



When the Righteous Perish

by: Ronald L. Dart

Isaiah 57

NIV

¹ The righteous perish,
and no one takes it to heart;
the devout are taken away,
and no one understands
that the righteous are taken away
to be spared from evil.

² Those who walk uprightly
enter into peace;
they find rest as they lie in death.

The Scripture is comforting in an odd sort of way. I've heard it often cited in funerals. But it kind of fell strangely on the ear in the good times we have enjoyed. It's really hard, having been through what we've had the last 20 years or so: the incredible prosperity, the numbers of people coming out of poverty and beginning to enjoy the good life. And you realize...well, no, it's not good that somebody has been laid away. I wonder, though, nowadays, what people will think when they hear this read over the casket of a dear, old friend. I've heard it lots of times at funerals. I will never think of it quite the same way again.

Maybe what brought it to mind this morning was a column I was reading by Peggy Noonan. She described what New York is like in these days of a sharply slowed economy, and that was what brought this to mind. We have been living in a carnival these last many years, an unreal world of wealth and plenty, and now we have to think about a different kind of world. Our leaders are pessimistic—which is an odd thing for leaders. They are supposed to mobilize us, to tell us the truth, but hold out hope. To tell us “this is what we need to do and things will be fine.” And yet we hear words like “crisis” and “catastrophe” coming from leaders who seem, I'm sorry, more concerned about political power than the welfare of the people they lead.

So they've got us all in a blue funk, these days, over what's happening. And it's probably a good thing that we're here, because the world is really headed back towards normal times. We've been living in very abnormal times.

Well, I wondered when I started thinking about this scripture. I looked it up, and I wondered what prompted him to write that, so I looked at it in context. The lead-in to this passage was sobering and kind of startling, in a way, in its aptness to this generation we're living in. I went back to Isaiah 56:10 and started there:

Isaiah 56

¹⁰ Israel's watchmen are blind,
they all lack knowledge;
they are all mute dogs,
they cannot bark;
they lie around and dream,
they love to sleep.

¹¹ They are dogs with mighty appetites;
they never have enough.
They are shepherds who lack understanding;
they all turn to their own way,
they seek their own gain.

¹² "Come," each one cries, "let me get wine!
Let us drink our fill of beer!
And tomorrow will be like today,
or even far better."

Mute dogs. Somehow I had overlooked this reading in the King James Version. The old Bible calls them "dumb dogs", but to the King James boys, it didn't mean dumb as in stupid. It meant unable to speak, as in "deaf and dumb." I know, there are times when you wish your dog were mute, but dogs hold themselves responsible for letting you know what is going on.

They are concerned when the doorbell rings that you might not hear it. Barking is their way of saying, "Somebody's at the door!" Now, I thought about this when a little girl was taken from her bed in the middle of the night not long ago, and nobody's found her yet. And I thought, "If I had a little girl like that, she would have a dog who slept in her room, maybe on her bed. A big dog." I had a smallish dog that slept on my feet in cold weather when I was a boy. You could not have come near me without her setting up an alarm.

But of what use is a mute dog that cannot bark? That only lies around, sleeps and eats. Then Isaiah shifts the metaphor from dogs to shepherds. And in the Bible, you've got to watch out for the mixed metaphors. They're all over the place, as they're grasping for a way to explain to you what's going on.

Isaiah 56

¹¹ [...] They are shepherds who lack understanding;
they all turn to their own way,
they seek their own gain.

¹² "Come," each one cries, "let me get wine!
Let us drink our fill of beer!
And tomorrow will be like today,
or even far better."

I groan when I read it, for there are many kinds of shepherds. There are presidents, governors, congressmen, preachers, teachers, school boards and administrators. Tomorrow, they say, will be just like today and even better. And that is the way nearly everyone has been acting for a long time now. And we have the right to expect better from our shepherds and guard dogs than what we've been getting. It is at this point, though, that Isaiah comes to the scripture I started with.

Isaiah 57

NIV

¹ The righteous perish,
and no one takes it to heart;
the devout are taken away,
and no one understands
that the righteous are taken away
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² Those who walk uprightly
enter into peace;
they find rest as they lie in death.

Which is probably where our old statement “rest in peace” comes from. So we don’t live in a world that goes on to greater and better things, after all. Tomorrow may not be all that abundant after all. It may get bad enough that we will be grateful our mom didn’t live to see it. But what happens to bring this situation about? Well, Isaiah’s not through:

Isaiah 57

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³ “But you—come here, you children of a sorceress,
you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes!

⁴ Who are you mocking?
At whom do you sneer
and stick out your tongue?
Are you not a brood of rebels,
the offspring of liars?

Would you have to look very hard in society today to find the children who sneer at society, who stick out the tongue at the rest of us? Now times change, cultures change. But human nature doesn’t, and the divine nature doesn’t change either. When you read a passage like this, you can say, “Oh, this isn’t *now*, not *us*. This was *then* and *those* people.

And yet, the ratio of children who are born without a father in the home grows on apace, and the children of adulterers and prostitutes abound among *us* and as much among them as it ever did if not more. And as much as we try to be understanding and compassionate with the children and so forth, we can’t deny what is right there in front of us. And there is a terrible cost associated with this.

Lay aside for the moment the cost for the kids themselves and consider what this means to society. Too many people are in denial about what all this is costing us. Did you know, for example, that the strongest predictor of whether a person will end up in prison is that he was raised by a single parent? Three studies and a well-documented book just stress the point.

70% of inmates in state juvenile detention centers were raised by single mothers according to Wade Horn, writing in *Imprimis*.

72% of juvenile murderers and 60% of rapists come from single-mother homes. That according to Chuck Colson in his book *How Shall We Live?*

Did you catch what I’m saying here? 70% of inmates, 72% of juvenile murderers, 60% of rapists come from single-mother homes. Is this just sort of accidental? 70% of teenage births, dropouts, suicides and child murders involve children of single mothers. Girls raised without a father in the

home are sexually more promiscuous and more likely to end up divorced.

A 1990 study by the Progressive Policy Institute showed that after controlling for single-motherhood, the differences between black and white crime rates disappeared. What's the real cause? Single-motherhood.

I don't think I could ever have tracked all this down. But Ann Coulter, in her book *Guilty* lays them all out. Every single fact is documented. This time Ms. Coulter is not trying to be funny. And, to be sure, it is not. As I read more figures, it made my blood run cold:

- 62% of youth suicide
- 70% of teenage pregnancy
- 71% of adolescent chemical substance abuse
- 80% of **all prison inmates**
- 90% of **all homeless and runaway children**

...are from single parent families.

Are we ready to deal with this or not? Frankly, I don't see any indication that we are.

Ms. Coulter cited an item from *The Village Voice* that children brought up in single mother homes are:

- 5 times more likely to commit suicide
- 9 times more likely to drop out of school
- 14 times more likely to commit rape (among boys)
- 20 times more likely to end up in prison
- 32 times more likely to run away from home

Ms. Coulter observed that most of these studies were done in the 1990s, and the situation has not gotten better, but worse in recent years. Now you tell me: is this or is this not a huge problem for society at large? And does it not have an economic impact almost beyond calculation? How in the world have we gotten to this point?

Back to Isaiah:

Isaiah 57

NIV

³ “But you—come here, you children of a sorceress,
you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes!

⁴ Who are you mocking?

At whom do you sneer
and stick out your tongue?

Are you not a brood of rebels,
the offspring of liars?

⁵ You burn with lust among the oaks
and under every spreading tree;
you sacrifice your children in the ravines
and under the overhanging crags.

Yeah, well, at least we don't do *that*, do we? No, maybe not in quite the same way. The references to child sacrifice have to do with Baal worship, which involved child prostitution and child sacrifice.

But in our generation, sexual abuse of children is all too common, and there is sex trafficking in children and teenage girls all over the place. We have sacrificed children in their millions on the altar of abortion.

A thought occurs as I put this together: How much of the efforts at sustaining abortion, paying for abortion (especially government paying for abortion) is aimed at this problem? I once asked the question of those in my audience who are Black Americans, “Do you realize that the government, in the process of paying for these abortions, is mainly abortion poor, black children?” What does it say about a society that it has to kill off its unborn in order to reduce the jail population? Because that is one of the deals they’re working on, and I don’t know what goes on in the brain of these people we send up to Washington. Do you? I can’t tell what they’re thinking, as what they are doing is so irrational at the normal level you know there has to be something else behind their thinking.

We are advanced people, though, and we don’t sacrifice to Baal. But I don’t think the children can really tell much difference in the results of the two. And we have our idols: rock stars, entertainers who have led our children to choose what some call “slut-wear” for their clothing. And the spirit of idolatry was in evidence even in political campaigns where a presidential candidate becomes like a rock star.

Yes, we are an *advanced* people...*advancing* into what? Isaiah went on:

Isaiah 57

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⁶ The idols among the smooth stones of the ravines are your portion; indeed, they are your lot.
Yes, to them you have poured out drink offerings and offered grain offerings.
In view of all this, should I relent?

Well, we haven’t made images of crawfish, I guess. We just eat them.

Isaiah 57

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⁷ You have made your bed on a high and lofty hill; there you went up to offer your sacrifices.
⁸ Behind your doors and your doorposts you have put your pagan symbols.
Forsaking me, you uncovered your bed, you climbed into it and opened it wide; you made a pact with those whose beds you love, and you looked with lust on their naked bodies.

Never in history has there been so much nakedness to look upon. I read somewhere recently that the average teenager spends 31 hours a week on the Internet and two hours watching pornography.

But we are an advanced people, aren’t we? And what is it that we are advancing toward, pray tell?

Isaiah 57

NIV

⁹ You went to Molek with olive oil

and increased your perfumes.
You sent your ambassadors far away;
you descended to the very realm of the dead!

You were working so hard to find people they went to the grave itself.

Now let me stop and explain something here. All this was spoken and written to generation of people living some 2,700 years ago. We are getting a snapshot, as it were, of a moral landslide. I am certain that Isaiah didn't expect this to be read 2,700 years later, but he may have understood that it was for generations to come because he wrote it down.

And remember this. God doesn't change. Human nature doesn't change. And because of this, prophecy repeats, and this one is just as valid today as it was when Isaiah wrote the words. And those who want to know can understand clearly enough what God has to say to this generation. Why should he bother sending yet another prophet that we won't listen to anyway.

Isaiah 57

NIV

¹⁰ You wearied yourself by such going about,
but you would not say, 'It is hopeless.'
You found renewal of your strength,
and so you did not faint.

¹¹ "Whom have you so dreaded and feared
that you have not been true to me,
and have neither remembered me
nor taken this to heart?
Is it not because I have long been silent
that you do not fear me?"

Yeah, I think it is. God has not been silent to people who read the Bible. He has a lot to say to them. But even Christian people in large numbers no longer read the Bible. **It has been so long since God has spoken to us, that we no longer fear him.**

Isaiah 57

NIV

¹² I will expose your righteousness and your works,
and they will not benefit you.

¹³ 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 whoever takes refuge in me
will inherit the land
and possess my holy mountain."

For us, Isaiah might say, "Let your BMW that you idolize carry you to safety." Or, let the political leaders you idolize show you the way. The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away.

Isaiah 57

NIV

¹⁴ And it will be said:
“Build up, build up, prepare the road!
Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.”

¹⁵ For this is what the high and exalted One says—
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
“I live in a high and holy place,
but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite.

Isn't that fascinating? God is high and lifted up. He dwells in a high and holy place, but also with the man who is humble, contrite, and lowly in spirit. To us, God says:

Isaiah 57

NIV

¹⁶ I will not accuse them forever,
nor will I always be angry,
for then they would faint away because of me—
the very people I have created.

¹⁷ I was enraged by their sinful greed;
I punished them, and hid my face in anger,
yet they kept on in their willful ways.

So that's what has happened to us. You know, there is something really ironic about people who have maxed out their credit cards, people who have gone out and bought houses with no money and no money to make the monthly payments pointing the finger at Wall Street greed. I hear “greed this” and “greed that” and talk about all the nasty traitors and evil people up there. And yet here we are, saying, “Do you see all those greedy people over there?” Well, those greedy people over there are us. God says:

Isaiah 57

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¹⁸ I have seen their ways, but I will heal them;
I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners,
¹⁹ creating praise on their lips.
Peace, peace, to those far and near,”
says the Lord. “And I will heal them.”

But not everyone.

Isaiah 57

NIV

²⁰ But the wicked are like the tossing sea,
which cannot rest,
whose waves cast up mire and mud.
²¹ “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

These last three verses are comforting. For the man who will look to God and repent, there is healing and restoration and peace. But there is no peace for the wicked. In these days when the whole world is shaken, we can have peace. One way is by remembering what is truly important.

There is a way of life that makes all the difference. There is the love of God, amply attested. There are family and friends and the love of good people. They mean so much more than BMWs and Mercedes and 16-room houses and all the wonderful things we can build up around us. If you find yourself naked on the street, broken down, no money and no where to go, having family that loves you and someone you can actually go to is priceless.

Paul had some awefully good advice. In his first letter to Timothy, he talks about people who were teaching contrary to what Paul was teaching.

1 Timothy 6

KJV

³ If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness;

⁴ He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings,

⁵ Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.

You know, all you have to do is pay attention to what is going on around you. You would certainly be able to see this if you haven't allowed yourself to have blinders put on by what's on television all the time or from talking heads spouting party lines from one side or the other.

1 Timothy 6

KJV

⁶ But godliness with contentment is great gain.

Get away from people who think that just "getting stuff" is good. Godliness, that is living a Godly life and being content therein, puts you so far ahead of the game you can't even talk about it. He goes on to explain:

1 Timothy 6

KJV

⁷ For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.

⁸ And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.

That's not much is it: food and clothes? Clothes so you can be warm when it's cold outside. Food so you can have something to eat when you're hungry. That kind of says it all; to learn to be content. Paul says in another place:

Phillipians 4

KJV2000

¹¹ Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, to be content.

That was even true of Paul when he had been beaten, had marks all over his back, had his feet in stocks in jail in the middle of the night. And he and Silas sat there and sang songs. He goes on to say:

Isaiah 57

KJV

⁹ But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.

Now this doesn't mean that if you really live your life as you should, if you're careful, you practice some of the principles of financial security, that you may not actually become rich. But if that is your goal, just trying to have more money, you're going to fall into a temptation and a snare with the many foolish and hurtful lusts which will drown you.

Isaiah 57

KJV

¹⁰ For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

¹¹ But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to realize that the goals that you hold out for yourself in your life will have an enormous amount to do with where you are when everything comes unglued. Whether you are going to be alone, and lost, and hungry. Or whether you are going to be with people you love, people you can spend time with and enjoy, and people who, when you are in trouble, will help you out.

Well, Isaiah got instructions after all of this. God told him to:

Isaiah 58

NIV

¹ "Shout it aloud, do not hold back.
Raise your voice like a trumpet.
Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.

You know, I can't help this. There comes a point in time when some of us have got to say something about what is going on. And there's not particular reason to hold back about it. So I may have raised my voice a little bit today. I'm sorry. I'm not talking down to you, because I'm just like you are. We have gone way too far down the wrong road and the way to correct it is going to be painful. Just make up your mind to it and deal with it.

Isaiah 58

NIV

² For day after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God. [...]

Well think about that. They tell God, “No, we haven’t turned away from God. We’re good people.” And God replies, telling them that is not the way it is.

Isaiah 58

NIV

² [...] They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.

³ ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,
‘and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?’ [...] [...]

⁶ “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

You own family? Then, if you will just do these things:

Isaiah

NIV

⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

I think that’s better.

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