

When the Righteous are Removed

Book of Isaiah

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Bible Text: Isaiah 57:1,2

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If you would, take your Bibles with me and look in Isaiah 57. We've been in this book for some time, but we are slowly making our way down toward the end and, honestly, by the time we get done, we could go back and start over again and see the whole of Scripture right here in Isaiah, all that pertains to Christ. But for this message, I want us, Lord willing, to focus on verses 1 and 2 and I want to speak with you about this thought: when the righteous are removed. We know in Scripture that Paul said it that in every generation God has had a witness. He has never left himself without a witness. Many times that witness is perhaps much like a candle up there in the darkness and you would say that it has dwindled down to nothing and yet it's to say the Lord has always had his people. There have always been in every generation somebody like Abel that the Lord has taught of his grace, even though they might be just one. Or as Isaiah in his day. Or as Joshua and Caleb. In the midst of all of that unbelieving mixed multitude, he had a witness that he preserved unto himself. But this points out for us in these two verses when and if that light is taken away, what then? What of the righteous when they are removed.

Here in verse 1 it says, "The righteous perisheth." That's not an eternal perishing but it's talking about dying. When one of the Lord's dies, in essence, if they are the Lord's and they were put in this world as light and salt, when the Lord takes them from this world there is an extinguishing of that light. There is an extinguishing of that witness. So this was how the Spirit directed Isaiah.

1 The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart: and merciful men are taken away, none considering that the righteous is taken away from the evil to come. 2 He [that is the righteous] shall enter into peace: they shall rest in their beds, each one walking in his uprightness.

So what happens upon the death of these righteous? Now, we know that there is none righteous but God, no not one. But here in the Old Testament it was a way of distinguishing the Lord's people from those who weren't: the righteous versus the wicked. We know also that these that the Lord called righteous in the Old Testament were given his Spirit to look to the same righteousness that we look to. It's outside of ourselves. This was not anything in them that made them more righteous or more holy than those of their generation, but Abraham, Christ said, "Saw my day and rejoiced." He looked forward to

that one who would come and would be his righteousness. We look back but it's the same focal point. It's the same object of faith that whereby we are declared righteous and that is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So that's who is addressed here and you can see the contrast from what we saw in the last chapter and, again, chapter divisions are put there to help us kind of divide up the reading but it's definitely connected by way of contrast, in contrast to these blind leaders of the blind of whom we heard last time. There are these righteous. There are these that God has so taught that they are uncompromising in their day and like Job would say, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." Now, I know that we live in a day much like Isaiah where those are few and far between. There are many that will call themselves righteous who are not. Their righteousness is one in their minds of self-sufficiency before God, that somehow even though they assume they know what it is for God to be holy, they think in their minds, "If I just do enough good works, then God will save me." That's their mindset but they're not righteous. Scripture calls such "filthy rags."

But these that are spoken of here when it says, "The righteous perisheth," these are ones that God himself by his grace has chosen out and for whom Christ did die. When he lay down his life, he paid their sin debt entirely and the Spirit of God being their teacher, caused them to look outside themselves to him, to that one blood which satisfied a holy God and therein they rested and therein they were kept. And in the midst of all the darkness of the day, these were light and salt and they were intolerant, if you will, of the error. They were intolerant of the message or the falseness of the preachers of the day as were mentioned here in Isaiah 56 in verses 9 through 12.

There are many that profess to know God and that is the subject of the article that I put in the bulletin, "Who hath believed our report?" I hope you'll take the time to read it out of Isaiah 53:1. It complements what I'm about to tell you here. But there are many that profess to know God, profess to be Christians, and yet there is no light in their hearts, otherwise if there were, they would not tolerate the darkness that is in these preachers that are mentioned here. There wouldn't be a tolerance of them. I've often told you that a person that is blind can live in a room whether the light is on or not. It doesn't matter. If you've ever, for example, accompanied a blind person, they ask for the restroom, my first inclination is to open the door and turn on the light for them, but it doesn't matter. They're not able to perceive whether the light is on or not. They pass their life kind of feeling their way. That's why you see many today. Then can come and sit here and listen to a clear message that exalts Christ and say, "You know, that's pretty good. I like what I heard." And next week go down the road and listen to one that's completely the contrary and they'll still say, "Do you know what? That was a good message I heard today." They're blind.

Such were the prophets in Isaiah's day as we saw last time in verse 10, "His watchmen are blind: they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber." Greedy. Each one looking out after their own salary. The fact that people and you can blame preachers, that's the point. You can blame preachers all you want to but the fact that they not only tolerate but promote these preachers shows that

there is darkness in them, the people, just as much as in the preachers. That will be no excuse before a holy God one day to say, "Well, the preacher..." Scripture says that the blind lead the blind and both together fall into the ditch.

If you hold your hand here in Isaiah and go to Jeremiah 5:31. The Lord does not excuse people who sit in darkness and listen to prophets who prophesy falsely and, "Well, we didn't know." Try that on the state patrolman that pulls you over for speeding. "Sorry officer, I didn't know that was the speed limit." Well, it is so here's your ticket. Listen to Jeremiah 5:31, "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means," and look at this, "and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?" So the Lord here is speaking to the hearts of sinners that are lost and that even when there is light in their midst they don't perceive it or, as Isaiah 57:1 says, "When the righteous perish," one who is a witness to the truth in their generation and the Lord takes them away, it says, "no man layeth it to heart." They don't consider that to be a loss, in fact, many think it's a gain because, "We don't have to put up with him anymore. All he did was talk about Christ, Christ, Christ." That's how people reason.

The other side of tolerating error, it's not just that men tolerate it. I truly believe that if it weren't for people who love to have it so, these false preachers would be out of business. Who supports them? They ask for money, people send it to them. It sounds like a good man. Promote their television ministries. All this stuff. It's people that are just as blind and dumb and hardened, ignorant as the preachers. Both together fall in the ditch. But it's not just tolerating error, that blindness equals hardness of heart. If it says here in Isaiah 57:1, "no man layeth it to heart." You'll see them swooning and falling over when a Michael Jackson dies and the whole world observes the taking out of a man who took to himself the title of "King," and yet you get a John the Baptist or an Elijah or any faithful preacher of the Gospel that passes away and you might see just a little bit of a note in an obituary somewhere. They don't perceive. I will tell you that that will add to the condemnation of people in the day of Judgment, that they had in their midst one who faithfully declared Christ unto them who was one of the Lord's; who was there as a light and yet they took it not to heart. It's not just in their death but it's in their life they took it not to heart. That's why they don't consider it in their death.

Look at 2 Corinthians 4:3. This is what it is to be blind and there might be some blind here sitting listening to me right now. "If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost." If a sinner has been made to see, then they value the Gospel. They see it as the most important, I don't want to call it a thing, but the most important thing that God could ever give, a gift that God could ever give to a sinner and that is the light of the knowledge of Christ.

It says here, "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not." The editors saw fit to put little g-o-d there as if it were Satan and I can understand. If God gives sinners over to their own reprobate minds, then they're blinded of Satan. But the word in the original is the same word as used up in verse 2, "every man's conscience in the sight of God," capital G-o-d, and I believe what Paul is writing here is that if the Gospel is hid and a sinner never hears it, believes it, trusts in the one

that the Gospel declares, the Savior, then it is God, capital G-o-d, who is the God of this world. There is no other God beside him, "In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds." In other words, he has left them to their own reprobate minds, "lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them."

So that blindness equals hardness. It's confirmed over in Ephesians 4:18 and if you're the Lord's and the Lord has taught you, you know what I'm talking about. If you've never been lost, then you don't know. You're sitting there wondering, "What on earth is he talking about?" But if you've ever been lost, you know what it is to be blind, the Spirit has made it so and now you see, I don't have to spend a lot of time on this. You know. You've been there. Ephesians 4:18 says, "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart." It's not that they're just ignorant, but it says "being alienated from the life of God." What is it to be alienated from the life of God? It's to be alienated from Christ. It's to have no life.

Such is the state of lost men but what I want you to see is according to Scripture it is lost religious men. They can put on a good front. Come Sunday, they can dress up like the best of them. Grab a Bible, sometimes they have to hunt around for it, dust it off. Most people just, like one man said, "I just keep mine on my dashboard, that way I don't have to look for it. When I get ready to go to church, I just reach for it and it's there." There are a lot of people that are of that mindset and yet lost. Clueless. And if you ask them, they'll tell you, "Man, the preacher had a mighty fiery sermon this past Sunday." Well, what did he say? What did he have? Did he declare the glory of Christ? "Well, he's preaching up the need to tithe. Give more. If you give more, then you get more." That's the message people are hearing.

But in addition to the above and this is where we come back to Isaiah 57 where it says, "The righteous perisheth," it's a big enough condemnation that men are in darkness and don't perceive the light but it's an even greater condemnation when the Lord is pleased to remove the candlestick and they don't even perceive it. In other words, he takes away the Gospel. I don't say it because of us, but I will say there is no city that is blessed more than Shreveport to be able to have a place where sinners can come and worship and hear of Christ exalted. I know of a lot of cities that you can hunt up and down. I get emails all the time, "If I could just have a place like where the people that come and hear you preach can come week in and week out and hear the Gospel preached." They're out there, the Lord is keeping them and preserving them, but they don't have anybody to fellowship with other than through the internet or on an email.

I wonder how much we value that? But I've often said to you: the Lord will raise up a witness for a time. I don't know. We always think, "Well, he raised up this witness," but when the righteous perisheth as the Lord might be pleased to take us out of here one by one and shut the whole operation down, if he does, that's his right to do so, but I wonder how many would even notice. What difference it would make if one day there is a "For Sale" sign out front here and they come and put a bar in here or a convenience store. Who would care? Who would care?

These are things that we ought not to take lightly. I think of our Lord who is the light, who walked in this world. He came unto his own and his own received him not because they perceived him not and even in his death, how few there were in his day that saw any significance to him, the righteous one, being taken out of the way, being removed. I know those that were the Lord's saw it. The thief on the cross saw it. He was given eyes to see. The centurion that had been hardened saw it, "Never a man died as this man." So there were those that that death was impressed upon their heart and mind but you think about the hundreds of thousands of others that when he died they thought they were rid of him and they were glad to have it so. Such was the hardness of their own hearts.

The Lord is the one who lights the candle and it's the Lord who removes it so when I read this in Isaiah 57, "The righteous perisheth, and no man layeth it to heart: and merciful men are taken away." Why are the Lord's people called merciful men, merciful people? It's because they know what it is to be shown mercy and if we ever get beyond that, we're in trouble. I understand the state of lost souls because I've been one. I understand what it is to be in need of mercy because I still stand in need of mercy and that's how the Lord causes us to deal with those of the world, but while we're in this world if we're the Lord's, we're here as light and salt.

Look with me in Matthew 5. Perhaps the Lord would give us some understanding of this portion in a clear way. As I studied it and I've studied it a number of times over the years and I've always asked, "Lord, help me to see what is truly set forth here." If you go up to verse 10 of Matthew 5, "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake." This is what Isaiah was facing. That's what any that stood in the light of the truth of his day faced, persecution. When you had so many blind watchmen and so many people left in idolatry which is why the Lord eventually took Israel into captivity, you stand alone. There is an opposition and when the righteous are removed, are taken away, those that oppose the truth tend to rejoice. They're glad to see you gone.

But here Christ says, "Blessed are they which are persecuted for that righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It can truly be said of one who is the Lord's that as a righteous one they are in a better state. I know it's said of anybody that dies, "Well, they're better off now." They may not be. If they're not the Lord's, they're not better off. They could have been writhing on a hospital bed with boils and sores and in pain, but death will be no relief because to be without Christ is to be ushered into an eternal judgment of separation, alienation from the life of God. So they're not better off. A lot of people don't consider that as the organ is playing at a funeral and the preacher is preaching a body or a soul into heaven when like the rich man and Lazarus, they're in condemnation. All the while people are saying good things about them in this life, in that life they know nothing but separation and suffering. That's why you don't trifle at funerals. I don't. All you can do is commend the souls of men that have gone to the Lord. But apart from the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no hope. I don't care how many preachers preach them into heaven. There's no hope and they were better off alive, breathing, even in that weakened physical state than what awaits them.

But for the righteous, it says their's is the kingdom of heaven. The reason I'm reading this is it parallels what we're seeing here in Isaiah 57 where in verse 2 that righteous one, even though they stood alone against all of the wickedness, the religious wickedness and idolatry around them, "He shall enter into peace," is what it says in Isaiah 57:2. That's our hope and that's what the Lord said, "Blessed are ye," Matthew 5:11, "when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake." You say, "Why would they do that? Why would any speak in any kind of evil manner toward a righteous one, especially when they're not boasting of any righteousness in themselves? They're giving all the glory to Christ?" That's exactly why they can't tolerate you because you give no credence to their works and what they do. In fact, your very testimony, very witness that it is Christ alone condemns them.

I remember the church up in Grand Rapids, Michigan when the Lord brought me back from Africa and I was struggling at the time of just how to let them know of what Christ had done in this heart and stood up week in and week out to a very angry and just vicious. These were people that on any given day if you knew them as your neighbors, they'd give you a bowl of soup and take care of you and look after you, but when they'll cut a man's salary and literally put him out on the street because they cannot tolerate you giving Christ the glory, that shows the hardness and blindness of their heart. I remember a very good friend of ours during that period of time back in 1986 when asked why it was that she was so opposed to my testimony, she said, "Because if I believe what you're telling me, that means I'm lost."

That's just how hardened that people are. They would rather hang onto their profession, they would rather continue in that false way, than to bow. And I'll tell you what, dear friends, unless the Lord gives us grace to bow, we'll do the same thing. We would split hell wide open in our false profession and that's the evil that they speak against you. You say, "What evil?" You'll be called a divider. A troubler in Israel. "Can't you just tone it down? Can't you just let be?" Well, the thing that light does is exposes darkness. That's what it is. If you heard a noise in a room and one of your kids was in there, what's the first thing you'd do when the light is out? You'd turn on the light. "Let's figure out what's going on in here. Let's check it out." You'd turn on the light. Now, if they're up to no good, they're not going to like the fact that you turned on the light. "How come you had to come here and turn on the light? What are you looking for?" But that's because their deeds are evil. The heart is evil, who can know it?

But here in Matthew 5:12, the Lord says, "Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven." Now, every word of Scripture is important. Notice it doesn't say, "great are your rewards in heaven." That's the way the world looks at it. "Well, just keep doing good works. You've got some rewards awaiting you in heaven." The word in Scripture "reward" is never in the plural. Take your concordance and look at it. The reward in heaven is Christ. The reward in heaven is what Isaiah is describing here in Isaiah 57:2, "He shall enter into peace." Paul described being absent from the body but being present with the Lord. I don't know if that strikes you, but there are days when if the Lord just took me out right then, I think I would be the happiest person in the world just simply because, do you know what? The longer you live here, you get kind of tired

of this. You get tired of it and I believe he prepares us. We have loved ones and we have things but in those days when nothing is...it's just like a whirlwind, that's the Lord and it's to keep you from getting your roots too deeply here. He just, "Here, let me put in your heart where your true hope is." And it is, it's in Christ.

But until that time, we live in this world and we can expect to be persecuted, but do you know what? As it says in verse 12, our reward is in heaven, that's Christ, "for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." There is no temptation taken you but such is common to man. Now, while we're here, it says, "Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men." Then verse 14 says, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." Even as the song we sang, it's not good works in us, but it's the reflection of his work that men see. There is no light in here, but as he is pleased to shine forth, men see that light.

Now, the question that I've always asked is: how does salt lose its flavor? I've heard all the arguments that it's got certain components that can't break down and so it's always salt. Salt is always salt. But here the Scripture says, "but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted?" You know as well as I do that you can take some salt and put it in a pot of soup but if you keep adding water to it, eventually you're going to say, "I don't even taste the salt." You add enough water to it and salt will lose its savor. You water down a Gospel enough, it's lost its savor and that's what these blind preachers of the blind do, the dumb dogs. "Let's just add some more water. Oh, we've got some more people coming in? We don't want to run them off. We certainly want to give them something so let's add more water to the soup." And the salt loses its savor.

But there's another thing that I believe might be worth our consideration here as well. If salt loses its savor, again, going back to what people...we talked about blindness but what it is to be dead. Will all the salt in the world help a blind person or a dead person if they can't taste it? The salt loses its savor whenever there is some sore of physiological function with the taste buds that can't taste it and when it says here, "it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men," consider that that's what men do when they can't really taste the salt because they're dead, they're blind.

The purpose of salt is to savor and certainly the Scriptures use the word of salt to be synonymous with grace. There is grace in exalting Christ before sinners, but if men can't taste it in that sense, they're dead, then what do they do with it? They throw it out. It is trodden under foot of men. So either way we can see here that unless the Lord himself gives that light, you see, that's what we're here as, light, but if men are blind they don't see it. It takes eyes to see. It's the Lord that causes men to see.

I would remind you, every one of us where we work in our workplaces, it's not so much about the work. That's not why you're there. It's not about the making of the money. It's

not about the general people we interact with day in and day out just to make a good living. If that's all it is, then we've missed our mark if we're the Lord's. It's about the sheep. It's about those whom the Lord might be pleased to cause our path to cross with that might be one of those for whom he has put us in this world to be light and salt and that, your passing that way, your crossing their path by God's providence, is what the Lord will use by his grace. That witness as a sinner saved by grace, that's all I know and all I have. A righteousness that was not my own that God was pleased upon completion of Christ's death to put to my account and to testify day in and day out of that. Even though it stands opposed to what they're used to hearing on a Sunday morning, yet it may be that that one lone voice in the wilderness is what the Lord is pleased to cause them to hear.

Coming back here to Isaiah 57, I'll wrap this up. Being the Lord's and being redeemed by his blood, called by his Spirit, does not exempt us from death. It doesn't say here in Isaiah 57:1, "If the righteous perish," it says, "The righteous perisheth." We're going to die just like anybody else. We're not exempt from physical death and it's the Lord that determines when that time will come. Not men. I've often said we are immortal until such time as the Lord is pleased to take us from this world and yet when that time comes, and it will, for some here sooner than later, you can't even say that age is a factor. We just assume that we're all going to live to a ripe old age and then die but we all know that death knows no age. I can remember when they had diagnosed my dad with terminal cancer and told him he had a year and a half to live. There were some who came to see him that were crying and upset and thinking, "You're too young to die," and this sort of thing, who themselves were taken out of the world even before he died.

We just assume when you hear that someone else has been diagnosed with this or that, that okay, they're going to be gone before I am. It may not be. It might be we leave out of here today and I'd be taken out. These are matters of reality and sometimes when the Lord cuts down the one fruitful tree, the purpose is to leave the rest barren. There are warnings even in the book of Revelation about him removing the candlestick. You go back and look at the history even of the churches that the Apostle Paul that the Lord used to raise up congregations, those seven churches in the book of Revelation that no longer exist today and they were founded on the truth.

The Lord is sovereign in doing that, but in taking away the righteous, they have a hope. That's where the rubber meets the road. It's not your profession but in your heart of hearts what is your hope? Who is your hope? If you can just fast forward in your mind to that time when the Lord might be pleased to take you out, whether he gives you time to think about it or not, where is your hope right now? If it's not Christ and if it's not his shed blood, if it's not that righteousness that he worked out, you have no hope and you will die the death of the wicked just like anybody. It doesn't matter that you're sitting in a church building where the Gospel is preached, you will die the death of the unrighteous.

But those that are the Lord's, it says there in verse 2, "He shall enter into peace." Christ is our peace. But also you see the end of verse 1, "considering that the righteous is taken away from the evil to come." That's a blessing. We all talk about what's ahead and what

kind of world awaits five, ten years from now. It may be we won't have to worry about it. The Lord will take us home. Precious in the sight of the Lord are the death of his saints. Paul said to the Philippians, "To die is gain," and you know what I'm talking about if the Lord has taught your heart to be free from this body, from this corruption, from all of the things that come in and just snuff out the word. You know as well as I do. You'll hear a great message and as soon as you go out the door, all these things start flooding your mind and it's just like thorns that come up and choke the seed, birds come and take it away. That parable of the sower of the seed is describing us. Don't just say, "Well, that's the unbeliever." No, that's us. Ask me what I preached on last week. I'd have to go back and look at my notes, quite honestly. I know something about it but it's gone. That's like the manna: it was there today, it's turned into worms. It's gone. I can't live on that. I need a fresh word from the Lord every day, every moment. I'm just that needy.

But what a blessed hope to know that whether my mind is on him or not, his is on me and whether I can think upon him or not in this flesh and most days I don't, quite honestly, yet he has never stopped thinking upon me to the point where he cared for my soul more than I care for it myself. He paid the debt and therein is my hope. I enter into peace. I'll rest in my bed knowing that Christ is my hope and I trust that that describes you as well. I pray the Lord will bless this to our hearing today.