

THE BOOK OF ISAIAH
PROMISE AND REBUKE
ISAIAH 56, 57



T. M. Moore

A Scriptorium Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Promise and Rebuke: Isaiah 56, 57
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The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Introduction to *Isaiah 56, 57*

The people of Judah and Jerusalem were soon to be taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar and carried away to Babylon. This was their punishment for failing to heed the Word of God and choosing instead to worship idols. Their leaders had let them down, and now the wrath of God was coming upon them.

But that wasn't the end of the story. God was sending His Servant to accomplish a great salvation for His people. And not only for them, but for the nations of the world as well. In this section of his book, Isaiah urges the people to keep focused on the promises of God. Their time in Babylon will be a rebuke, but they must endure it in faith, looking to God, hoping in His Word, and waiting for the promise of salvation to come.

The peace of God would come to all who trusted in Him, but for those who refused to heed His Word, there would be no peace.

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1 Worship at the Center

Pray Psalm 72.17-19.

His name shall endure forever;
His name shall continue as long as the sun.
And *men* shall be blessed in Him;
All nations shall call Him blessed.
Blessed *be* the LORD God, the God of Israel,
Who only does wondrous things!
And blessed *be* His glorious name forever!
And let the whole earth be filled *with* His glory.
Amen and Amen.

Read Isaiah 56.1-8.

Reflect.

1. Who are the people who dwell in the house of the Lord?
2. How important does God consider keeping the Sabbath (the Lord's Day)? Why?

Meditate.

From the image of a glorious city (chapter 54), God turns now to describe His work of salvation in terms of a glorious temple (cf. vv. 1, 7). The mention of the "holy mountain" recalls the prophecy of Isaiah 2.1-4, and thus brings together that prophecy and the one concerning the new city into this image of the temple. God is using familiar notions, greatly enhanced, to help His people fix in their minds a vision of the great work He is preparing to do for them.

Those who inhabit God's house are a peculiar people, a people who know the salvation of God and are just, righteous, and holy (vv. 1, 2, 7). They hold fast to His covenant, and especially, to keeping His Sabbaths (vv. 4, 6). Foreigners (non-Jews) may join themselves to the Lord and expect to have a place in His house (vv. 3-6), and this accords with what Isaiah prophesied in 2.1-4. All who choose what pleases God are welcome in His house. They love Him and serve Him gladly (v. 6), and thus know the joy of their salvation in a life of continual prayer (v. 7). The Lord's house "shall be called a house of prayer for all nations," a place where people from every land may come to know the Lord, enter His covenant, receive His salvation, and devote themselves to loving and serving Him in justice, righteousness, and love.

Worship is at the center of what it means to be the people of God. His covenant, His house, His Sabbaths, and His salvation make the people who know their God a worshiping people – a people gathered out of the nations of the world to worship God and live before Him in prayer (v. 8).

It's fair and prudent to ask ourselves whether this describes the people we claim to be.

Prepare.

1. Why is worship central to what it means to be saved?
2. How can we identify people who have "joined themselves to the LORD"?
3. How would you explain to an unbelieving friend what it means to know the salvation of God?

As if you did not know that all human beings come from Adam and that it is written that the nations will believe in Christ, as it is said, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." ... The saints were uncircumcised before they were circumcised, and Abraham before circumcision had faith, since there is one God who justifies a circumcision of faith. And he proclaims that each nation ought to be saved through the faith of Christ, that is, by faith in him. Cassiodorus (485-580 AD), Exposition of Romans 3

Thank You for the gift of salvation, Lord Jesus! Help me to grow into Your salvation today by...

Pray Psalm 72.

We are saved by grace through faith and called to the Kingdom and glory of God (1 Thess. 2.12). As you pray, reflect on how this psalm leads you to think about the impact your life can have on the people you see each day. Seek the Lord for His strength to do so.

Sing to the Lord.

Psalm 72.15-20 (*Martyrdom: Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed*)

Let Christ be praised and all the gold of Sheba be His right;

Let blessings to His Name be told, and prayers made both day and night.

And let the earth abound with grain, let fields His fame proclaim;

And may our King forever reign and nations bless His great Name.

Now bless the God of Israel Who wondrous works performs.

And bless His Name, His glory tell both now and forever more!

2 Self-Serving Shepherds

Pray Psalm 28.8, 9.

The LORD *is* their strength,
And He is the saving refuge of His anointed.
Save Your people,
And bless Your inheritance;
Shepherd them also,
And bear them up forever.

Read Isaiah 56.9-12.

Reflect.

1. To what does God liken the shepherds of Israel – the rulers, priests, and judges?
2. What were they doing to incur God’s judgment?

Meditate.

Israel’s problem – the reason the northern kingdom had been carried away to Assyria, and why Judah and Jerusalem were now going to captivity in Babylon – was a failure of leadership. All the prophets railed against the kings, princes, judges, priests, and even other prophets, because they cared only for their own interests, and did not watch out for the people.

Their failure to watch over the Lord’s flock meant that “beasts of the field” devoured the people (v. 9), leading them into all manner of idolatry and robbing them of the blessings of the Lord. Jesus warned against shepherds who did not know, lead, defend, and even lay down their lives for the sheep (Jn. 10).

The shepherds of Israel were like worthless watchdogs (vv. 10, 11). They were blind, stupid, and did not speak up to warn the people of sin. They did not lead them to the pastures of the Lord, but left them to wander the fields of the world in search of spiritual sustenance. They preyed on the people (v. 11), but they did not pray for them. They sought their own gain (v. 11), rather than to gain the blessings of God for His people. They became drunk with wine rather than with the salvation of the Lord (v. 12; cf. Ps. 116.12, 13).

If the people wondered why, in view of the great salvation God promised them, they were heading off to captivity in Babylon, they had only to look to their leaders, who had failed in their calling, and thus allowed the people to fail in theirs as well.

This is a warning that shepherds and people in every generation need to hear.

Prepare.

1. Who are the shepherds of your church? What work of shepherding do they carry out?
2. What is the responsibility of God’s people for helping their shepherds do the work appointed to them?
3. Against what kinds of threats should the shepherds of God’s flock guard the people under their care?

For often church leaders do not have foresight, and they fear to lose favor with human beings and fear to say the right things freely and according to the voice of truth. They in no way act with the attention of the pastors of the flock but are more like hired hands who flee when the wolf approaches, while they themselves quietly hide. Gregory the Great (540-604 AD), *Letter 1.23*

Lord, I pray for the shepherds of our church today, that You would help them to...

Pray Psalm 28.

Use this psalm to seek the shepherding care of the Lord, to guard against all wickedness and sin and to strengthen you for serving Him this day.

Sing to the Lord.

Psalm 28 (*Angel's Story: O Jesus, I Have Promised*)

I cry to You, our Savior, O, be not deaf to me!
Lord, speak to me with favor, lest I should dying be.
Hear now my supplications when for Your help I cry;
Receive these, my oblations, before Your throne on high.

Lord, count me not among those who walk in sinful ways;
With words of peace their tongue glows while evil fills their days.
Your works they disregard, Lord, while evil fills their hands;
Destroy them by Your Word, Lord, and let them no more stand.

Blessed be the Name of Jesus, for He will hear our prayer.
His strength protects and shields us with mercy and with care.
In You our heart rejoices; You help us by Your Word.
To You we raise our voices to praise and thank You, Lord.

Our strength are You, O Savior, our strong defense and sure.
Anointed with Your favor, we rest in You secure.
Save us, and bless us, Jesus, upon us turn Your face;
With shepherd's care, Lord, keep us forever in Your grace.

3 Idolatry Condemned

Pray Psalm 115.1.

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us,
But to Your name give glory,
Because of Your mercy,
Because of Your truth.

Read Isaiah 57.1-10.

Reflect.

1. In what sense were the “righteous” of Isaiah’s day about to perish and to enter their peace?
2. Why does the Lord hate idolatry so much?

Meditate.

Once more, for good measure, God lashes out at the idolatry of His people. This is the primary reason for their going into captivity – the idolaters and the righteous alike. It might have seemed that the righteous were being destroyed because of the sins of their neighbors (v. 1). In fact, by being sent to Babylon, they were being delivered from the idolatrous practices of the majority (v. 1), and given the opportunity to rest in the Lord and increase in uprightness (v. 2).

The Lord is severe in His judgment against the “sons of the sorceress” (v. 3) – all those who practiced idolatry. They mocked the righteous people of Judah and Jerusalem (v. 4), and mocked the true worship of God by their participation in licentious and idolatrous practices (vv. 4-10). They were the transgressors whose sin brought the entire nation to judgment (v. 4). They should have followed the worship practices prescribed in God’s Law (v. 6); instead, they submitted to the wicked and sensual ways of the surrounding pagan nations (vv. 7-10). They never stopped hoping in false gods, and they never grieved for their sins (v. 10).

Yet all the while, they regarded themselves as the offspring of Abraham and children of God’s covenant. They were instead the children of transgression and the offspring of lies (v. 4).

Against such comes the judgment of God.

Prepare.

1. How can we tell when something in our lives is becoming an idol?
2. Should we expect God to judge idolatry among His people in our day? What forms might that take?
3. What is our responsibility as believers in helping one another to avoid the sin of idolatry?

O sinful soul, filled with harlotries, turned foul and faded, turned unclean, and still loved like that! So go back to the beautiful one, in order to return to beauty; go back and speak to him who alone suffices you. Augustine (354-430 AD), *Sermon 177.9*

Guard me from all idolatry, Lord, and help me to serve You according to...

Pray Psalm 115.

Whatever we trust in besides the Lord has the potential of becoming an idol. Ask the Lord to reveal any idols in your life, and to take them away. Devote yourself to serving Him in your Personal Mission Field today, seeking His Kingdom and glory in all things.

Sing to the Lord.

Psalm 115 (*Plainfield: Nothing But the Blood of Jesus*)

Not to us, O God, not us, but unto Your Name give glory!
For Your love and faithfulness, ever to Your Name be glory!
Why should the nations cry, "Where is their God on high?"
You rule us, Lord, on high: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Idols made by men's own hand – ever to Your Name be glory –
see nor hear nor understand – ever to Your Name be glory!
They neither feel nor walk, nor can they speak or talk;
All those who serve them fall, but unto Your Name be glory!

All who trust in Jesus yield – ever to His Name be glory! –
find in Him their help and shield – ever to Your Name be glory!
O Israel, trust the Lord! He helps us evermore!
Fear Him obey His Word: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Blessings from our gracious Lord – ever to Your Name be glory –
will attend us evermore – ever to Your Name be glory!
Bless all who fear You, Lord, all who obey Your Word,
all who Your Name adore: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Grant us, Savior, great increase – ever to Your Name be glory!
Bless us with eternal peace – ever to Your Name be glory!
Heaven and earth are Yours; let every soul adore
and bless You evermore: Ever to Your Name be glory!

4 God Forgotten

Pray Psalm 43.5.

Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God;
For I shall yet praise Him,
The help of my countenance and my God.

Read Isaiah 57.11-13.

Reflect.

1. What made God think that the leaders of His people had “not remembered” Him?
2. What did God think of their “righteousness” and “works”? Why?

Meditate.

In these verses, the Lord teaches us what to desire and how to possess it. We are to desire His promises, here symbolized by the land of promise (v. 13); and we are to seek His presence in holiness – His “holy mountain” or His salvation (v. 13). Whatever we do, we must not forget God, nor allow anything to come before Him.

The leaders of God’s people were relying on their “righteousness” and “works” (v. 12) to make them acceptable to the Lord. But these would not profit them, because they were the fruit of idolatry rather than of love for God and His promises (v. 12). Let them see if their idols will rescue them from the trial that is to come (v. 13). They will not.

All other desires and longings must be kept subservient to God and His promises, or they will become idols. This includes the desire for ease or comfort, or for significance or material prosperity – the failings of Israel’s leaders.

We cannot help but think of those who will come to Jesus at the last day, holding out their “good works” as the key to their acceptance with Him. But because they trusted in their works, which became idols, Jesus will send them away: “I never knew You” (Matt. 7.21-23).

Remember the Lord; fear, love, and serve Him. Then your works will please Him.

Prepare.

1. What does it look like when someone is forgetting God? How does that happen?
2. Why are our righteousness and our works of no “profit” (v. 12) with God?
3. How can believers encourage one another to trust the Lord and seek His promises?

The church itself is the mountain ... we are going to rise again, and we shall be the holy mountain of God. On this mountain dwells whoever has given himself to God. “But those who have given themselves to me shall possess the land and inhabit my holy mountain.” Augustine (354-430 AD), Sermon 45.3-5

Help me to remember You always, Lord, that I might...

Pray Psalm 43.

Let this psalm bring you into the presence of the Lord, to renew your love for and trust in Him for the day ahead.

Sing to the Lord.

Psalm 43 (*Hyfrydol: Jesus, What a Friend for Sinners!*)

Vindicate me, Jesus, plead for me! Make my case against my foes.
Rescue me, do not ignore me, God of strength, relieve my woes!
From deceitful men and spirits, from oppression, mourning sore:
Heed my prayer, receive and hear it, keep me to You forever more.

Let Your light and truth precede me, bring me to Your holy hill.
To Your holy altar lead me, let me dwell within Your will.
Lord, my joy and consolation, You, Who grace to me impart,
hear my joyful adoration; I will praise You from the heart.

When my weary soul is troubled, when despair upon me falls,
let my hope in You be doubled, let me on Your mercy call.
God, my help, my great salvation, I will praise You to Your face.
In Your care my soul I station; let me know Your glorious grace!

5 A Promise of Healing

Pray Psalm 19.12-14.

Who can understand *his* errors?

Cleanse me from secret *faults*.

Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous *sins*;

Let them not have dominion over me.

Then I shall be blameless,

And I shall be innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart

Be acceptable in Your sight,

O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.

Read Isaiah 57.14-18.

Reflect.

1. God reminds His people of His high and holy status. Why?

2. From what does God promise to heal His people? With what result?

Meditate.

God's anger against His people does not continue indefinitely. When it is satisfied – as it will be in the suffering of His Servant – then grace and forgiveness can be renewed. These verses are a reminder to the people of Judah and Jerusalem that the high, lofty, and holy God who judges the sins of His people will also bring healing in its time.

But who can know that healing? Is God's grace dispensed willy-nilly to all people? No, only to those who seek revival and are humble and contrite in their hearts (v. 15). God does not "owe" His people salvation, forgiveness, or healing. They must desire these from Him, and seek them earnestly. There will be no healing for those who continue in their sins (vv. 16, 17), but only continued judgment. Knowing that God is ready to forgive, the people should begin seeking His grace now, even as they prepare to go into captivity in Babylon. Otherwise, they may harden their hearts against Him, and never realize His comforts (v. 18).

We can dwell with God, where He is; we have been seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 2.6). But only those who recognize their unworthiness, who confess that all they deserve is wrath, and who plead earnestly for revival, mercy, and healing – only those will know the blessings that come with the comfort of God's salvation

Reflect.

1. Do God's people today need His reviving and comforting grace? Why? How should they seek it?

2. It's pretty clear that God is not willing to overlook sins. How should this caution us?

3. What can you do to keep from falling back into sins from which you have repented already?

Although he is holy, these people blaspheme his name with evil desires and deeds that are not honorable. He says, I am holy, and I rejoice with the holy as I sanctify them, stirring up their power and rousing them in their attitudes, providing they show themselves to be worthy and demonstrate their wills to be contrite and penitent. For to such I will grant eternal life. Theodore of Heraclea (died ca. 355 AD), *Fragments on Isaiah*

Let the comfort of Your salvation, and the healing of Your forgiveness, surround and sustain me today, O Lord, and I will...

Pray Psalm 19.

The Law and all the Word of God are given to us to reveal our sin and direct us in the paths of righteousness. They show us Jesus, Who brings us into the glory of God, both in His Word and in His world. Let this psalm guide you to meditate on the many benefits of God's revelation from both sources.

Sing to the Lord.

Psalm 19 (*St. Christopher: Beneath the Cross of Jesus*)

The heav'ns declare God's glory, the skies His work proclaim!
From day to day and night by night they shout His glorious Name!
No speech, no words, no voice is heard, yet all across the earth
The lines of His all-present Word make known His holy worth.

Behold, the sun arises, a bridegroom strong and bright,
rejoicing as he runs his course from morning unto night.
From east to west across the skies his circuit he completes,
and none can hide their sinful eyes or shelter from his heat.

The Law of God is perfect, His testimony sure;
the simple man God's wisdom learns, the soul receives its cure.
God's Word is right, and His command is pure, and truth imparts;
He makes our eyes to understand; with joy He fills our hearts.

The fear of God is cleansing, forever shall it last.
His judgments all are true and just, by righteousness held fast.
O seek them more than gold most fine, than honey find them sweet;
Be warned by every word and line; be blessed with joy complete.

Who, Lord, can know his errors? O keep sin far from me!
Let evil rule not in my soul that I may blameless be.
O let my thoughts, let all my words, before Your glorious sight
Be pleasing to You, gracious Lord, acceptable and right!

6 No Peace for the Wicked

Pray Psalm 97.1.

The LORD reigns;
Let the earth rejoice;
Let the multitude of isles be glad!

Read Isaiah 57.19-21.

Reflect.

1. Who are the “far off” and the “near” of these verses (cf. Eph. 2.14-18)?
2. Who can expect to know peace, and who cannot? Why?

Meditate.

God promises His people, as they sink into the coming reality of captivity in Babylon, that peace is coming for them.

Well, for all who heed His Word, repent of their idolatrous ways, seek Him diligently, and prepare for His coming salvation. For those who choose to continue in the ways that have resulted in Israel’s captivity, no peace will be found.

It’s curious how God describes His peace: as “the fruit of the lips” (v. 19). The fruit of the lips is peace, says the Lord, and He alone can “create” it. God *speaks* His peace to us, just as He spoke the world into being. Here God uses the same word that appears throughout the Old Testament for His work of creation in Genesis, only in a participial form: בֹּרֵא, *boreah* – a *Creator*. This form of the verb describes something that is characteristic of God: He is always granting peace to those who heed His Word. It takes real spiritual power to know peace in the midst of temporal difficulties, and God can wield that power for all who trust in Him (cf. Phil. 4.6, 7). Jesus identified Himself with God when He told His disciples, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (Jn. 14.27).

And that peace is offered far and wide, to the Jews (those who are “near”) and to all the families of the Gentiles (those who are “far off,” cf. Eph. 2.14-18):

*Of the increase of His government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this. Isaiah 9.7*

The peace that God creates for those who heed His Word is the true healing (v. 19) they require, the healing of their soul. For when we can say, I have peace with God, nothing that might happen to us can bring any ultimate or lasting harm (Rom. 5.1-5).

But the wicked, those who refuse to repent and heed God’s Word, will never know peace (v. 20). They are like a troubled sea, always frothing and fretting, casting up wickedness and slime. The message should be clear for the people of Judah and Jerusalem: As you head off into captivity, do not let bitterness, despair, or continued transgression rob you of God’s peace. Repent, and look to Him Who creates peace for all who

trust Him, and you will know the peace of His coming salvation, even as you endure the trial of captivity in Babylon.

That same message speaks to us each day as well.

Prepare.

1. Why is God's peace the most important kind of healing?
2. Since God "speaks" peace to us, and does so continually, how would you counsel a troubled believer to know that peace (cf. Jn. 14.27, Phil. 4.6, 7)?
3. If God's peace eludes us, what might this suggest about the state of our soul? What can we do to gain access to God's peace?

For that joy that is after the fashion of the world is not true joy. Hear the prophet Isaiah: "There is no joy, says my God, to the wicked." What the wicked call joy is not joy, such as he [David] knew, who made no account of their joy; let us believe him, brothers. Augustine (354-430 AD), Explanations of the Psalms 97.16

Thank You for Your peace, Lord! Help me to know and grow in Your peace today as I...

Pray Psalm 97.

Peace and rejoicing are kindred affections. Let this psalm lead you into both.

Sing to the Lord.

Psalm 97 (*Rejoice, the Lord is King*)

Rejoice, the Lord is King! O earth, lift up your voice;
Be glad, you islands, shout and sing: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Refrain v. 9

Beyond, above all gods and nations be exalted, God of love!

His just and righteous throne 'mid clouds and darkness stands;
His fiery wrath consumes His foes in every land.

Refrain

Earth trembles at the sight of Jesus' holy face;
The mountains melt before His might and praise His grace.

Refrain

The heav'ns above declare His glorious righteousness.
And tribes and peoples everywhere; His Name confess.

Refrain

While Zion gladly sings, let all be brought to shame
who to vain idols worship bring and scorn His Name.

Refrain

All you who love the Lord, despise sin's wicked ways!
Praise Him Who guides us by His Word through all our days.

Refrain

7 Peace, and No Peace

Pray Psalm 22.27, 28.

All the ends of the world
Shall remember and turn to the LORD,
And all the families of the nations
Shall worship before You.
For the kingdom is the LORD's,
And He rules over the nations.

Review Isaiah chapters 56, 57.

Reflect.

1. In these chapters, for whom does God intend His coming salvation?
2. Who may not expect to benefit from the salvation of God?

Meditate.

In these two chapters, God continues the theme of expanding His salvation to incorporate the Gentiles. Those who are near (Jews) and those who are far (Gentiles), if they will come humbly to God, seeking His mercy and grace, they will know revival and salvation.

But the leaders of Israel, and all those like them who prefer idols to God, who will not repent from their wicked ways, and who seek to justify themselves by their own righteousness and works – all these will fail of God's salvation, and they will not know the way of peace.

God's people must endure a trial in Babylon, soon to begin. But He does not want them to languish there. Rather, He calls His faithful people to look past their trial, to recall His promises to the fathers, and look forward in faith to the coming of His Servant and that great day of salvation.

That's true for us as well. We have received a great salvation, but a greater measure of it is coming with the return of God's Servant. We need to be preparing for that great day even now, even in the midst of this secular and unbelieving age. Thus we may know the peace of God now and forever.

Prepare.

1. What is your approach to growing in the great salvation of our Lord?
2. In some ways, our lives here and now are a bit like Israel's experience in Babylon. Explain. What should we be doing?
3. What's your primary takeaway from Isaiah 56 and 57?

The church itself is the mountain ... we are going to rise again, and we shall be the holy mountain of God. On this mountain dwells whoever has given himself to God. "But those who have given themselves to me shall possess the land and inhabit my holy mountain." Augustine (354-430 AD), Sermon 45.3-5

Help me to grow in Your salvation Lord. Grant that today I may...

Pray Psalm 22.26-28.

Celebrate with the Servant – our Lord Jesus Christ – the salvation God is bringing to the world, and commit yourself to talking with someone about that salvation today.

Sing to the Lord.

Psalm 22.26-28 (*Darvall: Rejoice, the Lord is King*)

The suffering King shall eat and praise with us the Lord.

Forever we His praise repeat and trust His Word.

Praise God above, all you who keep His vows and who His mercies love!

All nations shall repent and hasten to the Lord;

All those to whom His truth is sent shall praise His Word.

The Lord is King! His sovereign rule on high now we His people sing!

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. God's salvation extends to the Gentiles. How does He intend to reach them? What is your role in that work?
2. Why did Israel's leaders fail the people of God? How could that happen? How should you pray for your church's leaders?
3. What does it mean to trust in God? When should we trust in Him? How can we know that we're trusting Him?
4. Peace is the greatest healing we can realize. Why?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Isaiah 56 and 57? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.