

Homiletics Analysis: Isaiah 57

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Isaiah 57 is a sustained divine oracle moving through three distinct but integrated movements. The chapter opens (vv. 1–2) with a counterintuitive observation: the righteous perish and no one takes notice or understands what God is doing in it — namely, protecting them from coming evil by taking them to peace. The middle section (vv. 3–13) is a searing prophetic indictment of Israel’s syncretistic idolatry — child sacrifice, cultic prostitution, the worship of false gods on every high hill and beneath every spreading tree. The charge is delivered with biting sarcasm: let your idols save you when you cry to them; let the wind carry them off. The chapter then pivots sharply in vv. 14–21 to one of the most stunning declarations in all of Isaiah — the high and exalted One who inhabits eternity condescends to dwell with the crushed and lowly of spirit, to revive them, to restore them. This is the theological heart of the chapter. The closing couplet (v. 21) — “There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked” — serves as a dark refrain echoing 48:22, framing the entire chapter as a call to choose between the way of the idol-seeker and the way of the contrite.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to shatter false confidence in idols and self-chosen worship while simultaneously opening the door wide to the crushed and contrite. The intent is not primarily to condemn but to call — to expose the utter futility and exhausting emptiness of idolatry (you wore yourself out in your many wanderings, v. 10) and to set against it the breathtaking reality that the transcendent God who fills eternity has chosen, freely and graciously, to make His dwelling with the broken-hearted. God intends for the reader to give up on every idol, including the idol of religious self-sufficiency, and to come to Him in lowliness — because that is precisely where He promises to be.

Subject Sentence:

The holy God who dwells in eternity descends to revive the contrite, while idols offer nothing but exhaustion and ruin.

Primary Claim:

God is calling His people to abandon every idol and every form of self-manufactured worship — not primarily by threatening judgment but by demonstrating that He alone meets the crushed spirit where idols cannot, and that He has already chosen to dwell there.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Identity of “the Righteous” in Verses 1–2

A recurring question in the interpretation of vv. 1–2 concerns whether the righteous who perish and are “taken away” refer to martyrs, to those who die before coming calamity (a protective removal), or to those whose death goes unmourned because society has ceased to value righteousness. The most defensible reading — and the one with the strongest contextual support — is that God is providing a theodicy of righteous suffering: the righteous are being removed *from* coming evil, and their death is not abandonment but protection, a gathering into peace (šālôm). This reading is consistent with the broader Isaianic vision of God’s sovereign governance over the fates of His servants. A purely martyrological reading (the righteous are killed because of persecution) is not excluded but is insufficient as a standalone interpretation — it does not account for the sovereign framing of God’s active removal, nor does it explain the positive peace into which the righteous enter (v. 2). The theodicy function should be retained: God is not indifferent to the suffering of His righteous ones; He is doing something in it and through it.

The Syncretistic Indictment — Israel or Pagans?

Some interpreters, particularly within dispensational frameworks, read vv. 3–13 as addressed specifically to apostate Israelites rather than the covenant community at large, and treat the prophetic indictment as applying exclusively to the pre-exilic period with no continuing homiletical force. This reading is too narrow. The oracle is addressed to “sons of a sorceress, offspring of an adulterer and a prostitute” — covenant language for a people who have broken their covenant relationship with YHWH. The practices described (child sacrifice to Molech in v. 5, cultic practices in vv. 7–8) are precisely those condemned throughout the pre-exilic and exilic prophets, and Isaiah’s use of them is representative, not exhaustive. The Reformed reading rightly generalizes the principle: this is what happens when God’s people seek satisfaction, security, and identity in sources other than YHWH — they multiply exhausting substitutes that cannot deliver. Keller’s idol-diagnosis lens is directly applicable here: the practices described are not merely ceremonial sins but displacement sins — the heart was looking for what only God provides and seeking it from every tree and high hill. The homiletical force extends to every form of functional idolatry.

Verses 14–21 — Condescension or Indwelling?

The theological pinnacle of vv. 15–16 has been read in several ways. Arminian and Wesleyan interpreters tend to emphasize the human side — God draws near to those who humble themselves, suggesting that human initiative in contrition is the enabling condition

for God's presence. This reading partially holds (genuine contrition is indeed named as the dwelling place of God's presence) but overreaches if it implies that the contrite earn or condition God's descent. The Reformed reading is preferable: God's free declaration — "I dwell in the high and holy place, *and also* with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit" (v. 15) — presents the condescension as God's own sovereign choice and initiative. The contrite spirit is the *meeting place* God has designated, not the human achievement that draws Him down. God revives the spirit of the lowly (v. 15b) — the reviving is His work on the lowly, not a reward for their lowliness. The Lutheran Law/Gospel reading helpfully captures the movement from crushing indictment (vv. 3–13) to liberating gospel (vv. 14–21) and is not wrong in its basic shape, but it can underemphasize the covenantal context — this is not abstract Law/Gospel dialectic but YHWH's covenant faithfulness to His own people, expressed through the specific form of condescension to the crushed.

Verse 19 — "Peace, peace" and Its Christological Resonance

Verse 19's declaration of "peace, peace, to the far and to the near" is quoted in Ephesians 2:17, where Paul applies it to Christ's reconciling work bringing near those who were far off (Gentiles) and those who were near (Israel). This canonical fulfillment does not require reading Gentile inclusion into Isaiah 57's immediate horizon, but the Reformed interpreter rightly sees in Isaiah 57:19 an anticipation — the peace God offers to the contrite here finds its fullest expression in the reconciling work of the one who is Himself both the high and holy God and the man of sorrows, contrite on behalf of His people.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 66:1–2** — The LORD whose throne is heaven and whose footstool is the earth asks, "Where is the house you will build for me?" and declares: "But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." Perfect canonical parallel to Isaiah 57:15 — the transcendent God dwelling with the humble is a consistent Isaianic theme, here at the book's close.
- **Psalms 34:18** — "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." The Psalter's own formulation of the same truth: divine nearness is specifically located at the place of brokenness, not strength.
- **Ephesians 2:13–17** — Paul explicitly cites Isaiah 57:19 ("peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near") in declaring that Christ has made peace through His cross, bringing near those who were far. The Primary Claim's promise of divine condescension to the lowly is christologically fulfilled in the incarnation and atonement.
- **Matthew 11:28–30** — Christ's invitation to the weary and burdened echoes the exact register of Isaiah 57:14–15: the weariness produced by striving (you were wearied by your many wanderings, v. 10) finds its answer in the one who gives rest

to the crushed. The Isaianic theme of divine condescension to the exhausted becomes incarnate in Christ's self-presentation.

- **1 Corinthians 1:26–29** — God's consistent pattern of choosing what is weak and despised, what the world counts as nothing, to shame the strong, grounds the Isaiah 57:15 principle in the very logic of grace: God does not dwell with the mighty because He is not in the business of supplementing human strength but of reviving the lowly.

Aim:

To bring the reader to the specific place of lowliness and contrition where God has promised to be — by exposing the exhausting futility of every idol and setting against it the astonishing reality of God's free condescension to the broken.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	The righteous perish and are taken away; no one understands that they are being removed from coming evil into peace	Divine theodicy of righteous suffering; protective removal, not abandonment
3	God summons the “sons of the sorceress, offspring of the adulterer and prostitute”	Covenant-breaking language; these are God's own people who have played the harlot with idols
4	Mocking question: against whom do you sport and mock? God's indictment of their arrogance toward Him	The people have inverted the relationship — mocking the One who is owed reverence
5	Idolatrous worship under oaks and trees; child sacrifice to Molech in valleys	The worst expression of syncretism — the highest human cost offered to the lowest substitute
6–7	Smooth stones of the valley as lot-divination objects; sexual cultic worship on high beds	The idols are literalized as lovers — the spiritual infidelity mapped onto physical imagery
8	Behind the door they have set up idols, abandoned	The door-mezuzah imagery inverted: where YHWH's

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	God, and “made a deal” with a substitute	word was to be written, idols are hidden
9	They went to Molech with oil and perfume, sent messengers far off, descended even to Sheol	The relentless pursuit of substitutes, no limit to the depth of the self-debasement
10	“You were wearied with the length of your way, but you did not say, ‘It is hopeless’”	The exhaustion of idolatry honestly named — and yet still they persist; no despair great enough to turn them
11	God asks: whom did they fear? They have not remembered Him, not given Him a thought	The root diagnostic: not primarily rebellion but forgetfulness; idolatry as practical amnesia about God
12–13	God’s sarcastic challenge: let your collection of idols save you — but the wind will carry them off	The idol’s total incapacity in the moment of need; contrast set up for v. 13b
13b	“But he who takes refuge in me shall possess the land and shall inherit my holy mountain”	The pivot: the one who turns to YHWH receives what the idols promised and could never deliver
14	“Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people’s way”	The highway imagery from Isaiah 40:3 recalled; God’s call to clear the way for His people’s return
15	The declaration of the high and exalted One who inhabits eternity — and His choice to dwell with the contrite and lowly	The theological heart of the chapter; divine transcendence and divine condescension held simultaneously
16	God will not contend forever or always be angry; His Spirit would faint if He did	Limit on divine wrath grounded not in human merit but in God’s own compassion; He will not crush what He made
17–18	God’s diagnosis: iniquity from covetousness; He struck, hid His face, they	The full cycle: sin, judgment, persistence in sin, and then divine resolve to heal

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	went on backsliding — yet He will heal	regardless
19	“Peace, peace, to the far and to the near” — God will heal	Quoted in Ephesians 2:17; the scope of restored peace; anticipates the reconciling work of Christ
20–21	The wicked are like the tossing sea — no peace for them; refrain echoing 48:22	The negative boundary: those who persist in idolatry have no access to this peace; their restlessness is the consequence of their choice

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–2	The Righteous Removed to Peace
2	3–13	The Indictment of Idolatry — Exhausting Substitutes That Cannot Save
3	14–19	The God Who Dwells With the Crushed — Condescension and Healing
4	20–21	The Dark Refrain — No Peace for the Wicked

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The holy God who dwells in eternity descends to revive the contrite, while idols offer nothing but exhaustion and ruin.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to abandon every idol and every form of self-manufactured worship — not primarily by threatening judgment but by demonstrating that He alone meets the crushed spirit where idols cannot, and that He has already chosen to dwell there.

Applications

1. (*Mind/Belief*) The reason you keep returning to whatever substitutes you run to — the overwork, the approval-seeking, the numbing behaviors, the relationships you have made load-bearing — is not primarily that you are addicted to them but that you have forgotten God. Isaiah’s diagnosis in verse 11 is exact: “you have not remembered me.” The cure begins not with a stronger resolution to stop but with a sustained practice of deliberately remembering — bringing God’s character, His covenant, His word, and His past faithfulness back into conscious view. Forgetting God is what leaves the idol-shaped vacancy; remembering Him is what begins to fill it.

2. (*Affections/Worship*) The idolatry described in verses 5–10 is not primarily about stone statues — it is about what you are willing to pay any price to possess. Wherever you are spending yourself most fully — most of your emotional energy, most of your planning, most of your anxiety, most of your longing — that is your functional worship. Isaiah’s sarcastic challenge (let your idols save you when the wind comes) is not directed at ancient cultists but at anyone who has made something other than God the center of their hope. Sit with verse 10 specifically: “you were wearied with the length of your way.” Is there an exhaustion in your life that is the fruit of chasing something that never delivers? Name it. That is where the repentance belongs.

3. (*Will/Behavior*) Verse 14 is a call to practical action: “remove every obstruction from my people’s way.” For personal application, this means identifying the specific practices, patterns, and arrangements in your daily life that function as obstacles to returning to God — and removing them deliberately. This is not vague spiritual effort; it is the concrete preparation of a cleared road. What is in the way? What have you left in place because removing it felt too costly? The God of verse 15 is waiting at the end of that road, not at the end of a performance, but the road still has to be walked.

4. (*Mind/Belief*) The declaration of verse 15 is one of the most stunning sentences in the Bible and must be believed, not merely acknowledged. The One who inhabits eternity and whose name is Holy has freely chosen to make His dwelling with the crushed and lowly of spirit. This is not a concession or a condescension God was reluctant to make — it is His declaration of where He lives. If you are crushed, you are not outside God’s reach; you are at His address. The temptation for the broken is to assume God is most present to the strong and capable. Isaiah 57:15 demolishes that assumption completely. Believe it — specifically, concretely, for yourself, today.

5. (*Affections/Worship*) Verses 17–19 trace the full arc of God’s dealing with His wandering people: He struck them in anger over their covetousness, they went on backsliding in the way of their own hearts — and then He resolves to heal them and restore comfort and peace. The staggering thing is not just that God forgives but that He persists through the cycle of repeated failure and still says “I will heal.” This should produce not presumption but undone gratitude — the kind that breaks the power of idolatry from the affections

outward. The idol cannot love you back. The God of verse 18 pursues you through your own backsliding and resolves to heal. Let that land.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Isaiah 57 teaches that God's transcendence and His condescension are not in tension — they are the twin movements of His character held in simultaneous, sovereign expression. He is the high and exalted One who inhabits eternity *and* He is the One who freely chooses to make His dwelling with the contrite and lowly of spirit (v. 15). This passage also teaches that idolatry is not primarily a ceremonial failure but a displacement of the heart — a relentless and exhausting pursuit of what only God can provide from sources that cannot deliver it. And it teaches that God's discipline of His people is not His final word: He names His own limit on prolonged wrath (v. 16) and declares His sovereign resolve to heal, restore, and speak peace — not because His people have earned it but because He is the God who revives. The chapter's movement from indictment to condescension to peace is not a progression the people achieved but one God announced and accomplished.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Isaiah 57:15 is a pillar text for the Reformed doctrine of God's sovereign grace — the basis of God's nearness to the crushed is not human contrition as merit but divine initiative in election and condescension. The high and holy One chooses His dwelling place; the lowly and contrite do not summon Him. This is grace in its purest structural form: the sovereign descends to the broken, not because they ascended to Him. The chapter also displays what Calvin identified as the heart's persistent tendency to manufacture idols (the *cor hominis fabricam esse idolorum*) — vv. 3–13 provide the Reformation's diagnosis in prophetic form: the heart does not wander into idolatry accidentally but pursues it with energy, persistence, and great cost. Finally, the peace declared in v. 19 and fulfilled in Ephesians 2:17 establishes the christological grounding of the entire chapter: the condescension of the eternal God to dwell with the lowly finds its ultimate expression in the incarnation of the Son, who is Himself both the high and holy God and the man crushed for our transgressions — making peace through the cross for both those who were near and those who were far.

Main Takeaway

The God who fills eternity has already decided where He lives — with the crushed and contrite, not the strong and self-sufficient. Every idol you have chased has left you

exhausted and empty-handed, because it was never going to be there when the wind came. Stop wearing yourself out on substitutes. Come broken. He is already there.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating vv. 1–2 as a detached comfort passage divorced from the judgment context.** These verses are frequently preached in isolation as a simple word of consolation about righteous suffering. But they function in Isaiah 57 as the opening frame of a chapter whose primary movement is indictment and then condescension — the righteous who are “taken away to peace” stand in explicit contrast to the idolaters who will find no peace (v. 21). Preaching vv. 1–2 without this contrast flattens the theodicy into generic comfort rather than covenant-shaped assurance.
- **Moralizing vv. 3–13 into a catalog of ancient sins with no present application.** The temptation is to treat the child sacrifice and cultic prostitution as historical curiosities requiring explanation rather than as representative forms of the universal pattern Isaiah is exposing — the heart’s relentless substitution of created things for the Creator. Application must do the idol-diagnostic work: what are the functional equivalents today? Where are people spending themselves most fully on what cannot deliver? Naming only ancient forms is safe but inert.
- **Preaching v. 15 as if human contrition is the condition that earns God’s presence rather than the place God has sovereignly designated.** The Wesleyan/Arminian reading makes contrition a human condition that God responds to; the Reformed reading makes it the meeting place God has freely chosen. Both readings call for contrition, but the motivational base is different. If you preach v. 15 as “humble yourself enough and God will show up,” you have re-introduced a merit structure the text actively resists. God is already at the address of the lowly. The call is to come to where He already is, not to perform enough to summon Him.
- **Losing the christological fulfillment of v. 19.** Verse 19 (“peace, peace, to the far and to the near”) cited in Ephesians 2:17 is the canonical bridge from Isaiah’s declaration to its New Testament fulfillment. Preaching Isaiah 57 without tracking this connection misses the fullest answer to the chapter’s own question — how does the holy God actually accomplish His dwelling with the contrite? He does it through the one who became contrite on their behalf, crushed for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5, 10), so that His dwelling with the lowly is not a gracious condescension that bypasses justice but one that has passed through it.
- **Ending the sermon on v. 20–21 without the gospel.** The “no peace for the wicked” refrain is a necessary and serious word, but if the sermon closes there, it inverts the chapter’s own rhetorical movement — which drives toward healing, restoration, and peace (vv. 14–19) with vv. 20–21 as a warning boundary, not the destination. The chapter wants listeners to choose the contrite path, not merely to fear the

wicked one. End where Isaiah ends in register, if not in verse order: with the offer of peace and the God who has already moved toward the crushed.

- **Failing to preach the exhaustion of idolatry as gospel-adjacent good news.**

Verse 10 — “you were wearied with the length of your way, but you did not say, ‘It is hopeless’” — is not only a rebuke but a diagnosis that opens a door. The weariness of idol-chasing is the Spirit’s preparatory work. Preaching that names the exhaustion honestly — “you are tired because you have been running toward something that will never hold you” — is not condemnation but an invitation. The sermon that identifies this weariness specifically and offers Isaiah 57:15 as its answer is doing exactly what the text is designed to do.