

CAN GOD'S MERCY REACH ME?

57 ³But 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. ¹¹Whom have you so dreaded and feared that you have been false to me, that you have not remembered me nor [even] given me a thought? Have I not been silent for a long time, [so therefore] you do not fear me? ¹²I will expose your “righteousness;” and your deeds shall be of no benefit to you.

¹³When you cry [for help], let your collection of idols save you! But the wind will sweep them away; a [mere] breath will blow them away. But the man who takes refuge in me shall possess the land and inherit my holy mountain. ¹⁴It will be said, Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people! ¹⁵This is what the high and lofty One—who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy—says, I dwell in the high and holy place, [I] also [dwell] with the man who has a contrite and humble spirit, in order to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite. ¹⁶I will not contend [against you] forever, neither will I continue to be angry, otherwise your spirit would faint before me—the very souls whom I have made.

¹⁷Because of his sinful greed, I was angry and I struck him; I hid my face and was angry. Then he returned with [all] his heart. ¹⁸I have seen his ways, and I will heal him. I will guide him and restore comfort to him, ¹⁹creating praise for the lips of those who mourned. Peace, peace to those who are near and to those who are far, proclaims Jehovah. I will heal them. ²⁰But the wicked are like the tossing sea; it cannot rest, and its waters churn up mire and mud. ²¹There is no peace, declares my God, for the wicked. (Isa. 57:3-21)

Introduction

A tall man with a dark complexion walked into the little chapel on the boardwalk. He wore a black leather jacket and mirror teardrop sunglasses. His hair was greasy and disheveled. He took a seat in the back row. At the front of the chapel the speaker was addressing a group of volunteers who had come to work at the chapel for the

summer, eager to share the gospel with the people who would be spending their vacation at the Jersey shore.

Suddenly, the man with the dark complexion stood up. His voice was loud and searing. "Hey man, I got a question. I killed six men in Vietnam. Where does that put me with God?"

Everyone sat stunned. No one moved. The man stood there, waiting for an answer. The speaker at the front of the chapel did not address the man; he simply continued to speak to the group of volunteers huddled around him.

The tall dark man shouted again, this time louder. "Hey man! You! I'm talkin' to you! I killed six men in Vietnam with my bare hands. You hear that? I want to know, where does that put me with God?"

That tall dark man wanted to know, he needed to know: How far does God's mercy reach? Can God's mercy reach to me in my sin? In this passage of Scripture presently before us, we find the answer to our question: The greatness of your sin cannot put you beyond the mercy of God, if you return to Him with a contrite spirit.

I. God's Mercy Can Reach You, No Matter How Great Your Sin (Isa. 57:3-13)

In verse 3 the LORD addresses the people of Israel, commanding them to draw near to Him. Their hearts and lives were far from Him, even though they had been dwelling in His land, note Isaiah 29:13,

Then the Lord said ... 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. (Isa. 29:13)

The LORD now proceeds to describe these people in the following terms. He begins by calling them "*sons of a sorceress.*" Here is a reference to the fact that they have forsaken their confidence in the LORD and have turned to pagan astrologers and soothsayers for guidance, a sin for which He rebukes them in Isaiah 2:6, "*You have forsaken your people, the house of Jacob, because they are full of the customs of the East and practice divination like the Philistines. They clasp hands with the children of foreigners, making covenants with them.*" The Word of God forbids any unhealthy interest and interaction with the unholy spiritual powers of darkness. The LORD now proceeds to address these people as "*offspring of adulterers and prostitutes!*" He is describing them as spiritually illegitimate children; they are not true spiritual descendants of Abraham, possessing his faith and commitment to the LORD; they are not true children of God, trusting, loving and serving their heavenly Father.

In verse 4 the LORD charges these people with mocking Him and defying Him—they make faces at God and stick out their tongues at Him. Then, in verses 5-8 the LORD condemns the practice of idolatry, which was rampant throughout the nation. They pursue their idolatries with great passion (*“you who burn with lust among the oaks”*), even succumbing to the practice of sacrificing their own children (vs. 5.) We should note that the New Testament also defines covetousness and materialism as being forms of idolatry: *“Of this you can be certain, no immoral or impure person nor any greedy man—who is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God”* (Eph. 5:5.) It is just as wrong in the sight of God to sacrifice our children to the idolatry of materialism; setting for them an example of devotion to money and to things instead of a devotion to the LORD, setting them aside for the pursuit of things and personal pleasures.

These people have offered their worship and their sacrifices to their multitude of idols, and now the LORD scornfully inquires, Do you suppose that such offerings appease Me? Have they not rather provoked Me? (vs. 6) Here is a vivid indictment against the false teaching that all religions are the same, they are merely worshipping the same God under different names and in different ways. In further refutation of this teaching, note the Apostle Paul’s testimony concerning the conversion of the Thessalonians, *“you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”* The practice of idolatry (false religion) is viewed by the LORD God as an act of spiritual adultery (vs. 7-8.) Furthermore, as these verses indicate in not so subtle terms, the practice of pagan religion involved a great deal of sexual promiscuity.

As the people gave themselves over to idolatry, involving both spiritual and physical immorality, they removed the remembrance of God and His law from before their eyes. The memorial plaques were now fastened **behind** the doors and the posts, instead of being prominently displayed as a constant reminder of the law of God, note Deuteronomy 6:4,8-9, *“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts ... ⁸Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”*

In verses 9-10 the LORD condemns the political policies of Israel. Rather than looking to the LORD their God as their King and Defender, they trusted in their own diplomacy and looked to their neighboring nations for security. Verse 10 is referring to the fact that Israel spared no effort in seeking to secure peace by means of their foreign diplomacy; they exerted the utmost degree of effort and put great hopes in their endeavors.

In verse 11 the people are described as a nation that has lost all fear of God. The LORD sarcastically inquires, “Of whom have you been afraid? What fear has caused you to commit such immoral and abominable acts (as those described in the

previous verses)?” The point being made is that they are devoid of that holy fear of God, which serves to restrain evil; having no fear of God before their eyes, they now plunge into every form of evil. The patience and longsuffering of God have been misinterpreted as acceptance of their sins, or indifference to their immoral conduct, or even impotence on the part of God. Having lost their fear of God, they have become emboldened in their sin; note the earlier indictment the LORD brought against them through the prophet Isaiah, *“The look on their faces testifies against them; they display their sin like Sodom, they do not hide it. Woe to them! They have brought calamity upon themselves”* (Isa. 3:9.)

But the LORD now warns them (and us) that the day is coming when He will act (vs. 12.) On that day, declares the LORD, *“I will expose your ‘righteousness.’”* That is to say, the LORD will examine and evaluate the nation’s claim to righteousness in the light of His own divine righteousness, and expose their “righteousness” as being in fact unrighteousness. Furthermore, the LORD asserts, *“your deeds shall be of no benefit to you.”* Their works, which shall be exposed as works of sin, not works of righteousness, shall not speak in their defense; on the contrary, those works will testify against them. From the language employed in verse 12 there is conveyed the impression that there was present within the people an incredible and misguided sense of self-righteousness; the accusation found in Proverbs 30:12 would apply to this people: *“those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not cleansed of their filth.”*

On the day when the LORD reveals Himself in His righteous justice and takes action against this sinful nation (vs. 13.) Those who cling to their idolatry shall cry out (presumably to the LORD), but the LORD will simply direct them to their idols in which they have trusted—idols that themselves shall be swept away by the wind of holy judgment. But those who acknowledge their sin, return to the LORD, and take refuge in Him, shall possess the land—they shall be saved to gain a share in the LORD’s everlasting inheritance.

The scene presented to us in this passage is that of a people whose lives are far removed from God and His commandments; a people who exhibit no fear of God, but yet possess an unfounded sense of self-righteousness. Here is a people who are destined to have an encounter with God that will result in condemnation (vs.13a); but, as verse 13b indicates, those who are awakened to their present condition, repent, and take refuge in the LORD, shall be spared—despite the greatness of the sins they have committed. Note, again, the LORD’s promise recorded back in Isaiah 55:7,

Let the wicked man forsake his way, and let the unrighteous man [forsake] his thoughts. Let him return to Jehovah, and he will have mercy on him. [Let him return] to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isa. 55:7)

God's mercy can reach each one of us, no matter how great our sin—provided that we are awakened to our true condition before God and seek the forgiveness and restoration He offers through the sacrifice of Christ at Calvary:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn. 1:8-9)

II. God's Mercy Can Reach You, If You Are Contrite (Isa. 57:14-21)

The LORD commands the construction of a great highway by means of which the contrite shall return to their God and to His blessed presence: *"It will be said, 'Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people'"* (vs. 14.)

The LORD reveals Himself to be a God of great compassion and condescension to those who are contrite:

This is what the high and lofty One—who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy—says, I dwell in the high and holy place, I also dwell with the man who has a contrite and humble spirit, in order to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Isa. 57:15)

God reveals Himself to be *"the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity."* Here is a reference to His incomprehensible majesty and exaltation, and yet He is a God who condescends to minister His refreshing life-giving grace to the contrite. God reveals Himself to be the One *"whose name is Holy."* Here is a reference to His absolute moral purity, a purity that is as infinite as the eternity He inhabits, and yet He is the God who delights to minister His forgiveness and mercy to the contrite.

What does it mean to be contrite? It means to honestly acknowledge our sins to God—as opposed to denying them, rationalizing them, minimizing them, or ignoring them. It means to express regret for those sins; acknowledging them to be an offense to our holy God, and that they have made a separation between us and our God, and that they will drag us to hell if we do not part company with them. To be contrite means to give our sins over to God, asking forgiveness by virtue of Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary, and seeking to lead a new life by God's grace; note Proverbs 28:13, *"Whoever covers his transgressions shall not prosper; but whoever confesses and forsakes them shall obtain mercy."* The LORD graciously condescends to show mercy on the contrite, as the Psalmist testifies, *"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise"* (Psl. 51:17.)

In verses 17-18 there is revealed to us the divine process that produces contrition in the hearts of God's children. The LORD declares, *"Because of his sinful*

greed (or, *selfishness*), *I was angry.*” The practice of sin, which literally is defined in terms of covetousness or selfishness—self-centeredness as opposed to God-centered living—causes the LORD to become indignant with a holy anger. Consequently, the LORD continues, *“I struck him; I hid my face.”* His righteous indignation caused the LORD to take punitive measures against the sinner and break off fellowship with him. Then as a result of the LORD’s act of judgment, *“he returned with all his heart.”* Such divine disciplinary measures have the effect of causing the child of God to return to his heavenly Father with all his heart—because he cannot bear the prospect of eternally being alienated and separated from the divine presence of God. Note: The Hebrew word, *שׁוּב*, meaning “to turn,” and rendered, “turning away,” in the original ASV version, also has the meaning “to return,” which is preferable in this context. Now the LORD declares, *“I have seen his ways [i.e.; his repentance], and I will heal him ... and restore comfort to him.”* When the LORD witnesses this contrition—this returning to the heavenly Father with sorrow, seeking forgiveness and restoration—He is moved with compassion and ministers His mercy in restoring the repentant sinner to covenantal fellowship.

Verse 19 reveals to us the extent of God’s mercy. Not only does the Lord pronounce the blessing of peace *“to those who are near”* (i.e.; those who are living in fellowship with God), He also pronounces the same blessing of peace *“to those who are far.”* From verses 17-18 it becomes clear that this is a reference to the contrite sinner who returns to the LORD. Referring to the Prodigal Son, the Lord Jesus declares, *“he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him”* (Lk. 15:20.)

Verse 19 indicates that in the final analysis there is no distinction between the righteous (that is to say, the man who possesses the righteousness of Christ his Savior and is devoted to Him) and the repentant (the man who turns to Christ the Savior with all his heart)—the former is living in fellowship with God, while the latter is restored to that holy fellowship, both alike receive God’s blessing of peace. As the Lord Jesus teaches in His parable of The Lost Sheep, *“I tell you ... there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent”* (Lk. 15:7.)

But the following verses reveal to us the limitation of God’s mercy. Verses 20-21 indicate that there is a vast distinction between the righteous and the unrepentant. Whereas, according to Isaiah 57:2, the righteous “enter into peace,” according to Isaiah 57:21, *“there is no peace for the wicked.”*

God’s mercy can reach each one of us, if we are contrite. That is to say, if we honestly acknowledge our sins before God; if we surrender them and ourselves to God; and if we ask for God’s forgiveness based upon Christ’s atoning sacrifice upon the cross of Calvary.

Conclusion

How far does God's mercy reach? Can God's mercy reach to me and to you in our sin? This 57th chapter of Isaiah presents the answer to that question: The LORD is gracious to show mercy and grant restoration to all who exhibit a contrite spirit. The greatness of our sin—no matter what it might be—cannot put us beyond the mercy of the LORD, if we return to Him with a contrite heart.