

Salvation for Idolaters

Isaiah 56:9 – 57:21

Halifax: 27 February 2011

Introduction

Dear Congregation,

- In Isaiah 53, we saw the glorious work that God promised to do in Jesus Christ.
 - There He promised that the suffering servant (Jesus) would come and would make His soul and offering for the sins of His people.
 - And that in doing so, we would be pardoned and reconciled to God.
 - It is such a glorious work that was done.
- And then in Isaiah 54 and 55, we saw how we ought to respond to this work!
 - In Isaiah 54, the covenant people of God who were so barren and unfruitful are called to rejoice because now they become a life-giving agent to the whole world!
 - All because of the life and peace that Jesus brought through His work.
 - And in Isaiah 55, the call goes out to everyone to come and partake of this glorious salvation in Jesus Christ!
 - To drink of the living water that He gives to all who will come to Him.
 - To return to God through His saving work.
- And last week, in chapter 56, we saw that this salvation is so powerful that it extends even to rejects!
 - to those like eunuchs who were excluded from the ceremonial worship of Israel.
 - And to the nations of the world who were also excluded.
 - Salvation in Jesus is so effective that it would even gather the outcasts of Israel who had been vomited out of the land of Canaan just as the Amorites had in the time of Joshua!
 - The salvation that Jesus brings into the world is so powerful that none who repent and look to Him will be rejected!
- And today, as we conclude chapter 56 and cover all of chapter 57,
 - We again see the mighty, powerful, effective salvation of Jesus Christ in reaching even to those who have given themselves to the worship of idols!
 - They are in such a desperate condition, clinging to their idols and forsaking the living God,
 - but the salvation of God in Christ is able to deliver them, even from this desperate condition!
 - This was the condition that the people were in Isaiah's day.
 - And Isaiah directs them to this salvation.
 - He shows them that this salvation can even save idol worshippers.

- But you are not here for a mere history lesson, but for a sermon!
- Our purpose is to hear a message from God to us!
- And so I want you see that just like Israel,
 - We are idol worshippers who ought to take warning from this passage.
 - And that there is this glorious salvation of God which is able to save us too—even us.

I. See in the first place that the church is ripe for judgement.

- The description here in our text is a description of the covenant people of God in Isaiah's day,
 - but it definitely applies to the church in our day—all those who name the name of Jesus Christ—all the baptised.
- A. The passage opens (in Isaiah 56:9) with the LORD calling for judgement upon His people!
1. In verse 9, He calls the beasts of the field and of the forest to come and devour His flock.
 - **Isa 56:9 All you beasts of the field, come to devour, All you beasts in the forest.**
 - Here is a terrifying picture!
 - The Lord's people are like sheep,
 - And here the LORD is calling in beasts to devour them!
 2. But why would the Lord invite ravenous beasts in like this?
 - a. The simple answer to that question is found in the Law of Moses.
 - God summons ravenous beasts when His people do not keep His covenant.
 - For example, in Lev 26:21-22, He says:
 - **Lev 26:21-22: 'Then, if you walk contrary to Me, and are not willing to obey Me, I will bring on you seven times more plagues, according to your sins. I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children, destroy your livestock, and make you few in number; and your highways shall be desolate.**
 - b. In the New Testament, we are told that God sends heretics and false teachers who draw away false disciples after them...
 - In 1 Cor 11:19, Paul says:
 - **1 Cor 11:19: For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.**
 - The false teachers come along and they attract those who are not truly in Jesus Christ.
 - They draw away those who were never really of us.

- And they form churches that name the name of the Lord, but teach heresy and even deny the Lord who bought them.
 - This is a judgement upon God's people.
- Such wolves are warned about in almost every book of the New Testament.
 - John and Paul and Peter and other apostles continually urge the people to continue in the truth and to not be deceived.
 - They also express confidence that those who are elect will not be deceived,
 - As Jesus Himself said, "If it were possible, they would deceive even the elect,"
 - but it is not possible.
 - It is only those who never embrace Christ that are drawn away from the truth to destruction.
 - Yet, even the elect may be deceived before they are effectually called out for salvation.

TRANS> So the short answer is that God sends beasts to devour His flock because not all who are in the flock are really His sheep.

- The wolves cannot destroy the true sheep because He Himself protects them.
 - The beasts are sent in as a judgement by Him to purify the flock.
- c. Now if you glance over our text, you will see that from 56:10 until 57:10,
 - The Lord describes the condition of His people that has caused Him to call in ravenous beasts upon them.

B. Let us now take a good look at how the people's condition is described.

- See how it is very much a description of our own day.
 - We will look at the condition of the covenant people that caused the LORD to call in beasts upon them under three headings...
- 1. First, that it is a day of worthless watchmen and shepherds (56:10-12)
 - a. It is very easy for the beasts to come in because those who are supposed to guard the flock are not guarding them.
 - Isaiah speaks of both prophets and princes here whom God appointed to protect His people.
 - In a godly society, you will have both the church and the civil magistrate looking out for God's heritage.
 - But in times of declension, good leaders will be few and far between.

- b. Just look at how these wretched watchmen are described!
- 1) First, they are said to be blind and ignorant...
 - You can see that in verse 10:
 - **Isa 56:10: His watchmen are blind, they are all ignorant.**
 - What good is a blind watchman who doesn't have a clue about the dangers that are coming upon the people?
 - The watchmen need to be skilled and able discern the dangerous heresies that come to plague the church.
 - They need to be like Paul and John and Peter who constantly warn the people.
 - They need to be like the prophets of old who pointed out the danger.
 - Perhaps even more,
 - they need to warn the people about it when they are behaving in a way that will provoke the Lord to call in devouring beasts!
 - In other words, they need say, "If you continue to do this, God will judge you," just as we find in the seven letters to the churches in Revelation.
 - But you need to see that there are two things that go hand in hand.
 - Whenever God has purposed to send in devouring beasts,
 - He also raises up blind watchmen and shepherds...
 - This is all a part of the outworking of His providence when He has purposed to judge His people for their unbelief.
 - He blinds the people as a whole by giving them blind ministers.
 - How descriptive this is of our day!
 - How else could it be that ministers in the PCUSA in 1924 could sign the Auburn Affirmation that says it is not necessary to affirm that Jesus was born of a virgin,
 - or that He rose from the dead?
 - How could those who deny the substitutionary atonement be received as ministers of the gospel—
 - They have no gospel!
 - Such wolves, rather than being warned about, were welcomed into the ministry because the watchmen were blind and ignorant!
 - 2) Isaiah goes on with his description—

- **Isa 56:10: They are all dumb dogs who cannot bark...**
 - [They cannot bark at the enemy because they are blind and don't see any danger!]
 - **sleeping, lying, down, loving to slumber.**
 - They are not busy with their duty—instead they sleep as if the souls they are called to look after are not important.
 - Oh brothers and sisters—pray for me as a minister of the Word!
 - Pray for all ministers—that I would have a great care for your souls and would labour diligently in the Word!
- 3) Isaiah says that they are like dogs with an insatiable appetite—like street dogs instead of watch dogs—look at verse 11:
- **Isa 56:11: Yes, they are greedy dogs Which never have enough. And they are shepherds Who cannot understand; They all look to their own way, Every one for his own gain, From his own territory.**
 - What are men doing in the pulpit who tailor their message to attract people and care not to bring them the truth?
 - They attend to their own affairs and seek their own advantage, but do not care for the sheep—
 - only for what they can get from them!
 - They want pay, not so they can devote themselves to the work, but so they can live in luxury and ease!
 - As Motyer says, “Life at public expense is a bottomless pit.”
- 4) Isaiah closes off the description of these worthless watchmen in verse 12 with these words:
- **Isa 56:12: “Come,” one says, “I will bring wine, And we will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink; Tomorrow will be as today, And much more abundant.”**
 - This is their secret!
 - This is how they keep themselves insensible to the danger of God's judgement that is about to fall on them and on the flock!
 - “Give me another drink!”
 - Let me fill my mind with empty theology, with vacations, with movies, with pornography, and with every sort of diversion.
 - They haven't a care in the world!
 - They are like Belshazzar, drinking and partying and having an orgy while Babylon was being invaded!
 - Woe to them! and woe to the people they are given to watch!

- But don't suppose that the people deserve any better shepherds than what God has given them!
 - The reason they have shepherds like this is because they are far from God.
 - The second reason they are ripe for judgement is given in verses 1-2:
- 2. Second, it is a day of insensibility to God's providential working (57:1-2)
 - a. This is explained with reference to their lack of discernment as to what God is doing in taking the righteous to be with Himself.
 - **Isaiah 57:1-2: The righteous perishes, And no man takes it to heart; Merciful men are taken away, While no one considers That the righteous is taken away from evil. He shall enter into peace; They shall rest in their beds, Each one walking in his uprightness.**
 - Apparently, at this time, God was removing many of His faithful disciples to spare them from the coming judgement.
 - But the general populace did not notice this!
 - They ought to have taken interest in those who were following the LORD, but instead they paid no attention to them.
 - Instead, the godly were marginalised and ignored.
 - b. How are we to apply this to our day?
 - Simply that we are insensible to what God is doing in His providence.
 - God is the one who sends storms and terrorist attacks like 9/11 and economic meltdown...
 - But instead of discerning that God is visiting us with judgement,
 - we seek out new economic plans to postpone the inevitable fall of our idol...
 - plans that will only make the coming crash worse...
 - and we build bigger flood walls and we ramp up airport security!
 - This completely misses the point!
 - Repentance is what we need!
 - We simply do not discern the hand of God in His providential working now.
 - And if, in a few years, godly men start to die off, we will not discern this either.
- Worthless watchmen and lack of discernment of what God is doing are both sure signs that a people are ripe for judgement—
 - but the third sign is, perhaps, the most telling of all...

3. Third, that it is a day when God's people find their portion in idols (57:3-10).
 - a. In the Bible, idolatry is always something we go after when we turn from God.
 - Although He is our gracious Redeemer
 - And although He has given us great and precious promises,
 - And although He is pure and holy and just and perfectly lovely,
 - We do not like to retain the knowledge of Him,
 - so we swap Him out for idols!
 - We change the truth of God into a lie and worship the creature instead of the creator...
 - We worship what is like ourselves instead worshipping Him!
 - People ask why there is so much false religion in the world—
 - Well here is the reason!
 - It is because we don't like God and we swap Him out for idols.
 - We suppose Him to be what we want Him to be instead of submitting to His revelation of what He truly is...
 - b. In verses 3-6, Isaiah describes a people who are no longer God's children because they have swapped Him out for idolatry.
 - 1) They took pride that they were Israelites, just as many take pride today in the name Christian...
 - a) They saw themselves as the sons of God...
 - But Isaiah tells them that they are not the children of God.
 - In verse 3, he calls them to him and says:
 - **Isa 57:3: "But come here, You sons of the sorceress, You offspring of the adulterer and the harlot!"**
 - They are not God's children—they are bastards.
 - Children of adultery and prostitution.
 - So in our day, there are many religious people who claim God as their Father, but He is not...
 - They are sons of Anti-Christ, of the Masonic order, of Neo-orthodoxy, Liberalism, the Emergent Church...
 - b) If they were God's children, they would not mock God's true prophets.
 - They would receive the word.
 - They would respond to the truth...
 - But they mock those who preach the truth!

- In verse 4, it says:
 - **Isa 57:4: Whom do you ridicule? Against whom do you make a wide mouth And stick out the tongue? Are you not children of transgression, Offspring of falsehood,**
 - Their venom is directed at those who preach the Word.
 - This is exactly what Jesus charged the Jews with in John 8 when they rejected His message...
 - They said that they were sons of Abraham and sons of God,
 - but Jesus told them that they were of their father the Devil.
 - You can always tell false sons because they will not accept the truth.
 - They want to make up their own religion out of their own heart and out of their own head!
- 2) But don't misunderstand! It is not that they have a problem with zeal!
- They are often very busy about religion!
 - They will go to great lengths in their devotion to God.
 - This devotion to God is described in verse 5-6.
 - a) The word translated *gods* in verse 5 could refer to terebinth or oak trees which they used in the idolatrous worship of God...
 - The ESV translates it like this:
 - **Isa 56:5: "You who burn with lust among the oaks [instead of the gods], under every green tree, who slaughter your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks?"**
 - I think this is preferable because verse 6 indicates that they were doing all this idolatrous worship for *God*...it says...
 - **Isa 56:6: Among the smooth stones of the stream Is your portion; They, they, are your lot! Even to them you have poured a drink offering, You have offered a grain offering. Should I receive comfort in these?**
 - You see the question at the end...
 - Was the LORD supposed to receive comfort from this idolatrous worship?
 - No more than He received comfort from the hypocritical worship of the Pharisees in Jesus day.
 - The thing they are said to love here are not false gods, but false ways of worshipping God.
 - It is like saying that people today love their altars and their incense and their organs...

- or that they love their worship teams and their bands and their interviews and their power point.
 - They have their portion in these rather than in the God they are supposed to be worshipping.

- b) You must understand that false worshippers are not *trying* to offend God.
 - They suppose that they are pleasing Him by all of their offerings and their service!
 - Some of the Jews claimed that they were only following the example of Abraham when offered child sacrifices...
 - Had God not commanded Abraham to offer Isaac?
 - Was God not pleased that He was willing to obey?

 - But the problem with their worship is just what Jesus spoke of...
 - They worship God according to the traditions and commandments of men.
 - It is not the worship that God has appointed.
 - Zeal does not make it acceptable!
 - The Jews had a zeal for God, as Paul says, but not according to knowledge.

 - They rejected Christ who had been revealed as Saviour.
 - They thought the LORD would accept their worship because they were zealous and sincere.

 - This is the great problem with idolatrous worship in every day...
 - It is the great problem with it today!
 - People suppose they can draw near to God in their own way instead of in the way that He appointed.

 - In these verses the LORD indicates that they were in love with their worship instead of with Him.
 - They were worshipping Him with that which they wanted Him to accept and which they thought He ought to accept,
 - instead of drawing near to Him in the way He appointed.

 - Ultimately, it is the very gospel that is rejected.
 - We come on the basis of our own works, our own goodness, or on the basis of the general mercy of God...
 - or some other way than the only way by which we may be saved.

- This is very common in our day!

TRANS> But such false worship does indeed lead to the worship of other gods.

c. Verse 7-8 indicate that they also went after other gods...

1) The LORD speaks of them as committing adultery with these other gods...

- Look at verse 7-8
 - **Isa 57:7-8: "On a lofty and high mountain You have set your bed; Even there you went up To offer sacrifice. Also behind the doors and their posts You have set up your remembrance; For you have uncovered yourself to those other than Me, And have gone up to them; You have enlarged your bed And made a covenant with them; You have loved their bed, Where you saw their nudity.**
 - You see how the LORD speaks of this as spiritual adultery,
 - as entering into a covenant with these gods—marrying them and then consummating the marriage.
 - It is like a brazen women who takes another partner right before the eyes of our husband!
 - She has lost sight of who her husband is!
 - She does not know Him as the Jealous God who will not give His glory to another.
 - She things the true God is worship through a variety of names!

2) Idolaters often end up going after other gods.

- Once you start to approach God apart from the way that He appointed,
 - you very quickly come to the conclusion that He is no different these other gods—it is all the same...
 - People say this all the time—
 - “we are all trying to get the same place.”
 - “The main thing is that we love each other.”
 - And it is true!
 - If you can approach God apart from Jesus crucified, there is not a whole lot of difference.
 - For the ancients, why not pray to Baal for rain?
 - For Robert Schuller and Rick Warren,
 - why not join together in prayer to Allah with the Muslims or in prayer to Krishna with the Hindus?

➤ Idolaters almost always go after other gods.

- But there is something else they almost always do.

- d. They turn to power-politics.
- Verse 9-10 indicate that they trusted in political alliances.
 - They go to kings to find their strength.
- 1) This has been a frequent theme in Isaiah...
- In chapter 7, we saw Ahaz rejecting the LORD's help and looking to Assyria.
 - Assyrian ended up bringing misery to them.
 - Then in chapter 30-31 we saw Judah loading their beasts with treasures to go to Egypt for help...
 - They kept on feeding Egypt like a hungry Leviathan,
 - But Egypt did nothing but take their payment.
 - And in chapter 39, we saw the otherwise godly Hezekiah courting Babylon.
 - Yet, Babylon was the one that eventually destroyed Jerusalem and took them into captivity.
 - Why couldn't they ever learn?
- 2) Here in verse 9-10, the LORD speaks of how the people weary themselves and go to great lengths to obtain help from these nations:
- It says:
 - **Isaiah 57:9-10: You went to the king with ointment, And increased your perfumes;** [Either they dressed up like a prostitute with gobs of perfume, or they took these as gifts and payment] **You sent your messengers far off, And even descended to Sheol.** [Not that they actually went to the dead for help—this is just a way of saying they went to great extremes to court these nations] **You are wearied in the length of your way; Yet you did not say, 'There is no hope.' You have found the life of your hand; Therefore you were not grieved.**
 - All the more offensive was the fact that they wearied themselves and never lost hope in these nations...
 - They were so confident that they spared no difficulty or expense!
 - They made an idol out of power politics.
- 3) Of course no one in the church today would look to politics as Saviour instead of God!
- No one would keep pumping more and more money into government programs that are doomed for failure.

- Surely we are wise enough to know that the government can't generate money or life itself—it is not a god.
 - Surely we are wise enough to know that the government can't give us protection from our enemies or from storms (or climate change).
 - Aren't we?
- What a wretched condition people fall into when they turn from God.
- This is their condition when they are ripe for judgement.
 - Their leaders are worthless...
 - They cannot discern the hand of God...
 - They turn to idols—
 - they approach God on their own terms (idolatrously)
 - then they begin to worship other gods (idols) besides Him
 - and they even make idols out of kings!

C. See how the Lord warns those who are in this condition in verses 11-13!

1. In v. 11, He asks how it is that we could ever lose our confidence in Him so as to turn to these worthless things.
 - **Isa 57:11: "And of whom have you been afraid, or feared, That you have lied And not remembered Me, Nor taken it to your heart?"**
- a. What was it that made Israel so afraid that they forgot the mighty hand that delivered them out of Egypt?
 - What made them forget the God of mercy who brought them through the wilderness and gave them water from the rock and bread from heaven?
 - How did they lose sight of the God of power who gave them the land of Canaan, overthrowing kingdoms and nations that were mightier than they were?
 - Why did they forget God and feel that they must turn to something else?
 - What made them tell lies about God?
 - What ever made them think that He could not handle their problems?
 - It must have been something very great indeed!
- b. This is the problem, my brothers and sisters!
 - We do not remember Him or take to heart what He has done for us!
 - This is why it is my desire, as long as I am able to preach, to preach Christ crucified...
 - I want to keep the gospel before God's people as long as He gives me breath.
 - If we forget the gospel, we lose everything...

- We will be left to run around in desperation to helpers that cannot help us—just like Israel did—
 - Just like so much of Christendom is doing today—
 - They look to psychology, they look to politics, they look to signs and wonders, they look to church growth marketing, they look to philosophy, they look to the arts, they look to the pope, they look to traditions of men, they look to post modernism...
 - But we must continue to look to Christ crucified.
 - What is it that draws us away from Him?
- c. God gives a reason that we do not continue in His fear...at the end of verse 11.
- **Isa 57:11 (end): Is it not because I have held My peace from of old That you do not fear Me?**
 - He means that He did not immediately chasten us when we began to go astray.
 - If He had sent burning coals from heaven, we would have feared!
 - But He was merciful and gave us time to repent,
 - so we turned away from Him and forgot who He was.
 - Must we have trouble to serve Him?
 - Can't we glory in Christ?
 - Can't we accept the fact that we are sinners who can do nothing apart from His grace—that there is nothing good in us?
 - Must we be brought to ruin before we will look to Him as our Saviour?
 - Oh covenant children, I plead with you—accept the truth—walk in the truth!
 - Look to Him as your Saviour and go forth serving Him faithfully.
 - Believe the word!
 - Don't force Him to destroy so that He can save you.
 - Indeed, He may not save you!
 - He may very well turn to others and pass you by for destruction if you reject Him.
 - Many are never brought back when they turn from Him.

TRANS> But in one way or another everyone is shown one thing very clearly...

2. The inadequacy of our self-made religion will be fully exposed.
 - a. In verse 12, He says:
 - **Isaiah 57:12-: I will declare your righteousness And your works, for they will not profit you.**
 - He will show you what your self-made righteousness by your own works is worth.
 - He will show you that it is utterly worthless and then you will fear Him, but it may be too late!
 - He may not show you this until the day of judgement.
 - b. In verse 13, He adds...
 - **Isa 57:13: When you cry out, Let your collection of idols deliver you. But the wind will carry them all away, A breath will take them.**
 - The words *of idols* is not in the original...
 - The idea is that the day will come when they will cry out to all the things that they have put their trust in—idols, nations, etc...
 - And the whole collection of things they have trusted in will prove to be utterly inadequate.
 - c. Don't let this be your end!
 - There is only one God and there is only one way to come to Him.
 - Don't be so foolish as to forget Him...
 - Don't turn from the sweet salvation that He offers to find salvation somewhere else.
 - There is none else to be found!
3. But there is a future for those among us who trust in the Lord.
 - The LORD Himself gives you the sure promise at the end of verse 13:
 - **Isa 57:13: But he who puts his trust in Me shall possess the land, And shall inherit My holy mountain."**
 - This is the only way to an everlasting inheritance
 - Put your trust in the LORD.
 - All other ways are worthless.
 - We are ripe for judgement, just as the people were in Isaiah's day.
 - All the signs are there—we are steeped in idolatry just like they were...
 - But if you will trust in the LORD, you will inherit the kingdom of God.

TRANS> The whole rest of the chapter is devoted to showing us the way of salvation
Conclusion: We will look at this next week.