

# Isaiah 57

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[ 0 : 00 ] In a relationship, it's quite easy for a gap to appear, a kind of relational gap.! And it's easy in a relationship, even in a strong relationship, for a gap to appear and problems to come.

And that's really what you've got in Isaiah 57. You've got a relationship where there's a gap between two parties, and it could not be wider. It's not a gap of class or income level.

It's not even kind of a little falling out or kind of relational coolness. But there's a great gap in the end of Isaiah 57. It concerns two things. It concerns holiness and sin.

On one side of the gap, you have God, who is holy. And then on the other side of the gap, you have yourself, us, who are not holy, but sinners.

And the gap is insurmountable. It can't be bridged. However, in this standing passage today, God is going to explain to us that he has done absolutely everything necessary to bridge the gap between himself and you.

[ 1 : 22 ] He wants to bring you to his dwelling place and to his home. God desires to open the door of his home and welcome you in forever.

And Isaiah is going to point us to the holy God, who in order to be hospitable, heals the humble. I don't think I've ever had four H's in my theme sentence before. That's quite unusual. It's a stroke of genius, really.

Holy God, who in order to be hospitable, heals the humble. It's easy to do that with P's and T's, but not so easy on H's. So let's look at, first of all, the barrier to God's hospitality, then the means to God's hospitality, then the result of God's hospitality.

The barrier to God's hospitality, look at verse 14. And it shall be said, build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstacle from my people's way.

Literally, the beginning is, he will say, because it's God speaking. And what he says in verse 14 is not that dissimilar from what he said already. You should pick up that in Isaiah.

[ 2 : 27 ] He kind of repeats himself quite a lot. So remember Isaiah 40. They're very familiar words. God says, comfort, comfort my people. A voice of one calling, prepare the way for the Lord.

Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. That's chapter 40. And in chapter 40, Isaiah was speaking about a highway that needs to be constructed, because the king, God the king, was coming to town.

God the king was coming to comfort his people. And God the king would lead them home along this road after their exile. So prepare the way for that kind of king. And God instructs, doesn't he, he says, all the valleys be filled in.

All the mountains be levelled off and brought down. But here in chapter 57, God is calling for another public works section, project. And the project is not for God himself.

This highway is for his people. But still, it's to be clearly a prominent road so that no one can miss it. It should be free from obstacles. No one's going to stumble on this way.

[ 3 : 31 ] There'll be no accidents. No highway maintenance necessary. God says, get rid of the boulders. I want you to get rid of those fallen trees. I want you to fill in those gullies so that they'll no longer be in the way.

From exile in Babylon. There'll be a road. No, those who walk this highway have already trodden, haven't they, the path from Babylon.

The highway is to take God's people through these present trials of this life and through their struggles to their final home. God's home. That's what this highway is about.

It's a highway to the final destination, the kingdom of God, which lay in the future for them. And still lays in the future for us. It's a highway for you and I to walk on. And it's a highway, God says, there are to be no obstacles that will prevent us ultimately.

There'll be no obstacles that will prevent us from getting to the final destination as God's people. And that's interesting, isn't it? Because the biggest obstacle to people making it to God's home, God's dwelling place, his kingdom, is God's holiness and our sin.

[ 4 : 45 ] And that's what Isaiah moves right into in verse 15. You see what he says? For thus says the one who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy.

I will dwell in the high and holy place. And also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit. And again, verse 15 is a flashback.

It's a flashback to an earlier part of Isaiah. He uses language which would remind his listeners.

We've heard this before. And it's to point you back, isn't it, to Isaiah chapter 6.

Let me remind you of how Isaiah 6 opened. In the year that King Uzziah died. I saw the Lord, Isaiah says, seated on a throne, high and exalted.

And the train of his robe filled the temple. And above him was Saraph with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces. With two wings they covered their feet.

[ 5 : 44 ] And with two they were flying. And the angels called to one another, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.

And at the sound of their voices, the doorposts and the threshold shook. And the temple was filled with smoke. And Isaiah is now reminding us, in case anyone has forgotten, through these 50 chapters that have gone past, that who this God is.

He is the God who is in charge. He is the God who is the rightful ruler of the universe. And who therefore has got the ultimate authority in your life and in mine. He is the God who is above all things.

He is exultant and resplendent. And he is the God who is holy. And so here in chapter 57 we're told that his name is holy.

His name has a holiness attached to it. But here we're told he is actually called holy. Because in the Bible names always mean something, don't they?

[ 6 : 50 ] In the Bible a name points to a person's character, to their nature. And God's name is holy because at his core he is holy.

That is because the seraphim, they call back and forth in the temple, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. It's not enough for them to double the word in emphasis.

In essence they create a super superlative. To express what their God is like and how holy he is. The word holy literally means waiting.

Essentially to say that God is holy is to say that God is God. It points to his separateness. It points to his moral purity and perfection.

His holiness is at the very core of his identity. It is his utterly unique divine essence. Because it defines everything that he is.

[ 7 : 55 ] And everything that he does. His name is holy. And you and I will never be able to grasp what the Bible is about. You will never understand why you need the gospel.

You will never understand the good news of the Lord Jesus if you don't start with God's holiness.

You won't get it. You'll never understand the problem unless you start with God's holiness.

And so I think that's partly the problem with it. Why there are so many half-hearted in church, out of church, are they Christian, are they not Christian people. Because they've never really understood that God is holy.

P.T. Forsyth was an eminent Scottish minister and theologian at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Here's how he explains the centrality of God's holiness. He says the holiness of God is the real foundation of religion.

It is certainly the rule and interest of the Christian religion. In front of all our prayer or works stands, hallowed be thy name.

[ 9 : 10 ] God's holiness is the interest which all the rest of it serves. Neither love, grace and faith nor sin has any meaning but a passing meaning except that they rest on the holiness of God.

Except as they arise from it and return to it. Except as they satisfy it. Show it forth and set it up. And secure it everywhere and forever. Love is but his holiness outgoing.

Sin is but its defiance. Grace is but its action on sin. The cross is but its victory. Faith is but its worship.

The holiness of God is the foundation of everything. Everything that we believe. And that of course leaves us in an enormous predicament.

Because to put it bluntly God is holy and you and I am not. Isaiah describes us and how God's natural attitude is towards us. Look at verse 17.

[10:17] For I will not contend forever nor will I always be angry for the spirit would grow faint before me and the breath of life I made. Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry.

I struck him. I hid my face and was angry. But he went on back sliding in the way of his own heart. God could have pointed to countless things on ways in which we act that enrage him rightly. Here he just highlights our sinful greed. Specifically the way that we disadvantage others in order to advantage ourselves. Always looking to put number one in the right place so to speak.

Perhaps what is most saddling here is not so much the particular sin to which God refers but what happens after he punishes those who rebelled against him. He says no matter how much no matter how much I punish those no matter how much I warn those no matter how much I try to get them to move in a different direction they keep going in the same direction.

They go on by sliding in the way of his own heart. Is that what Einstein defined as his sanity? Doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results.

[11:39] And that is what we do. We continue somehow in the way of rebellion. God somehow seeks to intervene in the person's life from walking their own proud way.

He tries to get their attention so that they will change direction and change course. But what do they do? What do we do? Maybe God is trying to get your attention today.

He warns us. He chastises us. And we get up and we keep going in the same direction as we were before. God is holy and we are not.

And that is a barrier to you and I receiving God's hospitality and welcome. Interestingly God indicates here that despite the fact he is holy and we are not which creates this barrier he is willing to show hospitality.

Or more specifically he is willing to dwell with a certain group of people. Look at how he defines that group of people in verses 16 and 17. For I will not contend forever nor will I always be angry for the spirit would grow faint before me.

[12:50] And the breath of life that I made because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry. I struck him. I hid my face and was angry. But he went on in the way back sliding in his own heart.

Sorry look at verse 15 this verse I should have read. For thus says the one who is high and lifted up who inhabits eternity whose name is holy I will dwell in the high and holy place but also with him who is of contrite and lowly spirit.

Do you see who God commits to dwelling with? He commits to dwell with people who are contrite and who are lowly and who are humble and you might say okay so these people are humble but that doesn't make them holy.

They've still messed up like the rest of us. They deserve the barrier to hospitality just like everybody else and you'd be absolutely right. The difference is because these people who are humble in their humility have recognised their sin and they've recognised what has caused the barrier they acknowledge their abject shortcomings before God they recognise that God is God and that they are not and so they come humbly before God they have nothing which is in contrast to how Isaiah portrays the bullish and the wicked the rebellious because one of the traits of that kind of person is that they're not humble they are proud Lewis Smeets describes the opposite side to a contrite and lonely spirit listen to what he says he says pride in the spiritual sense is a refusal to let God be God it is to grab God's stages for your own self it is turning down God's invitation to join the dance of life as a creature in God's world and wishing instead to be the creator independent relying on your own resources that is the greatest delusion the delusional fantasy of all fantasies the cosmic put on you see the proud person is the person who defines the rules by which they live in a small way or a big way the proud person always wants to insist they are right the proud person wants to think that their record in life will somehow be good enough for God to accept the proud person sees ultimately no need for God in life because they've got it all figured out and they don't want to be dependent upon anyone else and God says

I'm sorry but for that kind of person I do not have any accommodation in my dwelling place for people who are proud there's no room but I delight to dwell with the humble and the contrite the lowly and so God in this way is not like most people upward mobility is the name of the game there would be no neighbourhood too classy for us to live if we had the money but God shows that he doesn't value upward mobility he values downward mobility it's not because God feels uncomfortable dwelling in the high and holy place which Isaiah speaks of it's not because he feels

out there on his own it's not because he's somehow bothered with his surroundings and he's lonely after all these years of eternity no he values downward mobility because down low down low is where God finds people that are open to him and so to the extent in which you are resistant to God the extent that you might be unwilling to be open to God that extent is the indicator of how much pride is still dominant in your life because it is the humble and the lowly who God invites to dwell with him and that is all very well

[17:05] God is holy and we are not God does not God does invite those to dwell with him because they are humble and contrite but the question is how can they do that if he is holy how can God invite people to travel on this highway to his dwelling place when this massive gap still exists and so we look at the means to God's hospitality and Isaiah shows us here God can do it because he is the holy God who in order to be humble hospitable heals the humble he heals the humble two steps so how does God do it number one God acquits the guilty he acquits the humble look at verse 16 for I will not contend forever nor will I always be angry for the spirit would grow faint before me and the breath of life that I made he says he enters in doesn't he to a kind of legal proceeding against someone and God says there will come a time when I will not just drop the charges because I can't do that but I will declare you not guilty

God will somehow find a way to satisfy his legal requirements and Isaiah says God will also bring an end to his anger when God refers to his anger he's not talking about having a short fuse or a bad temper or a malicious spirit like we might have it's not some arbitrary action no his anger or his wrath is his personal righteous constant hostility to evil it is his settled refusal to compromise with evil and his resolve that one day completely and utterly he will condemn it which means he will bring an end to it and so his anger is a rightful anger and he promises to deal comprehensively with evil and God promises here that he plans to do that and he can only bring an end to his anger by dealing with it by dealing with the reason for which for that anger and the reason for God's anger is our evil and that's just as well because if God was not going to bring his anger to an end it would mean the end of all living things and it would mean the end of you and me and God promises that he is going to deal with his anger but he acquits the guilty and the second step is the healing self so look at verse 18 he says I have seen his ways but I will heal him I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners creating the fruit of the lips peace peace to the far and to the near says the Lord and I will heal him now let's just hit the pause button for a moment I think what is God saying here literally he says I've seen his ways but I will heal him and it's interesting he's talking about individuals here he's not talking about a mass of people he's talking about you and he's talking about me he says I've seen your ways but he knows absolutely everything about you he's seen the good and he's seen the bad he's seen the ugly he's seen the successes he's seen the celebration he's seen the devastation and the disasters he's seen it all he sees how your thinking works he sees what you're thinking right now he says stop thinking about lunch for a minute he knows exactly what you're thinking he knows your heart he knows what you long for he says don't you know that that's idolatry to be longing for all that all the time and then having said that he says these momentous words but I will heal him

I've seen his ways but I will heal him and that is those God says who come to me in humility those who come with contrite broken hearts knowing that the only thing that they contribute to their salvation is their sin from which they need to be forgiven and God says I will heal them God says to every person here this morning I've seen your ways everything yes even that I've seen that too but if you will come to me and come with humility and come with a broken heart I will heal you Isaiah in this chapter doesn't explain how he will do that but he did in Isaiah chapter 53 because in the suffering servant that chapter about Jesus the suffering servant says to those who will trust their lives to him I have seen your ways but I will heal you by dying for you Isaiah 53 by his stripes you are healed and Jesus adds to the promise here the first clause for the suffering servant to say I've seen your ways remind us what happened reminds us what happened to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane that night before Jesus was crucified think about it from Matthew's gospel we read that Jesus began to be sorrowful and troubled and the word trouble has got the kind of sense of the word horror mental and spiritual anguish that Jesus must have felt this is going to kill me even before he got to the cross and he tells Peter and James and John that his soul was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death and in addition to that Luke tells us that he sweats great drops of blood medical experts say that it is unusual but possible for blood to pour out of your pores together with sweat and they're experiencing severe shock so what's the deal why is he like that it's not as if

Jesus had some new information in the garden no

[ 23 : 28 ] Jesus doesn't say in the goodness oh my goodness this is really going to happen I didn't think this was going to really happen he knew he was going to die and why he would die so it wasn't that the night suddenly went on in the garden and he realised what was happening it was Jesus a wimp you contrast that with countless other people who have died for what they believe in people who have died in the name of Jesus have shown what looks like more poise and more peace doesn't it than Jesus does the French Huguenots they were burnt at the stake and they would lean into the flames to burn the cloth that was covering their mouths so they could continue singing praise to God as they were burned Hugh Latimer the English reformer said to Nicholas Ridley as they were being burned be of good cheer Mr Ridley we shall by God's great grace light such a candle in England that I trust shall never be put out here is

Jesus though distressed trouble sweating blood reeling in sorrow what's the deal why the agony the answer is because of what he saw in the garden Matthew tells us at one point in the garden Jesus fell with his face to the ground and he prays to his father father if this is possible may this cup be taken from me yet not as I will but as you will and you say well what cup is he talking about is it a physical cup well of course it's not no Jesus is referring to that cup that the Bible speaks of in the Old Testament as the cup of the wrath of God on human sin and evil and at that point Jesus gets a glimpse a preview of the depth of our sin for which he would die and he gets a preview of God's wrath that was going to be poured out upon him because of your sin and my sin and he recoils in shock he gets a preview of what it would mean for him to descend into death as the creed says of the hell he would suffer and he shudders in anguish it's not the death of a martyr like a Huguenot or Latimer or Ridley as horrible as those deaths it is Jesus seeing your sin and my sin seeing the deserved wrath and punishment that sin deserved and saying yes father I have seen their ways I have seen their ways but will heal them I will die for them the Lord is the holy God who in order to be hospitable has committed to heal the humble and so from that true diagnosis to this graceful remedy I will heal he says and God then points us to the result of this hospitality thirdly what happens when we get as we are received into this dwelling place there again at verse 18 to verse 21 I have seen his ways but I will heal him I will lead him and restore comfort to him in his mourners creating the fruit of the lips peace peace to the far and to the near says the Lord and I will heal him but the wicked like the tossing sea for it cannot be silent and its waters toss up mire and dirt there is no peace says my God for the wicked so you see having healed the humble God then leads to a new way of life a new lifestyle God says I'm now committed to lead you 24 7 I'm never going to abandon you I'm always going to be with you and he's going to lead us to a completely different relationship with himself described here as comfort for the mourners comfort for those who mourn over sin and repent and turn to him but if you want one word to summarise one word to summarise what does it mean to dwell in God's house to have God's hospitality to move in with God into his dwelling place God gives us one word in fact he gives it twice and it's the word peace verse 19 Shalom it's a word that has at its root wholeness and well being and it points us to a flourishing and a fulfilment in every area of life in your spiritual life in physical life in emotional life in cultural life it's a word that has everything to do with wholeness wholeness in your relationship with God and our relationship with one another but God says that peace is forfeited by one group in the world and it's lavished upon another it's forfeited by the wicked verse 21 no rest for the wicked we normally say that don't we tongue in cheek

I'm so busy I'm so busy there's no rest for the wicked but there's nothing tongue in cheek about Isaiah 57 because based on what Isaiah has told us in this chapter the wicked are not the contrite and they are not the humble and they do not turn to God and they say I will live life my way I'll do things my way I'm happy to go to church but I don't want you in my life Lord I don't need you and God says to those people fair enough but if you're wondering why your life feels like constantly stormy seas it's restless and turbulent with waves raking up mire and mud mire and mud that is why but as long as you keep generating sludge in your life through your pride and your self-righteousness and your greed there will be no peace and peace is forfeited by the wicked but to those who humbly come before

[ 29 : 27 ] God in repentance and faith well both far and near Paul picks up on that in Romans 2 in a prophecy of the gospel he says it's for Jews and for Gentiles far and near for those kind of people there is peace in fact there's peace peace to magnitude to express it the excellence of this peace is repeated peace peace in its fullness peace with God and peace with one another and peace with

ourselves sometimes it's hard to know what peace the writer is focusing on in the bible which pieces of peace is he talking about but I think here it's obvious because he repeats I will heal him in the singular and so the emphasis I think in Isaiah 57 falls on personal peace but that is God's commitment to those who come and dwell with him and that is a good place to land up as we finish because I am guessing that for many of us here we would count ourselves among those whom God has healed we would say yes that's me those whom God has rescued from sin those whom God has been and is being hospitable but when we describe the experiences of the wicked where life constantly feels like stormy seas and restless and turbulent there are some of us out there that think to ourselves

I know God has rescued me I know I'm no longer in the category of the wicked but that description feels awfully like what my life is like and you say I long to know what that peace feels like in my life because right now I'm not peaceful at all what I want to say to you what you've seen in the book of Isaiah is that knowing peace in the Christian life is not to bracket out but to bracket in what do I mean most people today when they talk about finding peace in their life they almost always think that it is removing certain thoughts and they think it's removing certain actions that peace is to do with the removal of certain thoughts or situations and that way of peace is always going to come down to techniques and so that is why most books on stress or anxiety or worry will suggest you techniques like relaxation or work life balance or sitting on a beach watching the waves doing yoga regularly and so that you can bracket out everything else in your life you remove the source of stress and tension in other words peace will come to you as you are able to get rid of those stressful thoughts and as pleasant and as helpful as those things may be the problem is they always over promise they promise you something that they cannot provide in fact to try and bracket out and to repress our worries and anxieties actually leads to them finding other outlets doesn't it and it leads to unhealthy and damaging patterns in life in other areas some people would say you just need to have a more pragmatic approach you know why worry all the worry in the world isn't going to make a difference is it you said that

I said that but you're the one who's anxious and worrying well you know that's true don't you people who worry and are anxious that's stupid they know that all the worrying in the world isn't going to make a difference but that doesn't solve the problem of worrying it doesn't deal with a particular situation that you're worried about it's not very helpful at all but whatever approach is used by people to try and find peace and it's not only some variation on those themes it's to bracket out everything that's causing you anxiety the problem is this your mind and your heart and my mind and my heart are anxiety producing factories and we never manage to get rid of it but you see the peace that God promises you is something completely different because this peace Isaiah says is a result of God's hospitality it's a result of moving in with God it's a result of God receiving and dwelling with us in other words in Isaiah 57 and throughout the Bible peace is not the absence of something but it's the presence of someone Christian peace is not about the absence of something but about the presence of someone Christian peace is not about expelling some negative thoughts because when you do that all you're doing is living in denial you're trying to ignore reality and not being willing to face it so how does Christianity approach the peace that we long for here is how if you are a Christian you don't bracket out you bracket in you think of the big picture and so instead of some technique you think through the ultimate truth that you know and the implications of those truths that enable you to triumph over restlessness and triumph over anxiety and stress and fear and the truth that Isaiah is pointing us to here is the presence of someone the presence of someone who says

I've seen your ways I know everything about you but I've healed you it's the presence of the one who says I've seen your ways but I've died for you and if the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit they saw the worst of you they saw the worst of you at its blackest are your darkest and most rebellious but they loved you and the cross of Jesus Christ shows you that so much that they would live together with you by their spirit and they would heal you if he knows all that and yet he loves you why would you ever doubt that he's going to take care of you now and so you bracket in all those glorious truths and all through the Bible you've got more truths to bracket in and your brackets are bulging if you do it right but God is for me and God is with me and God has done everything so that I can know his peace right now that when I'm doubtful he strengthens my faith that when I'm lonely he is the closest friends that when I'm restless he helps me find my rest in him and as a

[ 36 : 46 ] Christian you don't bracket out to find peace you bracket in and you find that the Lord is the holy God he is the holy God who in order to be hospitable to you has healed you he's healed the humble and he gives you his peace let's pray