

"But the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up refuge and mud!  
'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'"! (Isaiah 57:20)

Last week, we began our study on the last major section of the book of Isaiah, chapters 56-66--which deals with the importance, even more, the necessity(!) for "the servant of the Lord" to live out the righteousness of God! "Preserve justice and do righteousness," says the Lord (in Isaiah 56:1, as a starter), "for My salvation is about to come and My righteousness to be revealed"! And verse 2 follows with, "How blessed is the man who does it, and the son of man who upholds it...who keeps from profaning the sabbath, and keeps his hand from doing any evil!"

We quickly learned that this command and expectation from God is not just for Israel, but for all would-be "servants of God"! Even for foreigners and eunuchs, who were previously excluded by Levitical law from participating in Jewish worship rituals! "For thus says the Lord (Isaiah writes in verses 4-5), "to the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast to My covenant, to them I will give in My house and within in My walls, a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off"!

And (in verses 6-7), "Also to the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath and holds fast to My covenant; even those I will bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer! Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; for My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples"!

And so, "The Lord God, who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares (in verse 8) that "yet others (speaking of Gentiles?) I will gather to them, to those already gathered"! God, the Creator! And the "Gatherer"!

We were reminded by this passage of its connection with the beautiful story of Ruth, the Moabite woman (in the book of Ruth) who chose to follow the God of Israel and who, along with her husband Boaz, became included in the physical lineage of Jesus; and of the providence of God using His servant Philip whom He sent to join up with, and be used in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (in Acts 8); and of the intercessory prayer of Jesus (in John 17) where He expressed His desire to see "all those who would believe in Him (through His disciples He would send out into the world!) to become one, even as He is one with the Father"!

But sadly, Isaiah 56 makes it clear that not all (even of Israel) would be included in the fold, and it closes with another sad commentary on how false prophets and irresponsible religious leaders, rather than "gathering" people together before God, would lead them astray! (Constable writes that "the leaders of Israel were responsible for "the people's failure to appreciate the difference between a real relationship with God and membership in the covenant community of Israel"!)

And that set the scene for our lesson last night on Isaiah 57 where Isaiah draws a contrast between the "apostate" leaders of Israel and the righteous people of God who would suffer ridicule and oppression in the world!

Isaiah 57:1-2 (Passion version) begins with Isaiah's alarming words that, as the leadership of the nation worsens, "The godly perish, but no one seems to notice! The faithful ones are taken away, and no one understands! It's because of evil (and judgement coming!) that they ("the godly") are preserved from calamity, and enter into peace, resting serenely upon their death beds"!

Constable writes that, as things get worse, the number of the righteous people shrank, without people understanding what was happening"! Wiersbe explains it this way: "God permitted the unrighteous leaders to live and suffer the terrible consequences of the judgment He was about to send (referring apparently to the Babylonian captivity), while many of the righteous people were taken (died!) before the judgment fell! The godly found rest and peace, and the ungodly went into captivity, and some were killed"! (Young notes that "the godless don't realize that God often takes righteous men to Himself to deliver them from some impending catastrophe"!)

Does this surprise you? Constable notes that "God will do this when He removes the church from the earth (with the Rapture!) before He brings the Tribulation on it...and that He also did it in the past when He removed Lot before He destroyed Sodom"! (Matthew Henry writes that "it is a sign that God intends war when He calls home His ambassadors"!)

In Isaiah 57:3-13, Isaiah notes the widespread "apostasy" and evil that takes place as Israel forsakes their God and pursues idols! (God sees idolatry as "spiritual adultery and prostitution!") In verse 3 Isaiah (speaking for God!) calls them "sons of a sorceress, offspring of an adulterer and a prostitute...and children of rebellion" who--publicly and privately--engage in unspeakable evil and, among other things (the Passion version says):

- "Burn with lust for other gods among the oak groves and under every green tree"!
- "Sacrifice their own children (as an offering to Molech, the Canaanite god, would you believe?) in the caves near the bed of a stream, and from there take smooth stones and worship them as idols, and (even!) bring them grain offerings and pour out wine as drink offerings"!
- "Practice ritual sex on a high hill and go up to the lofty place to offer sacrifice"!
- And "hidden inside their front doors, set up obscene idols...uncovering themselves, sleeping with them, and gazing upon their nakedness" !

(Remember how they were instructed, by contrast, in Deuteronomy 6 and 11, to "write down God's law on the doorposts of their homes, and on the frontals of their foreheads, and to talk of them when they sat in their houses, and when they rose up, and when they walked in the way; and to teach them to their children"???)

Wow! What happened with that? "Shall I relent concerning these things?" (God ponders, in verse 6!)

But there's more! Isaiah writes in verses 9-19 that they "journeyed to the king (and to the Canaanite god, Molech!) with oil, along with many perfumes, and sent their envoys to exotic lands, even to the underworld, and though their wanderings wearied them, their strength was renewed (not by God but by their evil desires), and they didn't faint"!

"Why didn't you remember Me, or even care what I thought," asks God (rhetorically)? And then (somewhat sarcastically): "Let's see if your pantheon of idols can save you when you cry out! They will be blown away by the wind! But (and here's the amazing response of our gracious and compassionate God): "Whoever makes Me their hiding place will possess the land and inherit My holy mountain! Let the people return to Me ...Clear the way...Remove every obstacle from their path!"

Then verse 15 (which Oswalt calls "one of the finest one-sentence summations of Biblical theology in the Bible"!)) I'm going to quote this verse, along with those that follow, verbatim, without further comment,

because they convey (better than I could ever describe!) the true heart and thinking of our great God and His grace and mercy for all who believe and trust in Him! Here's what it says (borrowing again from the Passion version):

"For this is what the high and majestic one says; the one who fills the eternal realm with glory, whose name is Holy; 'I dwell in high and holy places but also with the bruised and lowly in spirit, those who are humble and quick to repent! I dwell with them to revive the spirit of the humble, to revive the heart of those who are broken over their sin! You will not find Me continually accusing them or holding anger against them, lest they feel defeated and lose heart before Me. For I am the One who gave the breath of life to My people. It was their sin and greed that made Me angry; so I struck them and hid My face from them. But they continued in rebellion, following their own desires! Even though I have seen their ways, I will heal them; I will guide them forward and repay them with comfort, giving mourners the language of praise! I offer peace to those who are far from Me, and I offer peace to those who are near, and I will heal their deepest wounds," says Yahweh! "But the wicked are like the storm-tossed sea, whose restless waves are never still, stirring up mud and mire. There is no peace for the wicked,' says My God!"

Ever feel afflicted and discouraged? (So where did you go to find relief?) Psalm 34:18-19 says: "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all!" (And there are so many verses in the Bible on the "peace of God" for the believer! And the great hymns of the faith as well! Among them, the one we sang last night, "It Is Well With My Soul"--along with the story of the one who wrote it! (As Men of the Bible, we know where to go, right?)

Wow! What more can we say than to us He (our God!) has said?

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