

Savage Beasts, Lazy Dogs, and the Contrite Ones – Isaiah 56:9 – 57:21

Introduction – Jesus tells us, “*I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit*” (John 15:2). This is the nature of the covenant and the way God has ordained that His kingdom will grow. There will be wheat and tares (Matt 13:24-30). Reformation and revival comes from God but it is always messy, never a tame thing. None of this threatens one’s assurance of salvation unless one is living in rebellion while thinking their covenant-status guarantees them their salvation (Rom 11:19-20). There is a dire warning and warm comfort, both, in this passage.

Call in the Beasts (v9) – We will have to keep track of the “players” in these many verses. Here, Isaiah is calling in the beastly nations (Babylon in Isaiah’s future) to come and devour Jerusalem.

Lazy Dogs, Devouring Shepherds (vv10-12) – The Lord calls them in because Israel’s watchmen are blind, watchdogs who are sleeping in the sun (v10). Worse, they are voracious dogs, shepherds who feed on and exploit their own (v11). They live their lives from one drunken party to the next, always believing tomorrow will be just like today (v12).

In the Days of Jesus – When the Son of God came to visit Israel, He found things in just this state. He called Israel’s leaders blind (Matt 15:14). He warned Israel not to be sleepy (Mark 13:34-37), and called down curses upon those Pharisees who extorted and misled their flocks (Matt 23:14-15, 25). He warned of a presumptuous attitude towards life as it is and judgment which would so quickly come (Luke 12:16-21).

The Consequences Upon the Righteous (57:1-2) – Meanwhile, the right-living people die and no one gives them a thought. The effects of unbelieving Israel upon all of Israel were devastating. The consolation in these two verses is that those who remained faithful even unto death found themselves brought away from evil and into everlasting peace. And this is the believer’s overriding hope, as Paul writes, “*to be absent from the body and present with the Lord*” (2 Cor 5:8). And because of this, we can “*rest in our beds*” (v2). The righteous know God is in control of their lives and of the future. There is a way to mourn with great faith. Jesus said, “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*”

But the Ungodly (vv3-10) – The contrast here between the godly and these apostates is stark. These wag their tongues at God and His law (v4). They satisfy their lusts any place they find some shade to fornicate, killing the fruit of such unions at any convenient abortion clinic (v5). They go down to the deepest valleys or highest mountains to practice foul sex and death religions (vv6-7). There is a swirling of metaphors of following pagan rituals, perverse immoralities, king-gods and idols, searching desperately, even all the way to hell (Sheol) to find meaning and pleasure in all of it (vv8-10). (*Does any of this sound familiar to our culture?*).

The Painful Truth (vv11-13a) – What is the end of those seeking separation from God? It is separation from God, a horrible place to ever be. God seems to say, “Who talked you into this nonsense, forgetting you ever knew Me? Your so-called righteousness will not hold up. Go ahead and see if your idols, your worldviews, your empty philosophies will save you in the Day of Judgment” (vv11-13a). Jesus will say, “*I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!*” (Matt 7:23), terrible words to hear.

Idolatry and Sexual Immorality – Throughout the Scriptures, and throughout human history, false gods and wicked sexual practices, including the murder of unborn or just-born children, have gone hand in hand. Although we do not have shrines in our secular humanistic society, the immoralities are abundant and we seem to have lost all the brakes in our descent to Sheol. Among other things, this is why we are called as the people of God to have nothing to do with such practices - or the jokes, the sit-coms, the porn on your smart phone, and even the lascivious language (Eph 5:3-7). It is simply a lie to think you are not affected spiritually by these things; you will become dead to the things of God – and there is six-thousand years of human history on my side to prove it.

But He Who Puts His Trust in Me (vv13b-16) – Turning to and trusting in the Lord, repenting and believing, this is the answer (v13b). God has prepared a way (v14) and so begins Mark’s gospel (Mark 1:3). A message is sent from the High and Lofty One: He will dwell with the lowly (v15). He will revive the spirit of the humble and contrite (v15b). For those who have trusted in Him, His anger was put away (v16). God made peace with man through the propitiation of His Son’s blood (1 John 4:10); His righteous anger was appeased.

A Stark Gospel (vv17-21) – God’s anger falls down upon all sinners. For those turning away from Christ, they find no refuge from the righteous anger. For those in Christ, there is healing and comfort (vv17-18). In fact, there is a new language and there is a new peace with God for those near and for those far (v19). But once again the warning: There is no peace for the wicked (vv20-21). And God finds Himself glorified with both (Rom 9:22-24).

Contrite or Condemned – Over and over again Isaiah preaches the Gospel. There are only two ways in this earth. The way of the fruit-bearing vine and the way of the fruitless vine. The way of the wheat or the tares. The way of the godly (who are so by grace through faith) and the way of the wicked (who will justify themselves all the way to hell). There are the contrite, who trust in God for everything and walk with Him humbly. And then there are the condemned, the living –dead awaiting their appointed end. But God has made a way. For you.