

Isaiah 57: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 57. The righteous man perishes, and no one lays it to heart. Devout men are taken away, while no one understands. For the righteous man is taken away from calamity. He enters into peace. They rest in their beds, who walk in their uprightness. But you draw near, sons of the sorceress, offspring of the adulterer and the loose woman. Whom are you mocking? Against whom do you open your mouth wide and stick out your tongue? Are you not children of transgression, the offspring of deceit? You who burn with lust among the oaks, under every green tree, who slaughter your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks. Among the smooth stones of the valley is your portion. They, they are your lot. To them you have poured out a drink offering.

You have brought a grain offering. Shall I relent for these things? On a high and lofty mountain you have set your bed. And there you went up to offer sacrifice. Behind the door and the doorpost you have set up your memorial. For, deserting me, you have uncovered your bed. You have gone up to it.

You have made it wide. And you have made a covenant for yourself with them. You have loved their bed. You have looked on nakedness. You journeyed to the king with oil and multiplied your perfumes.

You sent your envoys far off and sent down even to Sheol. You were wearied with the length of your way. But you did not say, It is hopeless. You found new life for your strength. And so you were not faint.

Whom did you dread and fear so that you lied, and did not remember me, did not lay it to heart? Have I not held my peace even for a long time, and you do not fear me? I will declare your righteousness and your deeds. But they will not profit you. When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you. The wind will carry them all off. A breath will take them away. But he who takes refuge in me shall possess the land, and shall inherit my holy mountain. And it shall be said, Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way. For thus says the one who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy. I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite. For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry. For the spirit would grow faint before me, and the breath of life that I made. Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry. I struck him. I hid my face and was angry. But he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart. I have seen his ways, but I will heal him. I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace to the far and to the near, says the [2 : 5 4] Lord, and I will heal him. But the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked. A new section of the book of Isaiah began in chapter 56. In the final verses of that chapter, the prophet described the unfaithful leaders of the people, who failed to act as effective watchmen, guards, and shepherds, but were given to indulgence, and unmindful of those committed to their charge. The opening verses of chapter 57 belong with those verses that preceded them. The wicked and irresponsible overseers of the people, on account of their failures in guarding the nation and curbing injustice within it, have produced a situation where oppression and unrighteousness can run rampant. When such a situation arises, the righteous will be dismayed and the wicked emboldened, leading to a more general decay of the society, something that is described in Proverbs, such as Proverbs chapter 11 verse 10.

When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish, there are shouts of gladness. Also chapter 28 verse 12. When the righteous triumph, there is great glory, but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves. The whole society is much worse off, as judges and rulers

fail to vindicate the righteous. The righteous are dying, many at the hands of oppressors, but no one is recognizing it or acting to prevent it. From wicked, gluttonous, and ineffectual rulers, we move in verse 3 to idolatry and spiritual adultery. The setting here seems to be one in which there was widespread idolatry in the land. This seems out of keeping with the supposed context of so-called trito-Isaiah, set within the land of Israel after the return from exile. Idolatry simply doesn't seem to be the same prominent issue within the post-exilic period. It really is not an issue that sticks out within the post-exilic prophets or the other writings from that period. Rather, it fits far more naturally with the period prior to the exile, where many of the prophets, from Jeremiah to Isaiah to Ezekiel, directly address such idolatrous practices. The practices involved in such idolatry were known from the time of the Canaanites, mentioned in Deuteronomy, for instance. In Jeremiah chapter 3 verse 6, for instance, we find descriptions that match some of those in this chapter. Have you seen what she did? That faithless one, Israel. How she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore. Also in Ezekiel chapter 6 verse 13. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when their slain lie among their idols around their altars, on every high hill, on all the mountaintops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak, wherever they offered pleasing aroma to all their idols. Here Isaiah describes the idolaters as sons of the sorceress, perhaps a way of characterising unfaithful Israel. Elsewhere in scripture, in Jeremiah for instance, Israel and Judah are described as adulterous women. This is an image that is most developed within the book of Hosea. They are here described as mocking the Lord, dishonouring him by their spiritual infidelity. What is meant by their opening of their mouth wide and lengthening their tongue is not entirely clear, though most likely the latter expression refers to the sticking out of the tongue in an act of derision. The sites of their adulterous relationships with the idols and false gods are found throughout the land. In speaking of their unfaithfulness to the Lord in terms of sexual faithfulness of her wife to her husband, the Lord underlines some of the betrayal that is involved.

While relationships with idols can be more transactional in character, the Lord desires the exclusive and wholehearted loyalty of his people. He wants them to be unreservedly devoted to him, and to love him fully. Yet the entirety of the land that he lovingly gave to his people is polluted with their infidelity. Every green and fruitful tree has been set apart for fertility worship.

[6 : 52] The blood of the children that he blessed them with is shed in the valleys as the children are sacrificed to Moloch. Gary Smith suggests that we read the opening clause of verse 6 as among the dead of the valley is your portion. They are there sacrificed to demonic deities, giving their very offspring as tribute. In verse 7 we move from the valleys to the high mountains where they had also committed their idolatry, continuing to describe this in the language of marital infidelity. In verse 8 the people are described as having uncovered their bed, loved the beds of their lovers, and looked upon nakedness. It is likely that this verse also talks about them having made a covenant with these false deities. The door and the doorpost here most likely refer to temples, not just to their private dwellings. Verses 9 and 10 most likely extend the notion of infidelity to refer also to the ways that they sought alliances and aid from foreign rulers.

This of course was a prominent theme within the first half of the book of Isaiah, where Judah was tempted to look to Assyria during the Syro-Ephraimite war, and then to Egypt and Babylon during the later Assyrian crisis. They had devoted great effort and invested great hopes within this pursuit. And the Lord asks, what dread or fear, what reverence led them to do these things? Was he just silent for too long and they ignored him? However, when the Lord speaks, it will not be in their favour. He's going to declare their righteousness and their deeds, but that righteousness and their deeds will clearly be of no benefit for them, because they are entirely hollow. What are they going to do when crisis comes?

They should go to their idols if they're really the object of their trust. Let them help them. All who do this, however, will be destroyed, but those who take refuge in the Lord will inherit the land itself. In verse 14 there is a shift as we move to a statement of salvation. Back in chapter 40 verse 3 we read, a voice cries, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Verse 14 could be read in part as an allusion back to this, although it also looks forward to chapter 62 verse 10. Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people, build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up a signal over the peoples. As in chapter 62, but in contrast to chapter 40, the way being prepared here is for the people, not the Lord primarily. The people are being brought back into the blessing of the Lord's presence. The

Lord is the one who speaks as the one who is high and lifted up. Once again, robust theological claims are those which drive the strength of the promises. Because the Lord is the God that he is, he can make the promises that he does. Our confidence ultimately rests in the fact that he is God. There is a correspondence in the contrast between the high and holy place where the Lord dwells and the contrite and lowly spirit that he heeds. The Lord does not merely dwell in the highest heavens. He also dwells with him with the lowliest spirit, promising to revive the strength of all who are humble. The Lord may discipline his wayward people, but never with the end of finally destroying them. He knows the weakness of man, and so he deals with man accordingly. Because of the iniquity and the injustice of his people, he was angry with them and judged them. He hid his face from them, withholding his blessings. However, the people did not respond by turning back to him. And so as the people would not respond, the Lord had to heal his people. One of the great promises of the new covenant given in the prophets is that the Lord will deal with the unfaithful hearts of his people, writing his law within them, and giving them a new heart of flesh where they once had a heart of stone. The consequence of the Lord's healing of his people is praise upon their lips.

[10:36] Peace, peace to the far and to the near. In contrast to these restored people, however, the wicked are like the restless tossing sea, ceaseless and peaceless tumult. They cannot be quiet, and as a result they will find no peace. A question to consider. Why is it appropriate that the Lord dwells with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit?