

Isaiah 57:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest,
whose waters cast up mire and dirt.

Analysis

The contrast with verse 19 is stark: "But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt." This vivid simile portrays unregenerate humanity's inner turmoil. The Hebrew *nigrash* (troubled/driven) describes violent agitation, the opposite of *shalom* (peace). "Cannot rest" emphasizes the inability, not merely unwillingness—apart from God, humans cannot find peace (Isaiah 48:22). The sea "casting up mire and dirt" depicts how sin produces moral pollution and spiritual filth. This echoes James's description of the double-minded person (James 1:6-8) and anticipates Revelation's troubled sea of humanity in rebellion (Revelation 13:1, 17:15). Reformed theology recognizes this as depicting natural man apart from regenerating grace—restless, agitated, and continuously producing corruption. Augustine described it as the restless heart that finds no rest until it rests in God. This is the human condition under the bondage of sin: perpetual inner turmoil despite outward success or pleasure.

Historical Context

Isaiah had witnessed this firsthand—Judah's persistent anxiety despite repeated attempts to find security through alliances, idolatry, and self-reliance. The prophetic literature consistently portrays the wicked as troubled and restless (Job 15:20, 18:11, Proverbs 4:16-17). This continued through the intertestamental and New Testament periods, climaxing in Jerusalem's rejection of Christ despite His offer of rest (Matthew 11:28-30, 23:37).

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. What does inner restlessness and anxiety reveal about the spiritual condition of our hearts?
2. How does sin produce ongoing pollution in our lives and communities?
3. What is the only source of genuine rest and peace for troubled souls?

Interlinear Text

וְהַרְשָׁע יָם	כִּי יָם	וַיִּגְרֹשׁ ו	כִּי י	הַשְּׁקֵט	ל א
But the wicked	sea	are like the troubled	H3588	rest	H3808
H7563	H3220	H1644		H8252	
וְכִי ל	וַיִּגְרֹשׁ ו	מֵימָיו	כִּי פֶשֶׁ	וְטִיט:	
when it cannot	are like the troubled	whose waters	mire	and dirt	
H3201	H1644	H4325	H7516	H2916	

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 3:11 (Evil): Woe unto the wicked! it shall be ill with him: for the reward of his hands shall be given him.

Jude 1:12 (Parallel theme): These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots;