

“Sabbath Is a Happy Day!” What Does Isaiah 58:13–14 Mean?

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As a Seventh-day Adventist who worships on the Sabbath and considers the fourth commandment God’s will for us, God’s call in Isa 58:13–14 for us to avoid “doing your pleasure” on the Sabbath resonates, but what does it mean? I want to do what God asks, but what does He mean by what He asks? Many denominations over the centuries have at times had strict rules against “Sabbath-breaking,” though they’ve defined it in various ways, whether carrying a purse, attending plays, purchasing liquor, or mowing the lawn.¹ Have they been correct in this? Generations of young people have found the Sabbath a burden and moaned about the many pleasures forbidden them on that day.² Just how happy a day should Sabbath be?

The fourth commandment does not forbid pleasure on Sabbath, but only work. The Hebrew word translated “you shall labor,” *ta^ʿbōd* (תַּעֲבֹד), is “sweat of your brow” work, like that done by an *ʿebed*, a servant or slave. The Hebrew word translated “your work,” *m^ʿla^ʿktekā* (מְלַאכְתֶּכָּא), especially suggests occupations, such as shopkeeper or craftsman, the work of commerce, though it also means all work.³

The Old Testament says very little about Sabbath worship, but it strongly emphasizes Sabbath rest. The Hebrew word for Sabbath, *šabbat* (שַׁבָּת) is a noun. The verb it is derived from, *šabat* (שָׁבַת), means “to cease,” primarily from work.

While liberal and secular scholars tend to doubt that Isaiah had anything to do with Isa 58, I do not find their arguments convincing, and it seems irrelevant

¹ See, for example, the tractate *Shabbat* in the Mishnah.

² I dedicate this article to my thirteen-year-old son Paul, whose frequent question, “What’s wrong with doing it on Sabbath?” encouraged me to search the Scriptures.

³ F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson [1906], 1996), 521-522.

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to this discussion, in any case. Isaiah 58 is part of a block of chapters dealing with the covenant curses against Israel, the redemption of Israel, the coming Messiah, and the Day of the Lord and what follows. That is to say, there is a strong eschatological emphasis. The relation of the Sabbath to this eschatology is suggested by Isa 66:22–23, which read:

For as the new heavens and the new earth,
which I will make,
shall remain before me, says the LORD;
so shall your descendants and your name remain.
From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
says the LORD. (NRSV)

While one must always allow for metaphorical language in the words of the prophets, this passage seems to indicate that for all eternity on the new earth God will prepare for us, God's people will come to the new Jerusalem every Sabbath to worship Him. While Isa 58 is not eschatological, it seems to involve the behavior God wants to see among His people.

The majority of Isa 58 deals with fasting as practiced, versus fasting as God wishes it do be practiced.⁴ In v. 3 God mocks the people for wondering why He doesn't seem to see them fasting, but He has seen them serving their own interests by oppressing their workers on their fast days. Verse 4 says, "Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high." I see 4a, "Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist," as parallel to 3b: "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers." Thus, the quarrelling and fighting and striking "with a wicked fist" should be seen as actions *against the oppressed workers*, not against, say, neighbors. Serving "your own interest" is closely connected here with this oppression of workers, so we should see it as having something to do with employment, not with pleasure or entertainment.

In v. 5 God asks, rhetorically, if being humble and bowing down on sackcloth and ashes is what He has in mind when He calls for a fast. In vs. 6–7 He answers the question: God's concept of true fasting involves something radically different from what we mean by the word: He means stopping injustice, freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, sheltering the widow, clothing the naked. This, of course, reminds us of the words of Jesus in Matt 26:35–40. Jesus does

⁴ The only fast day required by the Torah, of course, is on the Day of Atonement. On this basis, Roy Gane suggests that the fast day in question may actually be the Day of Atonement (personal e-mail). On this day, one recalls, it is not only fasting that is forbidden, but work. By this light, the Sabbath in vs. 13–14 is not the weekly Sabbath but the ceremonial Sabbath of the Day of Atonement. Actually, this would tie the chapter together very effectively. The problem is that it would suggest that it is only on the Day of Atonement that God desires service to those in need.

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not mention fasting in this context. It seems that fasting is being replaced with true, humble service to those in need. In 3a the people ask why God doesn't see them when they fast. In 9a God responds that if they do these things, He will answer and say "Here I am." In v. 8 God promises light, healing, righteousness, and divine protection to those who do these things. In vs. 9b–12, God again reviews what He asks of his people, then restates His promises of great blessings if they do what He asks.

The Sabbath Promise

Often Sabbath pleasures are denied on the basis of one of the loveliest promises in the Bible, Isaiah 58:13-14, which reads, in the New King James Version,

"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,
Then you shall delight yourself
in the LORD;
And I will cause you to ride on
the high hills of the earth,
And feed you with the heritage
of Jacob your father.
The mouth of the LORD has
spoken.

This is quite a literal translation, but when I read it some questions come to mind. Answering those questions will help us understand what God is really saying through His prophet. If we let it, the Bible will be its own interpreter.

The Literary Structure as Context

Determining the literary structure of a passage often begins with looking at it in context. There are, of course, sometimes several literary structures at work at the same time. A chiasm with its own central focus may in turn be only a part of a larger chiasm with its own different focus. Other structures may become apparent when the passage is examined more closely. This is what we find with this passage. David Dorsey, in his important book *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi*, lays out one chiasm for Isa 55–66, which he calls "Final invitation to return to Yahweh" (its center being the "glorious future restoration of Israel" in Isa 60:1–22), and another one for Isa

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58–59, which he calls “Hypocrisy of Israel’s religious activity” (its center being the “blessings of obedience” in Isa 58:8–12).⁵ The latter is more important for understanding the passage under consideration, so it will be given in full.

- a **Yahweh does not see** (*rāʾā*) or respond to their fasting because of their transgressions (*pešaʿ*) and lack of righteousness (*sědāqā*) (58:1–3a)
- b **social injustice and violence** is the cause of Yahweh’s unresponsiveness (58:3b–5)
- c **true fast** (not “pursuing your own business”) (58:6–7)
- d CENTER: blessings of obedience (58:8–12)
- c’ **true Sabbath** (not “pursuing your own business”) (58:13–14)
- b’ **social injustice and violence** is the cause of Yahweh’s unresponsiveness (59:1–15a)
- a’ **Yahweh does see** (*rāʾā*) their injustice; he will respond to those who turn from transgression (*pešaʿ*); he clothes himself in righteousness (*sědāqā*) (59:15b–21)

This is quite an impressive chiasm, with its three repeated words in A and A’, but the importance of the passage under consideration, regarding the Sabbath, is downplayed by this structure.

There is another structure worth examining. Isaiah 58:6–14 has a non-chiastic structure that helps illuminate the ideas being presented. There is a three part cause and effect parallelism, emphasized by “if/then” (ʾim/ʾāz) wording (the first “if” is only implied in the first section, but “if” and “then” are explicit in the five sections that follow. (I have used bold type to emphasize the “if/then” aspect of the passage and other type faces to emphasize other parallels that are worth noting in support of the parallelisms, though as they are not significant to the passage being studied in this paper, they will not be mentioned further.)

A1 6 “Is this not the fast that I have chosen: [**Implied “if you”**] To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you *break every yoke?* 7 Is it not to SHARE YOUR BREAD WITH THE HUNGRY, and THAT YOU BRING TO YOUR HOUSE THE POOR WHO ARE CAST OUT; WHEN YOU SEE THE NAKED, THAT YOU COVER HIM, and not hide yourself from your own flesh?

B1 8 **Then your light shall break forth like the morning**, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall **go before you**; the glory of the LORD shall **be your rear guard**. 9 **Then you** shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’

A2 “**If you take away the yoke** from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, 10 if [this “if” is not in the Hebrew] you **EXTEND YOUR SOUL TO THE HUNGRY** and **SATISFY THE AFFLICTED SOUL**,

⁵ (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 226–228, especially figs. 22.17 and 22.19.

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B2 **Then your** light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday. 11 The LORD will **guide you** continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. 12 Those from among you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Dwell In. (NKJV)

A3 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,

B3 14 **then you** shall delight yourself in the LORD; and I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the LORD has spoken."

We may speculate from this parallelism that the "trampling" of the Sabbath mentioned in v. 13 will have something to do with oppressing those who are hungry, poor, naked, and afflicted. We will find that these oppressed people are probably not jobless, but oppressed workers being forced to work on the Sabbath. This Sabbath work is only a part of their oppression.

The Delight of Sabbath

Let's move now to our text. God asks us to call the Sabbath a delight. I assume that when we say that, we should be telling the truth. That means learning to find it delightful, or doing on it what is delightful.

The Hebrew word translated "delight," found twice in verses 13–14, is *oneg* (נֶגַע), which means "exquisite delight," "dainty," "soft," and "delicate."⁶ It sometimes refers to luxury, what is rich and delicious, like Sabbath dinner. That's God's intention for the Sabbath! It should be the most exquisite, luxuriously delightful day of the week! Isn't that better than "your own pleasure"? But if the Sabbath is an "exquisite delight" for us, are we not taking pleasure in it?

In verse 14, *oneg* is in the Hithpael form, *tit'annag* (נִתְאַנַּג). Words in the Hithpael form are usually reflexive, meaning what one does to oneself. "Delight yourself" is a good translation. The BDB translates the word as "take exquisite delight."

However, the same word is found in Isaiah 57:4, and the BDB says that usage means to "make merry over." Does this suggest it's okay to make merry on the Sabbath, to be lighthearted, to laugh? Perhaps, even though the context is quite different.

⁶ BDB 772.

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Can you imagine Jesus laughing on Sabbath? I can. A merry heart can heal the spirit, after all (Prov 17:22), and Jesus approves of healing on the Sabbath (Matt 12:10–12).

**Textual Questions:
“From the Sabbath”**

Let’s look now at some of the questions raised by the text. The first question stems from the faulty parallelism introduced by the translators: “If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, . . . and call the Sabbath a delight . . .” If we turn away our feet from the Sabbath, why would we call the Sabbath a delight? As translated, this makes no sense.

However, the answer to this question is easy. In Hebrew, the phrase “from the Sabbath” is one word, *mishabbat* (מִשַּׁבָּת). That *mi* is short for *min*, which is usually translated “from.” Several dozen times, however, it means not “from,” but “on account of,” or “because of.” That’s the correct translation here, as well.⁷ For example, in Isaiah 53:5, *min* is usually translated “for,” meaning “on account of.” The first phrase can be translated, “He was pierced because of our transgressions.” That’s *min*!

So the text is talking about turning away from something “on account of” the Sabbath, because observing the Sabbath requires this turning away. It doesn’t mean turning away “from” the Sabbath.⁸

“Turn Away”

Second, what does it mean to “turn away your foot”? Does it mean to stop trampling on the Sabbath? No, it doesn’t. It’s an idiomatic expression. “Turning away the foot” means stopping whatever one is doing and returning to where one came from. The Hebrew word translated “turn away” is related to the Hebrew word *shūv*, “return.” This is God’s Old Testament word for repentance. (The New Living Translation uses the wonderful phrase “turn away from sin and toward God” when it translates the New Testament word usually translated as “repent.”) It’s interesting, though, that the Hebrew word is in the Hiphil form. Words in the Hiphil form usually refer to causing something. The BDB translates this word as “cause to return.”⁹ It might also mean “bring back” or “draw back.”

The important thing to note, though, is what the Hiphil form used here tells us. Turning away from our daily activities and returning to Sabbath-keeping is

⁷ Green’s Literal Translation renders the clause, “If you turn your feet away *because of* the Sabbath.”

⁸ The Jewish Publication Society translation called *Tanakh* renders the clause, “If you refrain from trampling the sabbath.” The Israelites were indeed trampling the Sabbath, but this translation neglects the idiomatic expression “turn your foot away,” which is not related to trampling.

⁹ BDB 998.

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our own choice. It's not automatic, it's not a forced decision, and it's not an accident. God asks us to make that choice.

Sabbath Pleasures?

Third, what is meant by "your own pleasure"? What does that include? If we take delight in the Sabbath, isn't that pleasure? Studying the passage in Hebrew has led me to believe that "pleasure" and "idle words" are not what Isaiah meant when he delivered his message from God. There is another valid way of translating the verses that better fits the fourth commandment's prohibition of work on the seventh day.

"Pleasure" is the most common meaning of the Hebrew noun *hepes*, but not the only meaning. A form of *hepes* is used twice in verse 13. It also appears in verse 3, where it is tied to the exploitation of employees. I think the English translators chose "finding your own pleasure" because it contrasted nicely with the true "delight" we should find in the Sabbath. They thought the verse was saying, "Don't do what pleases you, but what pleases God." Such parallels often exist in the Hebrew text, but not here, I think.

So what else might the noun *hepes* mean besides "pleasure"? The word also means "business," "affair," and "matter." It occurs in Eccl 3:1 and 17, in the phrase "a time for every purpose," which we never translate as "a time for every pleasure." Indeed, the *BDB* even gives "doing thy affairs" as the preferred translation in Isa 58:13, rather than "doing your pleasure."¹⁰

Thus, God is not speaking against pleasure here, but against working, doing business on Sabbath. "Finding your own pleasure" should actually be translated "finding business," or "looking for customers."

Silence on Sabbath?

Fourth, in the NKJV italicized words are not in the original. "Nor speaking *your own* words" reads, literally, not "speaking words." Are we to remain silent on the Sabbath? The New International Version changes this to not "speaking idle words," which makes sense, but it's not what the Hebrew says.

In Hebrew, the expression is *davēr dāvār* (דָּבָר דְּבָר) "the speaking of a word." Is God asking for silence on Sabbath? No, He's not. The noun *dāvār* is usually translated "word," as in "the word of the LORD," but it seldom means an actual word. It's more likely to mean a "statement," a "message," a "speech," a "report," an "edict," or even a "thing."

However, more significantly, *dāvār* sometimes means a "matter," or "affair," or "business," or "occupation."¹¹ In 1 Sam 21:8 it's translated "business." In 2 Sam 19:29 we also find the words *davēr*. . . *dāvār*. There they are translated "speak . . . of your matters," as in "business matters."

¹⁰ BDB 343.

¹¹ BDB 183.

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We find, thus, that God is asking us to refrain not only from “finding business,” but from “talking business” or making deals on Sabbath. Does this mean that if I invite people over for lunch on Sabbath, I shouldn’t ask them how their work is going? I don’t think so. But spending the afternoon discussing work does not fill us with delight. It isn’t refreshing. Does this mean it’s now okay to “speak idle words,” to talk about nothing? I don’t think it’s a good idea. But that’s not what this passage is actually prohibiting.

“Doing Your Own Ways”

Fifth, we’re familiar with the phrase “going your own way,” but both the Hebrew and the NKJV read “*doing* your own ways.” This is peculiar (so far as I’ve been able to ascertain using Accordance, it is a unique usage).

The Hebrew word *derek* usually means “road” or “way.” When Enoch walked with God, he walked on God’s road, going God’s way, because that’s where God walks. If we go our own way, we are not on God’s road. But the verb here is not “*going* your own way,” but “*doing* your own ways.”

“Doing” your way or road doesn’t make sense, so we should look for another meaning of *derek*. We find the word also means what is “customary,” our usual “undertaking” or way of doing business.¹² So, again the text speaks against working on Sabbath, this time not against “finding” or “talking,” but against “doing.”

What Does This Mean?

“Finding your own pleasure” actually means “finding business,” looking for potential customers. “Speaking words” actually means “talking business.” “Doing your own ways” actually means “doing business as usual.”

Translating these phrases this way fits nicely with the fourth commandment, as well, which forbids both field labor and commerce.

But was working on Sabbath a serious problem for the Israelites? Wasn’t the Sabbath always precious to them? Nehemiah writes, in Neh 13:15, “In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys, together with wine, grapes, figs and all other kinds of loads. And they were bringing all this into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Therefore I warned them against selling food on that day” [NIV].

Was this happening in Isaiah’s time, as well? In verse 18 Nehemiah says, ““Didn’t your forefathers do the same things, so that our God brought all this calamity upon us and upon this city?”” In Isaiah 58, God is trying to get those forefathers to avoid the coming catastrophe by putting aside their daily work and not treating the Sabbath as a normal business day.

This helps us understand the relationship between Isa 58:13–14 and the rest of the chapter (and Isa 59, as well). Who was treading the winepresses on the

¹² BDB 203.

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Sabbath? Who was bringing in the grain? Who was loading it onto donkeys? Who was transporting it into Jerusalem and selling it on the Sabbath? In Isaiah God has relatively little to say against the small farmer who works with his family on his own land. God speaks primarily against the rich, the large landowners, those who have servants and slaves to do their work, those who pay so little or provide so little that their workers are starving, naked, homeless. These landowners and businesspeople oppress their workers not only during the week, which is bad enough, but also on the Sabbath, which is even worse, because on that day God requires even the "manservant" and the "alien" to cease from work. That command is, of course, for their own good, because God is requiring them to take fifty-two holidays a year, for their own good and their own delight! Yet God does not merely ask landowners to let their workers cease from work on the Sabbath, but He asks the landowners themselves to cease and promises them rich blessings if they will do so.

Are there any Bible versions that have realized this passage is speaking against doing business on Sabbath? Yes, there are several: the New Revised Standard Version, Goodspeed, the Berkeley Version, the New English Bible, the JPS Tanakh, and the Jerusalem Bible. I was pleased to find, after doing this word study, that I wasn't alone in this understanding of the text.

A Revised Version

There's a lot more to discover in these verses, but I think I can now propose a very literal translation from the Hebrew that more accurately expresses both God's will and the meaning of the text.

I've repeated one implied word ("day") for the sake of clarity. Other than that, though the reading may seem a bit stilted, every word is a literal translation of the Hebrew original. The word order is as close to the original as possible.

If you turn back, on account of the Sabbath,
Your foot's doing of your affairs
On My holy day,
And you call to the Sabbath, "Exquisite delight!"
To the holy *day* of Yahweh, "Honored!"
And if you make it honorable,
Without¹³ doing your customary undertaking,
Without finding your business
And talking of business,
Then you will take exquisite delight in Yahweh,
And I will make you ride over the high places of the land,
And I will make you eat of the inheritance of Jacob your father,
Because the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.

¹³ "Without" is one of many possible translations of the Hebrew word *min*. The main idea of *min* is *separation*. In Job 11:15, "without spot," and Prov 1:33, "without fear," the Hebrew word translated "without" is *min*. BDB 577-578, especially 1.b.

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What does this passage mean for us today? It doesn't mean, "Don't do what you please on Sabbath." It means "Don't do what you please if what pleases you is working." Remember, too, that the Sabbath is not only a deliverance from work, but a symbol of deliverance from our own works.

This doesn't mean Sabbath is for doing whatever we feel like doing. But *pleasure* is not forbidden. Luxurious delight and a merry heart are not forbidden. If it is not our ordinary work, if it delights us, and if we can share that delight with God without rationalizing our behavior, then God smiles on us.

Conversely, if what we do makes the Sabbath a misery to us or to our children, if it makes us hate Sabbath, if it makes us long for Sabbath to be over, we're going the wrong way. In a sense, whatever we do on Sabbath that is not delightful in a God-honoring way breaks the Sabbath.

Now that we realize it is not pleasure God prohibits on Sabbath but business, perhaps more of us will experience its "delicate delight." I remember singing, as a child, "Sabbath is a happy day!" It should be.

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