

## Lesson 36 Isaiah 56:1-8 World People, Sabbath People, Praying People

### Introduction

And so, we begin the final major section of Isaiah. The Book of the King, Isaiah 1-39, announced that a child would be born. The government of justice and righteousness would rest on His shoulders and there would be no end to His peace. The Book of the Servant, Isaiah 40-55, announced that a servant would die. He would be pierced for our transgressions. He would justify by His death. And he would enable a covenant of peace. The Book of the Anointed Conqueror, chapters 56-66, announces the coming of a third Messianic figure. Just like the root of Jesse in the book of the King and the Servant in the Book of the servant, the Spirit of the Lord will be on this Conqueror whom He has sent:

To bring good news to the afflicted;	... to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives	And freedom to prisoners;
To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD	And the day of vengeance of our God; (61:1b-2a)

The figure of the anointed conqueror sounds very much like the figure of the King and the figure of the Servant. He also sounds very much like the Yahweh Himself, who comes to redeem the nation. Skimming through these chapters, we would be right to ask the question, "What more does Isaiah really need to say? This all sounds very familiar to what has come before in the first 55 chapters of the book. Why did Isaiah keep going?" A cursory overview does reveal a lot of familiar content: a sinful people, a holy God, the plan for Gentiles to stream into Zion. And our last three chapters provided a wonderful climax and resolution with the astonishing revelation in 53 of the Suffering Servant who dies for the sins of God's people, and the heartfelt double exhortation in chapters 54 and 55 for all peoples to come to the waters and drink of the Lord's gracious provision. Why not stop there? We could finish the whole book with the final verses of 55.

- <sup>11</sup> So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty,  
Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter  
for which I sent it.
- <sup>12</sup> "For you will go out with joy And be led forth with peace;  
The mountains and the hills will break forth And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.  
into shouts of joy before you,
- <sup>13</sup> "Instead of the thorn bush the cypress will come up, And instead of the nettle the myrtle will come up,  
And it will be a memorial to the LORD, For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off."

Amen! Let's end there.

But Isaiah does not want us to end there. Why not? What more did Isaiah want to add after revealing God's promises of both national and spiritual redemption? The trend in the academic world is to see in these last chapters the writings of a later prophet or a later school. Robert Alter's comments on the differences in Isaiah 56-66 support that conclusion. He writes,

The moral exhortation [in Isaiah 56:1], coupled with the urging to observe the Sabbath in the next verse, strikes a new note in the Isaiah collection, one that some commentators have characterized as "sermonic." It is the strong consensus of biblical scholarship, with only a few dissenters, that Isaiah 56-66 is a later composition than Isaiah 40-55, and almost certainly the work of more than one prophet... there are no further prophecies of the people triumphantly crossing the desert to Zion, and the issues engaged are the behavior of the people in their land and the nature of the community they constitute."<sup>1</sup>

I've argued throughout our series that Isaiah is a unitary whole by one author. And I believe that the biggest reason for seeing multiple authors in modern scholarship is the fundamental presupposition that miracles do not happen. Isaiah could not have predicted everything this book claims to predict. It could not have all been written in 700 BC. It must have been written later.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2019) 1975.

But that is not Alter's point here. His point is about a shift in style and content. These last chapters feel more like a sermon. And the theme of redemption from Babylon is hardly mentioned. I think what Alter misses is the possibility that this third book of Isaiah is a response to the fourth Servant Song and a further development of major themes begun by Isaiah, but not yet finished.

When we see a shift in style and theme, we don't have to immediately assume that we have a new author. Instead, we could easily ask, "How does this increased focus on the experience of the people of God in chapters 56-66 further develop Isaiah's message? Why does it sound more like a sermon now?"

Oswalt makes this point. He says,

"The issue is theological. Something about the theology of chs. 1-55 of Isaiah is not complete... The primary context of these chapters is not a historical one but a theological one. These materials are where they are because they add something to what has already been said; they make some important theological contributions to the corpus. What is that theological contribution?"<sup>2</sup>

Motyer's understanding of the literary structure of the Servant Songs provides interesting insight into why the style of these final chapters has shifted to address the people of Israel more directly. The fourth major division of the Book of the Servant was made up of the second, third, and fourth Servant Songs. The second and third Song were each followed by two comments. The fourth Song was followed by only one comment, though it was a rather long one. For each of the three songs, the first comment was a comment regarding the work of the Servant, either a confirmation of his work, or an invitation to respond to his work. A second, longer comment followed the second and third Servant Songs. That comment focused on Israel's relationship to God. Motyer points out that chapters 56-66 work very well as a development of Israel's relationship with God in light of the fourth Servant Song. The pattern of two comments is kept. The climactic fourth Song occurred in chapter 53. The comment on the servant's work that gave a double invitation was in 54 and 55. Now, the comment considering Israel's relationship to God is provided by the whole final book in chapters 56-66.

I do not know if Motyer is right in seeing chapters 56-66 as a the second comment on the fourth Servant Song. It does fit with the nature of the chapters. It also fits with Oswalt's observation that Isaiah is building theologically on what has come before. We should be asking, "What theological contribution do chapters 56-66 make to the book of Isaiah? Why did we not just stop at 55? What more does Isaiah want us to know?"

We will be considering that question as we study the Book of the Conqueror. This lesson is our introduction to the Book of the Conqueror. We've begun by asking this question, "What additional theological contribution does Isaiah 56-66 make to the whole of Isaiah?" Having raised that important introductory question, let's now consider briefly the structure of the Book of the Conqueror and address its first eight verses.

### **Structure of the Book of the Conqueror**

The Book of the Conqueror is organized chiastically. That's very nice. Commentators will disagree about how well-defined that arrangement is and about whether or not that arrangement is the controlling structure of these chapters. Whether we accept this as a tightly structured chiasm or as a loosely structured one, either way, recognizing the chiasm has helped me personally by providing a simple way to group the material in these chapters. It helps me to, kind of, get my mind around it.

I will give you Oswalt's arrangement, which seems pretty intuitive to me. When you read through these chapters several times, two pairs of passages stand out as providing interesting parallels. I encourage you to look at these two pairs on your own. They really do help structure the whole. The

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<sup>2</sup> J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 452.







simply because they are ethnically of the chosen people. “No, you need to look like these eunuchs and these foreigners!” The section is connected to verses 1 and 2 by showing the kind of man the Lord desires to bless. And it’s just really interesting the kind of man is a eunuch, or a foreigner. It’s like Jesus telling the Good Samaritan story. We are surprised that it’s the Good Samaritan the one who shows us the kind of man who delights the Lord’s heart. But we’re going to see, it is not the ethnic Jew who delights God. It is the one who “preserves justice, does righteousness, keeps from profaning the Sabbath and from doing evil.”

The basic principle is stated in verse 3.

<sup>3</sup> Let not the foreigner say \_\_\_\_\_ who has joined himself to the LORD,  
“The LORD will surely separate me from His people.” Nor let the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.”

Isaiah’s use of, “foreigner,” and, “eunuch,” echo Deuteronomy 23, but in a way that seems to overturn the Law of Moses. Deuteronomy 23:1-3 say this,

No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD. [...] No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their *descendants*, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD (Deuteronomy 23:1 and 3).

At the surface, Isaiah seems to be contradicting Moses. I doubt that is the case. Issues of the Law often create tensions that we have to work out with wisdom. It is more likely that Isaiah is expanding our understanding of Moses in a way similar to what Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount. The passage in Deuteronomy establishes principles of exclusion. In regard to eunuchs, the focus is most likely on ritual mutilation of the body connected to pagan worship practices. In regard to the Ammonite and Moabites, the focus is on the historical efforts to destroy Israel and pervert her worship of Yahweh. These exclusions are intended to maintain right relationship to God and the revealed truth of His Covenant. As harsh as these principles of exclusion are communicated, they did not prevent God from including into His family Ruth the Moabitess, an incredibly positive example of faith, who gives birth to the line of King David.

Isaiah’s focus in his passage is on inclusion rather than exclusion, though we need to see that Isaiah does maintain boundaries on inclusion. The foreigner and eunuch are not included on their own terms. They are not invited to bring their own religious beliefs and practices into the assembly. They are not invited to bring their own moral code into the assembly. They are not even invited to bring their own sense of identity into the community. They are included because they humbly submit to God’s revelation of Himself, to God’s code of ethics, and to God’s definition of who they are.

*Eunuchs are included (4-5)*

First the eunuchs:

<sup>4</sup> For thus says the LORD, \_\_\_\_\_ “To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths,  
And choose what pleases Me, \_\_\_\_\_ And hold fast My covenant,  
<sup>5</sup> To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial and a name better than that of sons  
and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.

The eunuch is included! Isaiah does not tell us whether this is a person born without genitalia or a person whose genitalia has been mutilated. The note of inclusion suggests that we are not supposed to make a distinction. Any eunuch can come. Now, something that occurred to me is, I don’t know any eunuchs. And I’m guessing that you don’t know any eunuchs.

For the last several centuries in Western culture Isaiah’s openness to eunuchs has been an abstract form of inclusion. It makes the point that someone abnormal, on the edge of society, can be included, but hardly anybody knows a eunuch. But this passage is taking on concrete relevance in the modern West. We could just slightly rephrase the term, “eunuch,” to, “transgender.” That might give us a similar uncomfortable feeling that Isaiah expects to create in his Jewish audience when he said eunuchs are welcome. He could have easily said, “Transgender people are welcome.”

So, we can modernize the challenge by asking, “Can a person struggling with gender dysphoria be welcomed into relationship with God? Can a person who has actually gone through transgender surgery be welcomed into relationship with God?” Isaiah says, “Yes, absolutely, yes. They can be a model of the kind of person that pleases God.”

Is a transgender person welcomed on their own terms? Well now, to that Isaiah would say, “No, absolutely, no.” None of us can come on our own terms. Demanding to come to God with your own definition of God, your own definition of morality, and your own definition of self is the opposite of coming to God. Entering a church is not coming to God. Engaging in religious community and ritual is not coming to God.

Genuine faith is giving of oneself into the hands of God. It is a humble obedience. It is a bowing of the knee to the King. It is an acceptance of God as the One who reveals and defines. God reveals His nature to us. God reveals what is just and loving, to us. God defines who we are as human beings. Coming to God on our own terms is not coming to God.

Will the person struggling with gender dysphoria experience immediate freedom from anxiety and confusion when they come to God? Most likely not, no. Coming to terms with who we are from the eyes of God is often a long and painful process. The person who has gone through transgender surgery will need to repent of their attempt at self-definition. They will be challenged by God’s Word to a new understanding of what it means to be human; what it means to be man or to be woman; what it means to be created in God’s image.

Isaiah highlights this humble obedience in relationship to God as requirement for inclusion, or maybe has a mark of inclusion. It is not all eunuchs who are included. “It is those who keep my Sabbaths, choose what pleases me, hold fast my Covenant.” There is a desire to know and obey God within the Covenant context that God has defined.

Covenant blessing follows Covenant obedience. Eunuchs who enter into this kind of Covenant relationship will receive in the house of God “a name better than that of sons and daughters.” It is better because it is everlasting. And it is true. They will “not be cut off.” That is an intentionally play on words. The eunuch may have cut off his genitalia, but if he repents and seeks God in humble faith, he will be included. And once included, he will not be cut off. He will receive a new name, a new understanding of self-identity that comes from his Creator. He will come to know his true self.

*Foreigners are included (6-8)*

The Covenant of God is open beyond the extremely marginalized eunuch to also include people of all ethnicities. All foreigners are welcome. Just as with the eunuch, they are welcome on the condition that they yield in faithful, obedient, loving relationship to Yahweh. Verse 6.

<sup>6</sup> “Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,  
To minister to Him and to love the name of the LORD,  
To be His servants,  
every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath And holds fast My covenant;

Isaiah piles up five traits to describe the foreigners who will experience the Covenant blessing of the Lord. If they join themselves to Lord in the way characterized by these five traits or behaviors, they will be fully recognized as God’s own people. The foreigner is welcome who ministers to the Lord. That is a surprising word to use for a foreigner. “Minister” in this context implies the Temple service of Jewish priests. Instead of the word, “minister,” we could say, “the foreigner is welcome who comes to serve God as an act of worship”. Second, the foreigner is welcome if he loves the name of the Lord. He does not bring in his own definition of the gods and apply it to Yahweh. He loves the name that God Himself has revealed. And this is a mark of faith. When your eyes have been opened, you will love who God is. Third, the foreigner is welcome if he comes as a servant. That implies a heart of willful obedience. Fourth, the foreigner is welcome if he keeps from profaning the Sabbath. That’s an odd, life-changing reality for a non-Jew. Who stops work on the last day of the week? Much more, who allows their own workers and slaves and animals a day of rest? This is a very Jewish practice. As with the eunuch, not profaning the Sabbath is not simply keeping the ritual command

not to work, but it includes the willingness to let God define our very schedule, and to focus on genuine relationship with Him. Finally, the foreigner is welcome who holds fast the Covenant of God. God defines what is good. God sets the agenda.

God's promised blessing on foreigners who are like this, who have this kind of heart for God, is communicated in verses 7 and 8.

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| <p><sup>7</sup> Even those I will bring to My holy mountain<br/>Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices<br/>For My house a house of prayer</p> | <p>And make them joyful in My house of prayer.<br/>will be acceptable on My altar;<br/>will be called for all the peoples.”</p> |
| <p><sup>8</sup> The Lord GOD declares<br/>“Yet others I will gather to them,</p>  | <p>who gathers the dispersed of Israel,<br/>to those already gathered.”</p>   |

Jesus quoted this vision, when He cleared the money changers out of the court of the Gentiles, proclaimed in Matthew 21:13, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a robbers’ den.” Jesus also agreed with the idea in verse 8 that God’s plan has always been to gather in non-Jews together with Jews, saying in John 10:16, “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them in also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.” Isaiah’s does not envision foreigners who merely adopt Jewish ritual. The foreigners who come will be joyful in God’s house of prayer. Everyone who has grown in up in church, synagogue, or mosque knows how tedious and not joyful prayer can be. What has to happen that prayer becomes joyful? Isaiah envisions heart relationship between these foreigners and their God.

Concluding this passage, we might ask along with Paul, “What then of the Jews?” This prophetic description of the accepted foreigner and eunuch is not meant to create a separate expectation for non-Jews. This is also the expectation for Jews. There is a rebuke here for the Jew who believes he is made acceptable by his ethnicity or by his ritual. And it is not just a rebuke for the Jew. It is a rebuke of any of us today who calls ourselves, Christian, based on ethnicity, or based on family participation in a church, or based on maintenance of certain rituals and being part of a certain institution. None of that makes you a Christian.

A heart of humble obedience, loving the name of God, receiving your name from God, this is what shows you to be in right relationship with the Lord. In the same way that this text stands as a heart-check for the Jews, it stands as a heart-check for every Christian. Is this who I am? Am I one who has joined himself to the Lord, who loves the name of the Lord, who seeks to minister to the Lord and live as His servant? Do I uphold the Sabbath and keep the Covenant? Do I pursue justice and do what is right? Is my life marked by humble obedience? That’s the challenge Isaiah serves up here at the beginning of the book of the Conqueror. He will develop this challenge in the following chapters.