



Highlights From the Book of Isaiah

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Outline of the Book of Isaiah

- I. Warning of Judgment on Israel (1-39)
- II. The Promise of Future Hope in the New Jerusalem (40-66)
 - A. The Announcement of Hope (40-48)
 - B. The Servant Fulfills God's Mission (49-55)
 - C. The Servants Inherit God's Kingdom (56-66)

The Servants Inherit God's Kingdom (Isaiah 56-66)

- On the surface, it might seem as if the book should have ended with chapter 55.
- What more could remain after those stirring promises that God's grace is freely available to all who accept the urgent invitation?
- Isaiah 55:12-13 reads almost like a final benediction.
- Yet the book is far from over.
- There are still eleven chapters left to go!

The Servants Inherit God's Kingdom (Isaiah 56-66)

- A careful reader will see there is a difference in *emphasis* between the teachings of chapters 1-39 and those of chapters 40-55.
- One way this difference can be seen is in how the word “*righteousness*” is used in these two sections.
- In chapters 1-39 “*righteousness*” is used *almost exclusively* for human behavior that is in keeping with the laws of God:
 - *Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and regard not the majesty of the LORD.* (Isaiah 26:10 NIV)
- But in chapters 40-55, there is an emphasis on **God's** “*righteousness*” in faithfully delivering his people *in spite of* their previous sin:
 - *I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free...* (Isaiah 45:13 NIV)

The Servants Inherit God's Kingdom (Isaiah 56-66)

- If the book ended at chapter 55, a reader *might mistakenly* conclude that:
 - Righteousness is basically impossible for humans
 - We are counted as righteousness by God's grace through his Servant
 - Therefore the stress on righteous *living* in the first part of the book has no bearing on those living in grace.
- In a remarkable way, chapters 56-66 bring together the teaching of the two earlier sections, showing that *actual righteous living is a requirement* for the servants of God, but that such righteousness is only possible through the grace of God.

The LORD Welcomes Outsiders (Isaiah 56:1-8)

- Today's text looks back to the inclusive invitation of chapter 55 (that we looked at last time) and emphasizes just how *universal* that appeal really is.
- In today's text we see that the servants of the LORD who make up the *true* covenant community are not defined by a particular nationality, family lineage, or physical characteristic, but by a heart allegiance to the LORD.

The LORD Welcomes Outsiders (Isaiah 56:1-8)

- The *opening verses* of today's text begin with a statement of what constitutes *true righteousness*.
- Isaiah then assures his readers that those who live in a manner that is pleasing to the LORD will be *acknowledged* by him as his people, and he will *provide* for them in ways that *more* than compensate for any disability or shortcoming they may have otherwise.
- So, as I see it, today's text can be divided into *two* sections:
 - **56:1-2** – The Importance of Holy Living
 - **56:3-8** – Outsiders Should Be Welcomed into the Congregation of God's People

The Importance of Holy Living (56:1-2)

56:1 This is what the LORD says, “Promote justice! Do what is right! For I am ready to deliver you; I am ready to vindicate you openly. ² The people who do this will be blessed, the people who commit themselves to obedience, who observe the Sabbath and do not defile it, who refrain from doing anything that is wrong.

56:1 *This is what the LORD says, “Promote justice! Do what is right! For I am ready to deliver you. I am ready to vindicate you openly.*

- “*Promote justice! Do what is right!*” is a splash of cold water in the face after the glowing promises of chapters 54 and 55.
- Reveling in the unconditional acceptance that those previous chapters convey, one might *mistakenly* believe that the *grace* of God carries *no obligations* with it.
- So, are these words a *denial* of what has just been said?
- Is it necessary to be righteous *before* one can receive the salvation of God?
- We *know* that’s not true – in fact the *whole structure* of the book argues *against* it.
- Well, what *is* being said then?
- Notice the *reason* given here for promoting justice and doing what is right: “*For I am ready to deliver you.*”

56:1 *This is what the LORD says, “Promote justice! Do what is right! For I am ready to deliver you. I am ready to vindicate you openly.*

- In other words, it is ***because*** of the gracious work of God in salvation and deliverance that we are expected to live righteous lives.
- People to whom salvation has come are urged to do what was ***previously impossible***.
- Because God will do what he alone ***can*** do, the people will be ***enabled*** to do what they in freedom ***must*** do.
- The righteousness that chapters 1–39 called for, but that the people ***could not*** produce, ***can now*** be produced by means of the righteousness of God that chapters 40–55 revealed.

56:2 *The people who do this will be blessed, the people who commit themselves to obedience, who observe the Sabbath and do not defile it, who refrain from doing anything that is wrong.*

- *“The people who do this will be blessed”* – In the end the responsibility for maintaining justice rests upon each individual. It is not something that can be left to leaders alone.¹
- The LORD then gives two negative commands: to *“observe the Sabbath”* without desecrating it and *“refrain from doing anything that is wrong”*.²
- It is easy to see how keeping the Sabbath might take on great significance following the Babylonian exile since the nation had been restricted from temple worship for so long.²
- It was important to remind the Israelites that gathering on the Sabbath was still an essential part of God’s laws.²

¹ Webb, Barry G.. *The Message of Isaiah (The Bible Speaks Today Series)* (pp. 220-221)

² Wegner, Paul D. – *Isaiah An Introduction and Commentary – Tyndale OT Commentaries*

56:2 *The people who do this will be blessed, the people who commit themselves to obedience, who observe the Sabbath and do not defile it, who refrain from doing anything that is wrong.*

- Under Old Testament Law, to keep the Sabbath meant, among other things, to recognize the **completeness** of God's original work of creation:
 - *For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them, and he rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.* (Exodus 20:11)
- But the Sabbath **also looked forward** to the time when the LORD's work of **re-creation** would also be completed and was therefore a sign of the **final** rest which all God's people will enjoy in the new heavens and new earth (66:22-23).
- It is this **final rest** that is the **major theme** of this last section of Isaiah.

Outsiders Should Be Welcomed into the Congregation of God's People (56:3-8)

56:3 No foreigner who becomes a follower of the LORD should say, 'The LORD will certainly exclude me from his people.' The eunuch should not say, 'Look, I am like a dried-up tree.'"⁴ For this is what the LORD says: "For the eunuchs who observe my Sabbaths and choose what pleases me and are faithful to my covenant,⁵ I will set up within my temple and my walls a monument that will be better than sons and daughters. I will set up a permanent monument for them that will remain.

Outsiders Should Be Welcomed into the Congregation of God's People (56:3-8)

56:6 As for foreigners who become followers of the LORD and serve him, who love the name of the LORD and want to be his servants – all who observe the Sabbath and do not defile it, and who are faithful to my covenant – ⁷ I will bring them to my holy mountain; I will make them happy in the temple where people pray to me. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my temple will be known as a temple where all nations may pray.”

⁸ The Sovereign LORD says this, the one who gathers the dispersed of Israel: “I will still gather them up.”

56:3 *No foreigner who becomes a follower of the LORD should say, 'The LORD will certainly exclude me from his people.' The eunuch should not say, 'Look, I am like a dried-up tree.'"*

- Now Isaiah sharpens his focus *even further*.
- In verse 2 he stressed the *importance* of “justice” and “righteousness”, but now he uses a *dramatic example* to drive home the point.
- The doing of justice and righteousness is the *fundamental requirement* for being counted among the “servants of the Lord”.
- So much so, that if people, who might otherwise have considered themselves *excluded* from covenant fellowship, do justice and righteousness – they will be *included* as God’s children.

56:3 *No foreigner who becomes a follower of the LORD should say, 'The LORD will certainly exclude me from his people.' The eunuch should not say, 'Look, I am like a dried-up tree.'*"

- Specifically, he addresses **two** categories of outcast individuals: the "*foreigner*" and the "*eunuch*".
- They are told **not** to view themselves as outcasts.
- **Others** might try to characterize them in that way, but they are **not** to go along with it.
- The LORD will **not** cut them off; they **are** not lifeless and fruitless.
- Those who seek the LORD (55:6) in sincerity by turning from their own wicked ways and thoughts (55:7) to the blessed ways and thoughts of God (55:10-11) will find themselves included **regardless** of who they are.

56:3 *No foreigner who becomes a follower of the LORD should say, 'The LORD will certainly exclude me from his people.' The eunuch should not say, 'Look, I am like a dried-up tree.'"*

- But how does what Isaiah says here fit with **other** Old Testament passages where these categories of individuals **do** seem to be excluded?
- Deut 23:1-4, for example, is **explicit**: neither **eunuchs** nor Ammonites nor Moabites (i.e. **foreigners**) are to enter the assembly of the LORD:
 - *A man with crushed or severed genitals [i.e. a eunuch] may not enter the assembly of the LORD... An Ammonite or Moabite [i.e. a foreigner] may not enter the assembly of the LORD; to the tenth generation none of their descendants shall ever do so, for they did not meet you with food and water on the way as you came from Egypt, and furthermore, they hired Balaam son of Beor ... to curse you (Deut 23:1-4)*

56:3 *No foreigner who becomes a follower of the LORD should say, 'The LORD will certainly exclude me from his people.' The eunuch should not say, 'Look, I am like a dried-up tree.'"*

- In order to see how these two ideas fit together we must first ask: Why was this law that excludes these groups given in the first place?
- Is it because being emasculated, or being an Ammonite or a Moabite, is *intrinsically evil*?
- Obviously not.
- The law was given to make a *theological point* (as were many of the ceremonial laws).
- With respect to the "*eunuch*", the purpose of the prohibition is clearly to teach the goodness of nature as we find it in creation.
- Sexuality is a good part of God's creation, and while we are not to worship it, neither are we to condone its destruction.

56:3 *No foreigner who becomes a follower of the LORD should say, 'The LORD will certainly exclude me from his people.' The eunuch should not say, 'Look, I am like a dried-up tree.'"*

- Similarly, with the Ammonites and Moabites a point about historical responsibility was being made.
- We must not forget that actions have consequences, especially when those actions are in opposition to God's plan to bring his salvation into the world.
- So, when we keep in mind the **bigger** point being made, I believe it helps us to see that the **exclusions** commanded in Deuteronomy are **not inconsistent** with the **inclusions** that Isaiah talks about here.

56:3 *No foreigner who becomes a follower of the LORD should say, 'The LORD will certainly exclude me from his people.' The eunuch should not say, 'Look, I am like a dried-up tree.'"*

- Isaiah's point is that it doesn't matter who a person is when it comes to being included among the people of God.
- Foreigners who come to him in glad obedience will be ***included***, while Jews who want to depend on their birthright will be ***excluded*** (cf. Mat 3:9) .
- By the same token, foreigners who persist in their arrogant contempt for Israel will be ***excluded*** while Jews who submit themselves to the Spirit of God will be ***included***.
- The issue is ***not*** who you are, but whether you are ***obedient***.

56:3 *No foreigner who becomes a follower of the LORD should say, 'The LORD will certainly exclude me from his people.' The eunuch should not say, 'Look, I am like a dried-up tree.'"*

- There had always been an understanding under the Old Covenant that a foreigner "*who becomes a follower of the LORD*" could participate in the worship of God along with the Jews:
 - *When a foreigner lives with you and wants to observe the Passover to the LORD, all his males must be circumcised, and then he may approach and observe it, and he will be like one who is born in the land – but no uncircumcised person may eat of it. The same law will apply to the person who is native-born and to the foreigner who lives among you.*
(Exodus 12:48-49)
- Isaiah here is showing that background and nationality will **not** be a barrier to having a **relationship** with the LORD, as long as there is a genuine commitment to serving and obeying the LORD.

56:3 *No foreigner who becomes a follower of the LORD should say, 'The LORD will certainly exclude me from his people.' The eunuch should not say, 'Look, I am like a dried-up tree.'"*

- Nevertheless, Old Testament Law **did** place **some** restrictions on foreigners (as well as eunuchs).
- The emphasis on **full unrestricted access** talked about here by Isaiah **prefigures** the much fuller access that is granted to **all** people in the New Covenant.
- The book of Acts records the moment when the Apostle Peter first came to this realization, when it quotes him as saying:
 - *I now truly understand that God does not show favoritism in dealing with people, but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is welcomed before him. (Act 10:34-35)*

56:4 *For this is what the LORD says: “For the eunuchs who observe my Sabbaths and choose what pleases me and are faithful to my covenant,*

- The two marginalized groups are now considered in reverse order, and it is authoritatively shown why they are **not** to consider themselves as **outcasts** from the community of faith.
- “*Eunuchs*” are to demonstrate their commitment to the LORD by
 - Observing the Sabbath
 - Choosing what pleases God
 - Being faithful to God’s covenant (i.e. the Mosaic covenant at this point).

56:5 *I will set up within my temple and my walls a monument that will be better than sons and daughters. I will set up a permanent monument for them that will remain.*

- God now tells what he will do for this kind of eunuch.
- They may think that they will soon be forgotten in the community since they have neither sons nor daughters to carry on their lives and names after they have died.
- But God says the nameless eunuch will have a “*permanent monument*”.
- Instead of being limited to what little posterity children could give him, the eunuch who trusts God will live forever in God’s house (Ps. 23:6).
- The Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27-39) is an example of what this verse is about.
- He has been remembered because of his faith far longer than if he had simply had sons and daughters.

56:6 *As for foreigners who become followers of the LORD and serve him, who love the name of the LORD and want to be his servants – all who observe the Sabbath and do not defile it, and who are faithful to my covenant –*

- “*Foreigners*” are likewise to demonstrate their commitment to the LORD by:
 - Becoming followers of the LORD and serving him
 - Loving the name of the LORD
 - Wanting to be his servants
 - Observing the Sabbath without defiling it
 - Being faithful to the Mosaic covenant ¹
- Notice their focus is not on what they *themselves* might gain through doing these things, but on the one whom they serve. ²

¹ Wegner, Paul D. – *Isaiah An Introduction and Commentary* – Tyndale OT Commentaries

² Mackay, John L. – *A Study Commentary on Isaiah Volume 2: Chapters 40-66* – pp. 418–419.

56:7 *I will bring them to my holy mountain; I will make them happy in the temple where people pray to me. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my temple will be known as a temple where all nations may pray.”*

- To such foreigners the LORD gives the promise that he will act so that they come to “*my holy mountain*”, the place where he has been especially pleased to reveal himself.
- They are brought there not merely as spectators, but as those who are spiritually “*happy*” with all they encounter in the place of the LORD’s presence.
- “*the temple where people pray to me*” is applied by Jesus during his earthly ministry to the Jerusalem temple (Mat 21:13), and it was true of that temple while it still stood.
- The *full* development of this promise, where the “*temple will be known as a temple where all nations may pray*”, must wait for the *destruction* of the temple, when worship was internationalized and no longer limited to a specific geographical location (John 4:21–23).

56:7 *I will bring them to my holy mountain; I will make them happy in the temple where people pray to me. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my temple will be known as a temple where all nations may pray.”*

- The worship here is **described** using Old Covenant terminology: “*burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar*”, “*the temple*” (“*Sabbaths*”, mentioned in earlier verses) – because all of these things were **types** of that which is to come.
- But this prophecy is speaking of a future time when all the **types** will be replaced by future **realities**.
- At the time that Isaiah writing this, the temple is not **yet** a house of prayer for “*all nations*”, but this is what **will** occur when God brings the eunuchs and strangers into His kingdom **without restrictions**.

56:7 *I will bring them to my holy mountain; I will make them happy in the temple where people pray to me. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my temple will be known as a temple where all nations may pray.”*

- Under the ***Old Covenant*** the Lord was worshipped by ***one*** nation in the Temple
- In the ***New Covenant*** and as well as the ***future eternal kingdom***, ***all*** peoples, nations, and tongues will serve the LORD and lift up the sacrifice of prayer to His holy Name, which they love. (Mat 28:19-20; Rev 5:9)

56:8 *The Sovereign LORD says this, the one who gathers the dispersed of Israel: “I will still gather them up.”*

- The LORD is described here as “*the one who gathers*”.
- In the Hebrew, the word translated “*gathers*” is used three times in this verse.
- The LORD has given himself the task of, gathering, i.e., bringing back – not just the Jews scattered in physical dispersion by Babylon – but ***all*** those of his people who have been scattered among ***all*** the nations in spiritual dispersion.

Next Time

- We will see how *Injustice Brings Alienation from God* (59:1-8)

Class Discussion Time

- Many, perhaps most of those outside of Christianity today think that what Christians **really** believe is that you have to become righteous before God will save you.
- Much of professing Christianity today believes that once you “get your ticket punched” and are “saved”, you can go on living a life characterized by sin and God will still let us into heaven when we die, because after all, we’re saved by grace!
- What we saw today is that Isaiah structures his **entire book** in a way that shows that both of the above views are false.
- How would you summarize Isaiah’s (and all of the rest of scripture’s) view?

Class Discussion Time

- Today's text emphasizes the importance of welcoming outsiders into the congregation of God's people.
- The only requirement for their admission is that they be living lives that are characterized by godly obedience.
- Have you ever seen a case where people were not welcomed into a church, merely because they didn't "fit in", they were viewed as "outsiders" in some way?
- Given what we saw in our text today, how do you think God looks at a church that would try to exclude "outsiders" for reasons other than clearly sinful behavior?