

July 19

Isaiah 57-59

Hello again! I'm glad you could join me for the July 19<sup>th</sup> edition of the Project 4:4 accelerators. I'm Terry Ebers & today we read Isaiah chapters 57-59. We are just a few chapters away from finishing the book of Isaiah. I hope your life has been enriched because of the things you've learned from the writings of this great prophet.

The first thing I want to point out about what we read is the description of how bad things were in Judah in the time of Isaiah. It was pretty grim. Here are some of the particular sins for which the people who bore the name of God participated in: occult practices, sexual immorality, a spirit of mockery, idolatry (the worship of false gods), child abuse (in particular the sacrifice of children to idols), no concern for truth, justice or obedience to the laws of God: in chapter 59 starting in verse 14 it says..."So justice is driven back and righteousness stands a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey." That's a description of Jerusalem in Isaiah's day. But it also seems like a fairly accurate description of our own culture today. And Isaiah goes on to say that it looks as though God either doesn't know what's going on or is unable to do anything to stop it. That sounds pretty contemporary, doesn't it?

If any of you have taken an introductory course in philosophy you were probably at some point introduced to what is usually called "the problem of evil." I remember talking in depth about this in my college philosophy course. Now, the argument looks something like this. Christians have always claimed that God is all good, all knowing, and all-powerful, but the existence of evil in the world poses a problem to that belief set. If God is all good then He will surely want to deal with evil. If He is all knowing He will know exactly what is going on and if He is all-powerful then the resources to deal with the problem are at his disposal. So, if God does not act to restrain or remove evil from the world, He must be lacking in one of those three categories of goodness, knowledge or power. Well, apparently the wisdom of man with regard to the problem of evil hasn't changed at all in the last 2700 years because that is exactly the "problem" to which Isaiah is speaking in chapter 57.

Behold the arm of the Lord is not too short to save (that addresses the power side) nor his ear too dull to hear (that's knowledge) but your iniquities have separated you from your God, your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear (this is the goodness issue. It's not God's goodness that's lacking, it is your rebellion that causes the problem). Isaiah is saying throughout this passage -- people wake up. Dealing with evil in this world is your responsibility. God delegated it to you!! Don't just mourn over it - Change it! That's the spirit behind the powerful passage in chapter 58.

"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? 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 him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? 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. (Just like when Israel left Egypt!) Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I."

So, what is God saying to us here? Well, remember the words of Samuel to Saul? Samuel urged..."To obey is better than sacrifice!" I think God is saying...Start obeying the commands of the Lord and watch how quickly things will change!! The overwhelming presence of evil in our world, in our own country is not because God isn't good anymore, or because He doesn't know what is happening or because His power to change it is somehow limited. It's because His people are not obeying His word, similar to Isaiah's day. I wonder how things would change, how our country would change if we just obeyed God's Word.

And one last thing I want to touch on is the idea of fasting mentioned in chapter 58. Here the prophet denounced it because it was not sincere fasting - it was not accompanied by true repentance and obedient behavior. Please also note, however, that nothing is said negatively here about the practice of fasting itself. That is not the issue and the Bible never opposes that. In fact here, there seems to be an assumption that God's people will fast, that it will be a normal, if not a regular, practice for the true follower of the Lord. We learn from scripture that there is value in the Biblical practice of fasting. But, the kind of fasting Isaiah's readers were doing was useless - a ritualistic attempt to manipulate God. Know this...God cannot be manipulated and that should never be our reason for fasting - to get something from God. But rather fasting should be practiced as a means to seek God and align our own hearts with His heart. That is the kind of fasting God does endorse and does bless. It seems that fasting today is a lost spiritual discipline. Not many people do it. But it sometimes also seems that as Christians we are much weaker than we ought to be. We have little holiness and little strength and little power and we bear only a little fruit for the kingdom of God. In the New Testament and through the history of the church, fasting has been a channel for God's power. And I believe it still is! Maybe it's something you want to begin to include in your own spiritual disciplines.

Well that's all for today. Thanks again for joining me these last few days as we've journeyed through the book of Isaiah. Tomorrow **insert name** will be back with you to continue the daily accelerators. And as we go let me remind you that God is all good, all knowing, and all- powerful...and obeying His word will surely bring about blessing!