

Isaiah 59: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 59. Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or his ear dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he does not hear.

For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity. Your lips have spoken lies. Your tongue mutters wickedness. No one enters suit justly.

No one goes to law honestly. They rely on empty pleas. They speak lies. They conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity. They hatch Adder's eggs. They weave the spider's web.

He who eats their eggs dies, and from one that is crushed a viper is hatched. Their webs will not serve as clothing. Men will not cover themselves with what they make.

Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity.

[1 : 0 1] Desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. They have made their roads crooked. No one who treads on them knows peace.

Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us. We hope for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.

We grope for the wall like the blind. We grope like those who have no eyes. We stumble at noon as in the twilight. Among those in full vigor we are like dead men.

We all growl like bears. We moan and moan like doves. We hope for justice, but there is none. For salvation, but it is far from us. For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us.

For our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities. Transgressing and denying the Lord, and turning back from following our God. Speaking oppression and revolt.

[2 : 0 0] Conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words. Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away. For truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter.

Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede.

Then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate. And a helmet of salvation on his head. He put on garments of vengeance for clothing.

And wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. According to their deeds, so will he repay. Wrath to his adversaries. Repayment to his enemies. To the coastlands he will render repayment.

So they shall fear the name of the Lord from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun. For he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the Lord drives.

[3 : 01] And a redeemer will come to Zion. To those in Jacob who turn from transgression, declares the Lord. And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord. My spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring, says the Lord.

From this time forth, and forevermore. Isaiah chapters 56 to 59 contain two subunits, each of which has a similar three-part structure. Chapters 56 and 57 comprise the first subunit, and 58 and 59 the second.

John Oswalt describes the breakdown of the component subdivisions of these subunits as a specific example of realized righteousness, the Sabbath in chapter 56 and true fasting in chapter 58, a reflection on the general situation, and then an announcement of the Lord's intention to deliver, the materials contained at the end of chapter 56 and chapter 57, and then in chapter 59.

In chapter 59, the last two subdivisions of the second subunit are contained. From verse 1 to the first half of verse 15, the prophet describes the pervasive iniquity of the people, and the rest of the chapter declares the Lord's redemptive intent.

Perhaps the people might have wondered, the Lord could not hear their prayers, or perhaps he just wasn't powerful enough to answer them. Yet the people are swiftly disabused of this misapprehension of their situation.

[4 : 32] The Lord is able to hear them, and his power is not constrained. The cause of their unanswered prayers is their alienation from God on account of their iniquities. He has hidden his face from them.

Their very bodies are defiled with wickedness, their hands and fingers upon their hands with blood. Their mouths and lips and the tongues within their mouths are both perverted with wickedness.

They have been rendered unclean as a result. Verse 4 might be speaking about the way that the people relate to each other in their legal dealings. People using the law, for instance, as a means of oppression, not in order to seek justice truly.

Alternatively, it could be about feigning a desire to have justice from the Lord, when they do not want justice at all. Wickedness tends to give rise to more wickedness, and so the Lord describes them as conceiving mischief and giving birth to iniquity.

Their sins beget further sins. To those who are unknowledgeable, the adder's egg might look like something that's fit for food, and the spider's web something beautiful that might be used to make clothing.

[5 : 33] Yet the adder's eggs, whether eaten or uneaten and crushed, have deadly contents, and the spider's web will not provide suitable thread for clothing. Like their hands and their mouths, their feet and their thoughts are also perverted.

Verses 7 and 8 particularly refer to the ways of the wicked which have been made crooked. They have rejected the ways of the Lord, the ways of justice and peace, and have sought after crookedness instead.

They pursue evil and bloodshed. Their minds are devoted to iniquity. We might perhaps recall the description of mankind from before the fall, in Genesis chapter 6 verse 5, Every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

In verses 9 to 11, the prophet, speaking as one of and as a representative of the people, acknowledges the truth described in the opening verses of the chapter, that their iniquities had separated them from the Lord.

This is not, as the people might have wondered, because of the Lord's shortened arm to save, or because the Lord does not hear them, but purely on account of their own sin. Throughout the book of Isaiah, justice and righteousness can have different senses, as Oswald observes.

[6 : 39] On many occasions they refer to the saving action of the Lord. His justice and righteousness revealed in delivering and redeeming his people, setting the world to rights. The consequent situation of a world set to rights can be described with the same language.

Justice and righteousness describes a world where society in all of its relations is appropriately ordered, where man has fellowship with God. Finally, justice and righteousness can describe morally upright actions and judgments from human beings.

Sometimes the emphasis is upon the judgments of rulers and authorities in upholding this order, and sometimes the emphasis is upon the ethical character of people in their personal lives. Most importantly for understanding passages like this, the use of these terms will often move between these different senses even within a single passage, because these senses belong together. An unrighteous people will be averse to receiving the Lord's righteousness.

The Lord's righteousness in setting people to rights will produce righteousness as an order in society. It will uphold human judgments of righteousness and will reward the righteous and establish them in their ways.

In verses 9 to 15, we see that the distance of the Lord's righteousness from the people can be connected to their own unrighteousness. Indeed, if the Lord were to display his righteousness in such a situation of unrighteousness, one would think that such unrighteous people would surely be destroyed.

[8 : 05] The previous chapters spoke about the blessing of those who devoted themselves to the proper form of fasting. If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness, and your gloom be as the noonday.

Verses 9 and 10, however, describe the reversal of this. These are people who are groping at the noonday, who hope for light and brightness and have darkness and gloom. All of this is on account of their spiritual blindness.

They feel sorry for themselves and their condition. They growl or groan like bears and moan like doves. They long for some sort of deliverance, but it does not seem to come. It is not clear, however, that the people have turned away from their wickedness to the Lord in their hearts.

There is a two-sided separation that they feel on account of their iniquities and sins. Their transgressions are piled up before the Lord. The Lord can see them and they testify to him, and they also are with them.

They are aware deeply of their own sin, and their iniquities testify against them in the accusing voice of conscience. In this verse we are beginning to see a movement away from lamenting the sins to confessing them.

[9 : 11] Their sins are both against God and against their neighbour. They have transgressed against and denied the Lord, both two more direct forms of rebellion against him. They have turned back from following him, a rejection of the Lord seen more in sins of omission than commission.

In oppression they have started to prey upon those under them, and in revolt to reject the authority of those over them. Their society is filled with their lies. In such a society justice and righteousness are removed, both in public judgment and also in the form of salvation and deliverance.

People have utterly given themselves over to lies, unfaithfulness and rebellion. In such a society to even seek after righteousness is to make yourself the prey of your wicked neighbours.

At the end of chapter 57, in the face of the people's impotence to save themselves, the Lord acted. And again, at the end of this chapter, the Lord does the same. From the second half of verse 15 to the end of this chapter, we find the conclusion, not just of chapters 58 and 59 as a subsection, but the wider unit of chapters 56 to 59.

Seeing no one to act to deliver his people, the Lord takes action to deliver them himself. In a situation with no righteousness whatsoever, his righteousness will be that which breaks through the darkness.

[10 : 26] On occasions in scripture we read of the Lord being clothed in light or in glory. Here, described as if he were a soldier preparing for battle, the Lord clothes himself with righteousness, salvation, vengeance and zeal.

He is going to deliver his people with his righteousness and salvation in particular, and with his vengeance and zeal he will repay his adversaries. Once again, this will be a way that the Lord displays the arm of his salvation to his people and to the nations.

The Lord will come as the redeemer to Zion, establishing his people once more, and their salvation will be enjoyed by all in Jacob who turn away from transgression. The chapter and the section concludes with a promise, a covenant that the Lord will make with them.

The covenant described here has all of the characteristics that we might associate with the new covenant, most particularly the law written upon the hearts of the people so that they will observe it from generation to generation.

The law not departing from the mouth might remind us of the beginning of the book of Joshua, where Joshua is charged to keep the law of the Lord in his mouth, in verse 8 of chapter 1.

[11 : 30] This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

It is also a fulfilment of the Lord's charge in Deuteronomy chapter 6 in the context of the Shema, in verses 6 to 7. A question to consider.

How does this chapter help us to understand Paul's teaching about the full armour of God in Ephesians chapter 6?