

# ISAIAH

## Chapter 56

### *Salvation for Foreigners*

**56** Thus says the LORD: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. **2** Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.” **3** Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people”; and let not the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.” **4** For thus says the LORD: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, **5** I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. **6** “And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— **7** these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” **8** The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, “I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.”

At first glance, it seems as though Isaiah should have ended his book with chapter 55. What more can he say? Yahweh will stir Cyrus to allow the Israelites to return from Babylon (41:2; 44:28; 45:1). The Suffering Servant will die and rise again for the sins of all (52:13–53:12). Lady Zion will be restored with her children in pristine beauty (Isaiah 54). And 55:13 is like a benediction when the prophet writes: “Instead of the thorn, a cypress tree will arise; instead of the brier, a myrtle tree will arise. And it will become for Yahweh a name, an everlasting sign that will not be cut off.” Through the ministry of the Servant “the many” (52:14, 15; 53:11, 12) are declared righteous (53:11) and reconstituted as Yahweh’s “servants” (54:17). (CC)

**Chs 56–66** Refers to strangers, or foreigners, as servants who will work the land on behalf of the Israelites (e.g., 61:5). This denotes a reversal for the Israelites, who were slaves in foreign lands. (TLSB)

Chapters 56–66 show us how servants of the Suffering Servant express their new life when living in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (Deut 32:5; Phil 2:15). They describe the faithful remnant who are confronted by a community of idolatrous apostates. Yahweh must finally split the community in two (e.g., Is 65:8–16). Far from being a clumsy appendix to the book, then, chapters 56–66 are the prophet’s logical conclusion to the ministry of the Suffering Servant. In the last eleven chapters we witness the rejection of Judaism, the birth of the church, and the final vindication of the Servant’s offspring. (CC)

Unlike Isaiah’s prediction of an exile in chapter 39, which distinguishes it from chapter 40, there are no literary markers separating chapter 55 from chapter 56. While mention of the Sabbath, eunuchs, the holy mountain, and foreigners (56:1–8) appears to create a sharp distinction from ideas in earlier oracles, Muilenburg rightly observes that there is no “radical break with the past, but a development” of the prophet’s message. (CC)

**Chs 56–59** Focus on the proper observance of the Lord’s covenant, as well as His willingness to forgive those who repent. (TLSB)

**56:1** *keep justice* – Sinners can only “maintain justice” after they have experienced God’s form of justice, i.e. justification by grace. Justice is established for God’s people by the ministry of the Suffering Servant in Is 42:1,3,4. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 3)

*justice ... righteousness.* Responding to undeserved mercy and goodness (ch 55), the redeemed find happiness in doing what is right toward their fellow man (righteousness) and toward God (the Sabbath, v 2). (TLSB)

“Keep justice, and do righteousness” are startling commands after the oracles of salvation in chapters 54–55. By drawing upon the promises in 46:13 and 51:5, as well as the admonition in 51:1, Yahweh describes the new life for all who embrace his salvation. The imperatives function as the introduction to chapters 56–66 and spell out the major themes of the book’s last eleven chapters. (CC)

*salvation.* Combining active (“doing”) and passive (“receiving”) righteousness for the first time in 56:1, Isaiah maintains that “righteousness” is *both* Yahweh’s gift as well as the ordering of his people’s life according to his Word. God gives both an exhortation as well as a promise of salvation. The gift of passive righteousness, received from Yahweh, empowers a life of active righteousness. The new community, born through the Servant (53:10; 59:21), is established in a life of *doing what is right*, because Yahweh has justified or *declared them right* through his Servant (53:11). Paul follows the same logic in Eph 2:8–10. We are not saved *by* good works, but *for* good works. (CC)

This righteousness is defined by what God loves (v. 4), what shows love for his name (v. 6) and negatively by avoiding what God hates (v. 2). Righteousness is brought by the wonderful Son (Is 9:6) and it is the means by which Zion is redeemed (Is 1:27). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 3)

*be revealed* – Often used in a technical sense of “revelation.” No matter how diligently sinners pursue righteousness, it is unobtainable unless the Lord brings it near. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 3)

God asks us, “Have you discovered the power of the future? My victory is near. Nothing in all creation will stop my salvation. Live by this future, every day!” Anticipating Yahweh’s imminent intervention creates the desire to make morally correct choices in life. We begin acting in just and right ways. John puts it this way: “Beloved, *now* [vũv] we are children of God, and what we will be has *not yet* [οὐπω] been made known. But we know that when he appears, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (1 Jn 3:2–3). The *now* of God’s salvation in Jesus gives us hope for the *not yet* perfection of paradise, and this sanctifies our lives to live in the present moment in love toward God and our neighbor. James Childs calls this connection between ethics and eschatology “an ethic of anticipation.” The hope for Christ’s final coming proleptically manifests itself at the present moment in holy living. (CC)

And this is the truth that drives 56:1–8. Yahweh places the accent upon what he *will* do. “My salvation is near” (56:1). “I will give to them” (56:5). “I will bring them” (56:7). “I will still gather” (56:8). God’s future action empowers present obedience. We are motivated to act righteously because Yahweh has first lavished his righteousness upon us. “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). (CC)

Isaiah’s message—do justice and righteousness in light of Yahweh’s impending salvation—also comports with the preaching of John the Baptist. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Mt 3:2), and then he goes on to say, “Bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Mt 3:8). Paul employs the same theology when he admonishes us to “cast off the works of darkness” because “the day is near” (Rom 13:12). (CC)

**56:2** *keeps the Sabbath*. † See vv. 4, 6. Just as the Sabbath had been instituted after the exodus from Egypt (see Ex 20:8–11) as a sign of the Mosaic covenant (see Ex 31:13–17), so God’s deliverance from the bondage of sin (55:12) afforded an opportunity to prove the sincerity of faith by an obedience summed up in “keeping the Sabbath” (see 58:13; 66:23; Jer 17:21–27; Eze 20:20–21). (CSB)

**56:3–8** The blessings of salvation are granted for two classes of people who, according to Israel’s laws, were not eligible to join the congregation in its services of worship: eunuchs (vv 3–5) and foreigners (vv 6–8). (TLSB)

**56:3** *foreigner*. See v. 6. Members of certain nations who came to live among the Israelites had been excluded from worship, at least for several generations (see Ex 12:43; Dt 23:3, 7–8). But the work of the servant of the Lord would change this. (CSB)

Gentile. (TLSB)

*joined himself to the LORD*. A convert who received the covenant. (TLSB)

*eunuch*. † See v. 4. Eunuchs were also excluded from the assembly of the Lord (Dt 23:1), but they could still be part of the servant’s offspring (see Ac 8:27, 38–40). (CSB)

Declared ritually unclean because he had been emasculated by those who put him in charge of women’s quarters. (TLSB)

*a dry tree*. A eunuch could not expect to have offspring of his own to perpetuate his name. Yet, God promises him spiritual blessings “better than sons and daughters” (v 5). (TLSB)

**56:4, 6** *the things that please Me*. The Sabbath was a constant reminder of what was most important (cf Mt 6:25). (TLSB)

*hold fast to my covenant*. Keeping the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant (see Ex 31:13–17; Eze 20:12, 20), as was circumcision (see Ge 17:11). (CSB)

When people observe the Sabbath, they confess that they belong wholly to the Lord. To profane this holy day is to deny the Lord and His teaching (cf Am 8:4–6). (TLSB)

**56:5** *My house*. The temple as embodiment of God’s household for His people. (TLSB)

*monument*. Absalom built a “Monument” (same Hebrew word) as a memorial since he had no surviving sons (2Sa 18:18). (CSB)

Absalom erected a monument to himself for remembrance because he had no children to carry on his name. A “monument and a name” is the name given to the main Holocaust memorial in modern Israel. *an everlasting name*. One that will never be disowned. (TLSB)

*name*. The Hebrew for this word is translated “renown” in 55:13. The Hebrew for “a memorial and a name” (*yad vashem*) was chosen from v. 5 as the name of the main Holocaust monument in Jerusalem in modern Israel. (CSB)

*that shall not be cut off*. An idiom sometimes referring to the preserving of a name through one’s descendants. (CSB)

**56:6** *the foreigners* – Isaiah progressively reveals that foreigners will become part of God’s covenant people and confess the true God. The Suffering Servant will be the one in whom the coastlands trust (v. 42:4); he will be the Light to the Nations (Is. 42:6; 49:6), so Yahweh’s salvation will extend to the ends of the earth (Is. 49:6). Nations will join Israel’s sons and daughters (Is 60:3-4) in an Epiphany procession to the Light. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 3)

*minister*. Bring their offerings and prayers; embrace the covenant. (TLSB)

*servants*. In chapters 56–66 the word “servants” recurs in 63:17; 65:8–9, 13–15; 66:14. Synonymous terms include those who take refuge in Yahweh (57:13b), are crushed in spirit (57:15), are redeemed, holy, and righteous (60:21; 61:3; 62:12), grieve over Zion (e.g., 61:2; 66:10), and tremble at Yahweh’s Word (66:2, 5). They are the offspring of the Suffering Servant (53:10; 59:21; see also 61:9; 65:9, 23; 66:22; and the third textual note on 57:3) and are Yahweh’s disciples (54:13). Their righteousness comes from him alone (53:11; 54:17). (CC)

*keeps the Sabbath*. Cf. 60:7, 10. (CSB)

Isaiah employs the verb “serve” (שָׁרַף) to announce that foreigners will assume priestly roles. This all-inclusive priesthood is the point the prophet makes at the end of his book (Is 66:21; cf. 1 Pet 2:5, 9). (CC)

**56:7** *my holy mountain*. The theme of the “mountain of the LORD” (Mount Zion) is common in Isaiah; it occurs in passages that depict the coming of both Jews and Gentiles to Jerusalem (Zion) in the last days (see 11:9; 27:13; 56:7; 57:13; 65:25; 66:20; see also 60:3–5; Zec 14:16). The peace described in this passage has been inaugurated through the coming of Christ and the preaching of the gospel, and will be consummated at the return of Christ. (CSB note)

Yahweh brings his servants, whose attributes are described in the previous verse, to his holy mountain, also called his “house of prayer” and “Zion” (e.g., Joel 2:1). This is where Yahweh lives (e.g., Is 8:18) and where he is worshiped (e.g., Ps 99:9). Only the broken and contrite find refuge in this high and holy place (Is 57:15). Since it is a location where righteousness dwells (Jer 31:23), no evil besets it (Is 11:9; 65:25). To live there, then, means to walk in Yahweh’s ways and to learn his Torah (2:2–4). This is his gift to all who trust in him (57:13b; 65:9, 25), for it is a place of supreme goodness (Ps 65:5 [ET 65:4]) and blessing (Ps 84:5 [ET 84:4]). No wonder David wants to dwell there for “length of days” (Ps 23:6) and is glad when people say, “Let us go to Yahweh’s house” (Ps 122:1). (CC)

The holy mountain in the ancient Near East was a place where people encountered the divine. Therefore sanctuaries were typically erected on mountains, which often were thought to have become holy by means of a mythological war. Such is the case in Canaan, where, according to Canaanite religious myth, the mountain of the fertility god Baal became holy when he defeated Yamm (“Sea”), the power of chaos. (CC)

In the OT, mountains became holy not by pagan mythology, but as a result of Yahweh’s historical action upon them. Thus Sinai becomes holy through Yahweh’s theophanies when, for instance, he appears as fire and a cloud accompanied by trumpets (Exodus 19) and provides a divine banquet for Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders (Ex 24:1–2, 9–11). This was also the mountain where Yahweh revealed his plan to deliver his people from Egypt, promised to give them the land of Canaan, and spoke his name to Moses (Exodus 3). However, after this, Yahweh’s work at Sinai was done, and it was no longer a holy mountain. Thus when Elijah sought his presence there, Yahweh asked what he was doing on Mount Sinai. The prophet did not find Yahweh in the forms of fire and earthquake (1 Ki 19:9–13) that had revealed Yahweh to Moses in the same place earlier (Ex 19:18; 24:17). Sinai had been replaced by Zion. (CC)

Zion became Yahweh's holy mountain when David defeated the Jebusites in Jerusalem and brought the ark of the covenant there (2 Samuel 5–6). As with Sinai, there was a theophany on Zion when the priests brought the ark of the covenant into the Holy of Holies in Solomon's temple (1 Ki 8:1–11). (CC)

It is the Lord who brings the saved to his holy mountain, gives them joy in his house of prayer, and regards favorably their sacrifices on his altar. This is a gracious call to all people. Although Israel at times ignored this aspect of the covenant, it was present throughout. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 3)

*offerings ... accepted on my altar.* Cf. 60:7; contrast 1:11–13. (CSB)

The worship of all peoples (cf v 3), here described in OT forms, will be acceptable to God. (TLSB)

*will be accepted* – The Hebrew for “accepted,” is literally, “for favor, good will.” By God's grace sinners are brought into a favorable relationship with God. Anticipating Christ's sacrifice, the OT sin offerings rendered the Israelites acceptable to God. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 3)

*house of prayer for all nations.*† Solomon may have anticipated this in his prayer of dedication for the temple (1Ki 8:41–43). See the words of Jesus in Mk 11:17. (CSB)

Cf 1Ki 8:41–43 for Solomon's dedicatory prayer of the temple and the anticipated prayer by Gentiles that God will hear. (TLSB)

The movement in the first half of 56:7 begins at Yahweh's holy mountain, continues into his house of prayer, and concludes with Yahweh's “altar.” This “altar” was likewise the means by which Isaiah's sin was atoned for, so that he could stand in Yahweh's presence and carry out his prophetic ministry (6:6–7). By faith all may claim this gift of sacrificial atonement (by Christ's “guilt offering” [53:10]), for his house is a house of prayer for all people. (CC)

**56:8** *gathers the outcasts.* The gathering of people from all nations is a continual theme in Is (cf 19:25; 49:6–7; 51:5; 55:5). (TLSB)

The Lord gathers both the exiles of Israel and others not of this fold (John 10:16). We are lost in our sins, unable to find God. The Good News is that the Good Shepherd comes looking for us and gathers us, as Luther declares in his explanation of the Third Article in the Small Catechism. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 6, Part 3)

The promise of imminent salvation (56:1) brings with it Yahweh's desire to “gather” (יָבֵן, three times in 56:8) his people together. Who are the additional ones whom Yahweh “will still gather” (56:8)? Are they Israelites or Gentiles drawn from the nations? The use of “still” (עוֹד) signals an addition to “its [the temple's] ones already gathered” (56:8). This, along with the fact that Yahweh gathers (יָבֵן) all the nations in 66:18, points to his incorporation of Gentiles in 56:8. Gathering the nations is a continual theme in Isaiah (e.g., 11:12; 19:24–25; 49:6–7, 22; 51:5; 55:5). In Jeremiah, God says, “Behold, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and I will gather them [יִבְנֶה אֶת־יְהוָה] from the farthest parts of the earth. Among them [are] the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labor— together. As a great assembly they shall return here” (Jer 31:8). Yahweh longs to assemble outsiders. A homecoming of universal scope is coming soon. (CC)

*gather yet others.* Including Gentiles. (CSB)

Jesus is the greatest Gatherer (e.g., Mt 8:8–12). He bids all who are weak and burdened to come to him (Mt 11:28). Christ promises, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. Them also I must bring” (Jn 10:16). Through the appointed means of grace, God’s Word and Sacraments, the Spirit and the bride join in the chorus and say to the Bridegroom, “Come” (Rev 22:17). Let all who hear swell the ranks and say, “ ‘Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever desires, let him receive the free gift of the water of life” (Rev 22:17; cf. Is 55:1). (CC)

**56:1–8** The Lord’s salvation will come not only for the chosen people of Israel but also for foreigners and outcasts. Today, pray for the Lord’s strength so that you believe and do not abuse His grace. Keep your hands from evil, keep justice, and do righteousness. Those who repent are not cut off from the Lord’s salvation. The deliverance revealed in Jesus’ death and resurrection is for you and for all peoples. • Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for gathering us into Your kingdom, and for giving us Your holy name in our Baptism. Gather more people of every nation into Your house of prayer. Amen. (TLSB)

### *Israel's Irresponsible Leaders*

**9 All you beasts of the field, come to devour—all you beasts in the forest. 10 His watchmen are blind; they are all without knowledge; they are all silent dogs; they cannot bark, dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber. 11 The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. But they are shepherds who have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all. 12 “Come,” they say, “let me get wine; let us fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow will be like this day, great beyond measure.”**

**56:9–59:15**† While there are no physical or racial barriers to membership in God’s family of nations, those who flout his will are not immune to his wrath. (CSB)

**56:9–57:13** Isaiah may be condemning the practices of a Canaanite death cult that his countrymen had adopted. The references are vague, but the practices may have combined funeral rites with fertility rites associated with the worship of Baal. (TLSB)

**56:9–12** In contrast to the comfort provided to the foreign believer who was in fear, the Lord takes to task the comfortable leaders of His people. Rather than leading His people, they indulge in worldly behavior, thinking that the day of the Lord will never come (Mt 24:45–51; Lk 12:13–21). The misuse of alcohol is also a cause for prophetic rebuke in Is 5:11, 22; Mi 2:11. (TLSB)

**56:9** *beasts*. Foreign invaders who will find easy prey among leaderless Israel. (TLSB)

**56:10** *watchmen*. The prophets (see Hab 2:1). (CSB)

Prophets were to warn Israel of spiritual dangers (Ezk 33:1–9). (TLSB)

*blind*. They fail to see that dangers, grave dangers threaten the welfare of the nation. Not seeing what is obvious enough, they have grown entirely ignorant as to what the nation really lacks. (Leupold)

*silent dogs*. Watchdogs who guarded the sheep (cf. Job 30:1). (CSB)

The leaders do not “bark” to alert the people. (TLSB)

**56:11** *mighty appetite*. They devour the sheep. See Eze 34:3. (CSB)

The failed watchdogs turn into wolves, devouring the flock they should protect (cf Mk 12:39–40; Ac 20:29). (TLSB)

*shepherds*. Rulers may be included. See Eze 34:1–6. (CSB)

**56:12** *wine ... strong drink*. Cf. the behavior of priests and prophets in 28:7. (CSB)

The prophet is speaking onomatopoeically. For this is what they are saying: “Let us eat and drink,” that is, by their teaching they do nothing but fatten their own belly. The supreme luxury is found among the Pharisees. When we see that every trace of godliness has been lost in them, nothing but greed and luxury could follow. (Luther)

*tomorrow will be ... great beyond measure*. Cf. the words of the rich fool in Lk 12:19. (CSB)

They are blind to their approaching doom, imagining that each day will feed their pleasures. (TLSB)

**56:9–12** Israel’s leaders have forsaken their sacred duty. We, too, often pursue personal pleasure and gain at the expense of our God-given responsibilities. Unlike Israel’s leaders who sought their own gain, Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He laid down His life for every sinful sheep, faithfully fulfilling God’s righteous requirements for our sake. • Give us grace, dear Lord, to forsake the pursuit of personal gain and to follow You always in the way that leads to life everlasting. Amen. (TLSB)