

# OpenTheo

## December 16th: Isaiah 59 & Luke 17:20-37

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### Alastair Roberts

The Lord clothing himself with salvation. The coming of the kingdom of God.

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## Transcript

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, 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 vigour 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, 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.

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 for evermore.

Isaiah chapters 56-59 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 Oswald describes the breakdown of the component subdivisions of these subunits as a specific example of realised 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. 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 is fit for food, and the spider's web something beautiful that might be used to make clothing.

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. 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 9-15 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.

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. 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. 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 this 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. 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 fulfillment of the Lord's charge in Deuteronomy chapter 6 in the context of the Shema in verses 6 to 7. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise. For a people so given to unrighteousness the Lord's dealing radically with their hearts

would be the only means by which they would be delivered. 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? Luke chapter 17 verses 20 to 37.

And he said to the disciples, And he said to the disciples, Luke chapter 17 ends with a discussion of the coming of the kingdom and the two big questions, when and where. Jesus is asked by the Pharisees about when the kingdom of God is coming. They presume that it is arriving at some point in the future.

Yet the kingdom is already dawning and present in Jesus. The Pharisees are also expecting to be able readily to notice when the kingdom arrives. However the coming of the kingdom is in many respects secret and imperceptible.

Like leaven working in loaves, the kingdom doesn't come as something whose arrival we can closely monitor and pinpoint. The kingdom is already in their midst. It's hidden like the leaven.

The Pharisees can't see what is taking place in Jesus' ministry. It's right under their nose but they cannot perceive it. Jesus then turns to address his disciples after this, as they also have difficulties recognising the coming of the kingdom and the manner it occurs.

When the Son of Man is revealed it will be sudden, dramatic, unmistakable and public. The time will come when they will long for a manifestation of the Son of Man but not see it, and people will point them in various directions but they should not be misled. When the Son of Man is truly revealed they will know it.

References to the Son of Man's day should also remind us of Daniel chapter 7 verses 13-14 when the Son of Man comes on the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days and is given the kingdom. Jesus' coming and judgement will be sudden and catastrophic and the rejection by and suffering at the hands of the current generation must happen first, a then catastrophic judgement described in verse 25. Jesus compares the judgement to come upon Jerusalem to the judgement that befell the pre-flood world and Sodom.

In each of these cases things were continuing as usual until unexpected, catastrophic and final judgement hit and everything changed. The day of the Son of Man, the days of Noah and the days of Lot are held alongside each other and paralleled. Jesus, the Son of Man, is the one who leads a new group of people escaping final judgement who are saved with him.

The story of Lot is one in which there is final judgement upon the cities of the plain. The angels come to inspect the city of Sodom and they deliver Lot and his family from it and its downfall. The story of the flood is the story of an end of an old world too.

The world before the flood is drowned and Noah and his family are delivered through it. The days of Noah and the days of Lot refer to the days of peace and seeming normality

before judgement hits. The days of the Son of Man are the days of his personal presence and his ministry with his disciples, the days they're currently enjoying.

As the judgement looms, the day of the Son of Man, I can imagine the disciples looking back upon the days by Galilee and wishing that they could return to that time. The Son of Man will be revealed and all else will be laid bare. Final judgement on Jerusalem is coming and all riches must be left behind.

Without looking back, the disciples must flee. They must recognise that anything that ties them down is a liability. Anything that attaches them to that present order is a threat in that day when they need to escape.

They must not run back into the burning building. This, it seems to me, is one of the reasons why the early church in Jerusalem sold its property, its land, and shared the money among them for their needs. Not only was the value of real estate in Jerusalem going to crater as the city was destroyed, it was also a danger to own property that would overly attach you to a place that was doomed.

And finally, liquidating their property and using that money to minister to those in need and to build up the body of Christ was laying up treasures in heaven. Condemned property was thus translated into something that would yield eternal dividends. One would be taken, another would be left.

Taken here does not refer to the rapture of the left behind series or anything like that. Rather it refers to being taken by the sword. Where will they be taken? The body, the carcass of Israel, is where the eagles, the unclean foreign force of the Romans will be gathered together.

Jerusalem and her people, overthrown Babylon, will become Rome's carrion. See this described in Revelation chapter 19 verses 17 to 18. Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.

A question to consider. What is the lesson of Lot's wife? Why is her example underlined here?