

LIVE FOR JESUS

56 This is what Jehovah says, Maintain justice and practice righteousness; for my salvation is coming soon and my righteousness is about to be revealed. 2 Blessed is the man who does this, the man who adheres to these things, the one who observes the Sabbath and does not profane it, the one who restrains his hand from doing any evil thing.

3 Do not let the foreigner who has committed himself to Jehovah say, Jehovah will surely separate me from his people. Neither let the eunuch say, Look, I am a dry tree. 4 This is what Jehovah says about the eunuchs who observe my Sabbaths, and who choose the things that please me, and adhere to my covenant: 5 I will give to them in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name [that is] better than sons and daughters—I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. 6 And the foreigners who commit themselves to Jehovah to minister to him, and to love the name of Jehovah, to be his servants, everyone who observes the Sabbath and does not profane it, and who adheres to my covenant—7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and I will make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house will be called “a house of prayer for all nations.” 8 The Lord Jehovah, who gathers the exiles of Israel, says, I will still gather others to him, besides his own [people] who have [already] been gathered.

9 All you beasts of the field, come to devour! Come, all you beasts in the forest! 10 [Israel's] watchmen are blind, all of them lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark. They lie around dreaming; they love to sleep. 11 Indeed, [these] dogs are greedy, they are never satisfied. They are shepherds who are unable to understand; they have all gone their own way, each one seeks his own gain from every quarter. 12 Come, [they say, let us] get wine! Let us drink our fill of beer! Tomorrow will be like today, or even better!

57 The righteous man perishes, but no one takes it to heart; devout men are removed, but no one understands that the righteous are removed [in order that they may be spared] from the [coming] calamity. 2 The righteous enters into peace; they rest in their [death] beds, each one who walked in the way of righteousness. (Isa. 56:1-57:2)

Introduction

During his entire four-year career at West Point, Cadet Ben Davis lived in a room by himself. He ate every meal alone, and was spoken to only in the line of duty. He swam alone and was unable to earn his Red Cross Life Saving Certificate because no one was willing to be his buddy.

Ben Davis was black. The color of his skin was the only reason for his ostracism. He entered West Point in 1932, appointed by the only black representative in Congress. It was an era when military leaders were convinced that a black man could not and should not command white soldiers. But Ben Davis persevered. “The more difficult they made it for me,” he said, “the more determined I became to succeed.” Ben Davis graduated near the top of his class, became a highly decorated combat pilot in World

War II, and went on to become the first black three-star general in the United States Air Force. (*POWER*, 3/8/82, p.8)

Will you and I endure that kind of abuse for the sake of Christ? Will we keep going despite closed doors and personal slander or worse, just because we are Christians? The next passage of Isaiah confronts us with this very message: Despite the opposition and difficulties we encounter, let us continue to live for the LORD, because that is God's command and that is the life that will receive God's blessing.

I. Live for the LORD Even Though You May Suffer for It (Isa. 56:9-57:2)

The ungodly state of the nation is evidenced in the conduct of its leaders, who are here referred to as "*watchmen*." They are described as being "*blind*" and "*lacking knowledge*" (vs. 10.) The very ones whose responsibility it is to guard the nation and be on the alert for its well-being are found to be incompetent and not capable of doing the job entrusted to them. They are characterized by an utter inability to discern the state of the nation and the peril to which it has made itself vulnerable.

What accounts for this deplorable condition? According to verse 10b, the leaders are self-indulgent; they are described as lazy dogs, idly lying around, daydreaming and snoring. These "leaders" enjoy their ease and are averse to exerting themselves; rather than address the evils and the problems of the day and seek to provide solutions, they find it more convenient to ignore those problems and not disturb their own tranquility. According to verse 11, these leaders are greedy; they are described as dogs with mighty appetites that are never satisfied, always seeking after greater personal gain. Rather than fulfilling their calling to be servants of God and servants of the nation, they have disgracefully allowed themselves to become the servants of their own appetites, using their power and position to increase their own wealth. They are further described as shepherds who have lost their understanding; they fail to appreciate that their role is to promote the welfare of the sheep, not their own welfare. They have become like lost sheep themselves, turning to their own way, seeking their own gain, using their power and position to increase their own wealth at the expense of the nation. According to verse 12, these leaders are immoral; they love their parties and they are confident that the party will go on forever, tomorrow shall be like today, or even better!

Verses 3-10 of Isaiah 57 describe the conduct of the majority of the people of the nation of Israel at this time in history:

But you, come here—you sons of a sorceress, you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes! ⁴Whom are you mocking? At whom do you sneer and stick out your tongue? Are you not the children [who are the fruit] of transgression, the offspring of deceit—⁵you who burn with lust among the oaks and under every green tree, you who sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags? ⁶[The idols] among the smooth stones of the ravines are

your portion; they are your lot. Yes, to them you have poured out drink offerings, to them you have presented grain offerings. Should I accept these things? ⁷You have made your bed atop a high and lofty hill; and there you went up to offer your sacrifices. ⁸And you have hung my memorial plaques behind the doors and the doorposts; for you have uncovered yourself to lovers other than me. You have climbed into your bed and made it available; you have made a covenant with them, you have loved their bed, you have looked at their nakedness. ⁹You went to the king [of Assyria], bearing gifts of olive oil and an abundance of spices. You sent your ambassadors to a distant land, and you abased yourself, bowing down as far as Sheol. ¹⁰You were tired out by the distance of your journey, yet you did not say, It is hopeless. You found renewed strength; therefore you did not faint. (Isa. 57:3-10)

These people are described as forsaking the LORD and giving themselves over to every form of pagan practice, no matter how immoral, *"You who burn with lust among the oaks"*—they were engaging in pagan cultic prostitution, or hideous, even sacrificing their children to pagan deities—*"you who sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags."*

It is little wonder that sandwiched in between the description of the leaders in chapter 56 verses 9-12 and the description of the people in chapter 57 verses 3-10, we find the words: *"The righteous man perishes ... the righteous are removed"* (Isa. 57:1.) In such an ungodly society there was the silencing, the persecuting, and the exterminating of those who demonstrated dedication to the LORD their God, those who practiced righteousness (Isa. 56:1.)

But note the commentary given in Isaiah 57:1b-2. *"No one understands that the righteous are removed [in order that they may be spared] from the [coming] calamity."* Unbeknown to the apostate nation, the righteous are being mercifully removed (delivered by death) from the catastrophic judgment that was about to befall the nation. The righteous *"enters into peace; they rest in their [death] beds."* Death for the righteous—those who are united to Jesus the Messiah, covered by His righteousness and being conformed to that righteousness—is the entrance into peace, it is described as a resting in their beds, peacefully waiting the day of resurrection.

Let us live for the LORD, even though we may suffer for it. Let us heed the exhortation the Apostle Paul gives to the Philippian church:

Live your life only in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that if I come and see you—or if I remain absent what I will hear about you is that you are standing firm in one spirit, and with one soul are contending for the faith of the gospel; ²⁸and that you are in no way being intimidated by those who oppose you. (Phil. 1:27-28a)

II. Live for the LORD, Because He Desires Obedience, Not Religion (Isa. 56:1-8)

Addressing those who have remained faithful to Him within the apostate nation of Israel, the LORD commands, "*Maintain justice and practice righteousness*" (vs. 1.) That is to say, the command is to preserve what justice still remained in the land and to do so by practicing righteousness—the moral law of God being the standard of righteous conduct.

In verse 2 the LORD defines faithfulness to Himself in terms of keeping the Sabbath. The Old Testament Sabbath was a sign of the covenant—almost a kind of sacrament, declaring that the LORD's people were set apart to be devoted to Him in worship and to enjoy His rest:

I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I, Jehovah, made them holy. (Ezek.20:12)

Then Jehovah said to Moses, ¹³Say to the Israelites, You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am Jehovah, who makes you holy ... ¹⁶The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. ¹⁷It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever. (Ex. 31:12-13,16-17a)

Today, in the midst of present day pagan society, our honoring the LORD by worshiping Him on the Lord's Day and honoring His day as sacred is a witness to the world; a witness that we belong to Christ and that He is Lord.

In verses 3-7 the LORD addresses a special word to the foreigner who has come into His covenant and to the eunuch. The concern of the foreigner and of the eunuch was that because of their race (the foreigner being a non-Israelite by birth) or their physical condition, they might be unacceptable to the LORD. With regard to the physical condition of the eunuch, note Deuteronomy 23:1, "*No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of Jehovah.*" But now the LORD addresses a word of assurance, first to the committed eunuch (vs. 5), and then to the committed foreigner (vs. 6-7),

I will give to them in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name [that is] better than sons and daughters—I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. ⁶And the foreigners who commit themselves to Jehovah to minister to him, and to love the name of Jehovah, to be his servants, everyone who observes the Sabbath and does not profane it, and who adheres to my covenant—⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain and I will make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house will be called "a house of prayer for all nations." (Isa. 56:5-7)

There is a two-fold reason for this special address to the committed foreigner and eunuch. First and foremost, to assure them of their acceptance with the LORD despite their non-Jewish identity or their physical defect. But secondly it was also intended to impress upon the nation of Israel that what is of ultimate importance is not mere religious heritage or religious formality, but personal faith in the LORD and the outworking of that faith in the form of obedience to His commandments.

These verses are confronting us with the biblical truth that true religion is a matter of the heart, and does not merely consist in the performance of religious rituals. The LORD had previously expressed His displeasure with the outward displays of religion presented by a people who had removed their heart from Him:

Then the Lord said, Because these people [only] approach me with their mouth and [only] honor me with their lips, but have removed their heart far from me, and their reverence for me is [nothing more than] a tradition they have learned by rote; ¹⁴therefore, take note, I will proceed to do an astonishing thing to these people, an amazingly astonishing thing. The wisdom of their wise men will perish, and the discernment of their intelligent men will vanish. (Isa. 29:13-14)

But furthermore, true religion is not merely a matter of the heart, it must express itself in a life of commitment to the LORD. The command of verse one is, "*practice righteousness.*"

Let us live for the LORD, because He desires obedience, not religion.

To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams; ²³for rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. (1 Sam. 15:22b-23a)

III. Live for the LORD, Because He Promises a Sure Reward (Isa. 56:1)

In verse one of Isaiah 56 the LORD urges and exhorts the faithful to remain faithful, because "*my salvation is coming soon and my righteousness is about to be revealed.*" He is assuring them that He will be faithful to honor and reward their commitment to Him.

True to His Word, that day of repayment and reward surely came. When the Babylonians conquered the apostate nation of Israel, those who had maintained their faithful commitment to the LORD inherited the land:

The Babylonians set fire to the royal palace and the houses of the people and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. ⁹Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard carried into exile to Babylon the people who remained in the city, along with those who had gone over to him, and the rest of the people. ¹⁰But

Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard left behind in the land of Judah some of the poor people, who owned nothing; and at that time he gave them vineyards and fields. (Jeremiah 39:8-10) These poor were the faithful remnant who had previously suffered at the hands of their apostate countrymen.

What the LORD did in the days of Old Testament Israel is just one example of His commitment to those who are committed to Him. In His Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus Christ declares,

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹Blessed are you when men shall reproach you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things against you falsely, for my sake. ¹²Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven; for that is how they persecuted the prophets that were before you. (Matt. 5:10-12)

Let us live for the LORD, because He promises a sure reward:

A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared Jehovah and honored his name.¹⁷They will be mine, declares Jehovah of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. ¹⁸And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not. (Mal. 3:16-18)

Conclusion

Cadet Ben Davis graduated near the top of his class, became a highly decorated World War II combat pilot, and then went on to become the first black three-star general in the United States Air Force. All along the way he had to overcome racial bias and discrimination. "The more difficult they made it for me," he said, "the more determined I became to succeed."

Despite the opposition and difficulties we encounter as Christians, let us, in reliance upon divine grace, live for the LORD, because that is God's commandment, and that is the life that will receive God's blessing.