

Introduction

Have you ever been amazed by God?

Have you ever lived through a “dark night of the soul,” the death of a mother or father or spouse or child, a loss of respect or reputation? Have you ever lived through one of these “dark nights” and finally come out into the light of day? From the vantage point of this bright new day, have you ever returned to a journal, calendar, or date-book of the time when you were in darkness and seen in the words kept there the hand of God sustaining you? “I was so down that day and then Sherry called me!” “That’s the retreat I went on where Martin said just what I needed to hear!”

Has your congregation ever struggled through a season of hard times, the loss of a beloved pastor, declining membership, a fire or an act of vandalism? Has your congregation struggled with adversity over a long period of time and then slowly begun to experience new life and energy. During this time of renewed vitality has a church leader ever reviewed the session’s minutes only to find glimpses of how God was faithful to your congregation through that time? “There was only one child born into our congregation that year, but she has been a blessing to us all!” “When we needed it most our members came through with an amazing good will offering!”

If any of these nights or seasons has been a part of your experience, then you have in some way entered the world of the people we discover through the words of Isaiah 56.

Most scholars identify Isaiah 56 as the opening chapter of a final collection of prophecy in the line of that great 8th century prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem. Isaiah of Jerusalem’s life and times, captured in Chapters 1–39, picture the prophet calling the people of Jerusalem to repentance and warning them of God’s coming judgment. If you follow the theory that what we now know as Isaiah is actually a collection of prophecies covering three distinctive time periods, then the evocative, hope-filled words of Isaiah 40–55 sing out to the defeated peoples of Jerusalem then living a life of exile in Babylon, a time when God’s judgment seemed to weigh most heavily on the people. Chapters 56–66 finally recount in alternating images of light and darkness the words of prophets of the return from exile. These prophets, remembering the warnings of 1st Isaiah and filled with the hope of 2nd Isaiah, could look back and see God’s hand at work through times of trial and exile. They could also see in their own times God’s salvation at hand calling the people to renewed faithfulness.

Isaiah 56 marks a pivotal time in the history of God’s people. As the people looked back at their recent history of exile in Babylon they could easily see a time when they thought their life as a people was over. They could easily tune their ears and hear the sad strains, “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion” (Ps. 137:1) so recently sung by their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters.

With the aid of sacred texts (narratives, poems, hymns, laws, genealogies, etc.) that had been collected and written down during the Exile, the people had begun to remember their story. They remembered their story as a grand saga of God’s faithfulness and their continual turning away from God. They remembered God’s faithfulness in the beauty of creation, in the making of covenants, and in the giving of kings. They remembered their own faithlessness in their recurring attempts to be like God, in their breaking of God’s covenantal law, and in their reliance on kings and other earthly rulers rather than on God’s promises. They remembered how this grand saga of God’s light and human darkness had seemed to come to an end with the destruction of the Temple and the fall of Jerusalem, when their leaders had literally been dragged off to captivity in Babylon.

Isaiah 56 was written in the light of a new day. The people had returned from almost fifty years of exile in Babylon. In the words of this unknown prophet, sometimes called 3rd Isaiah, there is a sense of amazement and joy that God's salvation is at hand. But there is also an underlying tension that can be discerned, a dark current running underneath the text. This current marks the emerging struggle within the community of the returned to set limits on who would be included in God's people, and maybe even more importantly, who would participate in God's plan for salvation. From inside the text we hear rumblings of the many voices vying for influence, power, and control over this decision. From outside the text we hear the cries of those long excluded, yet hoping anew to be heard. The prophet of Isaiah 56 proclaims a bold and inclusive invitation to these "outcasts and others." They are included in God's plan for salvation and deliverance!

A study of Isaiah 56 as it is read through the lens of verses 7 and 8 will offer you the opportunity to place yourself among the vying voices. Do you find yourself arguing to build walls of separation between your congregation and those who are different? Do you find yourself speaking in the more subtle voice of removed sympathy rather than engaged empathy for others? Or is your voice and that of your congregation openly inviting others to join your fellowship?

An in-depth look at these verses will also encourage you to begin listening for the voices of those who may currently be excluded from your love. What persons within the larger church, within your community, or even within your own congregation, do you not welcome wholeheartedly as brothers or sisters in Christ?

Each session of this study will include examples of Christian practices that are relevant to the topic being discussed. A Christian practice is a particular activity that has developed over time, within the context of the Christian community, and in light of the desire to live ever more obediently as children of God. Christian practices are woven into this resource as a means of inspiring future participation in the ongoing practices of the Christian faith community.

Finally, each session of this study will present to you a way in which the message of Isaiah 56 has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, particularly as the good news about Jesus Christ comes to us from the community of the beloved disciple, John. The voice of John's community, like the voice of our prophet, is distinct among the multiple voices seeking to say what is true about Jesus Christ and how we as followers of the way of Jesus are to live in embracing love with one another.

Hopefully, this study will challenge you to renew your faith in the God whose house of prayer is for all people.

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