



Highlights From the Book of Isaiah

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Injustice Brings Alienation from God (Isaiah 59:1-15)

- The purpose of chapter 58 (which we looked at last week) was to expose rebellion and sin in the nation of Israel.
- Chapter 59, which we will be looking at today, and contains *further* charges against the nation.
- As we saw last week in chapter 58, the people fasted but did not succeed in attracting the kind of divine attention and blessing they had hoped for.
- This was *not* because the Lord was unable to hear them or act on their behalf.
- Rather, it was the sins of the nation that had put a barrier between them and their God.

Injustice Brings Alienation from God (Isaiah 59:1-15)

- In the verses that follow today's text (some of which we will be looking at in coming weeks), Isaiah prophesies that the situation will soon be *resolved* because a time is coming when the LORD will no longer tolerate their unjust behavior and he will step in and take action to *correct* the situation (59:15b–21).
- This, then, prepares the way for the presentation of Zion's future glory that we see described in chapters 60–62.
- I have divided today's text as follows:
 - A Direct Accusation Addressed to the Nation (59:1-3)
 - A Further Description of Their Sin (59:4-8)
 - Isaiah Confesses The Sin of the Nation (59:9-15)

A Direct Accusation (59:1-3)

59:1 Look, the LORD's hand is not too weak to deliver you; his ear is not too deaf to hear you. ² But your sinful acts have alienated you from your God; your sins have caused him to reject you and not listen to your prayers. ³ For your hands are stained with blood and your fingers with sin; your lips speak lies, your tongue utters malicious words.

59:1 *Look, the LORD's hand is not too weak to deliver you; his ear is not too deaf to hear you.*

- The people have been asking why God does not seem to answer their prayers.
- Why do they have no sense of his presence and power in their personal lives and in their society?
- Why is God not keeping all the wonderful messianic promises that he made to them?
- The *lies* they've been telling themselves – that God is not *strong* enough (his “*hand*” is “*too weak*”), or that he can't *hear* them (his “*ear*” is “*too deaf*”) – are absurd on the face of it.

59:2 *But your sinful acts have alienated you from your God; your sins have caused him to reject you and not listen to your prayers.*

- Putting it as bluntly and unmistakably as possible, the prophet lays the blame where it belongs: at the feet of the nation is Israel itself.
- It is no light offense to charge God for things whose fault lies at our own doorstep.
- Their “*sinful acts have alienated*” the nation from their God.
- They nation started off as *accusers* of God, but they ended up having the role of the *defendant* thrust upon them.
- This is often what happens to those who make accusations against God (e.g. Job 40:1-4)

59:2 *But your sinful acts have alienated you from your God; your sins have caused him to reject you and not listen to your prayers.*

- Isaiah walks them through some simple cause-and-effect logic.
- God is neither powerless nor insensitive. But he *is* holy.
- What is it then that could keep him from them?
- Only one thing: sin.
- John says the same thing: if we think we can have a relationship with God while living in sin, we are badly mistaken.
- Sin separates us from God (e.g., 1 John 1: 6).
- And so Isaiah says here: “*your sins have caused him to reject you*”.
- It is because of their *sin* that God cannot pay heed to the people’s cries for blessing.

59:3 *For your hands are stained with blood and your fingers with sin; your lips speak lies, your tongue utters malicious words.*

- “*For*” introduces the evidence to substantiate the charge of misconduct within the community, which, in addition to undermining their relationship with the LORD, causes society to turn against itself.
- First, there is behavior which threatens the lives of others and culminates in murder (“*stained with blood*” – i.e. guilty of bloodshed).
- This has the effect of defiling those who have committed such acts, so that they are no longer fit to engage in divine service.

59:3 *For your hands are stained with blood and your fingers with sin; your lips speak lies, your tongue utters malicious words.*

- The mention of their “*hands*” highlights their *personal involvement*, while “*fingers*” shows that this goes beyond general approval and implies *detailed participation* in “*sin*”, conduct that makes them guilty in God’s sight.
- Their *words*, as well as their *deeds*, are corrupt:
- “*lips*” and “*tongue*” together portray the prevalence of speech involving “*lies*”.

A Description of Their Sin (59:4-8)

^{59:4} *No one is concerned about justice; no one sets forth his case truthfully. They depend on false words and tell lies; they conceive of oppression and give birth to sin. ⁵ They hatch the eggs of a poisonous snake and spin a spider's web. Whoever eats their eggs will die, a poisonous snake is hatched. ⁶ Their webs cannot be used for clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make. Their deeds are sinful; they commit violent crimes. ⁷ They are eager to do evil, quick to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are sinful; they crush and destroy. ⁸ They are unfamiliar with peace; their deeds are unjust. They use deceitful methods, and whoever deals with them is unfamiliar with peace.*

A Description of Their Sin (59:4-8)

- Verse 4 takes us into the law-courts, where justice and equity should prevail.
- But it soon becomes apparent that miscarriage of justice is the order of the day.
- Although the verse *begins* with a description of what is happening in their *courts* of law, it eventually branches out and shows that this kind of behavior is taking place in *every* area of their life.

A Description of Their Sin (59:4-8)

- The metaphor of conception and birth is an elegant one (“*they conceive of oppression and give birth to sin*”).
- It is elegant because of the way it sets the normal sense conception and birth directly on its head.
- What is the normal result of *conception*? Life.
- But here the result is “*oppression*”.
- What is it that is normally *born*? An innocent child.
- But here what is born is “*sin*”.
- Instead of the normal processes of life and regeneration, their society gives its energies to the production of shame and sorrow.

A Description of Their Sin (59:4-8)

- The two images given in verses 5–6 (“*They hatch the eggs of a poisonous snake*” and “*spin a spider’s web*”) illustrate the **premeditation** and **danger** of their sins.
- The image of a poisonous snake’s eggs hatching expresses the idea of evil plans made and then carried out.
- Those who participate in the plans of these evildoers will die (“*whoever eats their eggs will die*”).
- Similarly, evildoers weave sinful plans as carefully as a spider spins its web.
- These plans have no useful purpose (i.e. they “*cannot be used for clothing*”) other than to advance their evil purposes and promote violence.

A Description of Their Sin (59:4-8)

- The imagery here depicts how *dangerous* their sin is – to *themselves* and to *society* as a whole.
- The prophet is purposeful in choosing the images of “*snake*” and “*spider*”, creatures feared for being hard to detect and difficult to differentiate between poisonous and non-poisonous varieties.
- Clearly, the snakes and spiders referred to *here* fall into the “harmful” category.

A Description of Their Sin (59:4-8)

- The eagerness with which sinful Israel pursues sin is described in verses 7–8.
- There are *four* different Hebrew words in these two verses that refer to *patterns* of their sinful behavior.
- The NET translation masked these words, but the ESV preserves them for us:
 - *Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood; 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.*

A Description of Their Sin (59:4-8)

- The uncontrollable nature of their sin is so *regular* and *persistent* that it hardens their hearts like a “*path*” that is created and packed hard by continual treading.
- Those who walk in the ways of wickedness will never know peace, a theme that is highlighted at the beginning *and* end of verse 8 (“*They are unfamiliar with peace... and whoever deals with them is unfamiliar with peace.*”)
- The people have become so hardened by sin that they can no longer remember what it is like to act in ways that are pleasing to God (i.e., the way of “*peace*”).

The Apostle Paul's Citation
of
Isaiah 59:7-8
in Romans 3:15-17

Isaiah 59:7 *Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; desolation and destruction are in their highways.* ⁸ *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. (ESV)*

Rom 3:9 *What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,* ¹⁰ *as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." ¹³ "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known." ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes." ¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (ESV)*

Their feet are swift to shed blood...

- The Apostle Paul's citation of Isaiah 59:7-8 (in Romans 3:15-17) is in a section of the book (Romans 3:9-20) where Paul cites a series of Old Testament texts to demonstrate that *all* men, both Jews and Gentiles, are "*under sin*" and unable to be justified in the sight of God by works of the Law.
- Paul is bringing together here in summary form what he has laid out in the *two* previous sections of the book:
 - Romans 1:18-32 where he demonstrates that all *Gentiles* are sinners
 - Romans 2:1-3:8 where he demonstrates that all *Jews* are sinners

Their feet are swift to shed blood...

- This *bad* news (that all men are sinners and cannot please God by keeping the Law) then prepares the reader to recognize his need for and appreciate the *good* news of the Gospel whereby they may receive a righteousness from God *apart* from the Law through faith in Jesus Christ:
 - *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested **apart from the law**, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-- the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. (Rom 3:21-22 ESV)*

Their feet are swift to shed blood...

- As we saw earlier, the words of Isaiah 59:7–8 that Paul cites in Romans 3:15-17 were originally directed against “*the house of Jacob*” (Isaiah 58: 1, 14);
- This citation therefore *reenforces* an idea that he has already introduced in Romans 2: Israel itself is *included* within the charge against the wicked.
- In Romans 3:13-17, Paul then merges the prophetic charge against the people of God (in Isaiah 59:7-8) with the complaint of the psalmists against their (Gentile) enemies (where he cites Psalm 5:9 and 140:3 in Romans 3:13).
- Only the *gospel* can bring a reversal of this judgment – for the Jew as well as the Gentile.

Their feet are swift to shed blood...

- The question of the purpose of the law has been at stake throughout the last two sections of the book of Romans (2:17-3:20).
- The Jews understood the law as the gift of the knowledge of God's will, with the underlying assumption that the human being (no doubt with divine aid) is able to put that knowledge into practice (2:17–24).
- Paul understood the purpose of the law in a radically different way.
- He explains here that the Law was given in order that *“every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God”* (Rom 3:19).

Their feet are swift to shed blood...

- It is not that Paul imagines that human beings are incapable of doing anything that the law demands.
- Obviously, those who possess the law are able to accomplish the “works of the law,” deeds of outward observance that mark a person as a Jew.
- But here in Romans, Paul addresses the false conclusion that has been drawn concerning these “works of the law.”
- “No flesh” can be justified by these deeds before God.
- It is *not justification* that comes through the law, but rather “the knowledge of sin” — that is, the experience of sinning (see Rom 7:7–13).

Israel Confesses Their Sin (59:9-15)

59:9 For this reason deliverance is far from us and salvation does not reach us. We wait for light, but see only darkness; we wait for a bright light, but live in deep darkness. ¹⁰ We grope along the wall like the blind, we grope like those who cannot see; we stumble at noontime as if it were evening. Though others are strong, we are like dead men. ¹¹ We all growl like bears, we coo mournfully like doves; we wait for deliverance, but there is none, for salvation, but it is far from us. ¹² For you are aware of our many rebellious deeds, and our sins testify against us; indeed, we are aware of our rebellious deeds; we know our sins all too well. ¹³ We have rebelled and tried to deceive the LORD; we turned back from following our God. We stir up oppression and rebellion; we tell lies we concocted in our minds. ¹⁴ Justice is driven back; godliness stands far off. Indeed, honesty stumbles in the city square and morality is not even able to enter. ¹⁵ Honesty has disappeared; the one who tries to avoid evil is robbed. The Lord watches and is displeased, for there is no justice.

Israel Confesses Their Sin (59:9-15)

- In 59: 9-15a the prophet moves from condemnation to shared confession, using first-person plurals.
- Here Isaiah is speaking on behalf of all the faithful of the land, people who by their very nearness to God realize their own propensities and their own need.
- This confession is one of a person who has reflected deeply on the human condition.
- This is not a little regret over a few “unfortunate slip-ups.”
- Rather, it is a recognition of the profound incapacity of human beings to produce the very conditions on which “justice” and “righteousness” (the things God called for in 56:1) depend.

Israel Confesses Their Sin (59:9-15)

- The condition is one of complete “*darkness*” (59:9), into which “*light*” cannot penetrate.
- The reason for this is that the prophet confesses that “*we*” do not have the moral eyes to “*see*” (59:10) the light.
- In 59:12 the prophet makes it plain that the reason injustice and unrighteousness are such serious sins is not that they are first of all crimes against humanity but sins against the Creator who made us.
- They are “*rebellious deeds*” against the Lord of the universe.
- Thus, the prophet paints a picture that seems truly hopeless.

Israel Confesses Their Sin (59:9-15)

- If this is the condition of the people of God even after they have returned from exile, what hope is there?
- God continues to call for righteousness and justice as fruit of their restoration, but they are utterly incapable of doing those things.
- We may say that it is a realistic picture, born of the most searching reflection on the human condition.
- But that offers no comfort.
- Are humans doomed to continue in sin, recognizing that they ought to do differently but are constitutionally unable to do so?
- Isaiah is definitely not saying that.
- Rather, he is showing the need for something *other* than merely stern discipline and good intentions if God's commands are to be fulfilled.
- What that something is will be uncovered in the *next* segment.

Next Time

- We will see how *The LORD Intervenes*
(59:15b-21)

Class Discussion Time

- Concerning today's text, one of my commentaries observed: *"It is no light offense to charge God for things whose fault lies at our own doorstep."*
- And yet people do it all the time.
- Have you ever heard anyone ask: "If God is the good God that he claims to be, why does he allow so much sin and evil in the world?"
- In fact, there is an entire category of theologians, known as "Open Theists", who believe that God does not have exhaustive knowledge of the future and that the future is at least partly "open" and not predetermined by God.
- They argue that this view is more compatible with human "free will" and the existence of evil.
- Have you ever encountered people like this? How should we respond to these ideas?

Class Discussion Time

- Campus Crusade, a well known organization that is dedicated to sharing the gospel with students on university campuses, begins their gospel presentation with this statement:
 - *“God Loves You and created you to know Him personally. God has a wonderful plan for your life.”*
- Contrast this with how the Apostle Paul began **his** gospel presentation in the book of Romans.
- Why do you think the Apostle Paul began his presentation the way he did?