

## Reviving for the humble and contrite (Isaiah 57:13b-19)

By Jay Wegter

13b “But he who takes refuge in Me will inherit the land and will possess My holy mountain. 14 And it will be said, ‘build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstacle out of the way of My people.’ 15 For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’ 16 ‘For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before Me, and the breath of those whom I have made.’ 17 ‘Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry and struck him; I hid My face and was angry, and he went on turning away, in the way of his heart.’ 18 ‘I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and to his mourners,’ 19 ‘creating the praise of the lips.’ ‘Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will heal him’ ” (Is 57:13b-19).

**“I will heal him” (Is 57:19). One of the chief marks of being ‘healed from idolatry’ is a new bias against sin, and a new devotion to the beauty of God’s holiness.** This marvelous change is the effect of the work of Christ applied to a person. “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:11-4). The individual who has been transformed by Christ is radically different from a “cultural Christian” or false believer who contents himself with the assumptions of ‘natural religion’ rather than the truth of the gospel.

**In Scripture, God bids His redeemed people to abide in Him, to seek Him, and to draw near.** But, here is the paradox; the more closely one dares to draw near to God, the more vivid and brilliant the light of God’s holiness becomes. That means that as it shines upon the remnants of indwelling sin, there’s **trauma**. But it is a healthy brand of **trauma**. For, when we are searched by the brightness of God’s holy character, our response is much like what the Law produces in **Romans 3:19-20**. The Law’s ‘searchlight’ ‘closes our mouths’ by removing the excuses and alibis we use to justify our sin. Now, if you say that sounds like a very uncomfortable thing; you would be correct. There is **trauma** in drawing near to God—He is holy by nature, and we are not.

**But, this gets right down to the thrust and burden of our Isaiah text.** God promises abounding pardon, overflowing grace, the sense of His presence, and reviving strength to those who are willing to regularly undergo this **trauma of holiness**. His promises are made to the humble and the **contrite**. The **Hebrew word** for **contrition** used here in **Isaiah 57:15** is *daka*. It

means ‘crushed’—to be crushed over our sin. Admittedly, a sense of condemnation and moral failure is the universal human experience, but that is not the same as contrition. To exercise **contrition** is to be afflicted over one’s personal sin. It is to contemplate one’s sin in the presence of God’s holiness so as to feel sin’s defilement, treachery, and wretchedness. It is to lay that sin bare before God in ruthless honesty with the expectation that God is quick to pardon because of the perfect Mediator He has provided.

**Now, all of our carnal powers of self-preservation work against our being contrite—we are awfully good at avoiding contrition.** A contrite heart does not come natural to us. In fact, 100 plus years of psychology in the West have done their sinister work in making *contrition* seem like an undesirable and fruitless activity. Psychology says in effect: “If something makes you feel bad, it must be bad, so it is your duty to insulate yourself from it.” Thus, what is common today instead of contrition, is to hear platitudes such as: *we all make mistakes, no one is perfect, we did the best with what we knew, you were just being yourself, etc.* This ought to lead us to examine why our Isaiah text places contrition and humility together.

**Our text reveals that contrition accompanies the cultivation of a humble and lowly mind before God. And, contrition is how the humble respond to divine correction.** In **Psalm 119:67**, the Psalmist says, “Before I was afflicted, I went astray.” I think of the hymn with the line, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love” (Robert Robinson, “Come Thou Fount of every Blessing”). Not only does that stanza capture the wayward tendency of our own hearts, it also describes the general bent of the nation of Israel. Listen to what the Lord says to Israel through Jeremiah, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Just so will I destroy the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. ‘This wicked people, who refuse to listen to My words, who walk in the stubbornness of their hearts and have gone after other gods to serve them and to bow down to them, let them be just like this waistband which is totally worthless.’ ‘For as the waistband clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole household of Israel and the whole household of Judah cling to Me,’ declares the LORD, ‘that they might be for Me a people, for renown, for praise and for glory; but they did not listen’ “ (**Jer 13:8-11**). It was Israel’s pride that gradually replaced the fear of God with devotion to idols.

**In regard to that pride, the structure of Isaiah chapter 57 sets the promise of reviving mercies, between two ‘bookends’ sections of severe judgment.** Like bookends, 57:1-13, and 57:20-21 are devastating rebukes upon the proud who do not fear God and who continue to bring their energy to their idolatry. Thus, these two themes in Isaiah 57 of: 1) **judgment** and, 2) the offer of **compassion**—are addressed to the mixed multitude of Jewish exiles in Babylon—**reproof** to the proud hypocrites who use religion in name only, and, the **offer of mercy** to the repenting remnant whom the Lord will bring back to Jerusalem.

**“Build up, build up, remove every obstacle, prepare the way. . .” (V. 14).** Through Isaiah’s prophecy, God is beckoning the faithful remnant to leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem. God has cleared the way through the benevolence of king Cyrus and Darius. These

two pagan kings, through God's providence, will supply financial support as well as military protection for the endeavor of rebuilding Jerusalem and its temple. But, think for a moment what must have struck fear in their hearts of the Jewish exiles at the prospect of leaving Babylon. More than two generations had passed since the exiles had been carried off to Babylon (70 years). Much of their former farmlands were occupied by squatters and by Gentile invaders. No doubt these exiles were distressed by doubts such as these: *Will we live in tents; what dwellings will we find if we return? Will God protect us on their journey? What will be the expense to our families, our finances, and our health and safety if we obey God and leave the security of Babylon?*

**It is to the storm-tossed remnant that the promises in verses 13b-19 are directed.** God is assuring them that He delights to lift up and revive by His presence, but His people must bring themselves low in **humility** and **contrition**. This principle here is timeless; God does not miss not a single speck of our trust and humility; He will find us, for by **humility** and **contrition** we draw near to Him. The Hebrew word for **revive** here is *chayah*, it has a rich semantic range: *come alive, give life, heal, nourish, repair, recover, spare*. That is what God's presence does. That is what the exiles needed, and it is what we need.

**I. God is high and exalted.** "For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite' " (v. 15).

**God is transcendent (infinitely above us) in His self-existence, in His infinite power, and in His wisdom, and in His holiness. And, He is immanent (with us) in the incarnation of our Savior and the indwelling of His Holy Spirit** (see the name *Immanuel*, 'God with us' in Isaiah 7:14). Isaiah 57:15 is emphasizing that our salvation is attributable to God's remarkable condescension. This meekness of God in 'stooping' to care for our concerns is captured in the following Psalm: "Who is like the LORD our God, Who is enthroned on high, Who humbles Himself to behold *the things that are* in heaven and in the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make *them* sit with princes, with the princes of His people. He makes the barren woman abide in the house as a joyful mother of children. Praise the LORD!" (Ps 113:5-9).

**The true believer understands that God's love and care is a holy love, and the reception of this holy love through Messiah, the Mediator, has begun the process of making the believer like his Savior (Rom 8:29).** There's much talk about love today, but, it's often merely emotional love, or lawless love. It goes without saying that to receive God's holy love will have a sanctifying effect upon us and will cause us to mortify (slay) our lusts—declaring war upon them, starving them and, putting them to death out of love for God's holiness (Col 3:5-11; 1 Jn 4:17-19). God has but one way of making His people eternally happy, and that is by making them holy like Jesus Christ. "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as

yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 Jn 3:1-3). Therefore, one of the reasons true believers come to church is to find out what sins they need to repent of! God is relentless in sanctifying His people; it is our task to work out our salvation with fear and trembling as He works His holy will in us (Phil 2:12-13).

**In 57:15 we are to consider how high and exalted God is, yet even though He dwells in heaven, He takes care of human affairs.** He has tender pity for the *humble* and the *contrite*. He will visit them and converse with them like a family member. What comfort this is for those who are broken under sin and trials. But, in receiving His reviving comfort, we have a responsibility; a necessary response to His invitation. He promises to *revive* those who secretly mourn over their sin (Mt 5:4); who acknowledge their wretchedness—to *lift them* amidst the griefs and fears that break their spirits.

**But, the distance between God and ourselves in His holiness, and in His self-existence is the beginning point in our humility and contrition.** The sheer height of His majesty staggers us; it is something we are unable to wrap our minds around. Think of it, God is creator, maintaining the cosmos in all places, leading forth the constellations in their seasons (Is 40:26). The immensity of the heavens boggles our minds. There are billions of galaxies each with billions of stars. Our own galaxy, the Milky Way, is over 105,000 light years in diameter. A light year is the distance light can travel in one year. It is a more practical way of measuring astronomical distances than by integers which far exceed 10 decimal places. Some galaxies are over one million light years in diameter (Hercules Galaxy, about 10 times the size of our own). Galaxies normally have the shape of a disc, or of a spiral of arms like a pinwheel. The gravitational pull at the center organizes the stars in the ‘arms’, and even though these stars are tens of thousands of light years from the center of the galaxy, at those inconceivable distances, the stars feel the gravitational pull of the galaxy’s center. As a result, they obey that pull from trillions of miles away. It is that gravitational pull that aligns the arms in the galaxy; even the arm in the Milky Way in which our solar system resides.

**Scripture speaks of the inanimate creation obeying the boundaries placed upon it by the Creator (Jer 5:20-24; Job 38:8-11).** In those passages in Jeremiah and Job the oceans of the world are depicted as more obedient than fallen mankind. How needful we are of this divine perspective, for our culture is filled with *selfism*, of man-centered thinking. All the vehicles of secular communication continually lift up the importance of mankind, without an iota of material on divine viewpoint. This constant messaging of the *value of self* takes its cumulative toll. We have a planet filled with self-deceived individuals who imagine that their own importance has the right to be expressed in unhindered self-expression.

**There is no divine plan in time or eternity for those who reject their created purpose.** Scripture has many terrifying descriptions of an impenitent person. In the book of Jude, the reprobate is described as a lone star wandering aimlessly in endless blackness. This is sobering

because a star with no connection to a galaxy or constellation has no family, no relationship, no ordered path through space—what a graphic picture of tragic isolation in eternal perdition.

**My friends, just as the gravity exerted by the core of the galaxy organizes and shepherds the stars in that galaxy, so also the holiness of God orders the lives of the redeemed who are living out their created purpose as the image of their God.** The holiness of God, sometimes referred to as ‘His moral majesty’, is the focal point and purpose of the cosmos. And, how utterly blessed the believer is in that God’s holiness is communicated to him through Christ, the Mediator. In our self-consumed, work-a-day lives, it is easy to forget that the purpose of the entire creation is to serve as a kind of canvas, or stage for God’s glory to be exhibited. Thus, the true believer purposes to be continually aware of his alignment, or posture toward God’s holiness through his Mediator. “You shall be holy for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:16).

**As we have just seen, in a single galaxy, hundreds of millions of stars obediently align themselves to the gravitational center of their galaxy.** There is an analogy here: those who genuinely know God have their lives ordered and organized by the pull and draw of God’s holiness. This is not bare moralism, for only the Person of Christ has the power to redeem us from every lawless deed, to clothe us in righteousness, and thereby to make us God’s cherished possessions (2 Cor 5:14-15; Titus 2:14). It is our union with Christ which has properly aligned us with God’s burning holiness. Through Christ, our representative, we have right-standing with God, and through union with Him we are safely placed within the New Covenant (1 Cor 11:25).

**II. God is lofty, yet He dwells with the humble and contrite (v. 15). Under affliction and trial and sorrows, it can be challenging to properly conceive of God’s fatherly heart.** In fact, we are a bit like the exiles in Babylon who were overwhelmed with a fearful prospect: would they ever again taste God’s gracious providential dealings? Why, with all of the obstacles before them, they could hardly imagine how God would resettle them in Canaan. So also, we may find that our *inward trials* are speaking more loudly than the promises of God. And, so the words of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 57 are as apt for us today as they were for the Jewish remnant in Babylon. For, we need our doubts answered by His offers and promises of renewed hope, and by a comforting view of His merciful nature.

**There are aspects of contrition and humility that are not natural to us.** For, we imagine that God does not desire contact with us in our failures and our complaints. But, nothing could be further from the truth. I think of how surprising it is to us that the invitation to the church of Laodicea (Rev 3) to dine with Christ in intimacy is aimed at fellowshiping with Him at the *points of their spiritual poverty*—at the *points of their acute need*. The Laodiceans tried to cover their defects with hubris and false boasts. So the Lord counsels them: “I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ‘Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline;

therefore be zealous and repent. ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me’ (**Rev 3:18-20**). What a surprising meeting place! The Lord is inviting us to meet with Him at the most disastrous areas of our spiritual ruin. But, these divine invitations also include meeting with the Lord in our areas of dejection, sorrow, and suffering.

**Have you ever noticed how the Psalmist meets the Lord in some very painful places? In sorrow, disillusionment, in guiltiness, in fear, in persecution, in depression, in despondency, in blind rage, in self-loathing, in betrayal, in injustice.** The Psalms are a model of a theological response to our suffering. One third of the Psalms are cast in this mold of **praying our pain** to the Lord. That form of Psalm is called a **‘lament’**. Oh those inner trials we carry, often none see them but the Lord Himself. But, He urges us to draw near, and to commune with Him in those dreaded ‘dungeons of our soul’.

### **III. Humility and trust in God are inseparable virtues (v. 15). Humility will cost you something; it involves ruthless honesty before God concerning your pain and suffering.**

Humility before God is closely tied to what we do with our pain. Humility involves praying our pain to God so that our suffering and complaints have a genuine interface with Him. By contrast, the distrust shown by the children of Israel in the wilderness is a *negative example* of what is done with emotional pain. This negative example is cited by the authors of Scripture in numerous places (**Ps 78; 106; 1 Cor 10; Heb 3; 4**, etc.). The Israelites responded to their fear, deprivation, and insecurity by abandoning trust in God. But, the Bible is incredibly realistic about pain and suffering. In this broken world, the pain of abuse, loneliness, bereavement, sickness, reversals, and relational conflict, bring with them tears and sorrow, that is the norm. God desires that we learn to pray our pain to Him. This kind of prayer is an entire *prayer language* in Scripture known as ‘lament’. Over one third of the Psalms are laments.

**‘Lament’ is the biblical term or prayer language of praying our pain to God. Therefore, laments turn toward God, when sorrow tempts you to run from Him** (Mark Vroegop).

Unbelievers also have sorrows and tears, but believers talk to God about pain. Scripture gives us a divine invitation to pour out our fears, frustrations, and sorrows for the purpose of renewing our confidence in God. “Trust in Him at all times, O people; **pour out your heart before Him**; God is a refuge for us” (**Ps 62:8**). One pastor phrased the counsel of this Psalm in this manner: “Pour out your heart before Him until there is nothing remaining but peace and joy.” But, admittedly, this action of pouring our hearts to God for the purpose of trust is resisted by our lower natures. It is much easier to stuff the pain down inside, to become deadened on the inside, stoic, cynical, bitter, or to seek to blunt the pain by escapism, food, entertainment, sensuality. If we do not pray our pain to God, like the Israelites in the wilderness, we risk turning to false sources or refuge and relief.

**Praying our pain to God for the purpose of renewed trust is a spiritual discipline and ‘prayer language’.** This is a conscious, deliberate action that has several steps:

**1) Turn to God, choosing to bring your complaint to Him.** This is a choice, often punctuated with the kind of phrases we see in the Psalms such as, ‘How long oh Lord?’ (‘shall my enemy be exalted over me?’) (**Ps 13:2**). But, praying in this manner is more than rehearsing where we are hurting, or merely venting our frustration, confusion, and rage.

**2) It involves asking boldly for help.** To do so is an act of faith. We have to get past the self-protective doubt that says: ‘What if nothing changes?’ or, ‘I fear I am setting myself up for more disappointment’. This is why praying your pain to God (‘lament’) involves humility—you are choosing not to settle into the silence of despair, or into carnal retreats, but instead, you are daring to hope in God’s promises.

**3) Trusting is a choice which often involves renouncing carnal habits of self-protection.** Renewing confidence in God amidst our suffering involves self-renouncing, that is a deliberate rejection of our defense mechanisms. We will have to leave the insulating cocoon we have spun around our pain. Our troubled heart needs to have a full interface with God. Thus, the ‘destination’ of our laments is not just to get things off of our chests as we talk with God about our sorrows. The purpose of pouring out our hearts to Him is to renew our hope in His sovereign care (Mark Vroegop, “Dare to hope in God, How to lament well”).

**Prayers of lament take faith and biblical conviction because it is so easy to fall into bitterness, anger, and escapism.** A significant part of our reliance upon God finds hope in His plan to ultimately dry our tears and bring in everlasting joy and righteousness (**Rev 21:1-4**). Biblical hope consolidates its expectation upon the coming Kingdom of God. That kind of hope is the opposite of attempting to make a ‘heaven’ out of our current mortal existence. Since this present life is full of sorrows, we as believers must determine to pray our laments so that **our sorrows turn us to God instead of away from Him.** We should regularly talk to God about our sorrows and struggles. When you meditate upon the Psalms, do so with the intent of allowing phases in the **lament Psalms** to become yours (Ibid.).

**IV. God opens a way for mercy through His chastisements.** “For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before Me, and the breath of those whom I have made.’ ‘Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry and struck him; I hid My face and was angry, and he went on turning away, in the way of his heart.’ ” (**vv. 16-17**). **God does magnify His mercy through His chastisements.** These are God’s all-wise ways. God is compassionate; He sends His correction only as long as it is needed. He knows how weak we are—our spirits are apt to fail. But, He will not forsake the work of His hands. He knows that we dust (**Ps 103:14**), are like grass that vanishes quickly (**Is 40:6-8**).

**V. Contrition normally involves repenting of covetousness (vv. 17-19). The proper response to divine discipline is contrition.** We live in an idolatrous world, and we carry the remnants of a depraved sin nature. Thus, it is so easy for our hearts to get out of tune. Godliness involves the mortification of idolatry—and replacing those idols with the pursuit of satisfaction in God. We could summarize our tendency to stray from God as coveting, or as Paul says ‘coveting of every kind’ (**Rom 7:7-8**). Covetousness is fixated on the notion that ‘I would be happy if . . .’ You fill in the blank. Therefore, covetousness breeds discontentment, restlessness, sulking, moping, grumbling, resentment, lusting, lukewarm-ness, and ingratitude.

**Coveting is displeasing to our God in heaven because He looks on it with holy jealousy.** We were made for Him and redeemed by Him to be His possession, therefore coveting sets up a rival to Him. “You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”? (**Jas 4:4-5**). By contrast to coveting, the pursuit of satisfaction in God is great gain when godliness is accompanied by contentment. “But godliness *actually* is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment” (**1 Tim 6:6**).

**What a comfort; God knew how wayward these Hebrews were, but He would not cast them off.** “I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and to his mourners, creating the praise of the lips. Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near,” says the LORD, “and I will heal him” (**vv. 18-19**). He would heal this remnant of their corrupt and vicious disposition. He would direct them into the duty of grace and into pure worship. And, like us N.T. believers, these elect Jews would prove to be His workmanship—for He would ultimately glorify His grace in their lives and create the praise of their lips. “Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name” (**Heb 13:15**).

**The fact that God gives this grace ‘of Himself’ is a matter of praise and thanksgiving.** This is a remarkable dimension of grace that the reasons for God’s mercy arise from within Himself, and are not produced or motivated, or triggered by us, or by a response from us. We are solely the objects of His mercy. He puts life in spiritually dead hearts, He plants a new nature where there was only a corrupt nature, He bestows a yielding heart where formerly their was only an obstinate one. He will heal them by His comforts.

**Though written 2700 years ago, the application for us is timeless.** Because God’s reasons for His compassion arise from within Himself, do not choose distance from God no matter what you are suffering. Don’t fall into the trap of false reasoning that because your pain is great, God does not desire to be reconciled to you. Holy living means loving God enough to pursue satisfaction in Him with thanksgiving, and loving neighbor enough to serve him without coveting.