



# **THE NEW SHOFAR**

**The world stumbles in the dark, suffers and hurts  
as long as Christians fail to live out the Gospel**

**February 9th**

***It is a mistake to believe God is pleased with all of our religious acts***

Our chapter begins with a lament. The people are fasting and following all of the correct rituals as set down in the Law. However, they are being criticised for not backing up their actions with a “fasting” heart. They go through the actions but there is no inner desire for transformation. It is just one more religious action they can tick off their list for the year. How does the speaker know this? By looking at their behaviour. Their fasting has achieved nothing. They are the same people, acting in the very same way after the fast as before it...*Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. The judgment- such fasting will not make your voice heard on high!*

***What kind of change does God require?***

Isaiah makes God’s demands very clear. The acceptable fast is one in which the penitent undertaking the spiritual exercise *loosens the bonds of justice, undoes the thongs of the yoke, frees those oppressed and breaks every yoke. They share their bread with the hungry, bring the homeless into their own family residence, clothe the naked.* Then what happens? Then our spiritual actions will be a true collaboration with what God is doing in the world. Others experience God’s love.

It is then our lives will be enriched. Our dark times will be lit as though by the noonday sun, our down moments of struggle and darkness will be lit by the brightest of lights. We will find fulfilment and satisfaction in all we undertake, and it will be as though the garden that is our life is watered by a never-ending stream of water. What was broken will be restored and what we do today will be there for future generations to enjoy. These are magnificent guarantees from God.

***Why does God let us down when we do so much for Him?***

The people of Israel here are disappointed with God, angry enough to make the lament. When it all comes down to basics, they are challenging God to explain why their prayers, fasting, sacrifices and the spiritual things they “do” on account of their beliefs go unrewarded and unheard. It is a question most people of faith ask at least once in their lives. Generally more often than that!

The answer God gives is clear. Your religious words and spiritual actions; your faithfulness in coming to the Temple to offer sacrifice and your dedication to doing the works of the Law do not move out of your heads and transform your hearts. That is why the judgment verse is so painful to hear...*(these things) will not make your voice heard on high.*

Unless faith can be seen and experienced through the way we live in the world, with how we engage in charity and mercy with the poor and those on the margins, God will not hear us.

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## ***We are salt – do salty things in the world***

The wording here is so very important for us. Jesus says we are salt **now**. This is not because of anything we have done. We are salt because we live in the Risen Christ who is the true “flavour” the world needs. The problem for Matthew is how the Christians are not *being salt*. It is like having a salt-shaker in the pantry and not bringing it to the table. It is useless in the cupboard. The Father sent the Son for the re-creation of the world, for its restoration and healing. The Son continues that work in and through those claiming Christian fellowship with Him. To fail in bringing the power (flavour) of Christ alive in our daily activities is to fail in our fundamental vocations. All of those searching for meaning in life, for healing, mercy, rejuvenation and love must be able to find it in us. In the Church, in our parishes in our small groups. Otherwise we are not Christians.

What does Jesus want of us then? The Beatitudes are not a bad start (5:1-12) and in so many ways they pick up the prophetic demands of Isaiah. Jesus asks us: Where do we engage with those in poverty? The homeless? The refugees? Those who struggle and are isolated? Those with addictions? The lonely? That list could go on, but Jesus speaks of the way we bring Christ practical love and mercy to the lives of people in any kind of need. Where are these things in our lives?

### ***Don't bother coming to the altar!***

Here it is again. We saw this warning in Isaiah when he told the people how God is not listening to their prayers and offerings when their lives are not in accord with the Covenant. Here Jesus is telling believers not to bother coming to Church, coming to Communion getting up early in the morning to participate in the Sunday Eucharist – if our lives are not visibly interacting with others as Jesus engaged with the struggling people of his own time.

It is the failure to bring flavour to the world, light to those in darkness that brings about the decline of the Church. It is why parishes wither and fade away. It is why things religious are on the nose to many in the wider unbelieving world. They are not judging us on account of our faith. They are judging us on account of our failures to live our faith so that they can experience the living God.

The seriousness of these divine expectations are seen in the guidelines of Jesus to those coming to say their prayers or gather in the church for worship. Do not bother unless you are reconciled with those who with whom you have “issues”. The consequences for not bothering to take this seriously are horrendous...*you will end up in the unquenchable fires of hell!* The only way to escape this tough teaching is to say hell does not exist and hope that Jesus is using metaphors. Given that hell or its equivalent is mentioned across the entire Bible and is here on the lips of Jesus, I am prepared to take him at His word and strive in grace to do His will as He has outlined it.

### ***We are also light – the light of the world***

Here we are reminded of how Jesus Christ is not just light for our own lives. How is God answering the prayers of men and women across the world? We Christians are a major part of God's answer to the evil blighting our cities, our homes and our faith communities. It is a wonderful thing for us hear and to understand. Despite our unworthiness and sinful ways, God uses us – as we are – to flavour and to light up the world. If we believe we are living in terrible times, then as with Israel in the time of Isaiah the prophet, we need to lift our game. Evil triumphs when Christians are dormant.

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