

CHAPTER 56

After the exceedingly great and precious promises of gospel grace, typified by temporal deliverances, which we had in the foregoing chapter, we have here,

I. A solemn charge given to us all to make conscience of our duty, as we hope to have the benefit of those promises (v. 1, 2).

II. Great encouragement given to strangers that were willing to come under the bonds of the covenant, assuring them of the blessings of the covenant (v. 3-8).

III. A high charge drawn up against the watchmen of Israel, that were careless and unfaithful in the discharge of their duty (v. 9-12), which seems to be the beginning of a new sermon, by way of reproof and threatening, which is continued in the following chapters. And the word of God was intended for conviction, as well as for comfort and instruction in righteousness.

ISAIAH 56:1-2

EVANGELICAL PROMISES

The scope of these verses is to show that when God is coming towards us in a way of mercy we must go forth to meet him in a way of duty.

I. God here tells us what are his intentions of mercy to us (v. 1): *My salvation is near to come* — the great salvation wrought out by Jesus Christ (for that was the salvation of which the *prophets enquired and searched diligently*, ⁴¹⁰1 Peter 1:10), typified by the salvation of the Jews from Sennacherib or out of Babylon. Observe,

1. The gospel salvation is the salvation of the Lord. It was contrived and brought about by him; he glories in it as his.

2. In that salvation God's righteousness is revealed, which is so much the beauty of the gospel that St. Paul makes this the ground of his glorying in it. (⁴¹¹Romans 1:17), *because therein is the righteousness of God revealed*

from faith to faith. The law revealed that righteousness of God by which all sinners stand condemned, but the gospel reveals that by which all believers stand acquitted.

3. The Old-Testament saints saw this salvation coming, and drawing near to them, long before it came; and they had notice by the prophets of its approach. As Daniel understood by Jeremiah's books the approach of the redemption out of Babylon, at the end of seventy years, so others understood by Daniel's books the approach of our redemption by Christ at the end of seventy weeks of years.

II. He tells us what are his expectations of duty from us, in consideration thereof. Say not, "We see the salvation near, and therefore we may live as we list, for there is no danger now of missing it or coming short of it;" that is turning the grace of God into wantonness. But, on the contrary, when the salvation is near double your guard against sin. Note, The fuller assurances God gives us of the performance of his promises the stronger obligations he lays us under to obedience. The salvation here spoken of has now come; yet, there being still a further salvation in view, the apostle presses duty upon us Christians with the same argument. ~~ROM~~ Romans 3:11, *Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.* That which is here required to qualify and prepare us for the approaching salvation is,

1. That we be honest and just in all our dealings: *Keep you judgment and do justice.* Walk by rule, and make conscience of what you say and do, that you do no wrong to any. Render to all their dues exactly, and, in exacting what is due to you, keep up a court of equity in your own bosom, to moderate the rigours of the law. Be ruled by that golden rule, "Do as you would be done by." Magistrates must administer justice wisely and faithfully. This is required to evidence the sincerity of our faith and repentance, and to open the way of mercy. *Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* God is true to us; let us be so to one another.

2. That we religiously observe the sabbath day, v. 2. We are not just if we rob God of his time. Sabbath-sanctification is here put for all the duties of the first table, the fruits of our love to God, as justice and judgment are put for all those of the second table, the fruits of our love to our neighbour. Observe,

(1.) The duty required, which is to *keep the sabbath*, to keep it as a talent we are to trade with, as a treasure we are entrusted with. "Keep it holy;

keep it safe; keep it with care and caution; keep it from polluting it. Allow neither yourselves nor others either to violate the holy rest or omit the holy work of that day.” If this be intended primarily for the Jews in Babylon, it was fit that they should be particularly put in mind of this, because when, by reason of their distance from the temple, they could not observe the other institutions of their law, yet they might distinguish themselves from the heathen by putting a difference between God's day and other days. But it being required more generally of man, and *the son of man*, it intimates that sabbath-sanctification should be a duty in gospel times, when the bounds of the church should be enlarged and other rites and ceremonies abolished. Observe, Those that would keep the sabbath from polluting it must put on resolution, must not only do this, but lay hold on it, for sabbath time is precious, but is very apt to slip away if we take not great care; and therefore we must lay hold on it and keep our hold, must do it and persevere in it.

(2.) The encouragement we have to do this duty: *Blessed is he that doeth it*. The way to have the blessing of God upon our employments all the week is to make conscience, and make a business, of sabbath-sanctification; and in doing so we shall be the better qualified to do judgment and justice. The more godliness the more honesty, ⁵⁰⁰1 Timothy 2:2.

3. That we have nothing to do with sin: *Blessed is the man that keeps his hand from doing evil*, any wrong to his neighbour, in body, goods, or good name — or, more generally, any thing that is displeasing to God and hurtful to his own soul. Note, The best evidence of our having kept the sabbath well will be a care to keep a good conscience all the week. By this it will appear that we have been in the mount with God if our faces shine in a holy conversation before men.

²⁸⁰ ISAIAH 56:3-8

ENCOURAGEMENT TO THE SINCERE

The prophet is here, in God's name, encouraging those that were hearty in joining themselves to God and yet laboured under great discouragements.

1. Some were discouraged because they were not of the seed of Abraham. They had *joined themselves to the Lord*, and bound their souls with a bond to be his for ever (this is the root and life of religion, to break off from the world and the flesh, and devote ourselves entirely to the service and honour of God); but they questioned whether God would accept them, because they were of *the sons of the stranger*, v. 3. They were Gentiles, strangers to the commonwealth of Israel and aliens from the covenants of promise, and therefore feared they had no part nor lot in the matter. They said, “*The Lord has utterly separated me from his people, and will not own me as one of them, nor admit me to their privileges.*” It was often said that there should be *one law for the stranger and for him that was born in the land* (⁽¹⁰²⁴⁾Exodus 12:49), and yet they came to this melancholy conclusion. Note, Unbelief often suggests things to the discouragement of good people which are directly contrary to what God himself has said, things which he has expressly guarded against. Let not the *sons of the stranger* therefore say thus, for they have no reason to say it. Note, Ministers must have answers ready for the disquieting fears and jealousies of weak Christians, which, how unreasonable soever, they must take notice of.

2. Others were discouraged because they were not fathers in Israel. The eunuch said, *Behold, I am a dry tree*. So he looked upon himself, and it was his grief; so others looked upon him, and it was his reproach. He was thought to be of no use because he had no children, nor was ever likely to have any. This was then the more grievous because eunuchs were not admitted to be priests (⁽⁸²¹⁾Leviticus 21:20), nor to *enter into the congregation* (⁽⁸³¹⁾Deuteronomy 23:1), and because the promise of a numerous posterity was the particular blessing of Israel and the more valuable because from among them the Messiah was to come. Yet God would not have the eunuchs to make the worst of their case, nor to think that they should be excluded from the gospel church, and from being spiritual priests, because they were shut out from the congregation of Israel and the Levitical priesthood; no, as the taking down of the partition wall, contained in ordinances, admitted the Gentiles, so it let in likewise those that had been kept out by ceremonial pollutions. Yet, by the reply here given to this suggestion, it should seem the chief thing which the eunuch laments in his case is his being written childless.

Now suitable encouragements are given to each of these.

I. To those who have no children of their own, who, though they had the honour to be the children of the church and the covenant themselves, yet had none to whom they might transmit that honour, none to receive the sign of circumcision and the privileges secured by that sign. Now observe,

1. What a good character they have, though they lie under this ignominy and affliction; and those only are entitled to the following comforts who in some measure answer to these characters.

(1.) They *keep God's sabbaths* as he has appointed them to be kept. In the primitive times, if a Christian were asked, "Hast thou kept holy the Lord's day?" He would readily answer, "I am a Christian, and dare not do otherwise."

(2.) In their whole conversation they *choose those things that please God*. They do that which is good; they do it with a sincere design to please God in it; they do it of choice, and with delight. If sometimes, through infirmity, they come short in doing that which pleases God, yet they choose it, they endeavour after it, and aim at it. Note, Whatever is God's pleasure should without dispute be our choice.

(3.) They *take hold of his covenant*, and that is a thing that pleases God as much as any thing. The covenant of grace is proposed and proffered to us in the gospel; to take hold of it is to consent to it, to accept the offer and come up to the terms, deliberately and sincerely to take God to be to us a God and to give up ourselves to him to be to him a people. Taking hold of the covenant denotes an entire and resolute consent to it, taking hold as those that are afraid of coming short, catching at it as a good bargain, and as those that are resolved never to let it go, for it is our life: and we take hold of it as a criminal took hold of the horns of the altar to which he fled for refuge.

2. What a great deal of comfort they may have if they answer to this character, though they are not built up into families (v. 5): *Unto them will I give a better place and name*. It is supposed that there is a place and a name, which we have from sons and daughters, that is valuable and desirable. It is a pleasing notion we have that we live in our children when we are dead. But there is a better place, and a better name, which those have that are in covenant with God, and it is sufficient to counterbalance the want of the former. A place and a name denote rest and reputation; a place to live comfortably in themselves, and a name to live creditably with

among their neighbours; they shall be happy, and may be easy both at home and abroad. Though they have not children to be the music of their house, or arrows in their quiver, to keep them in countenance when they speak with their enemies in the gate, yet they shall have a place and a name more than equivalent. For,

(1.) God will give it to them, will give it to them by promise; he will himself be both their habitation and their glory, their place and their name.

(2.) He will give it to them in his house, and within his walls; there they shall have a place, shall be planted so as to take root (^{<B213>}Psalm 92:13), shall *dwell all the days of their life*, ^{<B204>}Psalm 27:4. They shall be at home in communion with God, as Anna, that *departed not from the temple night nor day*. There they shall have a name. A name for the good things with God and good people is a name *better than that of sons and daughters*. Our relation to God, our interest in Christ, our title to the blessings of the covenant, and our hopes of eternal life, are things that give us in God's house a blessed place and a blessed name.

(3.) It shall be *an everlasting name, that shall never* be extinct, shall never *be cut off*; like the place and name of angels, who *therefore* marry not, because they die not. Spiritual blessings are unspeakably better than those of sons and daughters; for children are a certain care and may prove the greatest grief and shame of a man's life, but the blessings we partake of in God's house are a sure and constant joy and honour, comforts which cannot be embittered.

II. To those that are themselves the children of strangers.

1. It is here promised that they shall now be welcome to the church, v. 6, 7. When God's Israel come out of Babylon, let them bring as many of their neighbours along with them as they can persuade to come, and God will find room enough for them all in his house. And here, (as before) we may observe,

(1.) Upon what terms they shall be welcome. Let them know that God's Israel, when they come out of Babylon, will not be plagued, as they were when they came out of Egypt, with a mixed multitude, that went with them, but were not cordially for them; no, the sons of the strangers shall have a place and a name in God's house provided,

[1.] That they forsake other gods, all rivals and pretenders whatsoever, and *join themselves to the Lord*, so as to become *one spirit*, ^{<441>}1 Corinthians 6:17.

[2.] That they join themselves to him as subjects to their prince and soldiers to their general, by an oath of fidelity and obedience, *to serve him*, not occasionally, as one would serve a turn, but to be constantly his servants, entirely subject to his command, and devoted to his interest.

[3.] That they join themselves to him as friends to his honour and the interests of his kingdom in the world, *to love the name of the Lord*, to be well pleased with all the discoveries he has made of himself and all the memorials they make of him. Observe, Serving him and loving him go together; for those that love him truly will serve him faithfully, and that obedience is most acceptable to him, as well as most pleasant to us, which flows from a principle of love, for then *his commandments are not grievous*, ^{<442>}1 John 5:3.

[4.] That they keep the sabbath from polluting it; for the stranger that is within thy gates is particularly required to do that.

[5.] That they take hold of the covenant, that is, that they come under the bonds of it, and put in for the benefits of it.

(2.) To what privileges they shall be welcome, v. 7. Three things are here promised them, in their coming to God: —

[1.] Assistance: “*I will bring them to my holy mountain*, not only bid them welcome when they come, but incline them to come, will show them the way, and lead them in it.” David himself prays that God by his light and truth would bring them to his *holy hill*, ^{<443>}Psalms 43:3. And the sons of the stranger shall be under the same guidance. The church is God's holy hill, on which he hath set his King, and, in bringing them to Zion Hill, he brings them to be subjects to Zion's King, as well as worshippers in Zion's holy temple.

[2.] Acceptance: “*Their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted on my altar*, and be never the less acceptable for being theirs, though they are sons of the stranger.” The prayers and praises (those spiritual sacrifices) of devout Gentiles shall be as pleasing to God as those of the pious Jews, and no difference shall be made between them; for, though they are Gentiles by birth, yet through grace they shall be looked

upon as the believing seed of faithful Abraham and the praying seed of wrestling Jacob, for in Christ Jesus there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision.

[3.] Comfort. They shall not only be accepted, but they themselves shall have the pleasure of it: *I will make them joyful in my house of prayer.* They shall have grace, not only to serve God, but to serve him cheerfully and with gladness, and that shall make the service the more acceptable to him; for, when we sing in the ways of the Lord, then great is the glory of our God. They shall go away and *eat their bread with joy*, because *God now accepts their works*, ^{<207>}Ecclesiastes 9:7. Nay, though they came mourning to the house of prayer, they shall go away rejoicing, for they shall there find such ease, by casting their cares and burdens upon God, and referring themselves to him, that, like Hannah, they shall go away and their countenance shall be no more sad. Many a sorrowful spirit has been made joyful in the house of prayer.

2. It is here promised that multitudes of the Gentiles shall come to the church, not only that the few who come dropping in shall be made welcome, but that great numbers shall come in, and the door be thrown open to them: *My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.* The temple was then God's house, and to that Christ applies these words (^{<213>}Matthew 21:13), but with an eye to it as a type of the gospel church, ^{<308>}Hebrews 9:8, 9. For Christ calls it *his house*, ^{<306>}Hebrews 3:6. Now concerning this house it is promised,

(1.) That it shall not be a house of sacrifice, but a house of prayer. The religious meetings of God's people shall be meetings for prayer, in which they shall join together, as a token of their united faith and mutual love.

(2.) That it shall be a house of prayer, not for the people of the Jews only, but for all people. This was fulfilled when Peter was made, not only to perceive it himself, but to tell it to the world, that *in every nation he that fears God and works righteousness is accepted of him*, ^{<405>}Acts 10:35. It had been declared again and again that *the stranger that comes nigh shall be put to death*, but Gentiles shall now be looked upon no longer as strangers and foreigners, ^{<419>}Ephesians 2:19. And it appears by Solomon's prayer, at the dedication of the temple, both that it was primarily intended for a house of prayer and that strangers should be welcome to it, ^{<180>}1 Kings 8:30, 41, 43. And it is intimated here (v. 8) that when the Gentiles are called in they shall be incorporated into one body with the Jews, that

(as Christ says, ^{<816>}John 10:16) there may be *one fold and one Shepherd*; for,

[1.] God will *gather the outcasts of Israel*. Many of the Jews that had by their unbelief cast themselves out shall by faith be brought in again, *a remnant according to the election of grace*, ^{<815>}Romans 11:5. Christ came to the *lost sheep of the house of Israel* (^{<452>}Matthew 15:24), to *gather their outcasts* (^{<470>}Psalms 147:2), to *restore their preserved* (^{<306>}Isaiah 49:6), and to *be their glory*, ^{<472>}Luke 2:32.

[2.] He will gather others also to him, besides his own outcasts that are gathered to him. Or, though some of the Gentiles have come over now and then into the church, that shall not serve (as some may think) to answer the extent of these promises; no, there are still more and more to be brought in: “*I will gather others to him besides these*; these are but the first-fruits in comparison with the harvest that shall be gathered for Christ in the nations of the earth, when the fulness of the Gentiles shall come in.” Note, The church is a growing body: when some are gathered to it we may still hope there shall be more, till the mystical body be completed. *Other sheep I have*.

^{<280>}ISAIAH 56:9-12

A CHARGE AGAINST THE PROPHETS

From words of comfort the prophet here, by a very sudden change of his style, passes to words of reproof and conviction, and goes on in that strain, for the most part, in the three following chapters; and therefore some here begin a new sermon. He had assured the people that in due time God would deliver them out of captivity, which was designed for the comfort of those that should live when God would do this. Now here he shows what their sins and provocations were, for which God would send them into captivity, and this was designed for the conviction of those that lived in his own time, nearly a hundred years before the captivity, who were now filling up the measure of the nation's sin, and to justify God in what he brought upon them. God will lay them waste by the fierceness of their enemies, for the falseness of their friends.

I. Desolating judgments are here summoned, v. 9. The sheep of God's pasture are now to be made the sheep of his slaughter, to fall as victims to his justice, and therefore *the beasts of the field and the forest* are called to come and devour. They are beasts of prey, and do it from their own ravenous disposition; but God permits them to do it, nay, he employs them as his servants in doing it, the ministers of his justice, though they mean not so, neither does their heart think so. If this refers primarily to the descent made upon them by the Babylonians, and their devouring them, yet it may look further, to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation by the Romans, after these outcasts of them (mentioned v. 8) were gathered in to the Christian church. The Roman armies came upon them as beasts of the forest to devour them, and they quite *took away their place and nation*. Note, When God has bloody work to do he has beasts of prey within call, to be employed in doing it.

II. The reason of these judgments is here given. The shepherds, who should have been the watchmen of the flock, to discover the approaches of the beasts of prey, to keep them off, and protect the sheep, were treacherous and careless, minded not their business, nor made any conscience of the trust reposed in them, and so the sheep became an easy prey to the wild beasts. Now this may refer to the false prophets that lived in Isaiah's, Jeremiah's, and Ezekiel's time (who flattered the people in their wicked ways, and told them they should have peace though they went on) and to the priests that bore rule by their means. Or it may refer to the wicked princes, the sons of Josiah, that *did evil in the sight of the Lord*, and other wicked magistrates under them, who betrayed their trust, were vicious and profane, and, instead of making up the breach at which the judgments of God were breaking in upon them, made it wider, and augmented the fierce anger of the Lord instead of doing any thing to turn it away. They should have kept judgment and justice (v. 1), but they abandoned both, ²⁴¹¹Jeremiah 5:1. Or it may refer to those who were the nation's watchmen in our Saviour's time, the chief priests and the scribes, who should have discerned the signs of the times and have given notice to the people of the approach of the Messiah, but who, instead of that, opposed him, and did all they could to keep people from coming to the knowledge of him and to prejudice them against him. It is a very sad character that is here given of these watchmen. *Woe unto thee, O land!* when thy guides are such.

1. They had no sense or knowledge of their business. They were wretchedly ignorant of their work, and very unfit to teach, being so ill-taught themselves: *His watchmen are blind*, and therefore utterly unfit to be watchmen. If the seers see not, who shall see for us? *If the light that is in us be darkness, how great is that darkness!* Christ describes the Pharisees to be *blind leaders of the blind*, ^{<4154>}Matthew 15:14. The beasts of the field come to devour, and the watchmen are blind, and are not aware of them. *They are all ignorant* (v. 10), *shepherds that cannot understand* (v. 11), that know not what is to be done about the sheep, nor can *feed them with understanding*, ^{<2485>}Jeremiah 3:15.

2. What little knowledge they had they made no use of it; no one was the better for it. As they were blind watchmen, that could not discern the danger, so they were *dumb dogs*, that would not give warning of it. And why are the dogs set to guard the sheep if they cannot bark to waken the shepherd and frighten the wolf? Such were these; those that had the charge of souls never reproved men for their faults, nor told them what would be in the end thereof, never gave them notice of the judgments of God that were breaking in upon them. They barked at God's prophets, and bit them too, and worried the sheep, but made no opposition to the wolf or thief.

3. They were very lazy, and would take no pains. They loved their ease, and hated business, were always *sleeping, lying down and loving to slumber*. They were not overcome and overpowered by sleep, as the disciples, through grief and fatigue, but they lay down on purpose to invite sleep, and said, *Soul, take thy ease. Yet a little sleep*. It is bad with a people when their shepherds slumber (^{<3188>}Nahum 3:18), and it is well for God's people that their shepherd, the keeper of Israel, neither slumbers nor sleeps.

4. They were very covetous and eager after the world — *greedy dogs that can never have enough*. If they had ever so much, they would think it too little. They so love silver as never to be satisfied with silver, ^{<2150>}Ecclesiastes 5:10. All their enquiry is what they shall get, not what they shall do. Let them have the wages, and they care not whether the work be done or no; they feed not the flock, but fleece it. They are every one looking to his *own way*, minding his own private interests, and have no regard at all to the public welfare. It was St. Paul's complaint of the watchmen in his time (^{<3621>}Philippians 2:21), *All seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ's*. Every one is for propagating his own

opinion, advancing his own party, raising his own family, and having every thing to his own mind, while the common concerns of the public are wretchedly neglected and postponed. They look *every one to his gain from his quarter*, from his end or part of the work. They are for fain from every quarter (*Rem rem quocunque modo rem — Money, money, by fair means or by foul we must have money*), but especially from their own quarter, where they will be sure to take care that they lose nothing, nor miss any thing that is to be got. If any one put not into their mouths they not only will do him no service, but they *prepare war against him*, ^{<305>}Micah 3:5.

5. They were perfect epicures, given to their pleasures, never so much in their element as in their drunken revels (v. 12): *Come* (say they), *I will fetch wine* (they have that at command; their cellars are better furnished than their closets) *and we will fill ourselves*, or be drunk, *with strong drink*. They were often drunk, not overseen (as we say) or overtaken in drink, but designedly. The watchmen did thus invite and encourage one another to drink to excess, or they courted the people to sit and drink with them, and so confirmed those in their wicked ways, and hardened their hearts, whom they should have reproved. How could they think it any harm to be drunk when the watchmen themselves joined with them and led them to it!

6. They were very secure and confident of the continuance of their prosperity and ease; they said, *“To-morrow shall be as this day and much more abundant; we shall have as much to spend upon our lusts to-morrow as we have to-day.”* They had no thought at all of their own frailty and mortality, though they were shortening their days and hastening their deaths by their excesses. They had no dread of the judgments of God, though they were daily provoking him and making themselves liable to his wrath and curse. They never considered the uncertainty of all the delights and enjoyments of sense, how they perish in the using and pass away with the lusts of them. They resolved to continue in this wicked course, whatever their consciences said to the contrary, to be as merry to-morrow as they are to-day. *But boast not thyself of to-morrow when perhaps this night thy soul shall be required of thee.*