

Isaiah Part 35: A House of Prayer for All Nations...

Isaiah 56 and 57

Salvation for foreigners (Isaiah 56 v 1 to 8)

“Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come” (v 1) – this prophetic word is directed to God’s discouraged people, who have failed in obedience and righteousness. They see no reason to repent as long as things look dark. God shakes them out of this by calling them to keep justice, and do righteousness, in anticipation of what he will do. “Blessed is the man who does this” (v 2) – there is both the inherent blessing of obedience, and the Old Covenant blessing to the obedient...

- What are the spiritual ‘criteria’ against which God will judge a person, whether a Jew or not, as being one of his own people (v 1 to 8)? How does this anticipate the New Testament offer of the Gospel to all, and how does it fall short of it? See Matthew 21 v 12, 13; Mark 11 v 15 to 17; John 10 v 16.

“Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’”(v 3) – why shouldn’t they say it? Because it isn’t true. They may feel as if they are going to be separated from his people, but God promises they will not be, so he says to them, ‘Don’t say that! “And let not the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree’” – the eunuch is an example of an outcast. Eunuchs were denied full participation in temple rituals (Leviticus 21 v 18, 19). God did not want them to accept their feelings of being excluded. Though they may feel that way, God’s Word is higher than feelings. Often when people feel like foreigners or outcasts, those feelings become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is only in refusing to embrace such feelings, and choosing instead to trust God’s promises, that such feelings can be broken...

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give... a monument and a name” (4, 5) – this is God’s call and promise to the one who feels like an outcast. The World Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Jerusalem is called ‘Yad Vashem’, and according to Wikipedia (2020), this name is taken from Isaiah 56 v 5: “I will give... a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” Using the name Yad Vashem (Hebrew: **יָד וַשֵּׁם**, literally ‘a memorial and a name’) conveys the idea of establishing a national repository for the names of Jewish victims who have no one to carry their names after death. The verse in Isaiah refers to ‘eunuchs’ who, although they cannot have children, can live for eternity with the Lord.

“These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer” (v 7) – God’s people had the idea that they were accepted by God no matter what, but that others were rejected by him no matter what. In these verses God makes it clear that even when a foreigner or a eunuch follows the LORD, holds fast his covenant and faithfully obeys his commandments, that person will be accepted. “For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” – God his temple to not only be a place where the Jewish people would worship him, but to be a house of prayer for all nations. The violation of this principle made Jesus angry: when he came to the temple and found the outer courts (the only place where the Gentile nations could pray) more like a marketplace than a house of prayer, he drove out the money-changers and merchants.

“The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, ‘I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered’”(v 8) – because of the pain of exile and captivity, Israel had become intensely self-focused. They believed God only really cared about them, and the rest of the nations (many of whom treated Israel cruelly) did not matter. But God wanted to expand the vision of Israel beyond her own borders, so they would know that God loved the perishing nations and wanted the people of Israel to love them also.

[MORE OVER...]

Israel's irresponsible leaders and futile idolatry (Isaiah 56 v 9 to Isaiah 57 v 13)

- Looking at the sad picture of a community whose leaders were unworthy, who were forsaking God for idols, what warnings do these verses give for us? What does this passage teach us about God?

“His watchmen are blind” (v 10) – the leaders of God’s people are blind; judgment is on the way, but they do not see it and warn God’s people. They are not fulfilling their purpose as watchmen. They are ignorant, like “silent dogs”, sleeping. “They are shepherds who have no understanding” (v 11) – these ungodly leaders are a sad contrast to the godly leadership personified by King David in Isaiah 55 v 3 to 5). These are unfaithful shepherds, who look “each to his own gain”. “Let us fill ourselves with strong drink” (v 12) – worse than being passively ignorant and blind, they are actively wicked. As judgment approaches, they simply drink and get drunk. “Tomorrow will be like this day, great beyond measure” – their blind faith in progress has replaced a reasoned faith in God. They are ripe for judgment, and unprepared for that judgment. In a similar way, world leaders, and perhaps church leaders, will be unprepared for the return of Jesus.

“The man righteous perishes” (Isaiah 57 v 1) – continuing Isaiah’s rebuke of Judah’s leaders from the previous chapter, the LORD speaks of the persecution of the righteous. In this case, it is persecution through neglect (“no one lays it to heart”). “The righteous man is taken away from calamity; he enters into peace” (v 2) – though ignored and persecuted by the wicked leaders of Judah, God would not forsake the righteous, taking them away from calamity and allowing them to enter into peace.

“Whom are you mocking?” (v 4) – the wicked among God’s people made fun of the righteous. Here God challenges them by simply asking ‘Who do you think you are? “Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit?” This speaks of human nature: to see the sins of others, while being blind to our own sins. “You who burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree” (v 5) – here God begins to expose the spiritual adultery of his people. They ‘burn’ with passion for other gods, worshipping them in the ritual worship places of Canaanite paganism: “under every green tree”... “among the smooth stones of the valley” (v 6)... “on a high and lofty mountain” (v 7). “Behind the door and the doorpost you have set up your memorial” (v 8) – in Deuteronomy 6 v 4 to 9 God told Israel to inscribe his name and his word on every door post. Here there is a perverse twist: they remember their pagan gods behind the doors and their posts!

“You were wearied with the length of your way” (v 10) – after the initial thrill of their spiritual adultery, God’s people were wearied, but even then they would not repent (“but you did not say, ‘It is hopeless’). “I will declare your righteousness and your deeds, but they will not profit you” (v 12) – God’s people did not trust in him, and their idols were so weak and helpless that “a breath will take them away”. “He who takes refuge in me shall possess the land and shall inherit my holy mountain” (v 13) – this is in contrast to those who turned away from God: taking refuge in God makes a person secure...

Comfort for the contrite (Isaiah 57 v 14 to 21)

“Prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way” (v 14) – whatever gets in the way of our getting right with God must be removed. In these verses, God deals with those obstructions:

- “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy” (v 15) – to be right with God, the first thing is to understand his greatness and holiness.
- “To revive the spirit of the lowly” – though God is “high and lifted up”, at the same time he will live with those who are lowly and contrite.
- “For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry” (v 16) – though God disciplined the unjust and backslidden person, he now says (v 18), “I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him.”
- “Peace, peace, to the far and to the near” (v 19) – God invites all people to peace – each one can receive God’s *shalom* – the gift of precious well-being...