

**Isaiah 56:2-7 (NIV)**

*This is what the Lord says: "Be just and fair to all. Do what is right and good, for I am coming soon to rescue you and to display my righteousness among you. Blessed are all those who are careful to do this.*

*Blessed are those who honor my Sabbath days of rest and keep themselves from doing wrong.*

<sup>3</sup> *"Don't let foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord say, 'The Lord will never let me be part of his people.' And don't let the eunuchs say, 'I'm a dried-up tree with no children and no future.'*

<sup>4</sup> *For this is what the Lord says: I will bless those eunuchs who keep my Sabbath days holy and who choose to do what pleases me and commit their lives to me. <sup>5</sup> I will give them – within the walls of my house – a memorial and a name far greater than sons and daughters could give.*

*For the name I give them is an everlasting one. It will never disappear!*

<sup>6</sup> *"I will also bless the foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord, who serve him and love his name, who worship him and do not desecrate the Sabbath day of rest, and who hold fast to my covenant.*

<sup>7</sup> *I will bring them to my holy mountain of Jerusalem and will fill them with joy in my house of prayer. I will accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices, because my Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations."*

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We're in the book of Isaiah today: Isaiah, Chapter 56, if you'd like to turn back to the passage that was just read for us. Isaiah 56 – we'll get there eventually.

We closed last week with a challenge to keep track of your laughter for a few days. So, did anyone notice how much you have or have not laughed, in the last few days? And was it enough?

Now, I realize there are things we go through. Even this past week, people have gone through plenty of things that can make finding humor and laughter challenging. Lyle Van Horn's unexpected passing, of course, comes to mind.

At the same time, there was much, much laughter at the gatherings for Lyle yesterday, as there should be at Christian funerals.

In fact, some of the funniest people, with the best senses of humor I know, are funeral directors. All of them that I know well are Christians, and, because of what they do for a living, they tend to have a very realistic perspective when it comes to life and death and Jesus and eternity.

Frank Dawson of the Dawson Funeral Home in my hometown: he was, hands down, the most popular speaker/storyteller in our area. He was so funny and had so many funny stories.

Every time he'd greet people, he'd shake their hands and ask them, so sincerely, how they were feeling. And as he did that, as he was shaking their hands, he'd put his two fingers there on the inside of their wrists, as if he were checking their pulse.

Funerals in the non-Christian world are so somber and sad, but there is almost always laughter at Christian

funerals. And that is precisely because when you know how the story ends, when your eternity is sorted out, there can be great joy and great happiness and great laughter, even in the midst of great grief.

And that is one immensely important thing that God does in the lives of those who love and serve Him: even in the toughest of circumstances, He *induces celebration*.

Isaiah is not often thought of, particularly, as a "laughing prophet." Much of what he wrote talks about the hardships of captivity and the displeasure of God with the people of Israel.

Eventually, Isaiah does come to write about Israel's return to her native land. But even then, much of his time is given to the political and spiritual corruption involved there.

It's really only in the last few chapters of his writings that Isaiah describes God's rescue of the Hebrew people and the nation's eventual glory.

So, while it is certainly true that threads of redemption and hope run all through Isaiah, there's not much, especially in the early parts, that would warrant any *explosion* of joy.

But there is here in Chapter 56, and especially so if you happen to be what might be called an "outcast."

Now, you might say, "Well, the whole nation of Israel would have been considered an outcast for most of her existence."

And that's certainly true. All through her history, it's clear that the world around Israel didn't know what to do with a nation that was utterly unique and exclusively possessing of the truth of God.

And so, since the world didn't know what to do with Israel, the world beat her up.

Just as the world, centuries later, would beat up Jesus.

And the fact is, the world still doesn't know what to do with people who possess God's truth. No matter how truly kind, truly loving, truly compassionate, truly concerned Christ-followers are, those that surround – more and more it seems in our society – just will not tolerate our claim that Jesus is the only way.

So, in that way, Christ-followers know something of Israel's status as an outcast.

Our own culture here is forcing us to learn that in these days. More and more it seems, we're strangers in our own land, which should remind us that this land is not our true home.

So, Israel herself was an outcast.

But you know, even within Israel, there were outcasts.

In the preservation of their spiritual identity as God's covenant people, there were persons who were marginalized from the greater group.

There were outcasts in Israel.

Do you know what it's like to be an outcast?

Even apart from being an outcast due to faith, most of us have felt the sting of rejection.

At one time or another, most of us have been the only one who thinks a certain way,  
or the only one of our race,  
or the only one of our gender,  
or the only one of our background,  
or the only one of our ability, or lack of ability, in the room.

And whether intentionally or not, we're made to feel that in one way or another.

Like the guy — did you hear about the guy — whose whole left side got cut off? He's all *right* now.

Or the skeleton who didn't go to the dance? Do you know why he didn't go? He had no *body* to go with.

Those are outcasts: someone different from everyone else.

Do you know what it's like to be an outcast?

Within Israel, there were at least two sorts of people who would be considered outcasts.

The first were foreigners — people other than Jews.

Now, understand that the Jews treated foreigners better than, really, any other people of their day did.

God demanded His people to be remarkably hospitable and concerned with the welfare of those who were *in*, but not *of*, their nation.

But still, there were differences, and especially when it came to worship.

You see, to the Jew, there were really only two races in the whole world: Jews and non-Jews, or Gentiles.

And a Gentile, a non-Jew, could not just wander into the Temple as a seeker might wander into a church service today. The idea of "seeker-sensitive temple worship" was just not part of Jewish thinking.

Now, Gentiles could *convert*, of course.

But conversion meant *full* conversion, requiring for males, circumcision. Well, you can be pretty sure if a person agrees to *that*, they're serious about their faith intentions, right?

I wonder how many conversions to Christ there would be if that was part of the sinner's prayer.

"Wait, I have to do what now?"

That separates the true believers from the "wannabees," which was at least part of God's rationale behind it.

The point is, there was no just dabbling with a relationship with the God of Israel.

You might be part of the neighborhood. You might live within the national boundaries. But regarding the practice of the faith, you were either out or you were totally in. And, if you were out, as a foreigner, you were out — of the worship ritual, anyway.

So, foreigners were the first sort of outcast.

The second sort was the eunuch.

According to the Mosaic Law, a eunuch could not participate in the assembly of the Lord (Deut. 23:-4).

A eunuch is, of course, a man with either damaged or removed private parts, and there are different reasons this could happen to a person.

It could be a person was born that way, or it could be the result of an accident of some sort.

Also, in other cultures, not in Judaism, one could wind up a eunuch as punishment for a crime, or through some pagan religious practice. There were also instances in the Gentile world, never in Judaism, where it was required to enter certain places of government service.

Based on other evidence we can presume at least these three reasons why the law barring eunuchs from temple worship existed.

First, because the human body is holy to the Lord; He made it and He likes what He made and He does not take kindly to our mutilation of it — which is something our culture would do well to remember today.

Second, God is concerned about human reproduction and wants people to be concerned as well.

And then third, since circumcision was a huge deal in following God as a Jew...well, you can see how a eunuch might have trouble with that.

We're not told if the reason behind a person's "eunuchness" mattered, so we presume it did not, since all Deuteronomy tells us is that a eunuch could not enter into Temple worship.

I wonder how they knew if a guy was a eunuch or not as he walked into worship. Seriously, did they just depend on the person's honesty, or was there an usher somewhere who was assigned to check?

Either way, this was the case, and so eunuchs were a second sort of outcast.

Of course, this informs and deepens the account of the apostle Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch that we find in Acts 8, doesn't it?

We're told of this man who was a high-ranking foreign official, and he's identified as a eunuch very likely because his position demanded it.

The way things worked back then was that if he was a man working closely with a royal woman — in this case, Queen Candace of Ethiopia — then it would not be unusual for such a procedure to be required.

Anyway, here was a man clearly interested in the God of the Hebrews. In fact, he had just been to Jerusalem to worship, verse 27 says, but, of course, he was not allowed into the assembly, not only because he was a foreigner, but even more so because of his condition.

So, he was marginalized — an outcast. Even this big, important guy. Wanting to come in, but unable to do so.

You see, marginalization doesn't depend, really at all, on class or wealth or color or gender or all the other things we often think it does today.

*Anyone*, in the right circumstance, *can be an outcast*.

This guy was also like a lot of people in another way: he was reading a passage from the Bible, and he didn't understand it.

His King James Version didn't make any sense to him either.

And, ironically, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Keep *that* in mind – more on that later.

So, Philip, led of the Lord, approaches him, and in this divine encounter is able to lead him to faith in Jesus.

And then here's where it gets *really* interesting.

Look at how the fellow responds.

He believes in Jesus (in the explanation and exposition that Philip offers), and then, seeing some body of water nearby, the fellow says, literally, "*What prevents me from being baptized?*"

All of this Judaism that I've been following (at a distance), if all this comes to fruition in Jesus, is there anything now that *prevents* me from fully exercising my faith?

You see, this guy knew all about barriers – about being kept away from expression of faith. He had just experienced that in Jerusalem.

He knew his nationality and his condition kept him from full temple worship.

But what about from Jesus? Would Jesus take him as he was? That's what he wanted to know.

And Philip had the beautiful ability to answer, "Friend, if you will give yourself wholly to Jesus, then *nothing prevents* you – *nothing keeps* you from *full relationship* with Him."

"Nothing prevents you: not your *nationality*, not your *physical situation*, nothing that has *happened* to you in days *past*. That's *all behind* you, *if* you will follow Jesus from this day forward with *all your heart*."

And the fellow said, "Yes, I'll do that," and so Philip baptized him there in the water, thus confirming his faith.

And then, Philip, Acts 8 says, was carried away by the Spirit. And the Ethiopian fellow, verse 39 says, "*went on his way rejoicing*."

He was glad, he was happy, he was celebrating – and don't even try to tell me he wasn't smiling and laughing – because the barriers that, for so long had kept him out of the most important thing in his life had been removed.

Now he was welcome. Now he was included.

Where he was once *out*, now he is *in*!

Is there any better feeling than that?

To have spent your life on the edge – because of something you couldn't do anything about, but then suddenly something changes and now you're welcomed in! You're a part! You're included! You're embraced and wanted and treasured and valued!

You see, that's what Jesus does for people.

That's why He ate with tax collectors and sinners, and that's why they loved being around Him.

Just by who He is, Jesus induces celebration.

Now, please understand – this is not just a free for all I'm talking about. No one just comes to Jesus – no one comes in on our own terms. We have to agree to follow Jesus, which means to do what He says; to live how He says to live; to do nothing less, actually, than to die to self.

But, for anyone who'll seriously do that and who will embrace Jesus like that, for them, the barriers to God all come down and we're *in* – where we were never able to be "in" before.

That is what that Ethiopian eunuch discovered.

And it was Isaiah who foretold all this, you see?

That's why it's so ironic that the Ethiopian fellow was reading Isaiah there in his chariot.

He was reading Isaiah 53, where a suffering messiah is predicted, but if he were to read just a little farther, he would reach today's passage in Chapter 56, where Isaiah says in verse 3, "*Don't let foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord say, 'The Lord will never let me be part of his people.' And don't let the eunuchs say, 'I'm a dried-up tree with no children and no future.'*"

This guy was both of these!

Isaiah says that at present this is how it is, although in the new covenant to come, God says, in verse 4 there, "*I will bless those eunuchs who keep my Sabbath days holy and who choose to do what pleases me and commit their lives to me. I will give them – within the walls of my house – a memorial and a name far greater than sons and daughters could give.*"

And the Lord says, the same goes for those *from foreign lands*. All those who will take me seriously, all who will do what pleases me and will commit their lives to me, God says, "*I will bring them all in*," and verse 7 says, "*fill them with joy in my house of prayer*."

Where there was once that sadness that comes from not being included, of being marginalized, of being an outcast, in Jesus there is now *inclusion* and *welcome*, and so there is *laughter* and *celebration* and *joy*.

Because Jesus' death and resurrection has covered all that separates us from God.

All that keeps us away from Him – all the sin and all its effects – Jesus covers, Jesus redeems.

If only we'll follow Him. If we only, as verse 3 says, "*commit ourselves to the Lord*."

If we'll give ourselves to Jesus and live for Him and be obedient to Him, then we are no longer outcasts.

*Instead*, we are *free* – free to enjoy relationship with God, both *now* and for *all eternity*.

And that means that, no matter what sort of outcast this world makes us out to be, no matter what label this world attaches to us, with *God* – in *His* world – we are *welcome*, we are *valued*, we are a *part*, and so we are free to *engage* and *celebrate* and *laugh* and *love* – all in the *deep joy* of the Lord.

No more margins.

No more sideways glances.

No more condescending stares from others.

No more looking in from the outside.

With Jesus, we are *in*, and we are *in forever* – and *that*, friends, is reason to celebrate!

Listen, no matter what label this world has tried to slap on you, no matter how you've been pushed to the side, if you will commit yourself to Jesus, He will welcome you in. He will welcome you into the only place, the only relationship, that really matters.

Closing Prayer:

Father, would you confirm the truth of this in every heart here today who knows and follows Your Son Jesus: that regardless of past, regardless of circumstance, regardless of what our broken world may say about us, assure us that we are Yours, and so we are included, accepted and welcomed into all that is Yours.

As the world even curses us, because of You, Father, help us to laugh, not *at them*, but with that confidence that we belong to You, for now and forever, which is all that really matters.

And if there is one here who does not know You today, Jesus, one who is drawn to You, but who is still on the outside looking in, would You let them know that would they but repent and believe and follow You, they are welcome, welcome, welcome!

Closing Song: *I'm Forever Grateful*

Benediction:

So why did I choose this text and message for Mother's Day?

Here's why: Mother's Day is hard for some women because, for whatever reason, they have not been able to have children of their own.

But see, God says that He'll provide for those who can't do, or are not, certain things – even involving children.

In fact, He'll provide far more of an inheritance – He'll provide, Isaiah says, *"a memorial and a name far greater than sons and daughters could give."*

If you will give to Him that situation, and all the pain that goes with it, He will give you, in Christ, something far, far greater.

Just as He will do for us all – wherever we've felt like an outcast.

In Jesus, God brings us in.

May the Spirit of God confirm that in our hearts today.