Motyer\(^1\) has a helpful overview of this section of Isaiah:

58:1-14 is a call to the people of God to recognize their sin and rebellion; 59:1-13 shows that there are those who have received and can exercise the divinely created gift of repentance of which 57:18β-19 spoke.

To which we add that chapter 59 ends with God as a warrior, this time fighting against sin.

**Confronting Unrighteous Behavior – True Fasting**

Motyer also gives a picture of the structure of chapter 58 that might not be apparent at first:

58:1 The voice of rebuke
58:2-5 A fast without a blessing
58:6-9b What God really wants, and his rewards
58:9c-12 What God really wants, and his rewards
58:13-14a A feast with a blessing
58:14b-d The voice of promise

The symmetrical structure (chiasmus) is surely deliberate, a literary device that helps a hearer grasp and remember what is said. We will see other poetic features as we look in more detail. Notice that at the very center is a call to both right injustice and help the needy — with a promise of God’s blessing. It is so crucial that it is said twice.

But the symmetrical structure is not the only way to see chapter 58; it can be seen as a logical argument, ostensibly about fasting. It is written in the voice of God talking to his prophet, starting with the command to *declare to my people their rebellion* (58:1). This declaration of the people’s sin is a serious matter that must be heard: the prophet is to raise his *voice like a trumpet*.

But what is the nature of this sin? This takes some time to explain. Israel appears to want to know God’s ways, but there is an inconsistency. Eagerness would be appropriate for *a nation that does what is right* (58:2). The very statement suggests that Israel is not such a nation, though that is not said explicitly here. Instead, Israel is said to ask for *just decisions*, and *seem[s] eager for God to come near them*. The word “seem” is a strong indication that appearances are deceiving. But again, this is not said explicitly.

Instead, God’s complaint against his people is interrupted by his people’s complaint against him. They have fasted, but they perceive God as having ignored it.

God does not disagree. Instead, he implicitly concedes the point, explaining why Israel’s fasting is not producing the desired results. There is a diverse list of things that happen at the time of the fast, all of them displeasing to God: exploiting workers; quarreling and strife that end in altercations. This time, the conclusion is explicit: *You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high* (58:4).

At this point, we might expect specific instruction on what is wrong with fasting as practiced by Israel, and what should be done instead. And the structure of the poetry seems designed to supply this. We start with, *Is this the kind of fast I have chosen* (58:5), a question that seems to demand an answer of no, and which naturally leads to a description of problems. And in a sense this description follows. 58:3 states that humbling oneself through fasting was expected to procure God’s *notice* (and almost certainly God’s favor). Here, self-humbling is described more fully (*bowing one’s head, wearing mourning garb*); apparently, this was the behavior shown by those who fasted. God’s negative judgment is emphasized by a second rhetorical question: *Is that what you call a fast*. It demands a negative answer.

This is the perfect place for a contrasting description of fasting from God’s view: *Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen* (58:6). And again the expectation is not met: fasting in the narrow sense is not the subject. Instead, the topics are liberation (*set the oppressed free*), and providing food, shelter and clothing. If only these things would be done, *your healing will quickly appear* (58:8). *You will call, and the Lord will answer* (58:9).

58:10-11 mostly repeats this. 58:12 says *your people will rebuild the ancient ruins*. This entirely new topic likely has the restoration of Jerusalem in view, at least in part, but it applies equally to any damage done by sinful man in one generation and restored in a later one. 58:13-14 then turn to keeping the Sabbath. If only people would devote themselves to what God wants done, rather than *doing as you please*, they would find joy in the *LORD*, and *ride in triumph on the heights of the land*.

We have to conclude that fasting was not the essence of the problem, but only a symptom. The first part of the chapter seems to be condemning the assumption that God could be manipulated, that the

adherence to a correctly performed ritual could ensure God’s response. So is the passage teaching that a different set of actions, deeds that benefit the oppressed and needy, would be more successful? That conclusion is consistent with what is said here, but it does great violence to our understanding of the whole of Old Testament teaching. Instead, the chapter ends with the admonition to simply do what God has commanded, without an eye on any benefit to come from it. And then the benefit will indeed come, as people rejoice in a life that God intended for them, for their joy.

**Confronting Unrighteous Behavior – The Effects of Iniquity**

If chapter 58 is about trying to manipulate God into blessing his people, chapter 59 deals with outright iniquity. It starts with disabling people of a misunderstanding: *Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save* (59:1). This is a common assertion in Isaiah, reminding people that if they are not receiving the benefits of the promised redemption, it is not because God cannot deliver on his promises, but because *your iniquities have separated you from your God* (59:2).

Starting in 59:3, Isaiah gives a vivid picture of these sins. Some of the descriptions are highly poetic. Consider, for example, they *hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider’s web* (59:5). This statement alone is perfectly understandable on its own, and even paints a picture, albeit sketchily. But the mention of eggs leads to thinking about eating such eggs, which would be fatal. Nor would abstaining be of any use, for the eggs would then hatch and the vipers would emerge. Again, a spider’s web leads one to think of weaving, and thence of clothing. But such weaving is useless for clothing, incapable of covering anyone. What could have been static metaphors become parts of didactic narratives.

But poetry should not make us miss the seriousness of the sin at issue. We have personal sins: hands *stained with blood* (59:3); lips *have spoken lies*; their deeds are *evil deeds* (59:6). And we have societal sins: *no one calls for justice* (58:4). All of these call for confession and contrition.

Confession and contrition are found in 59:9-15a, put into the mouths of the people. Briefly stated, the speakers agree to all the charges made by Isaiah, albeit in slightly different terms. Much of these verses are devoted to listing the effects of injustice, which here stands for the sin of the people – and is certainly one aspect of it. 59:13 adds *rebellion and treachery against the LORD*. This entire section is a frank admission of sin, but 59:9-11 also read like a lament for life in their current plight.

There are some noteworthy points about the way Isaiah speaks of the people’s condition. 59:9 refers to blindness, a figure of speech found throughout Isaiah, and most recently in *Israel’s watchmen are blind* (56:10). Perhaps the most interesting poetic effect is the way justice and righteousness appear. They were promised as part of the new thing that God was doing, but they seem to be withheld. *So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us* (59:9). But these words could also be understood as referring to the failure of Israel to provide these to those in need of it. This sense of ambiguity is also found in 59:14, so *justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance*; here the context, 59:15, seems to emphasize the human failure. But throughout, the two strands can both be discerned, implying that a failure to act with justice is blocking the God-given justice that Israel desires.

**God, a Warrior for Redemption**

59:15b gives God’s reaction to the lack of justice. His response was to take the role of a warrior. In an extended figure of speech, the various attributes of God are spoken of as the warrior’s armor and garb. Thus clad, God will *repay wrath to his enemies* (59:18). In the first part of Isaiah, such martial language would have been used of various nations, notably Assyria. Here, the enemy seems to be sin itself – a conclusion consistent with what was previously said about the new thing to be done by the servant of God, who would deal with the sin of a people who could not deal with it for themselves.

God’s work has a particular result intended, which is presented progressively. First, *from the west, people will fear the name of the LORD, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory* (59:19). But this is only the beginning, for we have: *The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins* (59:20). And there is yet more, for God will establish a new covenant with his people: *My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips* (59:21). And with this idyllic picture, there is nothing more that could be said.

These verses are the start of a new section of Isaiah. Just as with the servant of the LORD earlier, God will do something for his people that they could not do for themselves ([*the LORD*] saw that there *was no one to intercede*; 59:16). And as before, he chose to work through someone, someone well described but not precisely identified. Here, that someone works in the context of God’s covenant with his people (59:21). We will see more of him in the chapters to come, notably in 61:1-3.