

Notes on Isaiah 56—66

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Chapters 56–57

All that now follows is built on the work that the Servant has accomplished. God's salvation is now about to be revealed and because the salvation of God is his righteousness it will issue in righteousness among his people. Therefore, the people of God are called to participate in this new life.

Sabbath keeping marks it, because by the Sabbath, Israel confessed that God was their Creator and Redeemer. They rested in his finished works. It is characterised by there being an equal place in the Lord's temple for eunuchs and foreigners, those whose humanity was otherwise regarded as deficient or alien. Christ's death and resurrection have raised up a new humanity in which there is the equality of common access to the Father. Leaders who do not understand this are like mute and greedy dogs scavenging in the streets.

In fact, Israel was in a sad state. Righteous people would be better dead for then they would have rest. Using the image of a prostitute and her family, Isaiah shows what the nation had become: her people were reverencing idols in immoral worship and running to other nations for protection. The sons of a nation bred in this way should not thumb their noses at God. Have they forgotten how to fear him because it is so long since they have heard his voice? Remarkably, God assured them that his mercy was still available for those with a contrite spirit. From such an evil nation, God would make a people who loved and praised him. The wicked would not find peace in their wild worship and foreign trusts.

Prayer

I thank you Father that you are creating a new people of peace and justice out of the wrecks of our idolatry and mistrust. You have said: 'I have seen your ways, but I will heal you.' Therefore, Lord, I do trust you now and ask that you will save me from every false way. Teach me to keep the true Sabbath rest of relying on your Son for righteousness and peace. Grant to me a contrite spirit so that I may always hear your word. Amen.

Chapters 58–59

On many occasions, Isaiah has taken us from the real world of God's promise to the 'unreal' world of everyday life, and then, back to God's promise. Here, he shows that the religious practice of Israel was masking a strident pursuit of personal goals and their own righteousness and an abuse of the poor. Their desire for blessing from God would be quickly answered if they did what they already knew was God's will. The God of grace takes issue with our hypocrisy. The means of our healing is at our door.

God could readily save his people from disaster, except that the reason for the disaster on this occasion was their widespread and bitter and public pursuit of evil. A good man would quickly become a victim. The prophet acknowledged this sin on behalf of the people and knew it would be inappropriate for God to hear their prayers. However, God found no one to intervene, that is, to judge the sin of the land, no leader to turn the public tide of evil. So, he put on his own armaments to destroy it himself. Here is the God of grace, putting on the flesh of Christ, or, as John says, the zeal of the Lord of hosts consuming Christ (John 2), not only to cleanse the temple, but also to wear the iniquities of his people and bear the wrath revealed against them. This is the Redeemer needed by Israel, and the world. A word is given to Isaiah, or perhaps, to Messiah. This word of hope will never leave his people. The Spirit which is on the Davidic King (11:2) and the Suffering Servant (42:1) and the Anointed deliverer (61:1) will never leave either him or his descendants.

Prayer

Father, show me the ways you want me to live, the people I may assist and the people I should forgive, lest my heart gets lost in religious practice that has no truth. Yet even so, I thank you that though our race provides no justice and no saviour, you yourself have come with righteousness and salvation. I thank you for the zeal of Jesus Christ your Son, and that he still lives to intercede on our behalf. In his name, I ask that I may live to your glory. Amen.

Chapters 60–61

Deep darkness was prevalent in the land of Israel, but God's glory would prevail. It would rise on them (1) or appear to them (2), so they would be glorious (9, 13). God would be their glory (19) so that God would be glorified in them (21). This glory shone on Israel when gifts were born to the infant Jesus, but will also shine when all mourning is finished in the coming new heavens and earth (Rev. 21:4). The present church walks in the glory of God which has shone in Jesus Christ and which shines on them now. Nations come to the light that has shone on God's people and, together, they glory in his grace to them. They are administered by the peace and righteousness of God, which he has revealed in Jesus Christ (Phil. 4:7–8). But none of this is valid or convincing apart from the hope of glory that God has yet to reveal in the return of his Son.

In chapters 40–55, a Servant of the Lord emerged in whom the destiny of the nation would be focussed and fulfilled. Now, in these chapters, an Anointed Deliverer speaks. It is by him that all the promises of God will be fulfilled. Those who longed for God's kingdom to come will have great joy and liberation, they will be like oak trees of righteousness in the land, they will establish order and the nations will recognise that they are like priests bringing the blessings of God to them. So the Deliverer exalts in his God. He has been given salvation for his people and shares righteousness with his 'bride'. The earth breaks out with new growth, righteousness and praise, like a new Garden of Eden. Jesus quoted this chapter at the beginning of his ministry. He is the conquering Lord and we who trust in him are his Bride. He spoke of the joy that was set before him and which led him to endure the shame of the cross. This is the joy we now share with him.

Prayer

Glory be to you our God, for your Son has brought your presence and healing into our present life. According to your promise, may the nations hear your word and rejoice with us in your mercy. Grant us patience that we may not distrust in you as the bringer of righteousness to all the earth. Rather, may we delight with your Son as he waits until all his enemies be made his footstool. Thankyou for the liberty of heart and conscience, the joy and praise and righteousness which you have established for us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapters 62–63

God's Anointed Deliverer continues to announce the victory he has for his people. It is not what he has done already that he speaks of here, but what will happen by his word. So, he will not keep quiet until her righteousness shines in the earth with great glory. She is God's wife and her sons will be proud to belong to her. To aid in this work, the Deliverer appoints those who will pray over his people, so that God will not forget what he has promised. The church has become the true Israel of God. Christ stands amongst her and proclaims his word of redemption and justification through his preachers. His people pray that God will fulfil every promise. In this way, people of all nations will hear and confess that there is a Redeemer in the earth, for Israel and also for them also.

The Deliverer had been clothed by God with 'garments of salvation' (61:10) and comes here, still mighty to save. But now, his garments are red with blood. Those who do not meet Christ as Saviour will encounter the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 6:16) as he executes the rightful judgment on those who stubbornly refuse the majestic reign of God's grace.

A new section begins with 63:7. The prophet thinks of how God had such tender and high hopes for Israel when he saved them from Egypt. He remembers that they abused this benefit and grieved the Holy Spirit by whom they were led in the wilderness and were given up to their enemies. He remembers the prayers Israel prayed and prays his own prayer. God has been Father to Israel. Why should he abandon his own child, even if the earthly forefathers could not recognise their own nation? Remarkably, he says God has confirmed them in their evil ways, and their behaviour would suggest that God had never ruled them.

Prayer

Lord God, your Son stands among is in his risen power and announces good news. He will not allow his word to cease until all the nations know that you are God. Thanks be to you, faithful God, that you have brought to the world a righteousness which is of your own making and in which we may walk. Let me not forget your wrath or the zeal of your Son for your holiness. But more than that, let me never forget that you have been Father to us, giving up your own Son for us. When my heart is far away, even then, grant that I may call to you, for you will hear and turn my heart to you. I bless you Father for such tender care, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapters 64–66

The prophet longed for God's saving presence. He remembered the times when God came to destroy their enemies, the Assyrians (e.g. 31:4–5). However, Israel had long been caught up in her sins and no-one laid hold of God to alter this. What could change this? A Father could, and Israel had a Father! So the prophet prayed that God would act for his people. God had given them up to the power of their sins. Could the Father stand by and see his own nation fall so that there was no more worship from them?

God explains his situation. He had permitted unreal worship for a long time. In fact, while professing to worship the Lord they had actually been self-righteously worshipping idols. They were like grapes to be crushed by the treading, but, before they begin, the Lord notices some bunches oozing with juice and he pulls them out for separate treatment. (Juice that oozed before treading the grapes was prized for making fine wine.) For them, he would fulfil his covenant and give them an inheritance. God would make a separation between false worshippers and his chosen servants. They would fill the land with joyful praise because of the new heaven and earth that God had created, a creation filled with praise and where extraordinary fruitfulness and peace would endure. It would be characterised by prayers answered before and as they are prayed.

This is true worship. In such a creation there will be no harm to fear. Do we wait for such a creation? Of course, but we are already a new creation (II Cor. 5:17). Those who trust in the Son of God have life and the answer to their prayers (I John 5:10–15). In the end time, there will be a revelation of this people in all their glory and there will be no more crying (Rev. 21:1–8). Such a people are told that God is making all things new, now. Those who overcome, who hope in God through the present trials, will inherit all of God's riches.

Now the conflict that has been present throughout this prophecy is focussed, the conflict between those who trembled at God's word and those who would not believe. The latter were making their own religion by importing elements from idolatry and relying on alien powers, even while professing to be true to the Lord. God hated this hypocrisy. They sought to exclude from the worship those who listened to Isaiah. The central issue was this: would people delight in the work of their own hands or in the saving deeds of God? The Lord would come and deal with these enemies, the true nation of believers would be established in a moment, they would find themselves wonderfully comforted as part of the people the Lord had made (66:1) and with the Lord himself (66:13). Those who had opposed the Lord with their own works would see God's glory well enough. He would kill many of them.

While this judgment is being executed, a sign would be established to gather the survivors. This will be those who have trusted in God. The sign he would set among them is the cross on which his Son was killed. All who have looked to Christ on the day when God came to judge his enemies, the day Christ died, will be grateful for the mercy shown to them. They will be sent by the Lord to all nations to gather a people to the Lord (cf. 2:2–4). So true worship will be offered by all humanity. From the place of their worship, they will look at the judgment of those excluded from 'humanity' and wonder at the mercy shown to them.

Prayer

Father, how great is your love to those who wait on you! We were so close to being lost together with all those who are careless of you. We thank you that when the judgment fell on humanity at the cross, we were encompassed in Jesus Christ your Son. Now you have gathered us to be about your business. We thank you that already you are making all things new. New life issues and grows before we could know how it could happen. We are comforted by your church with her healing word and by your dear Son. Therefore Lord, keep us mindful of your word, always eager to hear and always ready to obey for the sake of Christ your Son. Amen.

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