

“For My Salvation is Near to Come, and My Righteousness to be Revealed” (Isaiah 56:1)

Isaiah 55-56 extends a beautiful invitation to all people to come and share in the blessings of the gospel. None are barred from partaking of the waters of life and feasting upon the everlasting bread, emblems of the atonement of Jesus Christ (see Isa. 55:1). Not only is Israel promised redemption, but “strangers” and “eunuchs” (representing all who have been cut off from covenant blessings) are invited to join together with covenant Israel in the holy temple of God, where their sacrifices and offerings will be accepted. The entire earth will rejoice; mountains and hills shall sing, and the trees of the field shall clap their hands for joy! (see Isa. 55:12)

These chapters beautifully convey Isaiah’s ability to see into the future, as the only time when there has been an open invitation for all worthy people, male and female, to participate in temple ordinances is in our own day. At all other times, only one family (Aaron) from one tribe (Levi) was able to enter within the walls of the temple. Isaiah, from the tribe of Judah, received his own endowment in the heavenly temple (see Isa. 6), as he was unable to enter into the temple in Jerusalem.

Whereas Isaiah 54 had a distinctively feminine aspect as it spoke of the desolate and barren wife, chapter 56 has a distinctively male tone, as the invitation is extended to eunuchs and the sons of strangers. Anciently, both the barren woman and the mutilated eunuch would have been separated from enjoying the full embrace of society; a person in such a condition felt shamed and branded by their perceived inadequacy. Taken together, they speak of the intimate knowledge that the Savior has for each of His children; He understands those frailties, disabilities and burdens we carry. By particularly focusing on the barren and desolate woman and the eunuch, each of whom is promised fruitfulness as a result of coming into covenant, we see that the Lord’s invitation for healing and redemption really is extended to all people.

Thus saith the Lord, keep ye judgment, and do justice:
for my salvation is near to come, and my righteousness to be revealed (Isa 56:1).

As in earlier chapters of Isaiah, the Lord’s emphasis is on righteousness and justice, traits he looked for in his people, but could not find (see Isa.5:7). These two character traits are evidence of people who understand and honor their covenants.

Blessed 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.

Neither 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.

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

Even 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.

Also 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;

Even 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** (emphasis added)

The Lord God which gathereth the outcasts of Israel saith,
Yet will I gather others to him, beside those that are gathered unto him (Isa 56:2-8).

The *CES Old Testament Student Manual* states that Isaiah “To understand Isaiah’s meaning in chapter 56, verses 1-8, one must understand the significance of three words and their meaning to ancient Israel. The words are *Sabbath*, *strangers*, and *eunuchs*.

“Sabbath. Modern readers think only of Sunday, or the Lord’s day, as the Sabbath, but for ancient Israel *Sabbath* had a wider meaning. The weekly Sabbath was only one of several days called the Sabbath. All of the feast days, including Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles, and the Day of Atonement, were also called Sabbaths. Thus, to ‘keep my Sabbaths (plural)’ (v.4) implied a keeping of the whole law of Moses, since the various feasts covered many aspects of the Israelites’ commitment to God. Also, by revelation, the Lord told Moses that keeping the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between Israel and God (see Exodus 31:13, 16-17). When Isaiah talked about polluting the Sabbath, he meant far more than simply working or playing on Sunday (Saturday, for the Jews)” (*Old Testament Student Manual 1 Kings - Malachi*, p. 204).

The emphasis on Sabbath-keeping has been renewed in our day. On June 30, 2015, the Church released a statement and a video to encourage better observance of the Sabbath Day. “Elder Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explained that Church leaders have felt the importance of encouraging families and individuals to rethink and refocus their efforts on what they do on the Sabbath day. ‘Our whole desire is that throughout the Church, we focus our Sabbath day worship on the Lord,’ he said” (<http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-leaders-call-for-better-observance-of-sabbath-day>).

The Lord stated that “it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you” (Ex. 31:13). How well are we keeping this “sign” that demonstrates that we know that we belong to the Lord, and that the Sabbath day is His? It is also the sign, according to Isaiah 56, by which He will know that the “strangers” have truly accepted His gospel and covenant.

“Strangers. ‘A stranger in the Mosaic law, and in the Old Testament generally, means one not of the Israelitish descent dwelling with the Hebrews, as distinguished from a foreigner temporarily visiting the land [Ex. 20:10; Lev. 16:29; 17:8; 2 Sam. 1:13; Ezek. 14:7]. The stranger was not a full citizen, yet he had recognized rights and duties. He was under the protection of God, and the Israelites were charged to treat him kindly [Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:18-19].’ (Fallows, ed., *Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. “strangers.”) (*Old Testament Student Manual 1 Kings - Malachi*, p.204).

“Eunuchs. Under the Mosaic law, anyone who had been sexually mutilated was not allowed into full fellowship in the house of Israel (see Deut. 23:1-2). The law was likely written because wholeness of

body typified or symbolized spiritual wholeness. A priest or Levite who was a eunuch could not function in the priesthood offices (Lev. 21:17-23)” (*Old Testament Student Manual 1 Kings - Malachi* p. 204).

The Parry brothers add: “A eunuch is a man who has been emasculated and therefore is physically unable to beget children. Under the Law of Moses, eunuchs had no inheritance in Israel because they had no offspring. The Lord promises that they will receive full blessings in the gospel if they will receive and keep his laws. Among these blessings is the Abrahamic covenant, which includes a promise of endless seed” (Parry, *Understanding Isaiah*, p. 497).

The term “eunuch” here could very well be symbolic, as is the term “barren” for the desolate wife. Whether because he had not been born into the covenant fold, or had not brought forth the fruits of covenant, the eunuch is barren, but like the sons of the strangers, once he takes hold of the covenant, he is promised all of the blessings pertaining thereto.

Chapter 56 seems to be particularly relevant to our day, as those who accept the covenant are promised a welcome in the temple. There, they are promised a “place” and “a name better than of sons and daughters.” The Parry brothers state that the word “place” should read “hand” from the Hebrew, so that within the walls of the temple, the Lord will give a “hand” and a name (Parry, *Understanding Isaiah*, p. 497).

What name could be “better than of sons and daughters?” Perhaps the name could simply be the name of the family of Israel, as the invitation extended in these chapters is to all people, including “strangers” who had not been born into the covenant; Israel is the name of God’s covenant family.

There are many possibilities for the meaning of the “name” that will be received in the Lord’s house. Modern revelation may help shed some additional light:

This earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, all be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon, whereby all things pertaining to an inferior kingdom, or all kingdoms of a lower order, will be manifest to those who dwell on it; and this earth will be Christ’s.

Then the white stone mentioned in **Revelation 2:17**, will become a Urim and Thummim to each individual who receives one, whereby things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms will be made known;

And a white stone is given to each of those who come into the celestial kingdom, whereon is a new name written, which no man knoweth save he that receiveth it. The new name is the key word (D&C 130:9-11).

The Parry brothers add: “The name may be the new name given to those who are exalted (D&C 130:11), or it may be the name that King Benjamin gave to his people, which ‘never should be blotted out’ (Mosiah 5:11) – that is, the name of Christ. Compare this usage of ‘everlasting name, that shall not be cut off’ with the usage in 55:13” (Parry, *Understanding Isaiah*, p. 497).

The focus and tone of the chapter changes from one of invitation to those who have not been part of covenant Israel to one of condemnation for those who are children of the covenant, but have disregarded the Lord — and worse, participated in idolatrous and adulterous worship. Because we have spoken in depth on this topic previously, we will only touch lightly upon it this week.

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

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

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

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

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 evil to come.

He shall enter into peace:
they shall rest in their beds, each one walking in his uprightness" (Isa. 56:9-57:2).

Because Israel's watchmen — priests, kings and prophets — were lazy, greedy and corrupt, the "beasts of the field and forest," or conquering armies, came in to devour the people. Whereas a watchdog performed an important role in protecting the flock, Israel's leaders were likened to sleeping dogs who could not bark, or raise the warning voice. They looked for "gain" from their business, and therefore did not speak words that would displease their congregations, a circumstance that is widely practiced in today's society. Instead, the leaders prophesied that "all was well," and that "tomorrow" would be the same.

In an earlier chapter, Isaiah wrote:

Therefore the Lord will cut off from Israel head and tail, branch and rush, in one day.
The ancient and the honorable, he is the head; and the prophet that teacheth lies, he is the tail.
For the leaders of this people cause them to err;
and they that are led of them are destroyed (Isa. 9:14-16).

As the righteous passed peacefully away in death, no one paid attention, and they certainly did not see their death as a merciful deliverance from the terror and destruction that would come with the conquering armies and resulting famine. The general population engaged in drinking and merry-making, heedless of the warnings from the true prophets, or of the signs of devastation to come.

But draw near hither, ye sons of the sorceress, the seed of the adulterer and the whore.

Against whom do ye sport yourselves?
against whom make ye a wide mouth, and draw out the tongue?
are ye not children of transgression, as seed of falsehood,

Enflaming yourselves with idols under every green tree,
slaying the children in the valleys under the cliffs of the rocks?

Among the smooth stones of the stream is thy portion; they, they are thy lot:
even to them hast thou poured a drink offering, thou has offered a meat offering.
Should I receive comfort in these?

Upon a lofty and high mountain hast thou set thy bed:
even thither wentest thou up to offer sacrifice.

Behind the doors also and the posts hast thou set up thy remembrance:
for thou hast discovered thyself to another than me, and art gone up;
thou hast enlarged thy bed, and made thee a covenant with them;
thou lovedst their bed where thou sawest it.

And thou wentest to the king with ointment, and didst increase thy perfumes,
and didst send thy messengers far off, and didst debase thyself even unto hell.

Thou art wearied in the greatness of thy way; yet saidst thou not, There is no hope:
thou hast found the life of thine hand; therefore thou wast not grieved.

And of whom hast thou been afraid or feared, that thou hast lied,
and hast not remembered me, nor laid it to thy heart?
have not I held my peace even of old, and thou fearest me not?

I will declare thy righteousness, and thy works; for they shall not profit thee.

When thou criest, let thy companies deliver thee;
but the wind shall carry them away; vanity shall take them; (Isa. 57:3-13).

Victor Ludlow explains: "Isaiah highlights two major abuses of the people, immorality and the sacrifice of children. In verses 5, 7, and 8, he plunges into a vivid description of their wickedness. They worship with 'great zeal' as they 'inflamm themselves' under the terebinths (v. 5). The precise meaning of this phrase is lost to modern readers, but the Hebrew word translated as "great zeal" or "enflaming yourselves" means to arouse a person sexually (Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 3:402). Ancient idol worship was inseparably connected with ritual prostitution and fertility cults. Since ancient economies were founded upon agriculture, the people's dependence upon the fertility of the ground was absolute. As the pagan worship developed in ancient cultures, the belief developed that if a farmer had intercourse with a priestess at a local temple and she became pregnant, this was a sign that the fertility god would look favorably upon his crops. . . . That is, if a man acted out certain activities on earth then this would facilitate their taking place in heaven. So, if people involved themselves in fertility acts in their pagan temples, then their gods would bless the land with productivity. Thus, the pagan temples usually became centers of ritual or religious prostitution. Isaiah describes this in verse 5. As the wicked Israelites commit adultery through pagan worship, they break their covenant with God.

"The people were not only steeped in adultery through their pagan worship, but sacrificed their children. The ritual of the pagan god Molech required the worshipper to sacrifice his firstborn son. Molech was a large brass god with a hollow stomach, in which a great fire was kindled and into which the child was placed.

Ludlow continues: “Both these pagan practices are denounced in numerous scriptural references. However, in spite of God’s obvious displeasure with both acts, they have found their way, metaphorically, into modern practice. No longer practiced as pagan religious rituals, the twin sins of immorality and abortion have the same evil effect in contemporary society. They strike at the root of the procreative processes and disrupt the respect people should have for life. They also indicate people’s selfishness and their desire for personal gratification rather than controlling their passions, respecting marital covenants, and committing themselves to raising a family. These sins continue to take people from God and subject them to the buffetings of Satan.

“In verse 9, Isaiah continues his theme: through these sexual and ritual acts the people have made covenants with the pagan gods. The oils, perfumes, and envoys are representative of the tribute paid to alien cults and their prostitutes. But Isaiah exposes the true nature of this tribute and to whom it is paid. Their covenant has been with none other than Satan” (*Isaiah: Prophet, Seer and Poet*, pp. 477-78).

but he that putteth his trust in me shall possess the land, and shall inherit my holy mountain;

And shall say, Cast ye up, cast ye up, prepare the way,
take up the stumbling block out of the way of my people.

For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy;
I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of contrite and humble spirit,
to revive the spirit of the humble, and revive the heart of the contrite ones.

For I will not contend for ever, neither will I be always wroth:
for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made.

For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him:
I hid me, and was wroth, and he went on frowardly in the way of his heart.

I have seen his ways, and I will heal him:
I will lead him also,
and restore comforts unto him and to his mourners.

I create the fruit of the lips; Peace, peace to him that is far off,
and to him that is near, saith the Lord; and I will heal him.

But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest,
whose waters cast up mire and dirt.

There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked (Isa. 57:13-21).

For those with a “broken heart and a contrite spirit” (see Ps. 51:17; 3 Ne. 9:20; D&C 59:8), the Lord offers forgiveness and healing. While the promise of mercy is a constant, repentance is required in order to access the power and blessings of the Atonement. Wickedness will find its final end where the sound of merriment no longer penetrates, with an “endless torment” of regret and sorrow (see D&C 19:6; Moroni 8:21; Jacob 6:10).

Isaiah is instructed to “cry aloud” to Israel, and expose her wickedness:

Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins (Isa. 58:1).

Israel is “going through the motions” of outwardly honoring God by observing sabbath and feast days, including keeping their fasts, but their acts are an outward show only, without heart. Victor Ludlow offers important insight as an introduction to the following verses:

“During Isaiah’s time, just as today, the most important fixed Jewish fast was *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-34). This fast day originated during the time of Moses as the one fast Israel was commanded to observe. Israelites could hold other public or individual fasts during times of mourning, famine, invasion, or thanksgiving, but *Yom Kippur* was to be strictly observed by the entire nation every autumn.

“*Yom Kippur* is held on the tenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish liturgical calendar (either in September or October). During the fast, each person evaluates his life and repents of his sins in order to be at peace with God and with others. No labor is performed — the day is observed as if it were a Sabbath (whether it falls on the Sabbath or not) (Lev. 23:27-32). *Yom Kippur* is still observed by the Jews as the most holy of all religious celebrations.

“During Isaiah’s day when the Israelites still had a temple, *Yom Kippur* was particularly significant because a holy convocation was held at the temple, and special sacrifices, including a particular sin offering, were made. The sin offering of an unspotted male goat represented the bringing of all Israel’s sins before the Lord. The high priest took some of the blood of that sacrifice into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled it on the ground in front of the Ark of the Covenant. He also performed other sacrifices and rituals before the holy day concluded with the blowing of the *shofar*, the ram’s horn (see BD ‘Fasts’ for more information on the Day of Atonement).

“Although every *Yom Kippur* was a special holy day, another religious commemoration was celebrated along with it twice each century — the Jubilee year (see BD ‘Jubilee, Year of’). Every fiftieth year, the blowing of trumpets on *Yom Kippur* proclaimed liberty throughout the land — all debts, slaves, and indentured servants were freed (Lev. 25:8-17, 25-34). When *Yom Kippur* was celebrated during the Jubilee year, Israelites had a unique opportunity to clear all their spiritual debts with the Lord and material debts with their fellow man. The celebration also provided the people with an opportunity to hear a reading of the whole Mosaic law, to review their history, and to commemorate another half-century of existence and (hopefully) growth for Israel (See BD, ‘Sabbatical Year’).

Ludlow continues: “Note the similarities between the ritual *Yom Kippur* (as celebrated during a Sabbatical Year, especially the Jubilee year) and the structure of Isaiah 58:

1) Trumpet (58:1) Isaiah’s voice is raised like a trumpet; the trumpet is blown each *Yom Kippur* and proclaims the Jubilee Year (Lev. 25:8-9).

2) Sins of Israel (58:1) Isaiah is charged to remind the people of their sins; on *Yom Kippur* the High Priest sacrifices a sin offering before assembled Israel for all the sins committed during the past year (Lev. 16:15-19).

3) Sabbath (58:3-4, 13) Isaiah condemns the people for pursuing their daily business on this Sabbath fast day; the Day of Atonement and Jubilee are both special Sabbaths during which no work is to be done (Lev. 16:31; 35:1-22).

4) Wickedness removed (58:6, 11) Israel is told to remove every yoke from the people, particularly wickedness and injustice; on *Yom Kippur* the High Priest places the sins of Israel upon the scapegoat and sends it into the wilderness (Lev. 16:20-22).

5) Freedom (58:6-7) The fast that the Lord desires includes releasing burdens (debts) and freeing the oppressed; every seven years debts and slaves were to be freed, and every fifty years land was to be returned to its original tribal owners (Lev. 25).

6) Mercy of the Lord (58:8) As Israel observes a proper fast, she is promised the glory of the Lord; as the high priest sprinkles blood before the mercy seat of the Lord each *Yom Kippur*, he fulfills a ritual atonement for the people that cleanses them of their sins and enables them to be worthy of the Lord's glory (Lev. 16:15, 30).

Victor Ludlow concludes: "Although the precise occasion of Isaiah's discourse on fasting is not recorded, it seems likely that it was on *Yom Kippur* during a Sabbatical year, and perhaps even during a Jubilee year. If so, Isaiah was addressing Israelites assembled in the Jerusalem Temple courtyards during the fall of the year. Apparently, the people were complaining about their lack of blessings, when the Lord spoke to them through his prophet (*Isaiah, Prophet, Seer and Poet*, pp 483-84).

Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways,
as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God:
they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching God.

Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not?
wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?
Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labors.

Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness:
ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high (Isa. 58:1-4).

The people were acting "as if" they were "a nation that did righteousness" and "as if" they had not in their hearts "[forsaken] the ordinances of God." They complain that they do not see the rewards for their fast, and that the Lord is not hearing them.

The Lord answers that they are in fact, not observing the fast in the manner in which He has ordained: they seek for their own pleasures, and force others to work on the sabbath. They contend with one another, and they seek for power and prestige.

Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul?
is it to bow down his head as a bulrush,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I have chosen?
to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens,
and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?

Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry,

and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house?
when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him;
and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? (Isa. 58:5-7)

Victor Ludlow states: "Combining spiritual, social, physical, and family responsibilities, verses 6 and 7 summarize the service the people of God should render each other. These verses parallel each other both in form and theme: grammatically they both open with a question; structurally, they follow a pattern of composite parallelism in developing similar concepts about fasting. Verse 6 stresses spiritual and social responsibilities, and verse 7 emphasizes temporal and familial opportunities for service. The climax of each verse is a phrase that includes any other service not expressly mentioned: 'break every yoke' and do not 'turn away from your own flesh and blood.' The parallelisms are a bit more obvious in the original Hebrew, but they can still be outlined in English as follows:

Israel's spiritual responsibilities (v 6):

- A. To loose the chains of injustice or wickedness
- A' To untie the yoke bonds (of sin)
- A'' and free the oppressed (from social and Satanic persecution)
- C and break every yoke

Israel's physical responsibilities (v 7):

- B To feed the hungry
- B' and provide for the homeless
- B'' To clothe the naked
- C and fulfill duties for kin (or mankind) (*Isaiah, Prophet, Seer and Poet*, pp 487-88).

The fast that the Lord has ordained is for bringing relief to those in need, for turning one's heart to his brother and to his family, seeking ways in which to offer service.

Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily:
and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be thy rearward.

Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am.
If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger,
and speaking vanity;

And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul;
then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday:

And the Lord shall guide thee continually,
and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones:
and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places:
thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations;
and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day;
and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable;
and shalt honor him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure,

nor speaking thine own words:

Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord;
and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth,
and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father:
for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it (Isa. 58:8-14).

If we perform the Lord's will on the sabbath, and do not follow after our own desires, and if we keep the fast as He has instructed, He promises spiritual and physical blessings in kind. He will answer our call, and be our Companion; we will have His spirit to "guide [us] continually." We will become His instruments to "build the old waste places and raise up the foundations of many generations" helping to gather the tribes of Israel, and while doing so, also ensure eternal blessings upon our own families. Our souls "will be satisfied" even in drought, and we are promised the blessings of having a spring of water within, whose waters will fail not. Later, Jesus echoed these words to the woman of Samaria when He promised:

But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst;
but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life
(John 4:14).

