

Renewal in 2023

Isaiah 56-57

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Did you make any New Year's resolutions? Lots of us do, and most of us don't keep them. Statistics show that 22% of all resolutions fail after one week, 40% fail after one month, and 60% after three months.

And since we have been talking about the Babylonians in our study of Isaiah, it is they that we have to thank for New Year's resolutions. They would make religious resolutions every year. Then the Romans picked it up, and the rest is history. New Year's resolutions are not bad. They can be good things.

I don't know what you decided was one of your goals this year, but humility or lowliness probably didn't make the list. You won't find that one on the list of top ten resolutions. Holiness probably doesn't make the list, either. What about God's peace in your life? That one probably got scratched off the top ten list of resolutions too.

Yet, when we read Scripture, we learn that peace with God, humility, and holiness are high on His list for us. While we may desire them and even strive for them, they really are works that the Spirit of God must do in us. Isaiah 56-57 addresses the importance of peace with God, lowliness, and holiness in our lives.

This morning we move into what is considered the third and final book of Isaiah. Remember, Isaiah wrote 150 years before Judah went into exile in Babylon. In the second book, Isaiah wrote to comfort His discouraged people. God promised to redeem His people. He wanted them to know that He had not abandoned them and that their exile was discipline for their sin. He called His people to repent of sin and trust Him.

Now in this last section, Isaiah 56-66, Isaiah sees further into the future and sees what God will do to redeem His people. In Book 2, Isaiah saw that redemption was promised. In Book 3, he saw redemption realized.

Isaiah 56 picks up where Isaiah 55 leaves off. Isaiah 55 invited us to Jesus' banqueting table, and now Isaiah 56 invites us to Jesus' house of prayer to worship God.

There are three scenes in chapters 56 and 57. The scene in Isaiah 56:1-8 looks forward to Jesus' atoning work, but Isaiah 56:9-57:21 looks back at the sin that landed Judah in exile. Bottom line: We are people who are in constant need of renewal.

I. Scene 1: Prepare for salvation (Isaiah 56:1-8)¹

Verses 1-8 point to the atoning work of Jesus on the cross. Verse 1 sets the tone *by calling God's people to love justice and live righteous lives within the covenant community.*

In v. 1, Isaiah called Judah back to covenant faithfulness. He did not have to quote all the law to them, for they would have known Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18:

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, "Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Leviticus 19:18, "Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord."

These two texts summarized all of the law and the prophets. The things taught in these texts laid out how to live in covenant faithfulness. Every Jew had been taught it since he/she was a baby. They knew what it meant.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment in the Law was, He replied,

³⁷ *He said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.³⁸ This is the greatest and most important command.*

³⁹ *The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."*

So, when God calls His people to *preserve justice and do what is right*, in a nutshell, He was calling them to *love Him with all of their heart, soul, mind, and strength and love their neighbors in the same way they love themselves.*

Then at the end of v. 1, God says *that His salvation is coming soon and my righteousness will be revealed.* He was preparing His people for the coming Messiah because Jesus would bring justice and righteousness.

¹ Just FYI, we are going to spend most of our time in these eight verses because they set the tone for the sermon.

He would love God with all of His heart, soul, mind, and strength and love His neighbor in the same way He loved Himself.

The arrival of the Messiah would reveal the hearts of people. Those who truly loved God's righteousness and justice and strived to practice it celebrated the arrival of the Messiah, and those who loved self-righteousness hated it.

Even today, when people hear the gospel explained, the very Spirit of Christ lays the heart bare. *When we really understand the gospel, we understand that we do what we do because we love what we love.*

So, God calls us to do a heart check on ourselves to see if we love Him with all of our hearts, soul, mind, and strength. When we love Him this way, then we will live justly and treat others with kindness, love, mercy, and generosity, and serve them. This is what it means when we love Jesus. It overflows in our lives in gracious, righteous living, and this will fill your life with joy.

Then at the end of v. 2, it seems like He deviates from his point when He calls us to keep the Sabbath. But, it is not a deviation; it is driving the point deeper. Sabbath rest does not mean inactivity on one day of the week. It means to love God's justice and righteousness every day of your life.

The principle of the Sabbath is that the part represents the whole. To worship God on this particular day means that all of life is worship. It means all of life is loving God and loving your neighbor in Jesus' name.

It is not inactivity but activity motivated by love of God and love of neighbor. The weekly celebration of Jesus should overflow in serving others in Jesus' name every day of the week.

For us, the Lord's Day is our Sabbath rest. It is the day we worship Jesus. This one day is the day when we focus on Christ and worship Him, and this day is designed to fill us as we rest in Jesus as we worship Him. By this day of rest in Christ, we are strengthened to worship Him and serve our neighbors every day.

Then in vv. 3-8, God blows the minds of the Jews because He tells them that the day of salvation that is coming is not for them only but for those who have previously been disqualified: The Gentiles (foreigners) and the eunuchs. These two classes of people represent all people who had previously been excluded.

The foreigners (Gentiles) is a concept that is easier for us to understand. It was not easy for the Jews, but it has always been God's plan to bring the nations into His family.

It was not just a challenging thing for the Jews to believe, but it was also hard for the Gentiles to believe as well. So, God tells the Gentiles not to say, *"The Lord will exclude me from his people."* God was not going to exclude them. Now, because of the work of Jesus on the cross, the outsiders were becoming insiders. God made a way!

This brings us to eunuchs being brought into God's kingdom. The idea of the eunuch is a bit more challenging. Why use the eunuch as the example of those being included in the family of God?

Think about it this way. Eunuchs were men who had their genitals crushed or removed in order to be temple prostitutes in their pagan religion. The Law said that people who mutilated their bodies were excluded from worship of God.

These men had submitted to sexual desire to become prostitutes. They had mutilated their bodies in order to lead pagan worship. This was serious sin that excluded them from the worship of God.

Now, all of that was going to change. When the Messiah comes, He will initiate a new covenant, and then outsiders have a way to become insiders. Those who had sinned in unimaginable ways and who were previously excluded will be included if they repent and believe in the Messiah.

In the minds of these eunuchs, they had sinned so badly that they believed there was no way God would accept them. They had mutilated their bodies, led in pagan worship, and now they want to repent and worship the Messiah. In their minds, there was no way God accept them. In their minds, their sin was too great. In their minds, it was not ethnicity that separated them from God but their sin.

They believed they were no longer useful to God because they didn't have the capacity to produce children. They believed they were too far gone to turn back, but this was far from the truth.

In v. 5, God says that within the wall of His house that He will give them a memorial, a name that is better than sons and daughters. It is not bearing children that gives you an everlasting name, but it is bearing God's name that makes you fruitful and gives you everlasting life.

It is faith in Jesus that renews us and transforms us. Jesus makes outsiders insiders. Jesus includes the formerly excluded. This is the work of Jesus' atonement on the cross.

Friends, there are men and women and boys and girls who, in the name of warped sexuality and misplaced desires, are mutilating their bodies. One day many of them will want to worship Jesus. They need to

know that although their bodies have been damaged that Christ will renew them and make them fruitful in ways they could never imagine. His healing will go far beyond the damage done.

The question is, will we practice justice and righteousness with them and tell them about the cleansing blood of Christ? Will we love our neighbors who seem like they have sinned so badly that they can't be saved? Will we tell them that Jesus' body was broken and torn and mutilated so that the broken and mutilated may be saved? It is His sacrifice that makes a way for the nations to come to Him and know what it means to be healed and renewed.

It does not matter who you are or what you have done; Jesus renews you. There is no one who is too far gone, no one too bad, no one too far off for God to bring them into His family through their faith in Jesus' sacrifice.

II. Scene 2: Beware of wicked leaders (Isaiah 56:9-12)

Scene two is in vv. 9-12. It is difficult to determine the setting of these verses. Hezekiah was king at the end of Isaiah's ministry, so these verses do not depict the leaders in Isaiah's day. They most likely look forward to the leadership of the nation during Manasseh's reign. He was king before Judah was carried into exile, and the leaders in his reign were wicked.

Regardless of what the setting is, the message is clear, Isaiah is contrasting those who rest in God in vv. 1-8 with those who don't believe in vv. 9-12.

The leaders he addressed in vv. 9-12 were asleep on the job. They were blind guides who were ignorant of the Lord's ways. They were silent when it came to speaking out against injustices in the community of faith and the covenant unfaithfulness of the people.

Perhaps if they spoke out about injustices, it might cost them their job, their status, their influence, or worse, money. These were self-centered shepherds who only cared for their own intense desires.

These verses serve as a warning for us all. If you are a leader in a church, then beware of succumbing to the temptation to be self-indulgent and self-centered.

Pastors, ministers, and leaders are constantly tempted to become the center of their own little world. They might believe they deserve to be privileged with certain things. In reality, they are going to get exactly what they deserve. They will be the main course for the dogs unless they repent.

The warning for the church is that they must hold leadership accountable. Pastors, ministers, and church leaders are charged with being godly leaders, and when they fail in their calling, then the church must do the right thing and hold them accountable. This is never an easy calling for a body of believers, but it is necessary. A healthy church loves its leadership well when it calls them to repentance.

III. Scene 3: Consider the outcomes (Isaiah 57:1-21)

Isaiah 57 sounds like Psalm 1 applied to Judah just before they were exiled to Babylon. Yet, it is also the story of any believer living in a wicked world. Friends, there are two ways to live, for Jesus or for the world. Listen to Psalm 1.

*¹How happy is the one who does not
walk in the advice of the wicked
or stand in the pathway with sinners
or sit in the company of mockers!*

*²Instead, his delight is in the Lord's instruction,
and he meditates on it day and night.*

*³He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams
that bears its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.*

Whatever he does prospers.

*⁴The wicked are not like this;
instead, they are like chaff that the wind blows away.*

*⁵Therefore, the wicked will not stand up in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

*⁶For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to ruin.*

Isaiah 57 is book-ended with four verses, two on each end, that teach us the outcome of those who truly trust in God have peace with God and those who don't won't. Look in vv. 1-2:

*The righteous person perishes,
and no one takes it to heart;
the faithful are taken away,
with no one realizing
that the righteous person is taken away
because of evil. ² He will enter into peace—
they will rest on their beds—
everyone who lives uprightly.*

Isaiah was referring to how the righteous people who lived among the wicked were overlooked. No one noticed them. They were faithful to God, and they suffered evil done to them. They perished right along with the wicked, but they died in peace, knowing God would receive them and give them their inheritance.

This should strengthen us as we live in a wicked society as the culture grows more and more hostile toward Christianity. Many believers will suffer. Some will suffer because of their faith, and others will suffer because of the general wickedness of the world, but God's people will possess peace in this life and enjoy peace in its fullness in the next life.

Then in vv. 3-13a, Isaiah describes what we can call the prostitutes family. He calls them "*witch's son, offspring of an adulterer and a prostitute.*" These are the mockers who walk in the path of the wicked.

In Isaiah's day, they were the ones living in Judah, calling themselves the people of God but practicing pagan religions. They claimed to trust God, but in reality, they only trusted in their own ability to appease the idols they had created.

However, v. 13 is where everything turns. Look in v. 13, for it lays out the difference between authentic faith and imitation faith:

*When you cry out,
let your collection of idols rescue you!
The wind will carry all of them off,
a breath will take them away.
But whoever takes refuge in me
will inherit the land
and possess my holy mountain.*

Now God mocks those who mocked the righteous. He tells them to call on the things they trust to rescue them. Of course, they won't because they can't.

Then the last part of v. 13, He turns around and offers everything to whoever will trust Him everything. He says, "*Whoever takes refuge in God will inherit the land and dwell on God's holy mountain.*" It sounds like John 3:16, "*Whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have everlasting life.*"

Verse 13b is our invitation to leave the idols behind and flee to Jesus for refuge and renewal. It is our invitation to receive everything God has to offer us in Christ. Isn't that what we really want?

Verses 14-19 are incredibly life-giving because they describe how God will renew His people if they will only humble themselves before Him. In other words, if they were to turn from their sin and turn to Him for eternal life. Listen to v. 14,

*He said, "Build it up, build it up, prepare the way,
remove every obstacle from my people's way."*

Verse 14 teaches us that God will build up whoever turns to Him. He is not putting barriers in our way to come to Him. He is tearing them down so that if we will humble ourselves and turn to Jesus, we will be saved.

Next, v. 15 is an amazing verse. In it, God is telling us that He dwells in two places at the same time:

*¹⁵ For the High and Exalted One,
who lives forever, whose name is holy, says this:
"I live in a high and holy place,
and with the oppressed and lowly of spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and revive the heart of the oppressed.*

Where does God dwell? He is the Exalted One who lives in a high and holy place. We get that. That is where He dwells.

But He also dwells with the humble and oppressed. He dwells with them so that He may revive them and renew them.

Friend, if you are looking for God and you can't find Him, then humble yourself before Him and seek Him with an authentic lowly spirit. If you humble yourself, you will find yourself; you won't have to look for Him because He will find you. I love how Ray Ortlund, Jr. explains this verse:

*God is not like us. For us, there's no neighborhood too classy for us to move up to, if only we can afford it. But God doesn't value upward mobility. He values downward mobility—not because he feels uncomfortable dwelling in the high and holy place, but because down low is where he finds the people who are open to him . . . Lowliness is the humility that admits, "Where I really belong is at the bottom. What I really deserve to be is nobody." That is so liberating. Life opens up [when we think like this].*²

Wouldn't our little church be amazing if we came in the door thinking this way? If we came in saying, "Father, let me be with the lowly and oppressed today. Make me humble. How can I be like you and build others up and be careful not to build myself up? How can I put others' needs before my needs? How can I encourage others and not expect to be encouraged? Help me overcome my resistance to talking to new people and people who are not like me."

Brothers and sisters, if our little church was filled with this kind of humility in 2023 what kind of community of faith would we have in this body? We would be one where those who are hurting and struggling would realize this was where they could find Jesus' heart and arms open wide to them.

But let's keep going because Isaiah has more to say to us. He is not done teaching us about the heart of our God. Listen to vv. 16-19:

*¹⁶ For I will not accuse you forever,
and I will not always be angry;
for then the spirit would grow weak before me,
even the breath, which I have made.
¹⁷ Because of his sinful greed I was angry,
so I struck him; I was angry and hid;
but he went on turning back to the desires of his heart.
¹⁸ I have seen his ways, but I will heal him;
I will lead him and restore comfort
to him and his mourners, ¹⁹ creating words of praise."
The Lord says, "Peace, peace to the one who is far or near,
and I will heal him."*

In these three verses, Isaiah was telling God's people that they were exiled because of their sin, but He had not abandoned them. He was actually disciplining them for their good. He was not going to be angry with them forever, or they would completely lose heart.

Instead, He promised He would renew them. He said He would speak words of comfort to them and create in their hearts words of praise. He would revive them. He would heal. He would fill them with His peace. Wow! What a wonderful promise.

Do you ever come to worship and have had such a rotten week that you do not have any words of praise? Have you ever come to worship, and your heart is just a mess? Anxiety and restlessness are creating a storm in your heart.

Then you discover that as you begin to worship, God puts words of praise in your heart and mouth. It begins when you hear others speak words of faith in song and in prayer. Your heart is softened and filled with praise. When this happens, the Spirit of God begins to renew your heart.

² Ray Ortlund, Jr., *Preaching The Word: Isaiah*, 383.

Here is the deal, anxiety, restlessness, discontentment, and turmoil will drain the life out of us. It is only when we humble ourselves and become lowly in heart that the peace of God drives out the restless storm that rages.

Don't let vv. 20-21 define your life. In these verses, we see the other bookend verses that describe a lack of peace.

*²⁰ But the wicked are like the storm-tossed sea,
for it cannot be still,
and its water churns up mire and muck.*

*²¹ There is no peace for the wicked,"
says, my God.*

Conclusion: Friends, we are not born with the peace of God in our hearts. We are by nature restless and never content. We are never satisfied, never grateful, and never relaxed. We are like the storm-tossed sea, and our hearts are white-capping with the foam of restlessness.

We need a Savior who will speak peace over the storm-tossed sea of our hearts. We need a Savior who will say to our hearts, "Peace be still." Then we need to obey our Savior when He says:

*"Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
²⁹ Take up my yoke and learn from me because I am lowly and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is
light."*