

# WHISPER Series Part 4: God's heart

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*Helen Harray*      *8 September 2013*

## **Today we focus on the whispers of God's heart for the world**

- a deeper level of listening that centers not so much on the cries of *our* hearts, but on the cries of the heart of God.

Those who spend themselves on behalf of others will *listen* with wide-open ears, they will *give* with wide-open hands, and they will *serve* with wide-open hearts. **Every true disciple is born into the kingdom of God as a missionary.**

God cares deeply about a litany of things, but certain passions rise to the top. In many places in his Word, God specifically advocates for the poor, the orphaned, the alien, the widow and more. God defends the underdog and asks us to do the same. "If you want to align yourself with my heart," he seems to say, "then pay close attention to these things I care most about."

Is 58:10 directs us to 'spend ourselves on behalf of others'.

It takes a certain level of spiritual maturity to listen for whispers beyond our immediate needs. We go from "Fix my husband!" or "Fix my teenager!" or, "Please, God, fix my job!"—to ask,

**"What justice issue is unfolding in this world that I might be able to help solve?"**

Is that a need I can meet?

Is that someone I can encourage?

Should I get involved in this particular effort?

Are those problems I can help solve?

Is this a BHAG ( Big Hairy Audacious Goal) for my life?

Will I have the willingness to say to God: what's next and to obey His call for our lifetime.

**Learning to hear the whispers of God in His word** - in 1990, Wayne and I made a BHAG decision to move from the North island to the South island. Katikati to Invercargill where the penguins reside in the streets. Lest you think this is normal for a north islander remember we lived in the Bay of Plenty and we had plenty. But the point is we didn't do it lightly, we felt we had a clear direction. And one of the ways God has always guided me is through his word.

In respect to this, Jeremiah 1 has been a passage which both affirmed me and called me to serve from a very early age. *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born, I set you apart...don't say you are too young, but go where I send you...I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down..to build and plant.* To build I think is a strength to which I give expression and I am fascinated by the language of building in Isaiah.

When we considered leaving our farm and orchard in Katikati it was the words of Isaiah 61: 4-6 which convinced me to go:

*They will rebuild the ancient ruins, and restore the places long devastated, they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations; strangers will shepherd your flocks, foreigners will work your fields and vineyards and you will be called priests of the Lord and ministers of our God.*

Speaking literally this is what happened...we left flocks and vineyards and fields of trees.

On a metaphorical level through counselling and prayer ministry and alongside and preaching, I have learnt to help restore the devastation of sin in people's lives, to rebuild ruins in people's lives...

I have a belief that God wishes to speak to us through his word and the more we are feeding in it the more we will see ourselves led and directed in a consistent way over a long period of time. He is still speaking to me about building today.

Not only this but words and phrases and verses will leap out at us when we read. We know this as the *rhema* word of God, living and active, speaking into our immediate now. This powerful quality of the Bible to leap out at us, is something to be cultivated and treasured and longed for. It is life to our spiritual bones. It has a better quality than most other experiences we will have in life, because it is the intersection of heaven with us. And it gives me passion and faith. But if you are not in the word regularly, learning, reading commentary and searching it, how can the Spirit speak?

Thus today I wish to help us reflect on what God is saying to us personally and corporately, about his heart, through a passage of scripture.

## **Isaiah 58**

**It will be read aloud and you may follow.**

**What pause is God putting on these words?**

**What strikes you?**

**What have you read differently?**

**What feelings are expressed in this passage?**

**What meaning?**

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## **Reflecting CONTEXT**

"Shout it aloud, do not hold back.

Raise your voice like a trumpet.

Declare to my people their rebellion

and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

<sup>2</sup> For day after day they seek me out;

**they seem eager to know my ways,**

as if they were a nation that does what is right

and has not forsaken the commands of its God.

**They ask me for just decisions**

**and seem eager for God to come near them.**

<sup>3</sup> 'Why have we fasted,' they say,

'and you have not seen it?

Why have we humbled ourselves,

and you have not noticed?'

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please  
and exploit all your workers.

<sup>4</sup>Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,  
and in striking each other with wicked fists.

You cannot fast as you do today  
and expect your voice to be heard on high.

<sup>5</sup>Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,  
only a day for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed  
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD

Sound the alarm, there’s a big issue here for the people of God. An enemy approaches. This passage is addressing certain individuals who rejoiced to declare they had been saved. But they were self righteous, meticulous in their religious observance, they studied, fasted and did everything to deepen their own spiritual lives, but at the expense of the poor. It was a self righteous religiosity that divorced faith from love and ignored God’s heart for justice and compassion.

Ritualistic fasting is not commanded in the Torah. Unlike the Islamic month of prayer called Ramadam.

There are no fast days in Israel, only the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. Lev 23: 26. The most important aspect of Yom Kippur is that it is to be a complete Sabbath of rest and humbling. It does not say how they were to humble themselves.

But in time the Hebrew people connected humility before Yahweh with depriving oneself of food, drink or some other pleasure. Food was the primary way to abstain from pleasure. Such an exercise was to enter into discomfort and a form of self-denial, so they thought, for the sake of pleasing God. Their view of God was that He wanted to exact something from them, to deprive them of something they enjoyed in order to achieve the status of humility.

The practice of fasting as interpreted as “giving up” food for a specific time became the commonly accepted practice for demonstrating humility and spiritual integrity worthy of gaining merit from Yahweh.

With this kind of thinking, no wonder the people of Israel were upset with Yahweh when He did not give merit to their fasting food as the means of showing their humility.

They asked: “Why have we fasted and You do not see? Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?” (Isaiah 58:3).

**BUT THEY HAD MISSED THE POINT!**

Yahweh answered them, pointing out their misunderstanding of what true humility was, of what a true fast was about:

“Is it a fast like this which I choose, a day for a man to humble himself [by abstinence]? Is it for bowing one’s head like a reed and for spreading out sackcloth and ashes as a bed [for self-denial of pleasure]? Will you call this a fast, even an acceptable day to Yahweh?” (Isaiah 58:5)

Humbling oneself by fasting food, Isaiah showed, was not what Yahweh desired nor called a true fast.

Instead, He wanted them to treat one another as He cared for them—with compassion, graciousness, slowness to anger, abounding lovingkindness and faithfulness, forgiving one another. Instead of joining hands to help each other, they pointed accusatory fingers and wagged their tongues in anger. They mistreated one another, took advantage of others' weaknesses, and failed to care for the widows, orphans, needy and hurting.

## **FASTING**

Have you ever gone to bed only to have a sleepless night where you tossed and turned and groaned in mental and physical agony that you completely stuffed up over? Over something you said or you were dishonest, or you really hurt someone or you slept with someone you shouldn't have...And this carries on for days...and food is not only abdominal but you want to throw up and purge yourself of this ugliness inside of you? Have you ever felt like this in relation to injustice? To poverty, to senseless war, to human trafficking?

Even on a mild scale.

When Nehemiah heard of the gates of Jerusalem broken down and useless, he wept and mourned and fasted and prayed for 4 months over the appalling state of his people, before he acted on the strategies God gave him in that time to rebuild Jerusalem.

This is the true meaning of fasting. Going without food because it is simply unimportant, because you are so passionately appalled at the state of the things you see around you, and the desperation with which you plea before God for change.

This is the true meaning of fasting. That is the *kairos* moment of eternal significance that is truly acceptable to God. You may only have one or two of these in your lifetime, but they may be so significant that they will change you forever. The idea of fasting in Isaiah 58 is a movement from *despairing*, to *caring*, *sharing* and, *finally*, *repairing*.

In the days of R. Tanhuma [fourth century], Israel had need of a fast [for the severe drought] so they went to him and requested: "Master, proclaim a fast."

He proclaimed a fast, for one day, then a second day, and then a third, yet no rain fell.

Thereupon he ascended [the pulpit] and preached to them, saying: "My sons! Be filled with compassion for each other, and then the Holy One, blessed be He, will be filled with compassion for you."

Now while they were distributing relief to the poor they saw a man give money to his divorced wife ... He summoned them and asked him, "Why did you give money to your divorced wife?"

"I saw her in great distress," replied he, "and was filled with compassion for her." ... Immediately the rain descended and the world enjoyed relief.

In this story of the famous Rabbi Tanhuma, the purpose of fasting is treated according to its fundamental biblical purpose—to bring about God’s favor to change unjust circumstances in an evil world.

A severe drought had seized the land. Water supplies and crops were failing. Everyone needed relief. In desperation, the Jewish people sought out Rabbi Tanhuma to proclaim a fast among the Jews on behalf of the people and the land. They fasted that God would have mercy upon them, overcome the injustice against man and the land, and send rain.

The fast was proclaimed, but abstinence of food and prayers did not work to their favor. No rain fell. God did not answer their cry based on their fasting and prayers. The people were puzzled, but the rabbi understood from the Bible the reason God did not answer them.

The rabbi explained that their fasting and prayer over the three day period, even it were extended longer, was to no avail. He knew that fasting as a form of rigorous abstinence did not move the heart of God.

What, then, was the problem the rabbi saw? The answer has to do with justice and injustice. He knew the heart of the people. They sought God through fasting for relief from the drought for themselves and their families—their own interests. They were concerned about self-preservation. Unlike God, they were without compassion for others who needed help as much as they did or more.

Self-affliction was not what God desired. Humility was not enough. A change of attitude and behavior in keeping with Yahweh’s holy Name was essential (*cf.* Exodus 34:6-7)—compassion, graciousness, slowness to anger, abounding lovingkindness, faithfulness and forgiveness of others was in order.

The rabbi arose to his pulpit to appeal to the people to act with compassion for each other so that God may have compassion on them according to his Name. This *quid pro quo* type of relationship with God was *not guaranteed*, for God could do as He pleased in his mercy and justice. But without acts of compassion towards others in the same character as God’s compassionate Name, he warned that the drought may not end anytime soon.

What moved God’s heart and inclined his favor to end the drought were the acts of righteousness done for others in spite of one’s own needs. This was highlighted in the loving and caring acts of a man towards his divorced wife who was in great distress. He acted beyond his bitterness and overcame it with his generous care.

This story of Rabbi Tanhuma and the severe drought is less a story about fasting food and more about the right kind of fast God desires— our doing acts of compassion for others in a world of evil and injustice.

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<sup>6</sup> “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?  
To untie the knots of hard bargains.

<sup>7</sup> Is it not to **share** your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

### **The key verb in verse 7 is:**

to share Heb: paras, literally means

- to break in two, to give half to the poor of what one has.
- To bring the homeless poor into your house and share it.
- To clothe the naked by reducing your own wardrobe.
- Don't hide by pretending not to see and thus avoiding having to help.

Self denial as in fasting does nothing to advance this plan of God for his people.

<sup>8</sup> Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

<sup>9</sup> Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

True spirituality shines when we do what God does. Healing others. In the act of sharing bread with the hungry God will say: here I am; for He himself has become the real presence in the act of breaking bread.

Then your righteousness (tsedeq) will go before you and the glory of the Lord not human glory, will bring up the rear.

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,  
<sup>10</sup> and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday

To satisfy the other person's desire or fulfill his personality before considering your own self is followed by the beautiful picture of the heart of God that even in the midst of his frustration with his chosen people, he offered them an amazing promise, if only they would heed his words. “If you will spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,” he said, “then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”

<sup>11</sup> The LORD will guide you always;  
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land

and will strengthen your frame.  
You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.

“I will *guide* you,” he said.  
“I will *satisfy* you.”  
“I will *strengthen* you.”

And as a result, when we allow God to fill these roles in our lives, we wind up getting all the benefit. *We* wind up being the ones who are like “a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.”

We wind up being *blessed* so that we then can be a blessing to others in something of a marvelous, unending cycle.

<sup>12</sup> Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and will raise up the age-old foundations;  
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,  
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.

In war it is the constant aim of the enemy to break up the lines of communication, to destroy and pull down defenses. It is the glory of the body of Christ to rebuild and to restore loss of access to peace and power and to heaven.

When the breaches are repaired and the paths of communication opened, a living, vital life is sustained, a guided life, a satisfied life, a watered garden of fragrances, a freshly sustained life.

Where are the BHAG's of today?

The big, hairy, extreme goals of faith that mark us out as Christians who serve a faithful God who provides and partners...

Spend yourself on behalf of others. *Give* with wide-open hands.

Yahweh meets our needs as we help satisfy the needs of others through deeds of compassion and lovingkindness.

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## SUMMARY

**God has a whisper for all of us of a calling to help his world.**

**True fasting is not about self denial, it's a state of mourning that grips us over what needs to be done.**

**To partner with God in repairing the ancient ruins and bringing healing to the nations.**

**In this we find true joy and healing and a satisfied life.**

Here's a kiwi worship song based on Isaiah 58 by Shirley Booth - may it bless and challenge you.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v= aCATrRLrQ4>



**For more information on fasting in this passage check out the link.**

**Revisiting the ANCIENT HEBREW MEANING OF FASTING**

**<http://www.ed-nelson.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=69>**