָה this H2088	תִּקְרָא under him wilt thou call H7121	צֹם Is it such a fast H6685	יּוֹם a day H3117		
וְכַצֵּן and an acceptable H7522	לַיהוָה to the LORD H3068					

Additional Cross-References

Zechariah 7:5 (Parallel theme): Speak unto all the people of the land, and to the priests, saying, When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me, even to me?

Isaiah 49:8 (References Lord): Thus saith the LORD, In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages;

Isaiah 61:2 (References Lord): To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;

Psalms 69:13 (References Lord): But as for me, my prayer is unto thee, O LORD, in an acceptable time: O God, in the multitude of thy mercy hear me, in the truth of thy salvation.

Luke 4:19 (References Lord): To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

Leviticus 16:29 (Parallel theme): And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that sojourneth among you:

1 Peter 2:5 (Parallel theme): Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

Esther 4:16 (Parallel theme): Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.