

ISAIAH

ISAIAH 56:9-12, WORTHLESS SHEPHERDS

Isaiah examines the spiritual state of Israel that was present in his lifetime, but we will see that this situation continued on and exists to this day. The point apparently being made is that in light of all the wonderful truth just revealed concerning the Suffering Servant, His substitutionary sacrifice, and the salvation freely offered mankind without money and without cost, people should turn to God and look forward to these promised blessings. But history bears witness to the fact that they, both Israel and mankind in general, did not do that.

The leadership of Israel is in for some serious criticism from Yahweh. The problem for them is that they didn't listen to Isaiah, and they didn't listen to Christ Jesus when He addressed the same problem during His First Advent which was hundreds of years later. Israel's failure to live up to the nation's covenant responsibilities could be placed squarely on the shoulders of the national leaders—religious and civil—priests, prophets, and kings. The people followed their leaders right into the divine temporal discipline that was imposed on them for their disobedience and rebellion which itself led to all the hardship, death, and destruction that situation entailed.

We also have to remember that membership in the covenant community by means of the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, which is circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14), did not mean the person was a believer. It simply meant they were an Israelite; therefore, the nation was made up of both believers, although generally a small remnant, and unbelievers, generally the majority of the population at any given time.

This is quite a change from the previous verses proclaiming God's salvation for all who answer the call to partake of the food and drink that is freely offered without money and without cost. Some theologians even think this is unrelated and just stuck in this part of the book on little more than a whim, but we have noted before that Isaiah quickly moves from one period of time to another or from one situation to another. These verses actually belong right here. They are calling attention to the failure of Israel's leadership to embrace the truths that have just been revealed by God through the prophet.

Isaiah 56:9-12 uses some highly figurative language to reveal the truth that Israel's leaders have led the nation into a desperate situation, the consequences of which will be devastating. God will use vicious, unbelieving nations as vehicles through which He will impose divine temporal discipline on the nation. There is a long list of nations that have been used by God to do His will in this matter: Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome, lesser nations such as Moab and Edom, and Islamic nations and other Gentile, antisemitic governments today have all been used by God for His disciplinary purposes. The number of these nations and the duration of their hostility against Israel and the Jewish people speaks to the stubbornness of Israel in their refusal to return to Yahweh. It is going to take a monumental period of judgment and destruction that these verses are referencing to finally convince Israel to actually turn to God and be saved to enter into the covenant promises made so long before to the Jewish patriarchs. To this day, that is, of course, still in the future.

Isaiah 56:9 ⁹All you beasts [חַיָּוָה] of the field, All you beasts in the forest, Come to eat.

This verse is not presenting a pretty picture of the nations that are going to be oppressing Israel in the future, which is a future that is still ongoing in terms of Israel's persecution about 2,800 years after Isaiah wrote these words. This undesirable state is the result of the imposition of God's divine temporal disciplinary program on the nation.

Beast, חַיָּוָה, means an animal or a wild beast. It may also refer more generally to a living thing, which is its most basic meaning, but it is most commonly used to mean an animal or a beast. It is a general term for an animal, usually a wild animal with a focus on the fact that the animal is living or animate.

These beasts are being called to serve as instruments of God's judgment on Israel. Some theologians believe that the beasts of the field imply domesticated animals while the beasts of the forest imply wild animals. I think that this declaration is suspect because the curse of destruction by beasts of the field is promised in Leviticus 26:22, and both Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied the destruction of the nation by beasts of the field. I know of no domesticated animals except hogs that will eat people and then usually only on opportunistic occasions; they are not attacking types of predators in the sense that other wild animals are predators. Besides, Jews do not raise hogs! The command to "come to eat" implies ravenous beasts that will devour the nation and destruction is the result. Because this is a metaphor, we need to regard the beasts of field and forest as nations of all types that come against Israel for no other reason than just because Israel is Israel. Israel is hated by Satan who is continually trying to destroy the nation and the people so the Lord cannot return to earth and inaugurate His Messianic Kingdom (Mt. 23:39). What Satan hates, his world system hates. What Satan wants destroyed, his world system will try to destroy.

Interestingly, in addition to Isaiah, the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel were also used by God to reveal the same truth. Jeremiah, like Isaiah, was prophesying before the Babylonian destruction of Judah occurred, and he was also prophesying against the shepherds of Israel. It is also interesting to note that Yahweh thought that the shepherds of Israel had already destroyed the nation before the beasts came to devour it.

Jeremiah 12:9–11 ⁹"...Go, gather all the beasts of the field, Bring them to devour! ¹⁰"Many shepherds have ruined My vineyard, They have trampled down My field; They have made My pleasant field A desolate wilderness. ¹¹"It has been made a desolation, Desolate, it mourns before Me; The whole land has been made desolate, Because no man lays it to heart.

Ezekiel, however, was prophesying from the Babylonian captivity against the shepherds of Israel which indicates that they were going to conduct themselves in the same failed way on into the future. However, immediately following Ezekiel's prophecy, the end-times restoration of Israel and Judah are revealed in chapters 36-37. The leadership of Israel did not learn the lesson they needed to learn from the ancient Babylonian destruction of Israel; therefore, they are going to have to learn their lesson from the end-times Babylonian world system that will be engaged with trying to destroy Israel and kill all the Jews once and for all.

Ezekiel 34:5, 8-10 ⁵“They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered.... ⁸“As I live,” declares the Lord GOD, “surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but *rather* the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock; ⁹therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.””

Clearly, the command to gather and eat is a metaphor for the destruction of Israel. The blame for the situation falls at the feet of the nation's leadership which failed miserably in terms of shepherding the Israelites into covenant fulfillment as a faithful people and nation of God.

One of the curses God was going to impose on Israel as a disciplinary measure was attacks from the beasts of the field and the earth (Lv. 26:22; Dt. 28:26). Those seem to have been references to actual animals doing the damage whereas the prophets are using “beasts” as a metaphor for nations that would attack and destroy Israel.

“The point being made is that on numerous occasions throughout the nation's history, poor political leadership and false prophets failed to serve the nation faithfully, so repeatedly the people ended up following false gods. The nation sought help from other nations instead of trusting only in God and consequently they had a deceptive relationship with God.... This prophecy indicates that the same general patterns of the past will exist in the distant future just before God introduces his kingdom.... If this was true in the past and will be true in the future, certainly these principles apply to all those who originally heard the words of the prophet and all who read it today” [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 538-539].

The nation is left defenseless as a result of the disobedient, rebellious leadership that does nothing but satisfy their own lusts. In military and para-military organizations such as police departments, we would call something like this dereliction of duty. The people who are supposed to be keeping watch over the nation are unqualified, ignorant, incompetent, derelict, and lazy.

Isaiah 56:10-11a ¹⁰His watchmen [צִפְּקָה] are blind [עִוְרִים], All of them know nothing. All of them are mute dogs unable to bark, Dreamers [הִנְדָּה] lying down, who love to slumber; ¹¹And the dogs are greedy, [עֵינֵי נֹכְשִׁים] they are not satisfied [לֹא יִרְעֻוּ שִׁבְעָה]....

Watchmen, צִפְּקָה, means to watch, to keep guard. “[It] conveys the idea of being fully aware of a situation in order to gain some advantage or keep from being surprised by an enemy.... Although God was faithful in sending Israel watchmen, many became blind to their mission (Isa. 56:10). The failure of these watchmen and the rejection of the true ones were major reasons for the downfall of Israel” [Harris, Archer, Jr., and Waltke, s.v. “צִפְּקָה,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 773].

Blind, עִוֵּר, means to be unable to see, i.e., blind, but here it is used in a figurative sense as a reference to being unknowledgeable which refers to a person who is dull and not able to understand. "False prophets and the nation of Israel are characterized as blind. Israel laments its blind condition (Isa 59:10)" [Harris, Archer, Jr., and Waltke, s.v. "עִוֵּר," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 655]. Obviously, a blind person is not qualified to be a watchman. The problem here is not that of a physical defect over which a person has no control; it is a deliberate problem of indifference (lack of interest or concern; relegating something to a position of unimportance), misfeasance (a wrong arising from affirmative action; the wrongful performance of a lawful act arising from the wrongful and injurious exercise of lawful authority), malfeasance (act of a public official that is legally unjustified, harmful, or itself unlawful, especially relating to an act in violation of a public trust), and nonfeasance (failure to perform an act that ought to have been performed). These words perfectly describe everything wrong with Israel's watchmen.

The watchmen are ignorant; they know nothing. One would like to think that some of them were faithful, but the word all, לֵל, is unambiguous; it means all. This is not due to the unavailability of the resources that could provide the knowledge they needed to know to be effective watchmen. They had the Torah and the prophets which leads to the thought that they knew what they were supposed to know, but they didn't care that they knew. We might say today that they were "blowing God off." At times in the nation's history, they did actually lose the Word of God. Hilkiyah the priest found the book of the Law in the Temple and took it to King Josiah who made a vow to faithfully follow it (2 Chron. 34).

Another metaphorical description of these worthless watchmen is that they are mute dogs who cannot bark. Again, the word "all" is describing the whole lot of them. The NASB translation of הָזָה as dreamers may not be correct, but there is a lot of lexical disagreement about this word which is used only in this verse. In this context, it may be a reference to a dog panting in its sleep; however, it may mean to dream. The word is also translated as sleeping. There is not a lot of certainty in terms of how to translate this word. The TANAKH has a footnote indicating that the meaning of this word is uncertain. It is variously translated dream/dreaming (NASB, NIV, RSV, CSB, ESV, ASV), pant/panting (NET Bible, LEB), and sleeping/dozing (YLT, NKJV, KJV, LSV).

At that time in Israel, dogs were hated and thought to be filthy, mongrel animals that were a nuisance and a scourge, but they were domesticated and put to work in other parts of the Middle East and in Egypt, presumably as guard dogs. Job mentioned sheep dogs (Job 30:1) which are a type of guard dog. "To the Israelites all dogs were utterly unclean.... [T]hough classed as a carnivore it lived on refuse of all kinds and thus was a potential carrier of many diseases ..." [G. S. Cansdale, s.v. "dogs," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2:153-154].

The context here certainly seems to be a reference to guard dogs. "Job can be referring only to sheep dogs, but it is not certain that Job was an Israelite [he was not]. Isaiah 56:10 is a fig[urative] passage but the expression 'dumb dogs, they cannot bark' certainly suggests that it was the custom to keep guard dogs; prob[ably] sheep dogs, since the

preceding v[erse] mentions 'beasts of the field come to devour'" [G. S. Cansdale, s.v. "dogs," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2:154].

If it is a reference to guard dogs, they are used as an early warning sign of approaching intruders. Their hearing is acute, and barking at the sound of intruders serves as a warning alarm for the approaching danger. What good is a guard dog that cannot bark and therefore cannot warn of approaching danger? Obviously, that dog is a waste of resources—it must be fed, housed, and have its medical needs addressed—and it certainly cannot be relied upon to do its job. A worthless guard dog can accomplish nothing which leaves those who depend on it in danger.

Israel's watchmen were men who loved to sleep. This is probably a continuation of the concept of dogs, which, in this case is a picture of dogs laying around sleeping all the time as dogs can tend to do. This is particularly important if this is a reference to a guard dog. A sleeping watchman is obviously derelict in the performance of his duties. In ancient armies, sleeping on watch was cause for execution and, in more modern times, cause for a court martial. It is a very serious offense. Whether it is due to indifference or to laziness, sleeping watchmen endanger the nation. They were called "dreamers" which suggests they thought nothing could go wrong. There is no point in being constantly on the alert if there is no possible danger nearby, or so they thought. These men were dreamers who were consumed by their own thoughts and visions of life and the future, men lying down rather than exercising the authority of their positions and watching over the interests of the nation, and loving to sleep because they subordinated the nation's spiritual needs to their own personal wants and needs.

The real issue here is spiritual; physical destruction will be the result of the leadership's failure to lead, but the root cause of it all is spiritual. This is a very shameful picture of Israel's leadership, a leadership that was not ensuring the spiritual welfare of the people. Once their spiritual welfare was neglected, the imposition of divine temporal discipline on the nation by God also placed their physical welfare in jeopardy. Idolatry was running rampant in the nation, and it had even invaded the Temple (cf. Ezek. 8:1-18). Most of Judah's kings had proven to be unfaithful. Some theologians believe this applies only to the prophets, but I think it is clear that the concept of watchman applies to not only the prophets, but to the priests, and the rulers led by the king.

Not only are the watchmen failures at keeping watch over Israel and the Israelites, but their own self-interests outweigh any consideration they should have had for the nation and the people.

Greedy, עֵזִי נָפֶשׁ, is two words, one of which is left untranslated in the NASB.

Greedy, עֵזִי, means strong, mighty, fierce.

The second word, נָפֶשׁ, means breath, life, soul, creature, person. It refers to the inner being with its thoughts and emotions. It can also mean appetite which is the context here, although strong desire or something similar works as well. "The Hebrew term usually is translated 'soul,' but here it must refer to the 'appetite' of the throat (see a similar usage in

5:14)" [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 543, n. 78].

Better translations are: fierce appetite (CSB); big appetite (NET Bible); greedy appetite (LEB); mighty appetite (ESV); strong of desire (YLT, LSV).

It is an interesting facet of fallen man's sin nature that no matter how much a person has, it is never enough. An overabundance of material things never satisfies the human soul, and greed can never be satisfied.

Not satisfied, *לֹא יָדְעוּ שְׂבֻעָה*, literally reads, "not they know satiation."

Know, *יָדַע*, means to know, to experience.

Satiation, *שְׂבֻעָה*, means abundance, satisfaction, satiation referring to a state of enough and more which implies satisfaction bordering on apathy. It has the sense of being satisfactorily full and unable to take on more. The word is negated here meaning that these watchmen are never satisfied; they never reach the limit of what it means to them to have enough.

Solomon spoke about the folly of riches. If there was ever a rich man who was never satisfied with his wealth, Solomon seems to be the premier example. Everything the man could do to make himself happy proved deficient.

Ecclesiastes 2:9–11 ⁹Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me. ¹⁰All that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor. ¹¹Thus I considered all my activities which my hands had done and the labor which I had exerted, and behold all was vanity and striving after wind and there was no profit under the sun.

Wealth can be a burden; those who have it constantly worry about losing it if they do not possess a biblical, godly worldview concerning wealth.

Ecclesiastes 5:10–12 ¹⁰He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its* income. This too is vanity. ¹¹When good things increase, those who consume them increase. So what is the advantage to their owners except to look on? ¹²The sleep of the working man is pleasant, whether he eats little or much; but the full stomach of the rich man does not allow him to sleep.

The prophet Micah revealed the level of greed the shepherds of Judah imposed on the people for whom they were supposed to be caring.

Micah 3:5, 11 ⁵Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray; When they have *something* to bite with their teeth, They cry, "Peace," But against him who puts nothing in their mouths They declare holy war.... ¹¹Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe, Her priests instruct for a price And her prophets divine for money. Yet

they lean on the LORD saying, "Is not the LORD in our midst? Calamity will not come upon us."

Notice that it was the entire shepherding apparatus of Israel that was greedy and corrupt: leaders, priests, and prophets. Not only were they failing to do their God assigned duties by demanding payment (nonfeasance), a bribe to do their duty (malfeasance), but they were abusing God's people who refused to cooperate with them in their corruption (misfeasance).

"They did not derive satisfaction from serving God faithfully, from meeting the needs of others, or from the earthly things that God providentially provided for them and their families. Instead, they were lazy, had lost their sense of calling to serve others, and were no longer interested in functioning as watchmen who warned God's people" [Gary V. Smith, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Isaiah 40-66*, 543].

The shepherds became their own authority and lost their way; they no longer shepherded God's people God's way. In so doing, they became corrupt and lost their identity as God's servants.

Isaiah 56:11b ¹¹... And they are shepherds [רֹעֵה] who have no understanding [בִּינָה]; They have all turned to their own way, Each one to his unjust gain [בְּצַעַד], to the last [אֶחָד] one.

Shepherds care for flocks that are otherwise incapable of caring for and protecting themselves. This fact naturally lends itself to the figurative use of the shepherding concept as that of caring for God's people. God was referred to as Israel's Shepherd (Ps. 80:1), Christ Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18), and David was called to be the shepherd of God's people, Israel (2 Sam. 5:2). In this verse, the watchmen of Israel are referred to as shepherds.

Shepherd, רֹעֵה, when used as a metaphor, refers to rule, that is, to have authority over people and so govern usually with a focus of care and concern as a figurative extension of being a shepherd over sheep.

A true shepherd cares for the sheep in all circumstances, facing all dangers, taking care of all needs, and doing what is right for the livestock under his care. That is no less true for God's shepherds over Israel. "Spiritual leaders are 'watchmen' who must be awake to the dangers that threaten God's people. They are 'shepherds' who must put the care of the flock ahead of their own desires. When the foreign invaders ('beasts of the field') come, the shepherds must protect the flock, no matter what the danger might be" [Warren W. Wiersbe, "Isaiah" in *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Old Testament: The Prophets*, 65].

John 10:11, 15 ¹¹"I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.... ¹⁵even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.

The problem for Israel was the shepherds abandoned the people and their needs in order to selfishly take care of themselves at the expense of those they were supposed to lead and care for. Once they gave themselves over to the satisfaction of their own lusts, they could no longer understand what it was they were supposed to do as Israel's shepherds. They became blind, spiritually unaware, and ignorant.

Understanding, *בִּין*, means to discern, to perceive, to observe, to understand, to have insight. "The background idea of the verb is to 'discern' ... The verb refers to knowledge which is superior to the mere gathering of data.... While understanding is a gift from God, it does not come automatically. The possession of it requires a persistent diligence. It is more than IQ; it connotes character. One is at fault if he doesn't have it and in fact, not to pursue it will incur God's punishment. When one acts on the objective presentations of God's revelation, he will attain the ideal of the significance of understanding" [Harris, Archer, Jr., and Waltke, s.v. "," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 103-104].

This is a very important concept that has applications beyond Israel to the church. People have to understand God's Word as written in order to properly serve Him in the way He wants people to serve Him. We have to develop Bible based discernment skills in order to know right from wrong, truth from error. It is only in light of God's revelation that we can clearly understand the issues we face and determine Godly responses to them. Only when we do this can we be effective leaders, teachers, and disciples. Israel's shepherds, may or may not have known the Word of God, but they certainly did not understand it—they did not even want to understand it—and they certainly could not discern God's program for Israel.

Israel's shepherds turned to their own way. This was not just some of them; this was all of those who were not part of God's believing remnant. Going their own way represents a repudiation, a rejection, of God's way. Any time that man turns to his own sin informed, sin infected way that is contrary to God's way, things do not end well. This had profound consequences for the Israelites. Primarily, their spiritual needs were not being met and idolatry stepped in to fill the void. But the nation's political needs were not being met either. In less than 200 years after these words were written, the nation would be destroyed by an invading army. The leadership was focused on their personal wealth and pleasure rather than on the nation's welfare. Real leadership focuses on the welfare of those being led; it is not self-centered and it does not take advantage of the constituents. That was not the situation with Israel's corrupt leadership; they were looking out for their own selfish interests. Conversely, the blessing promises of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 reveal that following God's ways would have resulted in national prosperity, well-being, and security. In other words, the true sense of *shalom* would have flourished under godly leadership that was walking in God's ways, and the true sense of *shalom* is what God intended for the nation all along.

Not only did the watchmen concentrate on enriching themselves, they did it at the expense of the people. In other words, they were corrupt and engaged in criminal enterprise to enrich themselves. The word translated "unjust gain" in this verse is loaded with meaning for explaining the mindset and the actions of Israel's watchmen.

Gain, **בָּצַע**, means gain made by violence, unjust, dishonest, or ill-gotten gain referring to valuable things obtained by theft, deception, or other immoral actions. The original Semitic meaning of the word was “to cut” or “cut off.” “[T]he more common connotation of the root is based on a slightly different aspect of ‘cut off.’ That is to cut off what is not one’s own, or in the slang of our day, to take a ‘rip-off,’ thus to be greedy, covetous.... Personal advantage derived from some activity. Used largely in the negative sense ... The context in which ... [beṣa’] occur[s] emphasize[s] two points concerning the lust for personal gain. First, it is a special temptation to leaders, and those showing any predilection in that direction should be disqualified. The leader who succumbs to this temptation to use his position for his own ends will certainly play his people false. Again and again in the OT, it was the desire of the leaders for personal gain which led Israel into disaster. Secondly, lust for personal gain is in direct opposition to unselfish devotion to God and must inevitably destroy the person who succumbs to it. Perhaps its most disastrous result is its tendency to dull the hearing of God’s word” [Harris, Archer, Jr., and Waltke, s.v. “בָּצַע,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 122-123].

This problem was systemic and pervasive; it extended to every watchman in the nation who was not part of the believing remnant—which itself was very few men and apparently had little influence in the life of the nation.

Last, **קָצַע**, means entire, from every end, referring to the whole of something as a unity. It stresses the point at which a thing is cut off, and therefore its extremity.

The watchmen collapsed into absolute debauchery which rendered them incapable of any rational thought or action even if they otherwise wanted to do that.

Isaiah 56:12 ¹²“Come,” they say, “let us get wine, and let us drink heavily [**סָבָא**] of strong drink [**שִׁכָּר**]; And tomorrow will be like today, only more so.”

Drink heavily, **סָבָא**, means to drink too much alcohol, i.e., to drink excessively referring to consuming wine or beer to the point of drunkenness. The sense is to drink heavily and in abundance.

Strong drink, **שִׁכָּר**, means an intoxicating drink, a strong drink, a fermented drink referring to “any drink made of fruit or grain which is potentially intoxicating when drunk in excess. Note: ‘strong drink’ as a translation may give the idea that this was a distilled liquor of high-proof alcohol of which there is no evidence for in the ancient biblical world, and so it is not recommended as a translation choice; note: in context, usually this is contrasted and compared to alcohol grape drink, ‘wine,’ suggesting this is often a grain-class of alcohol, ‘beer’” [James A. Swanson, s.v. “שִׁכָּר,” *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)*].

The point being made here is that drinking in excess was a habit, a way of life, for these men who were supposed to be looking out for the best interests of the nation and the people. They apparently had the mindset that God was not going to judge them just because they were the sons of Abraham; therefore, they could do whatever they wanted without consequences. False thinking, but that is what John the Baptist warned

them about centuries later (Mt. 3:9), and we know that their attitude was still the same then.

Their thinking had become so perverted, that they proudly, arrogantly proclaimed that they would do it all over again the next day.

“Here is a picture of complete moral degradation, utterly unbecoming of God’s people, called to be ‘a holy nation.’ The drunken scene, similar to that previously described in Isaiah 28:1-8 would fit better into some pagan Bacchanalia, than into the life of God’s chosen shepherds” [Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah: A Commentary*, 437].

It is interesting to note that in the previous chapter, everyone was called to “come” and partake of the food and drink that can be had without cost and without money, but here, the unfaithful watchmen are calling one another into debauchery and the subsequent abdication of their responsibilities to their nation, their countrymen, and their God. The contrast could not be starker.

“The threefold imagery of watchmen, dogs, and shepherds suggests that the diatribe here is addressed not only to the prophets but, as elsewhere in the book, to the entire leadership cadre: priests, prophets, and royalty. The people could not escape the responsibility for their sin, but with the failure of the leaders to carry out their tasks, the probability that the people would fall into sin was vastly increased. And what is the sin of the leadership? Every one of them, without exception, has chosen to put his own way before God’s way or his people’s way. Thus laziness and greed and self-concern have sapped the vitality of the shepherd so that he is unaware both of the danger and of his own failure” [John N. Oswalt, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 469].

I do not think that we can press the three elements—watchmen, dogs, and shepherds—in these verses to separately refer to prophets, priests, and rulers/leaders/kings. I think the term “watchmen” covers all three. The watchmen are called dogs, and the dogs are called shepherds which suggests that the term “watchmen” represents all three leadership roles. They are all, in fact, watchmen albeit with differing roles to play within the ranks of the watchmen, caretaker role of what it means to shepherd God’s flock.

By the time of the Lord’s First Advent, the shepherds of Israel, the scribes and the Pharisees, were still derelict in the performance of their duties. Their method of operation changed somewhat; they acted pious and put on a good show, but they were unfaithful to the call on their lives to shepherd Israel. They were still corrupt as well.

Matthew 23:2-7 ²saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; ³therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say *things* and do not do *them*. ⁴“They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so *much* as a finger. ⁵“But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of *their garments*. ⁶“They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, ⁷and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.

Instead of assisting people in their faith journey, they were a hindrance.

Matthew 23:13 ¹³“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

They were still enriching themselves at the people's expense by engaging in fraudulent, unlawful practices that took advantage of the disadvantaged.

Matthew 23:14 ¹⁴“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

When they led someone into Judaism as a proselyte, they corrupted them.

Matthew 23:15 ¹⁵“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

They were abusing the Temple as a means of enriching themselves.

Matthew 23:16 ¹⁶“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, *that* is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’

They made a show of following the letter of the Mosaic Law, but they neglected to uphold the spiritual basis for the Law.

Matthew 23:23 ²³“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.

The Lord called them blind guides due to their multiplication of rules for ensuring obedience to the Law while neglecting the spiritual intent of the Law.

Matthew 23:24 ²⁴“You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

They had a pious exterior, but they were spiritually filthy on the inside where it really mattered. If they had been spiritually clean on the inside, their outward behavior would have been much different, much better, and more godly.

Matthew 23:25–26 ²⁵“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. ²⁶“You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

They even claimed a phony self-righteousness that says they would have acted differently than the shepherds of old that Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel condemned.

Matthew 23:29–33 ²⁹“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰and say, ‘If we had been *living* in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in *shedding* the blood of the prophets.’ ³¹“So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³²“Fill up, then, the measure of *the guilt* of your fathers. ³³“You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?”

Israel's shepherds, with some exceptions to be sure, but for the most part, have been unfaithful throughout the nation's history and that will not change until the Kingdom begins and the Lord will appoint men who will be faithful shepherds as the overseers of His Kingdom flock in Israel.