

# Creating praise on the lips of mourners

Isaiah 57:15-19

*David C. Dixon*

*<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> I was enraged by their sinful greed; I punished them, and hid my face in anger, yet they kept on in their willful ways. <sup>18</sup> I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel’s mourners, <sup>19</sup> creating praise on their lips. Peace, peace, to those far and near,” says the LORD. “And I will heal them.”*

This Tuesday, Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, is traditionally celebrated in the liturgical calendar as All Saints’ Day, which of course gives us “All Hallows’ Eve” the night before, or as it came to be shortened, Hallowe’en. Before the full-scale invasion of American customs in Spain, the 1<sup>st</sup> of Nov. was traditionally a time of remembering one’s departed loved ones with a visit to the cemetery, “rehashing” our grief, and even a time of calling to mind one’s own mortality ... because **we’re all mourners** at some point in life (if not multiple times), and we also have to **learn** how to do this (especially with all that we went through in Covid and now due to the current war)! Biblical examples show that God understood this problem: the Israelites took thirty days to weep for Moses when he died (Deut. 34:8), and for Aaron as well (Num. 20:22-29). Does this tell us anything? It takes time to assimilate your losses! [Miriam was not mourned (Num. 20), because the people lacked water and were grumbling against Moses, provoking him to sin, wishing they had died with the rebels who were killed when the earth swallowed them up.] We have to **learn** what to do with our grief. The norm in Israel was for the community to come together for expressing grief and sorrow; it was institutionalized in terms of long-standing customs, showing our need to stop and work through such an experience. Today in our culture we hardly have time for more than a funeral, which is about remembering and giving thanks for what the person meant to us, the legacy they left, how their absence will affect us.

## Overview

Isaiah the prophet spoke centuries ago about the mourning that would overwhelm Israel due to the tragedy of her moral decline and spiritual collapse. The psychological devastation would be beyond all imagination. Our society today is also filled with the mourning of brokenness and desperation, and the reasons for grieving just seem to be growing like an avalanche! So is there any hope for praise to be heard from mourners' lips today?! This is what the **"high and exalted One"** does, **"he who lives forever, whose name is holy"**: He creates **"praise on the lips of the mourners"** and brings **"peace to those far and near"** (Isa. 57:15-19, Eph. 2:13-17). In spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, God promised to restore praise on their lips, and comfort in their hearts. Now mourners are not normally known for their expressions of praise and rejoicing, so don't miss this touch of irony. This is the tension that challenges our standard logic: "people in mourning can only be sad, depressed." Our focus must go beyond those moments in life when we have lost someone and we're grieving; we're talking more about what Unamuno called *"el sentido trágico de la vida."* Life itself is so tragic on the overview, full of grief and brokenness. So what Isaiah is prophesying has to do with the **reversal** that characterizes the whole gospel: the first shall be last and the last first; God's strength is made perfect in weakness; you must lose your life in order to save it; real life proceeds from death, etc. This is the essence of reality, because the Kingdom that Jesus announces won't come about thanks to bigger weapons and more powerful armies; it won't eliminate all the opposition with one blow. Instead, it will come more like a seed-sower, a farmer, or like a fisherman casting his net – but this doesn't sound terribly powerful or impressive, does it? Yet this is the true process of healing and comforting that God has promised, which finds **its culmination** in the **suffering of the cross** – **"by His wounds we are healed."** God delights in restoration and renewal, but His way of accomplishing it is **"not our way"** (Isa. 55:8-9).

## Biblical context

Before we examine this amazing work, however, we need to go back and remember more of the **devastating situation that led to this state of mourning**. That's what the first part of Isaiah 57 focuses on: the prophet wants to clarify the *depth of the problem* before offering the solution: the problem that was manifested in the greed, the willful stubbornness, the falseness and inauthenticity of Israel's sinful human nature. So in this case, the mourners are not grieving over lost loved ones; rather, they're grieving over the loss of their comfortable lifestyle, their favorite vices, their easy access to anything they set their sights on. But as a result of their utterly misplaced values, they lost everything. They're described with all kinds of uncomplimentary names, like **"children of a sorceress ... offspring of adulterers and prostitutes," "brood of rebels, the offspring of liars"** (vv. 3-4). The immediate reference is to the people of Israel – God's own people, from whom we would've expected better! – but the secondary reference is to humanity in general, since ultimately all of us join in the mocking, the sneering, sticking out the tongue (v. 4), which all amounts to bullying! Then Isaiah describes their burning with lust (v. 5), which reminds us of the growth of today's porn industry: lockdown conditions were beneficial for the media and entertainment sector; online porn received a huge upsurge in the number of users and subscribers over the lockdown period, so now it's mainstream entertainment: \$35 billion in revenues in 2019 globally, with a 15% growth rate during Covid. Market size for the Adult/Porno Websites Industry in US is increasing faster than the technology sector, bigger

than Netflix! Trends suggest a growing number of female users, with the US being the biggest market, but the Asia Pacific Region experiencing the highest growth; Sunday is the day of highest traffic! Porn's harmful effects are no longer a mystery. The science and research have been out for years now, and thousands of people, including porn performers themselves, have spoken out on how porn negatively impacts their lives and relationships: it fuels loneliness, aggression, low self-esteem, mental health issues. In other words, our society just as surely as that ancient one is pursuing idolatry in the form of **every possible selfish pleasure and self-indulgence** imaginable (v. 6) – a totally accurate description of today's world! Even to the point of sacrificing children in the process (v. 5); yes, they were even doing it back then, since unwanted babies could be religiously discarded – how convenient! Isaiah was giving us a “spoiler” about what was to come: a horrid but realistic portrait of utter depravity and wretchedness, which represented the sad state of humanity back then, and continues to be super-relevant today (Rom. 3:10-18).

## Our dilemma

So **the mourning was with good reason!** They mourned over all the wasted potential, the shattered hopes, the destroyed lives. We languish from our frenzied search for satisfaction among things that do not fulfill – **things that also ravage our souls** with corruption and shame even as we pursue them. Yet we have all had a hand in this tragedy, either through active participation or passive neglect. Maybe you're shocked to be “lumped together” in this general condemnation with all the riff-raff of humankind? Do you resist applying these descriptions to yourself? Do you protest that “hey, we are not all really that bad”? Our problem may be that we haven't reviewed our history lessons lately to help us remember man's consistently bellicose nature and self-centered focus (it's not exceptional); and maybe we've swept our own battles and temptations under the rug. **Scripture's verdict is unflinching: “all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory”** (Rom. 3:23); **“there is none righteous, not even one”** (Rom. 3:10); the human heart spews forth **“evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly”** – that was Jesus' take on our true condition (Mk. 7:21-22). And since His day, we've only taught ourselves to do these things at higher speed and with greater efficiency. Jeremiah had already warned that the human heart is **“deceitful above all things and beyond cure”** (17:9), and few have expressed the extent of **this damage** like the prophet Isaiah: damage **to – and through – God's crowning creation.**

## God's reaction

Isa. 57 is one of those deep pits of human depravity. The most amazing truth expressed in this prophetic message, however, is that **“the High and Exalted One”** should care a whit about such wretched creatures, who, after all His merciful provision, patience, and warnings, *persisted* in their selfish ways (v. 17). Yet Isaiah insists that **this Holy God is still full of compassion** for the **“contrite and lowly in spirit”** (v. 15), longing to revive their hearts, because God knew that if He kept on accusing and berating us for all our wrong thoughts and actions, He could go on forever in His righteous indignation, but **“the spirit of man would faint”** before Him (v. 16). We simply could not bear the weight of grasping the **full picture** of our own iniquity and foolishness. God's indignation at our stubbornness and self-centeredness (v. 17) was totally justified, but He knew He would have to act dramatically to bring about a serious change: **“I have seen their ways, but I will heal them”** God

promises; ***“I will guide them and restore comfort to them”*** (v. 18). Let that promise wash over your soul! This is a work of pure grace and unimaginable power – a true miracle!

## God’s solution

So what “work” could possibly produce such a **revolutionary recovery** in those who were mourning over their failures and losses? The Suffering Servant is not clearly present in this chapter, but He is the principal theme of the Isaian messages in the preceding section (chp. 40-55). This Servant would endure all the rebellion and meanness of this people personally – “in His face!” – the betrayals, the unjust trial, the false witnesses, the mocking, the insulting, the beating and raging – and **He would bear these awful iniquities against Himself with kindness and grace**, pouring out His life ***“unto death”*** and being ***“numbered with the transgressors”*** (Is. 53:11-12). The apostle Paul clearly sees Jesus’ death as the fulfillment of the announcement in Isaiah 57:19: ***“Peace, peace [shalom], to those far and near, says the LORD, and I will heal them.”*** In Eph. 2:14, Paul describes Jesus as ***“our peace”***, and in 2:17, as the One ***“who came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.”*** Those who were far away represented the Gentile nations, and those who were near represented the Jewish people; both now find their equal access to God through Jesus by the one Spirit (Eph. 2:18), just as they both find their peace with God and with one another through Christ alone. He is the only one powerful enough to overcome such enmity as existed between Jews and Gentiles – even today.

The redemption enfleshed in Jesus’ sacrifice was **the only event large enough** to bring true peace to those far and near – the very same peace He had offered His disciples on the night of His betrayal (Jn. 14:27). That peace consists of **the forgiveness Jesus declared and acted out there on the cross**; so it is both **RECONCILIATION** (with God and fellowman) accomplished by His forgiving, and **LIBERATION** (from sin, death, and the evil one) accomplished by His conquering. In other words, while hanging on that cross, He continued loving God with all His being (resisting the evil one) and loving His fellowman as Himself (forgiving us all our rebellion, incarnating divine mercy), all at the same time. These are the **two dimensions** of our spiritual need: restoration of our friendship with God, and victory over the enemy of our souls. And it was all perfected with that one act of pouring out His soul unto death – forgiving us and defeating our enemy, both at the same time. Such a peace is **so powerful** that even mourners cannot resist it – they break forth in praise! – and then are themselves turned into **peacemakers**, following in Christ’s footsteps (Mt. 5:9, Jas. 3:18, Col. 3:15, Rom. 14:19). As the psalmist exclaimed, ***“You have turned my mourning into dancing! You have removed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. Oh, LORD, my God, I will give thanks to you forever!”*** (Ps. 30:11-12). Will you lay your mourning over life’s disillusionments at the foot of the cross? Will you let Jesus soothe your anxiety and sorrow with His praises?