

Book of Isaiah



Chapter 56

*Theme: Grand particulars of the future Kingdom;
predicament of the present kingdom*

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THEME: Grand particulars of the future Kingdom; predicament of the present kingdom
The chapter before us follows a pattern that goes back to that marvelous fifty-third chapter, which tells of the salvation of the Lord provided for lost mankind by the sacrifice of His Son upon the Cross.

Now Isaiah the prophet returns to the nation of Israel and is speaking to his own people. What we have in this chapter is not a retreat to Mount Sinai (as some seem to think) but rather a victory march through the arch of triumph into the Millennium. It is a forward movement which is the logical outworking of what has preceded. It pertains particularly to Israel and radiates out into a widening circle of global benefits. This all rests on the new covenant which God has made with Israel. It will be the blessing for the earth in the future. At that time the Mosaic Law, which the Lord Jesus lifted to the nth degree in His Sermon on the Mount, will be enforced on the earth because Christ will be reigning. It will be His will and it will be His law.

The emphasis in this chapter is on ethics, not on events. The emphasis is on practice, not prophecy. All of this should influence our living today. The study of prophecy is not to entertain the curious or to intrigue the intellect but to encourage holy living. Remember that the apostle John wrote: "And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (1John 3:3). The study of prophecy gives us a purifying hope.

Isaiah now is looking forward into the Kingdom Age, the Millennium. The Lord Jesus is reigning. As we said, our Lord lifted the Mosaic Law to the nth degree in His Sermon on the Mount, which makes it absolutely impossible for anybody to be saved by keeping the Law. For instance, He said, "...Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca [a word of contempt], shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire" (Matt. 5:22). On that kind of basis, very few of us would escape. How, then, are we going to be saved? Well, we have a Savior who saves us. But when He is reigning on earth, there will be no hijacking of planes, no kidnapping, no murdering, no mugging. We will be able to walk in safety down Glory Boulevard and Hallelujah Avenue in Jerusalem; the earth will be a safe place in that day. Every man will dwell in peace under his own vine and fig tree, which means he is going to be a capitalist. Everyone will own property and will not be taxed for it. That's going to be great, isn't it!¹

¹ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

It is important that God's people demonstrate righteousness in their lives, but that is impossible without divine enablement. These chapters clarify the roles of God and man in demonstrating righteousness. This section consists of two parts, each of which concludes with a promise from God to help His people (chs 56—57 and 58—59). Each of the two parts has three segments: an example of realized righteousness (56:1-8 and 58:1-14), a reflection on the situation (56:9—57:13 and 59:1-15a), and an announcement of the Lord's help (57:14-21 and 59:15b-21).

The need for humility and holiness chs. 56—57. These chapters introduce the main subject of this section of the book, which grows out of what Isaiah revealed previously. If salvation depends on God's grace, do God's servants have any responsibility other than receiving that grace? Simply being a member of the covenant community of Israel and fulfilling the cultic (worship system) requirements of the Mosaic Law might seem to be an adequate response for some Israelites. Isaiah revealed that God had redeemed them so they could demonstrate His righteousness in their lives in the world. This would glorify Him, bring others to Him, and result in Israel's greatest blessing. But demonstrating that righteousness was impossible for them to do by themselves (cf. chs. 1—39). They needed to appropriate His grace as redeemed people—redeemed from captivity (chs. 40—48) and redeemed from sin (chs. 49—55)—to become the servants of God that He intended them to be. Chapter 56 contains moral exhortations in view of God's salvation.²

¹Thus saith the LORD, Keep ye judgment, and do justice: for my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed.

Eight Predictions -- Unfulfilled:

1. My salvation is near to come (Isa. 56:1).
2. My righteousness is soon to be revealed.
3. I will give the eunuchs that obey Me a place in My house and a name better than that of having sons and daughters (Isa. 56:5).
4. I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.
5. The sons of strangers that become My servants and obey Me will I also bring to My holy mountain; and I will make them joyful in My house of prayer (Isa. 56:6-7).
6. Their burnt offerings will be accepted upon My altar (Isa. 56:7).
7. My house will be called a house of prayer for all people.
8. I will gather others besides Israel to Myself (Isa. 56:8).

[Keep ye judgment, and do justice] -- Commands to Israel

Reference is here made to certain requirements of Israel -- things necessary for them to be saved and have a part in the Messiah's kingdom when He comes. Blessing is pronounced on all who keep these commands.

² <http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/isaiah.pdf>

Six Commands to Israel and Others:

1. Keep judgment (Isa. 56:1).
2. Do justice.
3. Keep from polluting the sabbath (Isa. 56:2).
4. Keep the hand from doing evil
5. Do not let strangers that are joined to Me slander Me (Isa. 56:3).
6. Do not let the eunuchs complain of their sterility.

The salvation and righteousness of God will be brought to Israel as a nation at the second coming of Christ (Isa. 66:7-8; Zech. 12:10 -- Zech. 13:1; Mt. 23:37-39; Rom. 11:25-29).³

"My salvation is near to come" -- apparently the prophets expected the establishment of the Kingdom immediately. Although they made allowance for the possibility of an interval, they speak of it in the immediate future. "Salvation" is the national salvation of Israel. This is what was in the mind of the apostle Paul in Romans 11:26 when he said, "And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob." Anticipation of the coming salvation was to be an incentive to do justice -- just as our hope of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is an incentive today to lead a holy life.⁴

1-2. People are urged to do what is right (cf. 1:17) because God's salvation (spiritual deliverance and physical protection) will come soon. Again Isaiah linked present behavior with future salvation and blessings. Because the Lord will bring salvation to those who believe, they should act justly in the present.

In Isaiah's day a righteous person (a believer who does what is right, 56:1) lived according to God's Law, an expression of His righteous standards. Keeping the Sabbath was important under the Law (Ex. 20:8-11), for a person by not engaging in agricultural or business pursuits on that day thereby acknowledged that he believed God would take care of him and bless him. Since the Sabbath was a sign of Israel's covenant with God, keeping the Sabbath signified that a person believed in the covenant and the Lord. Such a person also turned from doing... evil (cf. Isa. 55:7).⁵

Keep justice, and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come: This prophetic Word is directed to God's discouraged people, who have slacked in obedience and righteousness. They see no reason to repent as long as things look down. God shakes them out of this by calling them to keep justice, and do righteousness in anticipation of what He will do.

It's like the person who says, "LORD, I'll start giving when You bless my finances." No; start giving now, and do it in anticipation that God will bless your finances.⁶

³ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

⁴ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

⁵ The Bible Knowledge Commentary

⁶ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-Isa/Isa-56.cfm?a=735001

²Blessed is the man *that* doeth this, and the son of man *that* layeth hold on it; that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and keepeth his hand from doing any evil.

[Blessed is the man that doeth this] Happy is the man who keeps the requirements stated here (note b, Isa. 56:1).

[keepeth the sabbath from polluting it] Keeping the sabbath was one of the sacred rites of the Jewish religion and commemorated their deliverance from slavery in Egypt (Dt. 5:15).⁷

God commanded his people to rest and honor him on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). He wants us to serve him every day, but he wants us to make one day special when we rest and focus our thoughts on him. For the Israelites, this special day was the Sabbath (Saturday). Some Christians set Saturday aside as this special day, but many accept Sunday (the day of the week that Jesus rose from the dead) as the "Lord's Day," a day of rest and honor to God. Do you make Sunday special?⁸

Keeps from defiling the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8–11) epitomizes righteousness, for the Sabbath was the sign of the covenant (Ex. 31:13–17; Jer. 17:21–27; Ezek. 20:20, 21). Since keeping the Sabbath revealed clear commitment to the Lord, it was closely associated with righteousness and justice.⁹

When I was in high school, my two sisters and I had chores we were responsible for daily. But we always waited until our step-father was pulling into the driveway to think about it. Suddenly, we'd jump up out of our chairs and start madly trying to vacuum or empty the sink. It was always too late, and we'd always get in trouble for not having done them earlier.

Here, God is telling us not to wait for Him to return to start doing right. The one who preserves justice, avoids evil, and does righteousness BEFORE the Lord's return will be blessed.

Jesus spent a lot of time telling us to be on the alert (Matt. 24:35-30). We don't know the day Jesus will return, so we need to stay watchful and ready. We need to be found busy about God's business when that day comes. Remember that in the parable of the ten virgins, the five that were unprepared were locked outside of the wedding feast (Matt. 25:1-13).¹⁰

The Sabbath is a covenant sign that represents a lifestyle of devotion to the Lord, for it requires the practical reorganization of every week around him (cf. Ex. 31:12–17; Ezek. 20:18–20). True observance of the Sabbath entails not just refraining from work but also refraining from doing any evil. On the Sabbath command as it applies to Christian believers, see note on Rom. 14:5; also notes on Matt. 12:6–12; Mark 2:27–28; John 5:10; 5:17; 9:14; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:17; Heb. 4:8–10.¹¹

⁷ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

⁸ Life Application Study Bible.

⁹ Nelson's Study Bible

¹⁰ <http://rondaniel.com/library/23-Isaiah/Isaiah5501.php>

¹¹ ESV Study Bible Notes

³Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the LORD, speak, saying, The LORD hath utterly separated me from his people: neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree.

Gentile Proselytes - In all ages it has been common for Gentiles to become proselytes to the Jewish religion. The idea here is that no man should think he is cut off from the blessings of Jehovah; everyone can enjoy the rights and privileges of the people of God, even a stranger or eunuch who was formerly excluded from certain rights in the congregation (Dt. 23:1-3). This teaches that in the Millennium such restrictions in the law of Moses will be abolished so that all classes will enjoy the same rights and privileges (cp. Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).

[dry tree] That is, sterile. This means that in the Millennial and eternal kingdom of God on earth they will be healed and become normal. If the deaf, blind, lame, and other infirm ones are to be healed by the Messiah when He comes (as in Isa. 33:24; 35:5-6) then sterility will also be cured and all men who live in the coming kingdom will be normal eternally.¹²

The Gentile in that day is not to feel that he is an outsider because of God's peculiar arrangement with Israel. On the contrary, he is invited to step up and share the blessings. A eunuch could not serve as a priest under the Mosaic economy. In other words, a physical handicap will shut no one out in that future day.¹³

Isaiah clearly proclaims the radical message that God's blessings are for all people, even Gentiles and eunuchs, who were often excluded from worship and not even considered citizens in Israel. Whatever your race, social position, work, or financial situation, God's blessings are as much for you as for anyone else. No one must exclude in any way those God chooses to bless.¹⁴

3-5. Gentiles, people outside the covenant community, who followed the Lord were not to think they would have no salvation or part in the millennial kingdom. Even foreigners (cf. 14:1) and eunuchs who join themselves to the Lord are welcome. This contrasts with the exclusion of eunuchs under the Mosaic Law (Deut. 23:1). Keeping the Sabbaths and obeying God's covenant stipulations (cf. Isa. 56:6) would demonstrate their loyalty to the Lord (cf. vv. 1-2). In fact they will be memorialized forever (v. 5). This is striking because a eunuch, unable to sire children, has no way of passing on his name through sons.¹⁵

Obedience is tested by the opportunity for the observance of the Sabbath, which was to be a sign of the faithfulness of the people to God's covenant (cf. Mark 2:27, note). The reference to the "son of the foreigner" and "eunuch" indicates that no personal disabilities or ethnic heritage will exclude one from God's kingdom, which is open to every man who will turn to the Lord in faith.¹⁶

¹² Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

¹³ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

¹⁴ Life Application Study Bible.

¹⁵ The Bible Knowledge Commentary

¹⁶ Believers Study Bible

Why shouldn't they say it? Because it isn't true. They may feel like they are utterly separated ... from His people, but God promises they aren't. So He says to them, "Don't say that!" Often when people feel like foreigners or outcasts, the feelings become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is only by refusing to embrace such feelings, and choosing instead to trust in God's promise, that such feelings can be broken. If God says you belong, then you belong.¹⁷

In speaking of the proselyte who joined himself to the Lord, Isaiah was not speaking of the foreign wives that returning exiles married. Ezra and Nehemiah would have to purge the restored community of these unconverted pagans (see Ezra 9). Isaiah was prophesying of foreigners who would be converted to the worship of the true Lord (see 44:5). These were foreigners who would demonstrate saving faith and thus be counted among those "born in Zion" (see Ps. 87).¹⁸

God's exclusion of foreigners and eunuchs from Israel's public worship (Deut. 23:1-8) was not because these types of people were intrinsically evil and therefore unacceptable to Him. God excluded foreigners because He wanted to teach His people that opposition to His will and His people has abiding consequences. He excluded eunuchs because He wanted His people to learn that the destruction of sexual organs that He created has consequences. These consequences affected their worship of the Holy One of Israel, as well as their public life and their private life. Ruth and the Ethiopian eunuch are the proof that God accepts people on the basis of their faith in Him—in spite of their ancestry or personal history. Non-Israelites and disabled Israelites could enjoy the blessings of God's salvation (personal salvation and millennial blessings) along with normal believing Israelites. This passage helps us understand the qualifications for elders and deacons in the New Testament. While the office may be closed to a particular individual because of acts he committed previously that have continuing consequences, he is fully acceptable to God and capable of serving Him in equally significant ministries.¹⁹

⁴For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose *the things* that please me, and take hold of my covenant;

Eunuchs - Levitical law requires them to be cut off from congregation (Deut 23). However, here through Isaiah God is giving them grace. Hezekiah's son (2 Kgs 20:8); David, et al (Dan 1:3).²⁰

The handicapped, the strangers, and all outcasts are invited to accept God's gracious overture of a position that is better than a son or daughter and a security that is everlasting. This the Law did not give. He is talking about the Millennium, of course.²¹

Seven acts that constituted righteousness:

1. Keeping the sabbaths (all sabbaths, not only the weekly one, Isa. 56:4-6)
2. Choosing the things pleasing to God

¹⁷ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-Isa/Isa-56.cfm?a=735001

¹⁸ Nelson's Study Bible

¹⁹ <http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/isaiah.pdf>

²⁰ Chuck Missler, Notes on Isaiah, khouse.org

²¹ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

3. Taking hold of His covenant
4. Joining to the Lord (Isa. 56:6)
5. Serving Him
6. Loving the name of the Lord
7. Being His servant

[choose the things that please me] This simply means to observe the law.

[take hold of my covenant] To take hold of the covenant means to consecrate to obey it (Isa. 56:4,6).²²

⁵Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off.

Wolf on a place and a name: "An interesting application of this verse is the 'Yad vaShem' (A Memorial and a Name), the building in Jerusalem to honor the Jews who died in the holocaust during World War II but whose names are recorded in perpetuity."

The Lord would give eunuchs who obeyed Him out of love: an eternal reputation, far greater than what they would have had if they had not obeyed Him, but instead had borne children to perpetuate their reputations on the earth. The Lord's perpetuation of the Ethiopian eunuch's reputation in Acts 8:27-39 is only one example of how God can do this. He has been remembered for his faith far longer than if he had only had sons and daughters. This promise can be very comforting to childless couples. If they follow God faithfully, He will bless them more greatly than He would bless them if they only had physical children. This promise of an eternal reward anticipates Jesus' teaching that His disciples should pursue eternal rewards rather than treasures on earth (cf. Matt. 6:1-24).²³

⁶Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the LORD, to serve him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be his servants, every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant;

“Sabbath” - 1st day or 7th day?²⁴

Twelve Rewards for Obedience

1. Salvation (Isa. 56:1)
2. Righteousness
3. Happiness (note, Isa. 56:2)
4. Union with God's people (Isa. 56:3)
5. Healing (note, Isa. 56:3)
6. Access to God's house (Isa. 56:5)
7. A sure place in God's city

²² Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

²³ <http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/isaiah.pdf>

²⁴ Chuck Missler, Notes on Isaiah, khouse.org

8. A name better than that of having children
9. An everlasting name
10. Access to God's holy mountain (Isa. 56:7)
11. Joy in the house of prayer
12. Acceptance of sacrifices to God

[mine house] The eternal temple (Isa. 56:5,7; Ezek. 43:7; Zech. 6:12-13; Mt. 21:13).

[walls] The walls of Jerusalem.

[an everlasting name] This suggests that each person will be given an eternal name other than this earthly or present one (cp. Rev. 2:17; 3:12; 14:1).²⁵

The stranger will be given a new heart that he might love the Lord in that day.²⁶

6-8. Foreigners who love... the Lord are acceptable to God and will be regathered along with believing Israelites. Redeemed Gentiles, though not in the covenantal family of Israel, can still receive God's blessings. They show their devotion to the Lord by their service, worship, and obedience (keeping the Sabbath and God's covenant stipulations; cf. v. 4). As God promised Abraham, through him all peoples of the world will be blessed (Gen. 12:3). These Gentiles will be gathered to Zion (His holy mountain; see comments on Isa. 11:9) along with Israel, where they too will worship the Lord in prayer and offerings.²⁷

God would bless foreigners (non-Israelites) who came to believe in Yahweh, and sought to love and follow Him for His sake rather than for personal benefit (cf. Ruth 1:16). They could serve the Lord by ministering to Him. The Hebrew word translated "minister," *sharet*, usually describes priestly service (cf. 60:7, 10; 61:6). Foreigners might even serve the Lord in ways that would be as significant as serving as priests in Israel, though that particular ministry was not open to them under the Law.²⁸

⁷Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices *shall be* accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people.

“House of prayer for ALL peoples” - quoted Mark 11:17.
Situation there in Israel, yet even fits today!²⁹

[Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer]

This does not mean that every saved man in all eternity will move to Jerusalem and live in Palestine; that would cause other lands outside the promised land to be uninhabited. It simply means that God will permit men to go up to Jerusalem to worship (Isa. 2:2-4; Zech. 14:16-21).

[burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted] Another proof that animal sacrifices will again be offered in the Millennium and New Earth forever (Ezek. 40-48, notes).

²⁵ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

²⁶ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

²⁷ The Bible Knowledge Commentary

²⁸ <http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/isaiah.pdf>

²⁹ Chuck Missler, Notes on Isaiah, khouse.org

[mine altar] See Mt. 21:13.³⁰

Jesus quoted these words when He drove the money changers out of the temple (cf. Matt 21:13; Luke 19:46).

This is the verse from which the Lord quoted when He cleansed the temple the second time. It was God's original intention that the temple was to be for all people irrespective of their race, tongue, class, or condition. It had long ceased to function as such in Christ's day.

Also the present-day church is as far removed from its primary objective as the temple. The church has become like a suburban country club. It has moved from the downtown area and into the suburban area where it is serving good meals and has good volleyball and basketball teams. But there are few personal workers bringing the lost to the Lord.³¹

⁸The Lord GOD which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith, Yet will I gather *others* to him, beside those that are gathered unto him.

This verse speaks of the regathering of Israel at the second coming of Christ, and makes it clear that some will have been gathered before this (Isa. 11:10-12, notes).³²

The Kingdom is to be worldwide in its extent and will include members of every family of the human race. God says in that day they are going to go out after folk. I believe that the greatest time of turning to Christ will take place during the Millennium.³³

Because of the pain of exile and captivity, Israel had become intensely self-focused. They believed God only really cared about them, and the rest of the nations (many of whom treated Israel cruelly) did not matter. But God wanted to expand the vision of Israel beyond her own borders, so they would know that God loved the perishing world and wanted them to love them also.³⁴

⁹All ye beasts of the field, come to devour, *yea*, all ye beasts in the forest.

This seems to begin a new message of contrasted classes (Isa. 56:9 -- Isa. 57:21).³⁵

Throughout most of this second nine-chapter division of Isaiah (chaps. 49-57) the emphasis has been on the future glorious state of the redeemed remnant in the kingdom to be established by the Messiah. Now in 56:9-57:21, which concludes these nine chapters, Isaiah reflected on the spiritual situation in his day. In view of their glorious future, one would suppose that his people

³⁰ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

³¹ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

³² Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

³³ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

³⁴ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-Isa/Isa-56.cfm?a=735001

³⁵ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

would want to obey the Lord in anticipation of that kingdom. But this was not true in Isaiah's time.³⁶

Now that we have seen the marvelous view of the future Kingdom, Isaiah returns to the predicament of the kingdom of his day. And we see the same problems as we look around us today.

Our vision is now shifted from the lofty contemplation of the glorious future Kingdom to the sorry condition of the then existing kingdom. God was permitting the nations of the world to come in like wild and ferocious beasts, and they were robbing and pillaging His people. Assyria had already broken in, and Babylon was soon to break in; later others would come to plunder and destroy. If you have ever seen pictures of the walls of Jerusalem and the wailing wall, you can see that they are built of stones from different periods of civilizations. It is quite evident that the city has been destroyed repeatedly. History tells us that Jerusalem has been destroyed at least twenty-seven times, and today it is built upon debris. To go down to the place where Christ walked this earth you would have to dig thirty to fifty feet below the present surface. God permitted nations to come against Israel. Why? Because Israel failed Him so.³⁷

9-11 The "watchmen" were the nation's leaders. The leaders of Israel were blind to every danger and thus did not warn when danger was coming. Apathetic about their people's needs, they were more concerned about satisfying their own greed. Leadership's special privileges can cause leaders to either sacrifice for the good of their people or to sacrifice their people for their own greed. If you are in a leadership position, use it for the good of your people.³⁸

9-12. The Lord called for the beasts (Gentile powers, probably Babylon) to devour (punish) Israel because she was spiritually insensitive. The watchmen (cf. Jer. 6:17; Ezek. 33:7), priests and religious leaders, were blind and ignorant and were like dogs who like to sleep and eat. Good shepherds know the best grazing ground for their flocks. But these leaders were ignorant (cf. Isa. 56:10) shepherds going their own way like their sheep! (cf. 53:6) They were more interested in their own gain than in their people's welfare. Concerned only with their own pleasure, they failed to consider that judgment will come (56:12).³⁹

The same picture is used in Revelation 19:17: Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, both small and great."⁴⁰

³⁶ The Bible Knowledge Commentary

³⁷ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

³⁸ Life Application Study Bible.

³⁹ The Bible Knowledge Commentary

⁴⁰ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-Isa/Isa-56.cfm?a=735001

¹⁰His watchmen *are* blind: they are all ignorant, they *are* all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber.

Twelvefold description of wicked watchmen:

1. They are blind (Isa. 56:10).
2. They are ignorant.
3. They are like dumb dogs.
4. They cannot bark.
5. They love sleep.
6. They are lazy.
7. They are greedy dogs (Isa. 56:11).
8. They are covetous.
9. They are ignorant shepherds.
10. They are selfish.
11. Everyone is consecrated to gain.
12. They live in pleasure, drunkenness, and increased revellings (Isa. 56:12).⁴¹

This is a picture of the prophets and priests who spoke for God in that day. God permitted the enemy to take Jerusalem because of the weak and inadequate leaders of the people. They were blind. They were ignorant. They were dumb dogs. In the New Testament Paul warned the people to beware of dogs (see Phil. 3:2). What did he mean? Well, he's not talking about being wary of a stranger's dog that barks at you. He is referring to false teachers and preachers who are not declaring the full counsel of God. In Isaiah's day every shepherd had a dog to help him watch the sheep. The dog would lie down at night and keep one eye open. The minute a dangerous animal or a human being came to harm or to steal a sheep, the dog would bark. Watchmen -- the prophets and the priests who should have been warning God's people and giving out the Word of God -- were ignorant of it. They were like dumb dogs who did not bark when there was danger. It was easier for them to keep quiet.

Liberalism, in my judgment, came into being because of the cowardly position that many ministers took. When you preach the Word of God, you step on toes. I know this -- I have been doing it for years. I try to be as nice as I can about preaching the Word, but it is strong and this verse is very strong. The man who stands in the pulpit and won't give out God's Word is a dumb dog! I didn't say that, but Isaiah did say it, and Isaiah wrote at the direction of the Holy Spirit of God. A dumb dog is a man who won't give out the Word of God. He lies down and sleeps. He cannot bark. He loves to slumber. It is much more comfortable for the pastor to try to please his people.

Over the years I have received many letters from pulpit committees asking me to recommend a pastor. Then they list the qualifications they want him to have. The top priority qualification is personality. They want a friendly pastor who knows how to communicate to all groups -- a man that the senior citizens will love and the young people will love. Some of the letters don't even ask for a man with the ability to teach the Word of God! As a result, there are a lot of dumb dogs in pulpits. I am sorry to say this, but it is true, and Isaiah said it before I did.⁴²

⁴¹ Dake's Annotated Reference Bible

⁴² Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

The pronoun His refers to the Lord. Watchmen, those who ought to warn the city of approaching danger, refers to prophets (21:6; Jer. 6:17; Ezek. 3:17; 33:2-7) who do not fear God. The ungodly watchmen leave the people defenseless.⁴³

10-11 His watchmen are blind: The leaders of God's people are blind; judgment is on the way, but they don't see it and warn God's people. They don't fulfill their purpose as watchmen. They are ignorant, like dumb dogs, simply sleeping.

They are shepherds who cannot understand: These ungodly leaders are a sad contrast to the godly leadership personified by King David in Isaiah 55:3-5. These are unfaithful shepherds, who only look everyone for his own gain.⁴⁴

The false prophets, who were God's watchmen over His flock, were blind to the dangers that faced Israel (cf. 21:6; 52:8). They were like dogs that should have barked when danger approached but were silent. Instead of being on guard, they were asleep, dreaming of an unrealistically rosy future for the nation. They were unaware of those things that should have gripped their attention.

When the minister does not warn the flock of false doctrine, he ceases to be a faithful undershepherd of the sheep, and instead becomes a dumb dog that cannot bark.⁴⁵

In ancient times, the watchmen were the guys responsible for alerting people to danger. Their job was to stay up on the city wall (2Sam. 18:24) and look (1Sam. 14:16), keeping their eyes open (2Sam. 13:34), which meant staying awake (Psa. 127:1).

As the watchman made his rounds (Song 3:3), he was to tell what time it was when people inquired of him (Isa. 21:11). He was also supposed to blow the trumpet (Jer. 6:17) and alert people when something eventful was going to happen (2Sam 18:25), telling what he saw (2Kings 9:17), and continuing to explain what was happening to those who didn't have his vantage point (2Kings 9:20).

It was a vital job - lives were depending on him.

In the same manner, God appointed the spiritual leaders of the people as watchmen over their souls. But in Isaiah's day, God said that His watchmen were blind, ignorant, and unable to shout a warning. They were drunkards who were constantly asleep, greedy, and unjust. And it was only going to get worse.

Since there were essentially no guards on duty, the wild beasts were invited in to kill and eat the people inside. Following the spiritual metaphor, these would be the false prophets, who, Jesus said,

Matt. 7:15 "...come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

Or the devil, who...

1Pet. 5:8 ...prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

You can see why God valued watchmen who did their job, and why He was so frustrated when the watchmen He appointed got drunk and fell asleep.⁴⁶

⁴³ Nelson's Study Bible

⁴⁴ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-Isa/Isa-56.cfm?a=735001

⁴⁵ <http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/isaiah.pdf>

⁴⁶ <http://rondaniel.com/library/23-Isaiah/Isaiah5609.php>

¹¹Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough, and they are shepherds that cannot understand: they all look to their own way, every one for his gain, from his quarter.

"They are greedy dogs." They are concerned with their own personal interests rather than the welfare of their people.

One day I had lunch with a preacher friend of mine who is retired. He said to me, "McGee, you are making your message on the radio a little strong, aren't you? Suppose people turn against you and won't support your program?" I replied, "Then I'll go off the air and just tell the Lord about it. If He intends for me to stay on the air, He intends for me to give out His Word. Very frankly, I think that this is His problem, not mine. I'll just give out His word."⁴⁷

greedy dogs: The dog was not highly regarded in biblical culture, and to the Jews they were unclean. Shepherds is a metaphor for rulers (40:11; Ezek. 34:1-6).⁴⁸

Their absolute failure at being watchmen is why the Lord also called them "shepherds who have no understanding" (v.11).

A good shepherd knows the reason he's there. His job is to protect the sheep from predators. Jesus said,

John 10:11-13 "...the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep."

The shepherds in Isaiah's day had no concept of this, and as a result had left God's people open to predators of all sorts.

And sometimes those predators were the shepherds themselves. Since they were also greedy dogs themselves, they were often the ones who preyed on the sheep. God told Ezekiel,

Ezek. 34:2-10 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but rather the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.'"⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

⁴⁸ Nelson's Study Bible

⁴⁹ <http://rondaniel.com/library/23-Isaiah/Isaiah5609.php>

¹²Come ye, *say they*, I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink; and to morrow shall be as this day, *and much more abundant*.

These people drowned their sad plight and condition in drink, and they faced the future as drunkards and blind optimists. There are many people today who are facing life like that. They drown their troubles in drink. In our nation today, my friend, we have an alcohol problem among adults and young people -- and even children! I am seeing more drunkards today than I have ever seen before in my long life. When I was on a plane the other day, I was seated near a dear old grandmother. She was the sweetest looking little thing, and I just wished she were my grandmother. I was thinking, Well, she is one person on this plane who won't be ordering a cocktail. And, do you know, she ordered a Bloody Mary! Oh, boy, she tossed them down! Obviously she was accustomed to that sort of thing. The morality of our nation is gone, my friend. And a great many Christians don't want to hear about it; they would rather listen to soft, sweet music.

Well, you don't get into trouble when you play soft music, but you do when you give out the Word of God. But Isaiah told it like it was, and that's what I intend to do also.⁵⁰

We will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink: Worse than being passively ignorant and blind, they are actively wicked. As judgment approaches, they simply drink and get drunk.

Tomorrow will be as today, and much more abundant: Their blind faith in progress has replaced a reasoned faith in God. They are ripe for judgment, and unprepared for judgment. Since the picture of Isaiah 56:9 relates to the pictures in the Book of Revelation regarding the return of Jesus, we can see this as a picture of the leaders of the unprepared world - perhaps even the unprepared church - at the return of Jesus.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

⁵¹ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-Isa/Isa-56.cfm?a=735001