EBS9 Isa 56-57

**Lesson 9: Isaiah 56:1-57:21**

**Title: Justice and Righteousness**

**Objectives:**

1. Students will understand the setting of Isa 56-66.
2. Students will understand the overall themes of Isa 56-66.
3. Students will understand the process of God setting a vision for a community that does not meet his expectations.

**Preparation:**

1. The Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem takes its name from Isa 56:5. See [www.yadvashem.org/museum](http://www.yadvashem.org/museum).
2. Read an encyclopedia article on the Court of the Gentiles in Herod’s temple (for example [www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second\_Temple](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Temple)).
3. Review the outline of Isa 56-66:
   1. 56-57—salvation seen as the contrast between the righteous and wicked.
   2. 58-59—obstacles that delay salvation.
   3. 60-62—God describes the new Jerusalem where the redeemed will live and introduces the anointed one.
   4. 63-64—God comes.
   5. 65—God explains why the new Jerusalem failed and outlines his plans for the future.
   6. 66—God’s final words to the righteous and wicked of Jerusalem including his plans to come again.

**Theme:** The God high and holy sends a preacher.

1. The theme of Isa 40-55 was “the God of hope and history sends a servant.”
2. Isa 56-66
   1. God: While Isa 40-55 sought to show God’s power and care to the exiles, Isa 56-66 stresses God as the object of worship and the one against whom humans sin.
   2. High and holy: Isa 40-55 repeatedly offered God’s hope and used his role in history to establish monotheism, Isa 56-66 stresses the high and holy nature of God (Isa 57:15; 66:1).
   3. Preacher: Four times in Isa 40-55 God announced the coming of his servant while Isa 61 announces the coming of the anointed one who will be a preacher.

**Background:**

1. Isaiah addresses three different time periods in his book.
   1. Isa 1-39 is addressed to 8th century Jerusalem.
   2. Isa 40-55 is addressed to the exiles.
   3. Isa 56-66 is written to post exilic Jerusalem.
2. The text gives clues about the historical background, but they can be confusing. It appears that the audience Isaiah addresses has returned to Judah and Jerusalem and at times is on the verge of rebuilding and other times well into the project. See the following clues.
   1. Temple.
3. RUINS: Isa 64:11 Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.
4. REBUILT: Isa 56:7 These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Cf. 56:5; 66:20.
   1. Exiles.
5. RETURNED and RETURNING:
   1. Isa 56:8 Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered." Cf. 57:14.
   2. Isa 56:8 TEV The Sovereign LORD, who has brought his people Israel home from exile, has promised that he will bring still other people to join them.
6. To be RETURNED: Isa 60:4 Lift up your eyes round about, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far, and your daughters shall be carried in the arms. Others will return 60:9; 57:14.
   1. Jerusalem.
7. Walls will be rebuilt.
   1. Isa 62:6 Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen; all the day and all the night they shall never be silent. You who put the LORD in remembrance, take no rest, 10 Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples.
   2. Isa 60:10 Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I smote you, but in my favor I have had mercy on you.
8. Walls still in ruins.
   1. Isa 63:18 Thy holy people possessed thy sanctuary a little while; our adversaries have trodden it down.
   2. Isa 64:10-11 Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. 11 Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.
   3. Judean towns.
9. Towns rebuilt:
   1. Isa 60:11 Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut; that men may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession.
   2. Isa 58:7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
10. Towns to be rebuilt:
    1. Isa 61:4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.
    2. Isa 58:12 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.
    3. Isa 64:10 Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation.
11. Several texts in Isa 56-66 point to the condition of the people in post-exilic Judah:
    1. Some of the people are engaged in idolatry—Isa 57:3-10; 66:20.
    2. Injustice is widespread—Isa 59:14.
    3. Some of the people confess their guilt—Isa 59:12-13.
    4. The Sabbath is widely misunderstood—Isa 58:13-14.
    5. Post exilic leadership has failed —Isa 56:9-12.
    6. The post exilic community is divided—Isa 58:9-10.
    7. Many of the people are discouraged—59:1, 11.
12. Isa 56-66 contains striking images of God including:
    1. God as solider with 4 defensive weapons—Isa 59:17.
    2. God is like a rushing stream—Isa 59:19.
    3. God covered with blood—Isa 63:1, 3.
    4. God carries humans—Isa 63:9.
    5. God mourns—Isa 63:10.
    6. God as father—Isa 63:16.
    7. God hides—Isa 64:7.
    8. God’s nose—Isa 65:5.
    9. God’s feet—Isa 66:1.
    10. God works as fast as a woman who bears with no labor—Isa 66:7-9.
    11. God nurtures as a mother does—Isa 66:13.
13. Isa 56-57 follow a sequence: God sets a lofty goal, but post-exilic Jerusalem fails in two significant ways to which God responds with an offer to visit his people to set things right.

**Learning Experiences:**

1. Isa 56:1-8—Inclusiveness.
   1. Isa 56:1 establishes justice and righteousness as the major concern of Isa 56-66.
      1. Justice calls for each member of a community to be treated with fairness and equity.
      2. Righteousness is a one word summary of the Golden Rule: do unto others the way you want them to do unto you.
      3. Together justice and righteousness form the standard by which God wants his community to function.
      4. There is ample evidence (especially Isa 58) that there was a growing gap between the haves and the have nots.
      5. The Hebrew word tsedekah appears twice in the opening sentence reflecting its two uses in the book of Isaiah:
         1. The RSV translates the first tsedekeh as “righteousness” which as the definition above suggests refers to how people treat each other. The word was generally used this way in Isa 1-39. Isa 1 uses this word frequently as a measure for how 8th century Jerusalem had become a place of oppression and thus lacked righteousness.
         2. The RSV translates the second tsedekah as “deliverance” which reflects the use of the word in Isa 40-55 as God treating the people in a kind and considerate way in his deliverance of them from Babylonian captivity.
         3. The implication is that since God has treated Israel with tsedekah so now they should treat each other with tsedekah.
   2. Isaiah announces that the post-exilic community is based not on the physical descendants of Abraham (many of whom did not return from exile) but now include the spiritual descendants of Abraham with these markers:
      1. Isa 56:1-2—the one who holds fast to justice and righteousness.
      2. Isa 56:2; 4, 6—the one who keeps Sabbath.
         1. The prophets used Sabbath keeping not as a requirement for the faithful, but as a barometer of the heart.
         2. Jer 17 introduced this concept in the days before Jerusalem’s fall (cf. Ezek 20:12; 22:8; Neh 13:17f).
         3. Those who keep Sabbath have a heart for God.
         4. There is a fine line in this distinction.
            1. It might be paralleled by the issue of Christians avoiding X rated movies.
            2. A person who avoids this kind of media has a heart that seeks the better things of God, but the avoidance of X rated movies can often be reduced to a list of “things not to do in order to be saved.”
      3. Isa 56:2—those who avoid evil.
      4. Isa 56:4—those who do what pleases God.
      5. Isa 56:4, 6—those who keep covenant. Jer 31:31f echoes this same teaching which stresses the relationship between God and his people. Once one entered a covenant, God looked with favor on those people with a willingness to forgive their sins. When they violated the covenant (idolatry was the clearest means of violation), God could not forgive their sins (Isa 59:1f).
      6. Isa 56:6—those who join themselves to the LORD and minister to him.
      7. Isa 56:6—those who love the name of the LORD.
      8. Isa 56:6—those who are his servants. While Isa 40-55 spoke in the singular about Israel as a servant and a particular Israelite as the servant, Isa 56-66 speaks of those who faithfully follow God as his servants (Isa. 36:9, 11; 37:5f, 24; 54:17; 56:6; 63:17; 65:9, 13ff; 66:14).
   3. The inclusiveness of this new community is illustrated by two figures formerly excluded but now included:
      1. Eunuchs—Isa 56:3-5.
         1. Deut 23:1 describes the exclusion of the eunuch: “He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the LORD.”
         2. In the new post-exilic community such men are welcomed in the community (v5), in the worship (v 7) and in the temple (v 7).
         3. The eunuch in Acts 8 is another beneficiary of this inclusiveness.
      2. Foreigners—Isa 56:3, 6.
         1. Deut 23:3 describes the exclusion of some foreigners: “No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the LORD for ever.”
         2. Admission of the nations into the post-exilic community is anticipated in Isa 42:9; 43:19; 48:6.
         3. The Roman centurion in Acts 10 is another beneficiary of this inclusiveness.
      3. Why the change?
         1. Isa 56, Jer 31, Ezek 16 all stress that God’s people are not those of blood, but heart.
         2. A careful study of the law at Sinai (Ex 20-24; Lev) and the law at the end of the exodus (Deuteronomy) reveals changes.
            1. A thorough investigation of these changes is beyond the current study.
            2. For example the Passover was a home-based celebration in the wilderness (Ex 12:1-11) but a temple-based feast in Deuteronomy (even though there was no temple at the end of the exodus, cf. Deut 16:1-8).
            3. The Old Testament is not static, but moving toward the New Testament revelation.
         3. The inclusive community is inherent in God’s original plan. Gen 12:1-3; Ex 19:6 and the passages about Israel being a light to the nations (Isa 42:6; 49:6) imply that God’s interest is in all people and none are to be excluded. He chose Abram and Israel in order to show the world how to be God’s people and the blessings that result from living in that relationship. Israel repeatedly failed to be that model. Isa 56-66 shows God increasingly moving in new directions ultimately to a new heaven and new earth.
   4. Temple worship becomes inclusive.
      1. Mt 21:13; Mk 11:17; Lk19:46 record Jesus showing how second temple Judaism with its Court of the Gentiles fell short of this standard.
      2. The gathering in Isa 56:8 refers to the end of Babylonian captivity but also to the welcoming of non-Jews into the post-exilic community. Other references to the welcoming of outsiders are found in Isa 60:4, 10; 61:5; 66:20.
      3. The “holy mountain” refers to the Jerusalem temple. See Isa 2:4; 57:13.
2. Isa 56:9-57:2—Ineffectiveness.
   1. This section deals with two groups of people:
      1. Leaders in post-exilic Jerusalem.
         1. The watchmen (Isa 54:10) and the shepherds (Isa 54:11) are leaders in Jerusalem who do not fulfill their task.
         2. Isaiah wishes that they would be eaten by wild beasts.
         3. He compares the watchmen to a watch dog that does not bark or warn of intruders but only eat.
         4. The shepherds seek their own agenda but have no understanding of their leadership role.
      2. The oppressed.
         1. Isaiah speaks about the calamities faced by the righteous and the devout.
         2. He twice uses the term righteous to refer to those who are innocent of causing the suffering they endure.
   2. The lofty goals of the post exilic community envisioned in Isa 40-55 and explained in Isa 56:1-8 are at risk.
      1. The leaders in the post-exilic community should be safeguarding justice and righteousness, but instead they are like drunkards who are oblivious to their surroundings (Isa 56:12).
      2. The righteous and devout only find relief from their misery in death (Isa 57:2).
      3. Isaiah echoes the inclusiveness of the community (Isa 56:1-8) by the repeated use of the word “all.” List the 6 appearances in Isa 56:9-12.
3. Isa 57:3-13—Idolatry.
   1. Isaiah adds a third group to the post-exilic community in Isa 57:3-13.
      1. Leaders—Isa 56:9-12.
      2. Oppressed—Isa 57:1-2
      3. Idol worshipers—Isa 57:3 refers to them as the “you.”
   2. The description of their idol worship—Isa 57:3-10.
      1. Isaiah describes the idol worshippers in at least 5 ways. List them.
      2. Isaiah lists at least 9 different forms of their idol worship. List them.
      3. They practiced their idolatry in at least 5 different places. List them.
      4. The prophet tells them that their idol worship makes sport of God and is a verbal rejection of him—Isa 57:4
      5. The “smooth stones” may refer to graves where some idol worship takes place or to a pagan symbol or worship place (Isa 57:6).
      6. Some pagan worship involved sexual activity (Isa 57:5, 7-9). See the book of Hosea for a deeper treatment of similar activities in the 8th century B.C.
      7. The meaning of Isa 57:10 is unclear but may point to how they exhausted themselves in idol worship or kept after idol worship long after it produced no positive effect.
   3. God responds to the idol worship—Isa 57:11-13.
      1. The people apparently claimed to worship God but instead of or in addition to worshipped idols which made them liars with regard to the covenant—Isa 57:11.
      2. They worshipped idols because they feared the idols but not God.
      3. The word “righteousness” is used in an ironic way. Their attempt to do the right thing was wrong.
      4. Isa 57:13a recalls the diatribes against idol worship in Isa 40-55.
      5. Isa 57:13b belongs with the assurance of the next section.
4. Isa 57:14-21—Incarnation.
   1. These verses describe the process of Israel drifting away from God and God’s response of coming among his people to bring them back. Beginning with God walking in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2-3) and climaxing in the arrival of Jesus (John 1:14), God has come to earth in various forms. This section describes one of those occasions.
   2. The process includes these elements:
      1. Isa 57:13b—the offer of land and the holy mountain to those who seek God.
      2. Isa 57:14—removal obstacles to those seeking God. Cf. Isa 35:8; 40:3; 48:11.
      3. Isa 57:15—God is high, lofty, lives in eternity and is holy.
      4. Isa 57:15—God seeks out the humble and contrite
         1. The humble and contrite could refer to the spiritual seekers of Isa 56:1-8.
         2. The humble and contrite could refer to the righteous and devout (perhaps the oppressed) of Isa 57:1-2.
      5. Isa 57:15-16—God sends his spirit to revive the spirit and the heart and to give the breath of life.
      6. Isa 57:17-19—God goes so far as to show his anger at the iniquity and backsliding, but promises to heal them, comfort them, move them to repentance (“mourners”) and give them peace.
      7. Isa 57:10-21—Isaiah raises a theme to which he will return: Those who resist and remain in their wickedness will find no peace.
   3. God is the subject of 19 verbs in this passage. List them.

**Continuities:**

1. Spiritual communities often become exclusive instead of inclusive. What response do you have to the inclusiveness that God demands in post-exilic Jerusalem? Give examples of other spiritual communities that are exclusive or inclusive.
2. Why did Isaiah choose to illustrate the point about inclusiveness with the eunuch and the foreigner? What other NT passages reflect on this point?
3. Isaiah critiques the leaders in post-exilic Jerusalem. What did they do wrong? Give examples of contemporary parallels.
4. Does the idol worship in Isa 57 have any parallels in contemporary culture? Why did the people in post-exilic Jerusalem find this kind of worship attractive?
5. Describe the way God is depicted in Isa 56-57. What draws you to this God? Is there any quality of God in this section that you do not understand or question?
6. What does it mean that God is high? What does it mean that God is holy?

**Assignment: Read Isa 58-59.**

**Additional Study:**

1. Read chapter 13 in Harold Shank, *Listening to His Heartbeat—What the Bible Says About the Heart of God* Joplin, Mo: College Press, 2009. This chapter provides an overview of the use of righteousness and justice in the OT.
   1. Justice and righteousness in their various forms are each used about 400 times.
   2. Consider these passages where the two appear together: Gen. 18:19; Deut. 16:19; 1 Ki. 10:9; 2 Chr. 9:8; Job 29:14; 34:17; 37:23; Ps. 33:5; 37:28, 30; 72:1f; 89:14; 94:15; 97:2; 99:4; 106:3; Prov. 1:3; 2:9; 8:20; 18:5; 21:3, 15; Eccl. 3:16; Isa. 1:21, 27; 5:7, 16; 9:7; 16:5; 28:17; 32:1, 16; 33:5; 56:1; 59:9, 14; Jer. 9:24; 22:3, 15; 23:5; 33:15; Ezek. 45:9; Hos. 2:19; Amos 5:7, 24; 6:12; Hab. 1:4; Zeph. 3:5.
2. Consider a study of the beginning and end of Babylonian captivity
   1. Deportations
      1. 606 Daniel and friends.
      2. 597 Ezekiel and exile.
      3. 586 Exile following the fall of Jerusalem.
   2. Returns
      1. 538 Zerubbabel.
      2. 458 Ezra.
      3. 444 Nehemiah.
   3. Read Daniel 1, 2 Kings 24-25 and Jer 39-45 about the fall of Jerusalem and the deportations.
   4. Read Ezra and Nehemiah about the return from captivity.