

ISAIAH CHAPTER 56

JEWES AND CHRISTIANS ARE ONE

Peace—everyone seems to be seeking it. We look for wars to end. We crave relaxation and peace of mind; we search for ways to have peace in our interpersonal relationships. We seek refuge from the noisy and chaotic world in a little peace and quiet. Yet those are only one variety of peace. The true peace we need is spoken of in Scripture, especially in Romans 5:1, peace with God. This chapter in Isaiah will turn our thoughts to that kind of peace.

The messages of Isaiah 40–55 were directed to those who were in exile in Babylon. Sometime around 700 B.C. the prophet Isaiah wrote a series of messages for the Jews who would be taken into captivity in Babylon some 100 years later, around 600 B.C. Why would he do something like that? God inspired Isaiah to write these messages so that when the time came for the Jews to be taken captive, they could read these prophecies written 100 years earlier and have hope for the future. These messages made it clear that although God would punish Israel by sending her into exile in Babylon for her disobedience, that punishment would not last forever. The people in captivity could read Isaiah's message and know that what he was saying would come to pass. They could know that because the prophecy predicting their captivity had by then actually taken place. You see, Isaiah had predicted the Jewish captivity more than 100 years before Babylon was even regarded as a world power.

Knowing, therefore, that if the prediction about the captivity had come true, then it was very likely that the predictions about the release from captivity would also come true. They could believe Isaiah when he said that captivity would only be temporary, and also when he spoke about the glory Israel would know again at some time in the future.

In chapters 56 and 57 Isaiah begins a new message. This new message from Isaiah is addressed to the Jews who are still in Canaan, that is what most of us know as Israel. So, we might say that Isaiah has brought us back from the future and is once again directing his message to the people of his own time. Isaiah urges them to “*do what is right*” and uses Sabbath-keeping to illustrate obedience to the divine law (Isaiah 56:1–2).

According to that law Eunuchs were banned from participating in Israel's worship (Deuteronomy 23:1). Isaiah uses them here as a symbol of all those who feel insecure in their relationship with God. If **anyone**, and I cannot emphasize the word **anyone** enough, if **anyone** believes and obeys God's covenant, he or she will surely be accepted by God and blessed (Isaiah 56:33-8). At this time, however, Israel's leaders were acting like beasts of the forest, blind watchmen, and shepherds concerned primarily with satisfying their own appetites rather than the needs of their flock (verses 9-11). As we move into

chapter 57, we'll see that Israel is condemned because they continue to run eagerly after pagan gods (verses 3-13). Yet God has a word of comfort for the godly remnant of faithful people in Israel. The Lord is with the "*contrite and lowly of spirit.*" God punishes, but He will heal. But **as for the wicked, there is no peace for them** (verses 14-21). Now let's look at these verses more closely to fully understand what the prophet is telling us.

Isaiah 56:1, 2 NAS:

*1 Thus says the Lord, "Preserve justice and do righteousness, For My **salvation**¹ is about to come And My righteousness to be revealed.*

2 "How blessed is the man (woman)² who does this, And the son of man who takes hold of it; Who keeps from profaning the sabbath, And keeps his hand from doing any evil."

Isaiah begins by urging people **to do what is right** (Isaiah 1:17) because God's salvation will come soon. "*Salvation*" as used here is referring to God's promise of a life of safety and peace.³ Again Isaiah linked present behavior with future salvation and blessings. In verse 2 the reference to *man* and *son of man* reveals that righteousness is available to all mankind. Because God will bring salvation to those who believe, they should do what they know to be right in the present. In Isaiah's day a righteous person (verse 1) lived according to God's Law.

Keeping the Sabbath was important under the Law (Exodus 20:8-11). A person was not to do any work on that day in order to confirm that he/she believed God would take care of them and bless them. **Since the Sabbath was a sign of Israel's covenant with God,** that is to obey His laws, keeping the Sabbath signified that a person believed in the covenant and the Lord. Such a person also kept from doing evil (Isaiah 55:7).

In addition, the Sabbath served as a reminder of God's own covenant faithfulness, demonstrated when He delivered His people from slavery in Egypt, Deuteronomy 5:15 NAS:

*You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the **sabbath day.***

I consider it to be very possible that we see in this verse one of the main reasons God rested on the seventh day after creating the universe. We know God didn't rest because He was tired. He was establishing a foundation for keeping the Sabbath. When God's people had been slaves in Egypt they were not allowed rest from their continual labor,

¹ The Hebrew word that is defined here as *salvation* is *yeshuah*, meaning *safety*, or *ease*.

² Parentheses added.

³ Young's Analytical Concordance.

day in and day out. Additionally the Sabbath was also to be a day of rest in which their deliverance from slavery would be remembered with thanksgiving as a sign of their redemption⁴ and continual sanctification.⁵ It is because the Sabbath was so meaningful in Israel's faith that Isaiah holds up **Sabbath-keeping** as a symbol of an individual's commitment to keeping God's whole Law.⁶

Now just a few more comments regarding the Sabbath so that we might have a clear meaning of its significance.

If I were to ask you how do we keep the Sabbath, the correct reply would be that we keep the Sabbath by **trusting God to meet our needs.**

In the very beginning God asked Adam and Eve to trust in Him and not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In this way Adam and Eve would be demonstrating their trust in God to provide for all their needs. The fall of man is nothing more than a lack of faith. God does the work and humanity trusts that work is sufficient. God works for those who trust in Him. We exercise dominion over the earth, but that dominion flows out of dependence on God. All of Sinai's covenants are embodied in the Sabbath. Israel went into exile to Babylon because they continually broke the Sabbath. They wouldn't trust God. We now hope in the second coming of the Messiah in the second Exodus in the end times. Those who have such faith keep the Sabbath. Those who have such faith will make an outward demonstration of that faith by taking the Sabbath as a day of rest as well.

There are two aspects of the Sabbath: physical and spiritual. As human beings with limitations we, unlike God, do get tired. We do need periods of rest in order to be physically restored for the tasks we have to do. If, as we just said, we truly trust God to meet our needs, then we will obey His principle of resting one day a week; we will not insist that we have to do work or it will never get done, or that we won't earn enough income if we don't work on that one day. If we trust God, we can confidently obey His principles and know that He will meet our needs. Secondly, there is the spiritual rest that we have on the Sabbath, as we worship God, pray, and meditate on the Word of God. Richard Swenson, MD, the author of *Margin*, states it this way:

“When our bodies find rest, we feel refreshed. When our emotions find rest, our countenance is lifted. Yet relaxed muscles and minds are of little worth unless our souls also find rest in the acceptance of God. Such a rest transcends the problems of our world and shelters us where no injury can follow. As the psalmist tells us, ‘He who dwells in the

⁴ To extricate from or help to overcome something detrimental.

⁵ To set apart to a sacred purpose or to religious use .

⁶ Richards, Larry: *The Bible Reader's Companion*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1991, S. 441.

shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” The shadow of the Almighty is impregnable; His rest ultimately the only dependable rest

“At Sabbath time we suspend dominion work and instead worship the dominion-Maker. We cease reaping for our own cupboards and instead bring an offering to Him. We rest not because we are tired. . . . We rest and worship one day in seven simply because He is the Lord. . . .

“Remembering [what God has done for us], worshiping, and resting are acts of contemplation. . . . The Sabbath rest is an opportunity for contemplation When my surrender is completed and His yoke is accepted, then my soul will find rest. *And it is imperative, in such an age as ours, that we rest spiritually.*”⁷

Isaiah 56:3-5 NAS:

3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from His people.” Nor let the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.”

4 For thus says the Lord, “To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, And choose what pleases Me, And hold fast My covenant,

5 To them I will give in My house and within 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.

No one who has faith in the Lord will be excluded from the kingdom of God.

Gentiles, people outside the covenant community of the Jewish people, who committed themselves to a life of faith and obedience to God would be included as well in all the promises God made to the Jewish people. Even foreigners (Isaiah 14:1) and eunuchs who join themselves to the Lord are welcome. **Keeping the Sabbath** and obeying God’s covenant stipulations would demonstrate their loyalty to the Lord (verses 1-2). In fact verse 5 tells us that such believers will be blessed throughout all eternity.

According to Old Testament law no eunuch could enter the temple compound to worship (Deuteronomy 23:1–8). The same passage excludes many foreigners from worship. Here, however, God promises that eunuchs will be honored within His temple and its walls (verse 5) and that His temple will be “*a house of prayer for all the peoples*” (verse 7). This promise to the eunuch and the foreigner is intended to comfort and reassure **anyone** who feels they are unqualified to approach God. None of us merit God’s favor. Yet He

⁷ Richard B. Swenson, *Margin*. Colorado Springs: NavPress. 1992. Pp.232-234.

speaks words of reassurance to us and lets us know in unmistakable terms that **everyone is welcome.**

Isaiah 56:6-8 NAS:

6 *“Also 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 My covenant;
7 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.”*
8 *The Lord God, who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares, “Yet others I will gather to them, to those already gathered.”*

All people throughout the earth who love God are acceptable to God and will be an equal part of the kingdom right along with believing Israelites. Redeemed Gentiles, though not in the covenantal family of Israel, can still receive all of God’s blessings. They in turn show their devotion to God by their service, worship, and obedience, which also means keeping the Sabbath along with God’s other covenant stipulations. As God promised Abraham, through him all peoples of the world will be blessed (Genesis 12:3). These believing Gentiles will be gathered to Zion, God’s holy mountain, which refers to Jerusalem (Isaiah 11:9) at the end of the age, along with the believing Jews, where they all will worship Jehovah God with their prayers and offerings.⁸ The Scripture seems to be repeatedly telling us that during the Millennium the world headquarters will be in Jerusalem, and that all believers who died or were raptured prior to the beginning of the Millennium will be gathered there for a great celebration. Many may then be re-assigned to various parts of the world where they will rule and represent the world rule of Jesus Christ. In fact there is enough evidence I believe to suggest that the saints will occupy all of Israel according to the boundaries given by God to Abraham.

God emphasized that the Gentiles who believed (Isaiah 56:3) would be included in his blessing (56:7). The inclusion of Gentiles in God’s plan for world blessing can also be found in Genesis 12:3; Amos 9:12; Acts 15:16–18; Romans 4:9–16; Galatians 3:7–9; and Ephesians 2:11–19; 3:4–6.⁹

The nation of Israel was sent into Captivity because she had disobeyed the Law of God, particularly the fourth commandment: *“Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy”* (Exodus 20:8). This commandment was a special sign between God and the Jews (Isaiah 31:12–18; Nehemiah 9:13–14); it had never before been given to the Gentiles. The Jews received strong disapproval from God for the careless way they treated the Sabbath

⁸ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:1111

⁹ Hughes, Robert B. ; Laney, J. Carl ; Hughes, Robert B.: Tyndale Concise Bible Commentary. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House Publishers, 2001 (The Tyndale Reference Library), S. 267

almost from the very time that God gave it and the other commandments to them through Moses at Mount Sinai. Even after their return to the holy land after the Captivity, the Jews continued to violate the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15–22).

God never before asked the Gentiles to join the Jews in keeping the Sabbath, but here He does so. He welcomes the very people He prohibited from entering His covenant nation, that is foreigners and eunuchs. This is another picture of the grace of God. The invitation is still, “*Ho, everyone! Come!*”¹⁰ God’s admonition to the remnant to “***Preserve justice and do righteousness***” (Isaiah 56:1) was, however, not obeyed. When you read Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Malachi, you discover that the Jews soon forgot God’s goodness and returned to their old ways.

Beginning in Isaiah 56:9 and going on through chapter 59, the prophet presents a series of indictments against the disobedient in the nation of Israel. He directs his criticism primarily to the leaders of the nation in Isaiah 56:9–57:2, the idolaters in Isaiah 57:3–13, the proud and greedy in verses 14–21, the hypocritical worshipers in Isaiah 58:1–14, and those responsible for injustice in the land in Isaiah 59:1–21. But even in His wrath, God remembers mercy (Habakkuk. 3:2); for along with these indictments, the Lord pleads with people to humble themselves and submit to Him.¹¹

Isaiah 56: 9-12 NAS:

*9 All you beasts of the field, All you beasts in the forest, Come to eat.
10 His watchmen are blind, All of them know nothing. All of them are mute dogs unable to bark, Dreamers lying down, who love to slumber;
11 And the dogs are greedy, they are not satisfied. And they are shepherds who have no understanding; They have all turned to their own way. Each one to his unjust gain, to the last one.
12 “Come,” they say, “let us get wine, and let us drink heavily of strong drink; And tomorrow will be like today, only more so.”*

In verse 9, God called for the beasts, the Gentile powers and most probably Babylon, to punish Israel because she was disobedient. God would use the powerful world power of Babylonia as the instrument for punishing the Jews. **The watchmen** (Jeremiah 6:17; Ezekiel 33:7), a reference to priests and religious leaders, were blind and ignorant and were like dogs who like to sleep and eat. Good shepherds would know and lead their flocks to the best grazing ground available. But these leaders were ignorant shepherds going their own way (Isaiah 53:6). They were more interested in their own gain than in their people’s welfare. They were concerned only with their own pleasure, failing to consider that judgment would eventually come (56:12).¹²

¹⁰ Isaiah 55:1.

¹¹ Wiersbe, Warren W.: Be Comforted. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1992 (An Old Testament Study), S. Is 56:9

¹² Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:1112

It was the godless conduct of the leaders that caused Judah to fall to Babylon (Lamentations 4:13, 14). Had the prophets, priests, and rulers turned to God in repentance and faith, He would have intervened on their behalf; but they persisted in their rebellion.

With biting sarcasm, Isaiah calls them blind watchmen who cannot see the enemy coming, and sleeping dogs who could not bark their warning even if they were awake. The leaders were not alert; they loved to sleep, and when they were awake, they loved to eat and drink. In fact, a closer look at verses 10-12 suggests that God's watchmen, the priests, spent much of their time drinking heavily and therefore probably were drunk. These were God's leaders who were supposed to be shepherding the people, guiding them and setting an example for them. It is probably fair to say the very same reality applies to the situation the United States finds itself in today, whether you take this passage literally as applying to heavy drinkers and alcoholics or take it figuratively as being intoxicated with the ideas of the culture.

Spiritual leaders are "*watchmen*" who must be awake to the dangers that threaten God's people. They are "*shepherds*" who must put the care of the flock ahead of their own desires. When the foreign invaders, "*beasts of the field*", come, the shepherds must protect the flock, no matter what the danger might be.¹³ The men spoken of here, however, are so wholly preoccupied with self-interest that they do not care for their sheep.