Lessons from Troubling Times

First in a new series of the same title for summer 2017

# Scripture: Isaiah 56:9-58:5

# Key Thought: The lessons Isaiah taught Israel during troubling times can help us today.

# Intro:

Let’s start with a Snoopy cartoon.



Unfortunately, we feel a lot like that in our world today. With the unsettling nature of the current leadership in our country, with the looming fiscal crisis in our own state of CT, with the continuing of foreign conflict for our nation’s military, and the constant threat of violence at home both from terrorists and domestic crazies, it is little wonder if we lose some sleep. We would be glad for a day when worries were simpler maybe things like a leaking rain gutter, a slicing golf drive, a shirt that lost buttons, or a pet with fleas.

So how do we react in today’s troubling times? How does God work in our lives when life is difficult? Are there special lessons that God is teaching us when we go through trying and stressful periods in our lives? To find the answers to some of these questions, we turn to the book of Isaiah. The latter part of Isaiah does not have the precise contextual historical references that the first half does. But, one thing is certain, it was written during troubling times, just as the first half of Isaiah was. Our text for today is taken from Isaiah chapter 56 and 57.

# Two situations compared

## For Isaiah

* It was a time of injustice for the oppressed (59:4,8,14)
* It was a time when forms of worship, spiritual rituals and even rules of religion were popular. Everybody considered themselves spiritual. But it was also a time when true heart-felt religion was missing. Truly repenting of evil and allowing God’s word to change one’s life was not popular.
* The country’s “shepherds” which might refer to spiritual and/or political leaders were self-serving, and even lazy according to Isaiah 56:10-12. There was no convictional preaching by the spiritual leaders. They didn’t even try to discern what was right. They simply prophesied prosperity, which was what people wanted to hear. The writer of Isaiah 56 lived in a time when idolatry was rampant. People worshipped gods of wood and stone. The prophets used metaphors of sexual immorality to describe Israel’s unfaithfulness with idols intentionally, partly because, as we learn from archaeologists, the idol worship practices of those days included sexual immorality and prostitution. Part of their worship of other gods also included putting pagan symbols in their home out of superstition. Idol worship in that day was especially deplorable as it also included the sacrifice of children.
* The time when Isaiah 56—59 was written a time of greed (56:11; 57:17). Workers were being exploited (58:3)
* It was a time when Sabbath-keeping was considered antique. The Sabbath was thought of as a day for pleasure (58:13). This was a symptom of a larger neglect of their covenant with God.
* Violence was common (58:4)

## For us today

In summary, this passage was written to a time uncomfortably like our own time.

* Today is also a time of grave injustice, racial injustice, injustice to immigrants and very troubling income disparity.
* Many people today claim to be spiritual but want nothing to do with Christian faith, especially the Christian church. Many are too independent to come submit to the teaching of the church.
* Today also, leaders are not doing well. Many leaders in industry and government, even some spiritual leaders can unfortunately be described accurately as self-centered. When this is true, good leadership suffers and those underneath that leadership suffer.
* As for idolatry, while we don’t have many literal images before which we bow down, we do have our contemporary idols; material possessions, high paying jobs, Wall Street portfolios, personal convenience, sports, electronic gadgetry, media watching, travel, etc. These are things which we prioritize over allegiance to Jesus Christ. We would never say it that way, but when it comes to prioritizing our time and money, these other things consistently get first pick. That speaks louder than our words.
* Sexual immorality is one of the big sins of our time too. Lust of the eyes is more of a problem that ever with the rise of pornography online. We do not seem to remember today that God hates divorce, and we have forgotten that in Scripture, God blessed human sexuality only when it was expressed in a heterosexual covenant relationship.
* People today are still greedy, workers are being exploited,
* And the Sabbath – what is that? Sunday is becoming just another day, a day for doing our own thing. And I’m not talking about a Jewish Sabbath, I’m talking about a day of rest as was established in the Creation order long before the covenant of Sinai. I’m talking about taking time for worship on Sunday. Fewer and fewer do so. And there has been a shift in thinking among Christians about Sundays too. It used to be that it was generally accepted that one should worship on Sunday as often as possible. To neglect it was—well, not the best. Now even many professing Christians do not feel the slightest qualm about not attending church, they just don’t feel it necessary. That is not a good shift.
* Violence is common today too. Multiple shootings made the news this week alone.

So we have much in common with the times in which this portion of Isaiah was written. The human situation is more similar than we might think. So what did God want Israel to learn in this troubling time? What did God want to do for Israel?

* Today - In troubling times, God exposes our false securities
* Next week – In troubling times, God desires to revive us.

# In troubling times, God exposes four false sources of security

God knocks out the false and unreliable props that we have been using that will not stand the test of time and trials. Here in Isaiah and in our world today there are four false sources of security that God is particularly concerned about.

Here’s a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon for you.



## Superficial comfort

In troubling times, we often run to God for comfort and sustaining grace. And both are available. The trouble is that we are often like Calvin in the cartoon; we don’t want to deal with the issues. We want our pat on the back without having to address the problems in our relationship to God.

The true prophets sent serious warnings to Israel, but no one wanted to listen. However, Israel had false prophets who gladly confirmed the people’s false security. They provided false comfort.

“They have lied about the LORD; they said, "He will do nothing! No harm will come to us; we will never see sword or famine.” Jer. 5:12

The shepherds described in Isaiah 56:12 even recommended wine and beer as an irresponsible distraction from the issues of the day. Many today seek the false comfort of chemical substances to lessen the stress of daily living. It is also a false comfort which ultimately brings us harm, not good, when it becomes a crutch.

Let’s illustrate this idea of false comfort from marriage.

Let’s suppose a wife is spending too much money online compared to the family budget. Her husband is upset about it and brings the subject up. The wife doesn’t want to talk about it but offers to fix his favorite desserts.

Or maybe a wife is upset and getting lonely. She tries to speak about how their relationship is deteriorating with the husband working so much overtime, and then playing sports all weekend. He walks out on the discussion with a wave but at supper offers a hug and wants a kiss.

Usually, whether it is in the finances of our state of CT or our marriage relationship, it is a crisis that eventually forces us to deal with the real issues.

Another area where we are quick to seek superficial comfort is the area of our mental and emotional health. Some drink alcohol to help when they are depressed, not realizing that in the long term, alcohol makes depression worse. What may be needed is to seek help in understanding and finding better solutions to depression. Other people use food to comfort themselves when what is needed is help in dealing with a long buried issues or grief or abuse.

But in troubling times, whether in our personal lives or in our nation, God would like to get our attention, to turn us away from false and superficial comforts and force us to deal with the real issues before the crisis. He wants us to know that easy comfort is a trap.

Israel’s true prophets always had a sharp moral edge to their messages.

They looked for the issues God was concerned about and sought God’s perspective on them. They condemned evil and called for repentance which is seldom popular.

True comfort faces our issues head-on and deals with them.

## Other religions

Today it is popular as it was in Isaiah’s time to try out different religions. But they provide false comfort. Isaiah warned the people against worshipping false gods.

Here is a quote from the early Swiss reformers echoing the need to worship God alone.

GOD ALONE IS TO BE ADORED AND WORSHIPPED. We teach that the true God alone is to be adored and worshipped. This honor we impart to none other, according to the commandment of the Lord, You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve (Math. 4:10). Indeed, all the prophets severely inveighed against the people of Israel whenever they adored and worshipped strange gods, and not the only true God. But we teach that God is to be adored and worshipped as he himself has taught us to worship, namely, in spirit and in truth (John 4:23 f.)

(from Second Helvetic Confession 1566 AD of the Reformed Churches of Switzerland: Creeds of the Church, PC Study Bible formatted electronic database Copyright © 2003, 2006 by Biblesoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

Horoscopes won’t save us; lucky numbers won’t help; astrology can’t intervene. Though we respect creation and care for it, we do not worship the earth. Only the Triune God is to be worshipped.

Troubling times send us to the God of Moses, Elijah, of Peter and of Paul.

“Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Psalm 96:4-5

Troubling times send us to our knees to appeal to Jesus who is at the right hand of God the Father interceding for us. As Peter preached:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12

Listen to God’s message through Isaiah,

“When you cry out for help, let your collection [of idols] save you! The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away. But the man who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain." Isa 57:13

## Our possessions

A third false security that God would warn us about is dependence upon our possessions, especially money. Such a preoccupation leads to greed and exploitation of others. This was happening in Isaiah’s day and it is characteristic of our day as well.

Jesus warned us that we can’t serve both God and money (Matt. 6:24).

Carey Nieuwhof, a contemporary Christian leader and a blogger as well wrote a very thoughtful list of “10 reasons Even Committed Church Attenders are Attending Church Less Often” (<https://careynieuwhof.com/10-reasons-even-committed-church-attenders-attending-less-often/> )

His #1 reason is, “Greater Affluence. Money gives people options.” Number 3 on his list is “More travel,” which is related.

It is easy to be lulled into spiritual indifference when we are surfeited with material goods. We are then in danger of being warned like the church of Laodicea in Revelation.

 You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Rev 3:17-18

Wealth is ultimately a false comfort. It easily distracts us from Christian discipleship which is the only thing that prepares us for heaven.

## Superficial faith

People in Israel were going through the motions of Jewish faith but not taking it to heart. Moses had described such thinking in Deuteronomy.

“When such a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, ‘I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way.’ This will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry.” Deut 29:19

I mentioned the list of Carey Nieuwhof as to why even committed people are attending church less in America.

Number nine on his list is “Valuing attendance over engagement.” In other words, many people want a superficial level of connection to the church. They are not involved in giving or serving or organized prayer, they just want to say they have a church. These kind likely do not value attendance highly either. This kind of superficial religion will help us little in troubling times for we will not have developed the “spiritual muscles” needed to endure hardship. One thing I admire here at Copper Hill is that most of you are very regular in your church attendance. I want to encourage that. It helps us to maintain our zeal for God and it helps to keep us walking in the right paths. It strengthens our discipleship.

Whenever our faith becomes superficial we are in danger in ways we do not recognize.

Let us remember Paul’s admonition:

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Rom 12:11

# Our Response

I read a testimony this week that I think will illustrate this message for us. It’s from the book The Rest of Your Life by Patrick M. Morley

Robert was a pretty typical American man, confident that he could work out his problems somehow. He was in between jobs and so had time to attend a Friday morning breakfast men’s Bible study to which he was invited.

“When Robert first started attending... He made it quite clear that he already attended church and didn’t want anyone trying to cram religion down his throat. Bill, the discussion leader at his table, honored Robert’s wish, but as a result he often felt handcuffed and speaking to Robert. It was as if 98% of the helpful information he could share was off-limits.”

But Bill kept the door open and offered to talk with him more whenever he wanted. So when financial pressures and family pressures got worse instead of better in Robert’s life, Bill was not surprised when he got a call from Robert. They went out to breakfast together and Bill finally had a chance to share the meaning of genuine faith. “Robert, I have honored your request to not try to ’cram religion’ down your throat, but I feel I must express myself to you today,” he said honestly. “First though, let me say that I really see and feel your pain, your frustration, your sense of aimless drifting, and I want to help you.”

“It’s like this. In my mind’s eye I see you in a small, dark room, say 10’ x 10’. I’m in the very next room, but my room is big, very big, say 100’ x 100’ and brightly lit. And there are lots of other people – happy people – in my room. Sure, some have problems but all the happy people are helping the others to get through their difficult times. You, on the other hand, are all alone, sitting in a dark room. A door connects your room to mine. I desperately want to invite you into the room where I am, but you have asked me not to. But today I just want you to know that I think you would like it in my room very much. Jesus Christ is the door. He will help you to get out of the dark room if you will let them, if you will turn to him.”

That morning was the beginning of a new level of Christian commitment for Robert. He asked Bill to tell him more about what it meant to be a genuine Christian. Sometime later Robert wrote in his journal, “I have always lived by my own best thinking – my own ideas. Now I realized that while I can choose my own way, I cannot choose the results. My decisions have consequences. Many of my rough edges have been knocked away. I feel more humility, contrition, and tenderness. I am filled up with the repentance I have never known before. I can see so clearly that I don’t have all the answers after all – so clearly that’s embarrassing. I’ve always had an answer for everything. Now I have more questions than answers. It’s a radical change… I sincerely want to be a man whose heart is fully committed to God. It is the deepest vein of desire in my soul…. I want to be a biblical Christian. No fluff. No drivel. No canned answers. No self-centered ambitions. No impure thoughts. No wrong motives…. I sense God is not finished with me yet, that God has more for me. Now I long to know what it is…Robert.

(from the story of Robert pp. 7-14 in The Rest of Your Life by Patrick M. Morley)

Robert was able to recognize his false securities and seek the true hope in Jesus. That testimony of Robert’s resonates with the words of St. Paul.

I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.
Phil 3:12-14