

Isaiah 56

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[0 : 0 0] I want to imagine two people who got a call this week from an employment agency and they said! they've got work starting this coming Monday and it turns out that it's exactly the same! work and for the same company and for the same people. The two people turn up tomorrow morning and the company boss says that he really hopes that they will both give it their all and that they will have a positive mental attitude to their work they'll work really hard and he's just wrapping up a pep talk he turns to one of them and he says by the way at the end of the month you will repay three thousand pound for your work then he turns to the other person and he says at the end of the month you're going to see three million pounds for your work now I know it's not realistic but we'll run with it for a minute ask yourself the question do you think those two employees are going to have the same attitude to their work throughout this coming month will they there's no way you might think well the work is exactly the same they'll get the same lousy uniforms the same hours and that's absolutely right all those things are the same but what lies ahead at the end of the month makes all the difference it makes all the difference or to put it a different way it is the future hope that determines how you live in the present if you were the person promised three million pounds at the end of this month I'm guaranteeing you you would work differently you're going to behave differently you will deal with the adverse conditions differently from the person who's going to be paid three thousand pounds it all depends doesn't it on your future hope the future hope changes everything about how you live in the present so the last two weeks we've seen is i55 and the beginning of is i56 and we've had amazing promises to those who will trust their lives to god isaiah has invited you and i look to the future a future which will be everlasting an eternal future in which we as god's followers god's followers will be transformed and we will live in a transformed world and it will be a future of joy and perfect peace of feasting a future where every tribe and nation will be gathered together to enjoy perfect fellowship and friendship with god and one another and the bible makes the point over and over again that if you live with that future hope at the core of your being it will completely change everything about the present if you know that is the future that you've got to look forward to it changes how you look at the present struggles and the suffering it changes how you handle relationship struggles or issues it changes how you handle money it changes how about you how you go about your job how you appreciate this world and art how this creation is changed by that future hope the trouble is you and i ignore that future and if you choose only to focus on the here and now that affects doesn't it how you live in the here and now and that is all for the worse and that is exactly what isaiah has just talked about in isaiah 56 and 57 because from the heavy heights of isaiah's vision of the future we plummet down to the reality check of what was happening in isaiah's day and it's not pretty we saw part of isaiah's a future vision last week is that outsiders that is foreigners and eunuchs people who are regarded as outsiders are brought inside but this week isaiah describes for us insiders who are actually on the outside

and so he describes first those who consider themselves to be part of the church part of the people of god but the reality is they forfeited the rights to be part of god's family they're insiders who are actually on the outside and so we're going to think about this as we work through the passage in three parts lost shepherds lost sheep and then finally how the lost can be found firstly lost shepherds look at isaiah 56 and verse 9 it says this all beasts of the field come to devour all you beasts in the forest is watchmen are blind they're all without knowledge they're all silent dogs they cannot bark dreaming lying down loving a slumber the dogs have a mighty appetite they never have enough but they are shepherds who have no understanding they've all turned to their own way each to his own gain one and all come they say let's get let's get wine let's fill ourselves with strong drink and tomorrow we'll be like this day greater beyond measure do you remember isaiah 55 first verse is really famous isn't it it says come everyone who comes to the thirst come to the waters and

he who has no money come by and eat and this section starts with exactly the same command in fact the word devour the word devour in verse 9 is just the word eat two passages side by side with the same invitation but if the words are similar dinner could not be more different could it because it's not an invitation like isaiah 55 it's not an invitation for all people everywhere to come come experience god's love and grace and kindness and goodness and forgiveness this is an invitation to israel's labouring nations and they're portrayed as beasts of the field and beasts of the forest and the invitation is come come and feast on the rebellious people of israel it's not some kind of random command here on god's part that god is having a bad day and he's kind of fed up his people no this is actually god keeping his promise god has promised in the law of moses that if the people of god refuse to obey him and instead to disobey him that he sets wild animals on them and in this case it's the surrounding army so his role isaiah's role as a prophet part of which entailed him being a kind of covenant enforcement officer for god's promises isaiah lays out the evidence why god can bring this punishment on his people how they've rebelled against god and he's going to start with the leaders those lost shepherds and as you look at the passage i use two words to describe what the roles the leaders of israel were supposed to fulfill and there's two things firstly they were to be watchmen verse 10 and they were to be shepherds there were to be those two things watchmen and shepherds and those two aspects highlight highlight important truths about what leadership in christ's church is to entail the leaders here they were to guard from external danger and they were to care for the internal needs of his people so protection from the outside and care for those on the inside but the problem is with these leaders is that the eyes of these leaders should have been turned outwards towards their people and the care of them but their eyes are turned inward to their own welfare and so isaiah doesn't pull any punches as he describes them he says what are these leaders actually like he compares them to dogs doesn't he in verse 10 blind, mute, sleepy, greedy dogs

who are unable to guard the community and therefore the community is at the mercy of these beasts and these leaders should have been watchmen and shepherds of god's flock but isaiah says they're drunks and they're gluttons and they are supposed to be like watchdogs who would warn of the approach of animals like lions and wolves who could destroy and could kill who would kill a village's sheep but instead they are like dogs who are interested in eating and then lying about in the sun dogs who are interested in sleeping they're not watchdogs they're not guard dogs so when their robbers arrive they wag their tails of welcome instead of barking they are useless as leaders and in fact they are worse than useless they are dangerous and there's actually a certain sequence that isaiah lays out spiritually they are blind they have no vision and you go through the old testament and vision is always tied to the word of the lord they are not hearing the word of the lord they are not paying attention to the word of the lord so there's no vision they don't hear so they can't see they don't hear which leads to no message they are mute and they've got nothing to say which leads to escapism and self-pleasing which leads to complacency about tomorrow everything is great everything is going to be great tomorrow they think everything is grand and they've no idea that they're about to be devoured they've completely failed as leaders and so if nothing else these few verses remind us that leadership matters and leadership matters in the church because as we're going to see in a moment as the leaders go so does the church the old adage is right isn't it no organisation will rise above the level of its leadership and that is why the work of our denomination in developing leaders and training a next generation of preachers and our work of training elders is absolutely vital to the health of this congregation it's why it's crucially important for you to be praying for the elders and for those who are training to be elders and for all leaders down to every area of church life it's why those of us who are leaders need to read a passage like this and we need to be reminded that we've been called to be watchmen and shepherds not selfish and complacent not doing this because it scratches where we itch but because God has given us this responsibility and notice before we move on that this critique from Isaiah is focused on character and not on policy or to put it in terms of the New Testament it is about spiritual fruit in the leaders lives not spiritual gifts so our culture increasingly wants to believe doesn't it that it doesn't matter what is going on for example in a political leader's life as long as he or she is delivering in terms of policy economic or social or whatever it is that's okay but actually character matters the sheep follow the shepherd character matters in the world of politics but it certainly matters in the leadership of the church because we are about to see private wrong and public rights do not coexist leadership matters

and it matters because Isaiah shows us that lost shepherds result in lost sheep secondly lost sheep I wonder if you noticed in verse 11 there is a phrase there which is familiar it's not verse 11 the dogs have a mighty appetite but they never have enough they are shepherds who have no understanding they have all turned to their own way a few chapters early in Isaiah 53 in that very famous chapter it says the Lord's people we all like sheep have gone astray each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all and now Isaiah is telling us why it is that the sheep have gone their own way because the shepherds turned to their own way first the lost are leading the lost the blind are leading the blind and the direction that the shepherd goes in is the direction that the sheep end up going in you know Dritten Green outside our building 53 Dritten Green there is a path there and there is a little kind of running path that goes round the green you've seen this next

I don't know if you ever noticed people only ever run one way you never see on that path people running in opposite directions why? I don't know why it is because whoever it is earliest in the morning must get there and decide to run that way and then you have all the people during the day running the same way round the path nobody runs different kind of directions they all run away why?

[13:52] well because you follow the leader aren't you? everyone runs in the same direction so in the running so in life the sheep follow the shepherd whatever direction the shepherd takes those who come after and takes them in the same direction if the shepherd goes in the wrong direction so does the sheep and that is exactly what was happening in Isaiah that is exactly what happens in church life and so Isaiah just wants to make sure that we realise that and he launches into this attack on the sheep which is an attack on the whole nation verse 3 and 4 of Isaiah 57 but you draw near sons of the sorcerers offspring of the adulterer and the noose woman whom you are mocking against whom do you open your mouth wide and stick out your tongues are you not children of transgression the offspring of deceit the catalogue of sins of which the people are guilty is simply shocking as you run down the list from verses 3 to 9 just glance down at it with me they are guilty of spiritual adultery they are guilty at the mockery of God they are guilty of religious prostitution they are guilty of child sacrifice literally child sacrifice rampant idolatry political alliances with pagan nations and you see when you have no focus on the future hope that has been promised to you there is no transformation in the present and so it's a live for now attitude go for it with gossip you've only got one life and so the people of Israel they romp through every expression of paganism and sin possible anything goes anything goes because anything goes however exhausting however degrading however stupid that in their blindness they thought this was what life was all about this is how you fun along the way and God says let me tell you what you've made yourself you've become prostitutes you've become adulterers you've taken other loves you've taken your love where it doesn't belong and you've become idolaters you've trusted in gods which are no gods at all there's almost a manic quality to these verses of people in a frenzy trying to find security the security that they are longing for and so we follow them down into the valley pursuing these false gods and then we're taken up onto the mountain where they metaphorically jump into bed with the false gods and then down into Sheol into the realm of the dead they are ready to do whatever if necessary they'll do whatever they want whatever they can if only they didn't get a secure alliance they are lost sheep are people who consider themselves to be insiders but Isaiah says no you are not insiders you are actually outsiders now I'm guessing as this passage was read to us many of us think this sounds so weird so foreign so unreal and as you can see where I'm going perhaps you are offended of the suggestion that I might make that you are some kind of spiritual prostitute or adulterer but the Bible will not offer you and I that was all in the ancient world but now it's different option throughout the

Bible God describes his relationship with his people in terms of a marriage and God tells you and I that he loves his people with a jealous love he's like a husband in terms of the love and the passion and commitment for his wife and so when we treat God as if he's not enough and when we treat God as if we need something else to satisfy us and excite us and when we look elsewhere for love and meaning and significance the Bible has got a whole vocabulary to describe that words like prostitution words like adultery and like idolatry Tim Keller in his brilliant little book on idolatry says an idol is anything more important to you than God anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God anything you seek to give you what only

God can give and once you understand that the Bible's category of ideology covers the breadth of things or its first cousin adultery in the same way you realise that this passage of Isaiah 56 and 57 is very very relevant so there are personal idols aren't there like romantic love or family or money or power or achievement or your social circle your fitness your health your beauty there are cultural idols technological progress and economic prosperity there can be idols with work can't there what we do and what we study and where we work and how we're perceived and all those things are competing for our worship and our devotion and all those things although not bad things in themselves they are seeking to seduce you to become the ultimate thing in your life instead of God and some relationships whisper in your ear and say come to me and through me you will find meaning and you will find significance or work comes to you and says give yourself to me sell yourself to me and you will find meaning and you will find happiness in success and if this is new to you you always thought that an idol was just a statue in a little room in the corner and you think to yourself do I have an idol in my life what is it well I'll apply this for the test when your mind has space simply to go wherever it wants to go your default more often than not is to what you love most and worship and if that is not

God the chances are you've uncovered what your idol is so ask yourself what is it that your mind just defaults to what is it that you love to think about what do you love to dream about the problem with any idol no matter what it is is that whatever it promises you whether it's fulfilment or satisfaction or otherwise it never keeps its promise it never does and it will only lead you to destruction and the sobering factor just in case you haven't picked it up is Isaiah is not addressing pagan unbelievers he's speaking to the people of God he's speaking to the church and he's speaking to those who consider them insiders who are in reality outsiders and we see an interesting little detail in verse 8 can you see that behind the door and the door post you've set up your memorial the word literally he's a reminder and I think the reference to the door post is probably an allusion to

[21 : 57] Deuteronomy 6 where the Israelites are reminded and told to write God's commands on their door posts and on their homes and they were to do that because it would remind them that they are to live by God's commands but it also served didn't it as a public statement to those who came into this house that this household lives by the word of God and so something easy isn't it in many of our homes there will probably be a framed little quote which says as for me and my house we will serve the Lord the problem here is that in Isaiah 57 is that the spiritual adulterers those lost sheep they put those verses out of sight they put them behind the door verse it on the door they don't erase them but they concealed it because frankly they want a foot in both camps they want some hidden reminder that preserves some form of commitment to God it's a bit like a baptism certificate or a bible that you were given years ago or some moment or a pledge card that when you were a teenager you gave your life to Christ or at a camp years ago when you were given a book and it's like an insurance policy that you stuck away in some drawer or cabinet that you can pull out to prove

I am a Christian but you keep it hidden because frankly the way you act or speak when you're around other people besides those who come to church with you the way you act and the way you speak makes a mockery those reminders and Isaiah says it's trying to have a foot in both camps trying to walk the route of spiritual compromise and that is just adultery and idolatry sheep who follow lost shepherds are lost sheep they only consider themselves to be insiders but Isaiah says they're outsiders and it's very depressing stuff it's very heavy isn't it we need to feel the weight of it but let's say for the sake of argument that you see this morning in your life that according to Isaiah's diagnosis that you are close to the category of lost sheep you recognise that in yourself and you recognise although you've got the name of insider you see the signs of outsider in you and if you're honest with yourself there are things in your life which definitely take priority and precedence over God and so the question is what do you do what do you do if you recognise this morning as we all do that there are things in your life that are taking precedence and they're more important to you than God and Isaiah helpfully in this passage points out how the loss can be found this morning and I want to point to you three things that

I think he shows us here how the loss can be found first of all you need a new reality look at verse 10 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 a new reality there's a fair dose of irony here some of you might think those words are familiar and you'd be right do you remember in Isaiah 40 that

famous verse that we love even youths grow tired and weary those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength they will run and not grow weary they will walk and not grow faint they're very familiar words and they're similar words and the problem here is that the Israelites have somehow found a way of not fainting but carrying on carrying on in their sin and rebellion to stagger on in their adultery and their idolatry look at verse 11 whom did you dread and fear so that you lied and did not remember me and did not lay to heart have I not held my peace even for a long time and did you 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 Isaiah is a great preacher he's a great preacher because he mocks and he uses irony and he uses humour and he mocks the idols he says they are non-gods and they are lifeless and they can do absolutely nothing for you build your life on them go for it what will it mean to you and you count on your idols to bring you happiness and Isaiah says you know what it takes to knock one of those idols over do you know what it takes for one of those idols to disappear verse 13 the wind will carry them all off a breath will take it away because they're nothing and Isaiah says to you the only sufficient refuge lies in

in God he is the one you are to run to he is the one with whom you are to take shelter he is the one who will shelter you when you are feeling at your wit's end when you are helpless and despondent he is the one who will protect you when you're feeling insecure he alone is the refuge you see on your deathbed on your deathbed you've given your life to work you've given your life to sport you've made your family the big thing in life more important than anything else and on your deathbed what's good will it do you part of my job is I sit at the deathbed of people I've seen people ushered into eternity and let me assure you work is no comfort money is no comfort you leave your family and so God can be your only refuge

[28 : 41] Isaiah uses words to help us understand what it might look like for us to be taking refuge in God look at some of the words he uses he says to take refuge in God means to fear him to fear the Lord it comes over and over again in the New Testament it's not a servile fear but a fear that is a trembling trust it is a trust in God because we know how absolutely trustworthy God has been for us in the past trust and it's a trembling trust because this Isaiah is the sovereign ruler of the universe you don't mess with him to take refuge in God is to be true to him I was recently with a group of ministers and one of the ministers prayed Lord we want to relax into you I wanted to kick his head in it's absolutely ridiculous isn't it you don't relax into almighty God he is your father it's wonderful you have great access you can call him

Abba father but he is God to take refuge in God is to be true to him once you know what you know of what God has done for you in the past and who he is you can trust him which means to obey him to take that foot out of the camp of adultery and idolatry and plant both feet in God's camp and say as for me and my house we will serve the Lord to take God as a refuge is to remember God and to take all that he does and is and take it to heart remembering the Bible is not just oh yeah I've forgotten that to remember in the Bible is always an action verb that means you take what you know about God and you live it out so when you do this in remembrance of me at the Lord's table it's not oh yes I've got to think about Jesus on the cross it's to remember who God is and to live that out and to apply it in every area of life and Isaiah says that's the only safe place it is a trembling trust it is hearing and remembering

God and being true to him it's to take him as your one refuge and the third thing that the lost person needs this morning to be found is the most important thing so listen up lastly the third thing that the lost needs to be found is the righteous man look at chapter 57 verses 1 and 2 because there's really something very interesting going on there isn't there verse 1 look at verse 1 it's surprising 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 in peace they rest in their beds who walk in their uprightness it seems a strange couple of verses to put here because it almost seems it would make more sense to go from the lost shepherd to the lost sheep and yet here Isaiah inserts a couple of verses about who are truly insiders they are inside and they belong inside because they walk in righteousness but they are people who God in his sovereign will with sovereign timing will remove from this life through death he protects them by bringing them from life to death I wish I could talk

more about that but I need to go on but notice how Isaiah flips back and forth between the singular and the plural can you see that in the verse one righteous man to devout men back to one righteous man and then finally the plural who are left in their beds and lots of commentators think Isaiah is just kind of mixing it up stylistically he's talking about lots of people through these verses and he kind of he varies it to make it interesting sometimes he's singular sometimes plural but we know that's not right

Isaiah definitely speaks of a group of people who are devout and righteous and godly a kind of remnant whom God under certain circumstances of persecution and death delivers from suffering by means of death Isaiah is suggesting isn't it that certain situations God draws his followers out of further suffering to bring them to a place of peace and rest where suffering is no more Paul talks about that in the Philippians he says for me to live is Christ to die is gain because for the Christian when God decides to bring us out of life and into death he brings us into the holy presence of Christ where there's ultimate joy and peace and rest we might want them back but they don't want to come back the saints of heaven so that's the plural but what about the singular what about the righteous man that Isaiah is flipping back and forth and the reason he does that is because he is thinking of the righteous man the suffering servant from Isaiah 52 to 42 to 53 that's still in his mind and the clue that he's still thinking of is in the lines about the shepherds going their own way just as the sheep have gone their own way which was an allusion to Isaiah 53 so look at verse 1 the righteous man perishes and knows no one lays it to heart for the lost to be found for the outsider to be brought into the inside he or she must take the perishing death of the righteous man and you need to take it to heart you have to come to terms with the fact that this God is not a static refuge he is one who has pursued us to bring us inside that he has pursued us by sending his son the suffering servant the only righteous man the only person who ever walked the earth without committing spiritual adultery without committing idolatry the sinless perfect son of

[35 : 06] God the righteous man who was put to death who perished on a cross not because of any of the wrong that he had done not because he deserved to die in any way but because you and I deserve it and he willingly went to the cross in our place as the sin bearing penalty for our sin and so the righteous man perished but of course that's not the end of the story is it because the righteous man rose again and the righteous man ascended and the righteous man is seated at the right hand of the father and the righteous man is coming back again but the point is he has defeated sin and he has defeated death and for those who will lay this to heart that death has been defeated that when you come to the end of your life that is not the end and there is future hope that is portrayed for us in Isaiah 55 and 56 and hope changes everything the righteous man perished and you took it to heart and you realise this applies to me big time and you realise that you don't have to run after those senior gods you don't have to run after the god of money or work or sex or family that keep promising you so much but never come through you no longer have to run after idols because everything you need is in him because he is the only refuge that you need and he is the only sufficient refuge and in him there is a new reality and through faith in

Christ alone the outside is brought inside never to be put outside again amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me I once was lost but now I'm found to us blind but now I see that's Christ a Thank you.