

A Study in Isaiah 5:13–17

*No Knowledge — Sheol Opens Her Mouth — The Lord Exalted —
Lambs Feed After Their Manner*

We are reading Isaiah chapter 5, beginning at verse 13.

*"Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge: and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst. Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it. And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled." —
Isaiah 5:13–15*

"But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. Then shall the lambs feed after their manner, and the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat." — Isaiah 5:16–17

No Knowledge — What Verse 13 Is Describing

Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge. The knowledge in view is not secular or academic learning — it is the knowledge of the things of God. There was a teaching priest in Israel whose function was to bring that knowledge to the people; when that ministry was absent, the people perished for lack of it (Hosea 4:6). Malachi 2:7 gives the standard: the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth. When that function fails — whether through the failure of those who should be

teaching, or through the unwillingness of the people to receive instruction — there is no knowledge, and captivity follows.

The connection with what precedes is essential. The people of verses 11 and 12 were not idle — they had feasts, they had music, they had wine, they had company. But they regarded not the work of the Lord, neither considered the operation of His hands. The soul cannot accumulate divine knowledge while it is occupied entirely with its own pleasures. Knowledge of God requires attending to God — to His word, to His ways, to what He is doing. A people that has given itself over to self-indulgence has made that attending impossible, and the result is precisely what verse 13 describes: they have no knowledge. Their honorable men are famished. Their multitude dried up with thirst. The wine of the feasts left nothing to nourish with.

Proverbs 4:5–7 calls for the opposite posture: Get wisdom, get understanding; forget it not, neither decline from her. Wisdom is the principal thing — therefore get wisdom, and with all thy getting, get understanding. That is an active, deliberate, sustained pursuit. It is the direct contrary of sitting down to eat and drink and rising up to play. Paul's word in 1 Corinthians 10:1 — I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud — is a caution against the comfortable embrace of ignorance. Knowledge implies responsibility, and there are those who would rather not have either. But ignorance is bliss is a lie, and the passage before us is the proof of it.

Sheol Enlarges Her Mouth — and the Broad Road

Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it. Sheol — the place of departed spirits — opens wide to receive the consequences of the self-indulgence and the no knowledge. All the things they gloried in, all the crowd, all the display, all the rejoicing — it all descends

there. Matthew 7:13 is the New Testament parallel: wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat. The broad road has many companions, much company, much pomp. But it leads to one place. The bandwagon effect — everybody doing it, everybody approving — is not evidence of rightness. It is the evidence that no one is judging.

And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled. Three levels of human self-esteem, all brought to the same place. The mean man — the ordinary man, the undistinguished one — has only a little way to fall. The mighty man has further. The lofty-eyed — those who are wise in their own eyes, who feel they have the understanding of everything, who look down on the common man — have the furthest to fall of all. Darby's marginal note on mean man from Isaiah 2:9 gives it as an ordinary man, one of the people. The same word for man in both cases — merely undistinguished versus distinguished. And both are brought down equally, because sin is sin, and what honors God honors God, regardless of which class of person is in view.

Respecter of persons — having different judgments based on a person's standing or class — is a failure of judgment the New Testament explicitly condemns. The poor man in James 2 and the rich man in fine clothing must be treated the same. The reason is that the difference between good and evil is not determined by social rank. The remedy is not to elevate everyone to loftiness — the flesh would love that solution — but for everyone to be brought down. God's way is not to raise man up, but to humble him, so that He alone is exalted. And He Himself has given the great demonstration of the principle: the Son humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, wherefore God has highly exalted Him. He that humbleth himself shall be exalted; he that exalteth himself shall be abased.

The Lord of Hosts Exalted in Judgment — God Holy, Sanctified in Righteousness

But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. This verse is not a change of subject from what precedes — it is the conclusion of it. The bringing down of the mean man, the mighty man, and the lofty is the mechanism by which God alone stands exalted. And it is important that His exaltation takes place in judgment and in righteousness. He is not exalted by the applause of the crowd or by religious enthusiasm or by emotional stimulation. He is exalted by the righteous exercise of His own character against everything that has set itself up in opposition to Him.

There are those who would begin a reading at this verse and speak warmly about exalting the Lord while leaving behind everything that preceded it. But to do so is to separate the exaltation of the Lord from the judgment that produces it — to want the result without the means. It is the spirit of judgment, brought to bear in righteousness, that is the door to the exaltation of God. When the soul bows to that judgment — whether in personal dealings with God about what is in the heart, or in the assembly's acts of discipline whereby the name of the Lord Jesus is maintained — that is where the Lord is exalted. He cannot be truly exalted in a setting where evil is tolerated. His holiness requires that it be otherwise.

God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness. His people are called to reflect what He is. They are His people, and their walk is meant to be consistent with who their God is. That is why it says in 1 Peter 1:16: Be ye holy, for I am holy. The holiness is not an arbitrary rule — it flows from the character of the God with whom they have to do. And when that is not the case — when His people live as those in Isaiah 5, no different from the world around them — then His holiness must be sanctified by judgment. Either it is acknowledged in the soul by grace, or it asserts itself in government.

Propitiation — The Ground of the Lambs' Feeding

Then shall the lambs feed after their manner. This verse is almost parenthetical between the judgment of verse 16 and the further woes that follow. But it is placed here deliberately. The judgment has been executed. God has been exalted in righteousness. And in that cleared and righteous ground, the lambs feed after their manner.

The manner of the lambs is submission and dependence. It is not self-assertion or self-provision. The shepherd leads; the lambs follow. The shepherd provides green pastures and still waters; the lambs receive what is given. There is no grasping, no rising early to seize what is not provided, no music to drown out the conscience. The lambs are quiet. They are fed. And they are satisfied.

Why can the lambs feed? Because propitiation has been made. Propitiation is the rendering of satisfaction to God — the work of Christ on the cross satisfying the justice and holiness of God so that God can now act in grace toward those who belong to Him. He is the propitiation for our sins. In 1 John 2:2 — he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world — the latter phrase indicates that there is an aspect of propitiation that relates to the world in that God's nature is now openly satisfied in the cross, making it possible for Him to approach the world in gospel grace. But for the believer specifically, propitiation means that God has received full satisfaction for the offence of our sins, and out of that satisfaction He acts in grace. The lambs feed because the shepherd has secured the ground on which they feed.

And the waste places of the fat ones shall strangers eat. The fat ones — rich men (Darby's note) — who devoured what was not rightfully theirs, whose self-indulgence consumed what God had provided, whose places are now wasted — out of those waste places God brings a blessing for others. The strangers eat. God brings good out of everything where man has failed. Every place where man

has abandoned his trust, every vineyard that brought forth wild grapes, every resource that was squandered on self — God takes up those things and, in His sovereign grace, produces something from them for His own glory. That is consistently the pattern of Scripture.

Only One Life — Joseph of Arimathea

The closing application of this whole section is personal. We each have things — strength, intelligence, wealth, time — that could be used to distinguish oneself, to fulfill selfish cravings, to build a comfortable place in this world. The fat ones in Scripture are those who use what God has given them simply to fill themselves. But there have been those, like Joseph of Arimathea, who were rich and yet used what they had for the glory of the Lord. He made his tomb available for the body of the Lord Jesus. One cannot plan for such a moment — it comes in the unexpected hour. But a soul that has been in the habit of holding things with a light hand, using the world and not abusing it, is ready when such a moment comes.

Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last. The self-indulgent soul spends itself on what is temporary and leaves nothing behind but waste places. The soul that holds things for the Lord's glory finds that God takes up even the small, quiet, unnoticed service and uses it for His purposes. The lambs feed after their manner — not by grabbing, not by rising early for strong drink, not by feasting and music and the pursuit of sensation, but by following the shepherd who has laid down His life for them and who leads them to green pastures.

Then shall the lambs feed after their manner — for the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness.