

RUF Bible Study – Attributes of God in Isaiah

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Isaiah 56-61 – The Justice, Openness, Comfort, Integrity, Glory and Jubilee of God

Every week we're talking about what it's like to be in the presence of greatness. I started thinking about that because of Isaiah 6, where Isaiah goes into the presence of God and gets undone but also finds grace. We've highlighted different aspects of that idea every week.

This week I'm thinking about something completely unexpected. And I'm thinking about Greco-Roman heavyweight wrestling – just like you were I'm sure.

In the Sidney 2000 Olympics Russian Alexander Karelin was a lock to win the gold medal in men's super heavyweight wrestling. After all, he had won gold in 1988, 1992 and 1996. He had never lost in international competition, and in fact had not even surrendered a point in the previous five years.

His opponent in the finals was little known, lightly regarded American Rulon Gardner, a Wyoming native whose biggest claims to fame coming in had been a junior college national title and a fourth place finish in the NCAA Championship.

The two met in the finals, and the impossible happened. Gardner stunned the world, earning a 1-0 victory over the man most experts proclaim the greatest Greco-Roman wrestler of all-time.

That's why we watch. That's why the game you watch might be the best comeback of all time, or it might just be a 30-point blowout. That's why sports can be riveting – the unexpected can happen and sometimes does.

Let's reset ourselves. Isaiah is writing this book around 700 B.C., but he is looking ahead to what we now know is 539 B.C., when Cyrus allows the Israelites to resettle in Jerusalem. Thus, in this last section of Isaiah, 56-66, we read about a people who have returned from exile – they have regained their land, yes, but they still are under a pagan king.

Friends, let me submit to you that we find ourselves in a similar situation if we are Christians. We are a redeemed community under the authority and leadership of the King, but all is not yet realized. We too live in a sort of exile, as aliens and strangers in the world, if you will. We have been given many freedoms, but yet live in a strange land with non-Christian rulers all around.

What shall we do? To answer that, I need to remind us why we're here. We're not just coming to hear an inspirational message. That's simply not good enough and not going to last. No, we have a vision. Simply put, it is to reach students for Christ and equip them to serve. Through the outpouring of the gospel in our lives, we are to go out into the world and church with a growth in grace, evangelism and missions, fellowship and service and an increasing biblical worldview.

To put it another way, we've been borrowing Redeemer Presbyterian Church's vision statement: *To spread the gospel, first through ourselves and then through the university by word, deed, and community; To bring about personal changes, social healing, and cultural renewal through a movement of ministries that change the University of Oklahoma and through it, the world.*

If we truly understand Isaiah 52 and 53, the Song of the Suffering Servant, and we come to him as per Isaiah 55, then spread the gospel first to ourselves. We experience personal change. Has that happened to you? Can you give testimony to the gospel changing things in your life?

But it doesn't stop there. Once the gospel starts pinging around our hearts, it has to get out somewhere, and we move into what we might term revival. Revival in the sense that our lives are changed and that comes out as we think about the community around us. Social healing and cultural renewal. The Bible is filled with this. There is a fruit to our beliefs, to our passions. We cannot contain it.

So Isaiah 56-61 is about revival breaking out in our midst, even when it is difficult for it to do so. Even when the authorities barely tolerate it. If we hear and understand the gospel of Isaiah 52 and 53, and if we respond to it as evidenced in Isaiah 54 and 55, then we will see the fruit of Isaiah 56-61 in our communities. Let's look and see what those are. And let's see if something unexpectedly great also happens.

The Way God Is

Let's start by looking for a few minutes about the way God describes himself, his people, and his kingdom in this passage. It ranges around so there is a lot to see.

Just – the idea of shalom

Isaiah 56:1-2 Thus says the LORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. 2 Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil."

We first read about justice and righteousness. God loves both, and hates the reverse of both.

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For this series, I used commentaries on Isaiah from Meyer, Webb, Ortland, Oswalt and Motyer. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller, Fred Harrell and Bryan Chapell, and used notes from RUF campus minister Kevin Twit and seminary professor Dr. Jack Collins. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

Justice presupposes the Biblical idea of *shalom*. *Shalom* isn't just the Hebrew word for peace, it has a much fuller meaning. What is *shalom*? Author Cornelius Plantinga writes: "The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*... In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness and delight* – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied with natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be."²

We are to be a people who care about justice, about *shalom*. If we hoard our gifts, then we continue the spread of injustice. It's not just selfishness we will be charged with, but injustice and unrighteousness. We should be a people who disadvantage ourselves in order to help others in need.

It is interesting that Isaiah connects the Sabbath with this concept of justice. Somehow keeping the Sabbath is a statement of faith for us keeping it helps orient us around *shalom*, truth and justice.

Open – salvation for foreigners

Isaiah 56:3-5 3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." 4 For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, 5 I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

We next read about God opening up his doors to any type of person who will walk in. There is an openness to the gospel, an openness to revival. It should include people who don't look like everyone else. It should include the unexpected, the marginalized, the outcast.

Last week, we talked about the eunuch that Phillip encountered, recounted to us in the book of Acts. He would have loved this verse, of course. There can be salvation for people who seem to be unsaveable. You don't have to have the right family lineage, the right look, the right Bible, the right neighborhood, the right color of skin to be a Christian. God opens the doors wide for all types. For everyone.

Isaiah 56:8 says: *The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered."*

God is a God who gathers together the unexpected. Maybe you have forgotten this. Maybe you think that you've grown up in Oklahoma and in church and of course God works with people like you. That's the wrong way to be looking at thing. It is very unexpected that that anyone would believe in him for we are the epitome of outsiders from the point of view of the Bible.

Do you believe this? Do you believe that God can save the unexpected?

Comforting – receive and restore

Isaiah continues his vision of a revitalized community that is working out the gospel by talking about how every obstruction that might keep his people away will be removed.

Isaiah 57:14-21 14 And it shall be said, "Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way." 15 For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite. 16 For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before me, and the breath of life that I made. 17 Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart. 18 I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, 19 creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near," says the LORD, "and I will heal him. 20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. 21 There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."

We read a similar passage in *Isaiah 40:1-5*, and here again we see that nothing will be able to stop God's people from coming to him. This awesome, holy, high and lifted up God of *Isaiah 6* doesn't have to dwell with sinners such as us. But he does. He makes his home with the contrite and lowly in spirit. In fact, he revives those kinds of people. He restores them. He is just for them. He heals him.

That is an awesome thing, to hear: Peace, Peace, to the far and to the near. Do you long for peace? *Shalom*? The way things ought to be? Do you need comfort? Where do you need comfort? How do you need comfort? Are you lonely? There are many students at OU who are incredibly lonely. Maybe you dread summer vacation because that means going back to a family that is dysfunctional. Maybe you are trapped in a relationship you know is bad for you and don't feel like you can get out of. Maybe you feel overwhelmed by the expectations and the scholarships and the grades and the pressure to achieve. Maybe you're tired because of all the effort and energy required to keep people away from you, to keep a certain image together. Perhaps you're exhausted from all that sinning and hiding, sinning and hiding again and again.

Then come to Christ alone for comfort. He says Come all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.

If you do not come to him, then you will not receive peace at all.

Glorious – of the church

Isaiah 60:1-5 Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. 3 And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. 4 Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. 5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

² Plantinga, 10

After remembering the sinfulness of our estate, we are called by Isaiah out of there to realize that there is another reality at work, that of his glory pouring out into the world. He pulls out all the stops in describing it to you. The glory of the Lord has risen upon you because the Lord will arise upon you and his glory will be seen upon you.

His children will be his glory! Not only will he get camels, gold, frankincense, good news, praise, flocks, rams, and everything else; not only will he get everything, but he will get you. All for the king, the servant of whom this song sings. You will be a son or a daughter coming as the glory of the king.

The king will be surrounded with his treasures and someone will ask, Show me all your riches. And – clap clap – he will ask for you to come stand beside him and he will say: Behold my treasures!

This is glory, is it not? Your people shall be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified. The least one shall become a clan and the smallest one a mighty nation. I am the Lord; in its time I will hasten it.

You have to understand the glory that awaits you. You will be a prince, a princess in the kingdom. You will be glorified. God promises it. Do you believe this?

Jubilee Jubilous – all will be set right

Isaiah 61:1-4 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to grant to those who mourn in Zion- to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Isaiah writes that all will be set right at the year of the Lord's favor. This is really the culmination of all that has gone before us. It takes into account the sin and oppression of the world, and of the word of a redeemer to change things for the good. It calls to mind the festival year of the Jubilee, a time prescribed by God when everything would be reset back to the original boundaries and settings so that no one could permanently take advantage of another. This was a social policy that came out of a sense of worship and glory. It was justice. It contained comfort and openness.

Why this is great is because it reminds us that God isn't just concerned with spiritual things only. He's not only just worried about our souls. Yes, that is a part of it. But he's concerned about our bodies, our culture, our society, all that we are made of. He cares about *you*. And *me*. And *us*.

So many religions have just offered freedom for your souls. They treat this world and this body as bad things. And even some in Christianity have done that, treating people as if their bodies and situations don't matter. Just save their souls! I think most of us cringe when we feel that someone is doing that, though we may not always know why.

The Jubilee reminds us that God cares about everything and is working to make all things right. There is good news for the poor, binding up for the brokenhearted, liberty for the captives, freedom from bondage, comfort for those who mourn.

That means that this world matters. Your body matters. Your major and your career matter. Your words matter. Everything is important, so the world is big and huge and needs you and your help in it.

Gracious – a double portion

Isaiah 61:7 Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion; instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot; therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion; they shall have everlasting joy.

And look what you get. God is a God of justice and righteousness – and grace. God gets your shame. You get a double portion. How special do you feel when you get two scoops instead of one? Two slices instead of one? Two for one is a great deal that we all like, especially when the thing you're paying isn't money at all but your own sin and shame.

God gets your dishonor and you get an inheritance. God gets your sin, shame and misery and you get everlasting joy.

That is the gospel. His riches to you. Your shame to him.

Do you have shame tonight? Do you have guilt? Give it to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. Give it to the one who offers comfort. He won't wipe it away and pretend it never existed. He will pay for it, so it'd done for. And he will offer to you an inheritance, a place, a spot, a double portion far richer than you could ever imagine.

Our God is a gracious God. One who deals justly with sin, but give it to another, who sacrifices his own son.

The Way We Are - Ugh

So that's who God is: just, open, comforting, glorious, filled with jubilee and gracious to his people.

What about you? Are you that way?

I bring this up not to pound on us yet again, but because so many of us have this inherent almost definition of sin. We think that that sin is breaking God's law. Yes, that's a part of it to be sure. We shouldn't break God's law. But why?

Let me just touch on something here. Breaking God's law is going against his design for you. He has made you to work and act a certain way as your creator, so he has set the rules and boundaries. So God says that you are not have sexual intimacy before marriage. Because he made you to experience sexual intimacy in the context of a loving, committed, lifetime covenantal relationship. He cares about you and about me and about our community and how it interacts.

We look at the characteristics of God, and we fall far short in our own lives, don't we? Just thinking about those aspects as law breaking doesn't help us as much. God calls us to justice, but we turn a blind eye. He's created us to know that this world matters in what happens to people and society, and that it's not just survival of the fittest. Justice matters and things break down

when we don't have it. He made us for shalom, for the perfecting interweaving and goodness of all things. But we're selfish. We're lazy. We're inconsiderate. We're mean. We're hateful. We break shalom all the time.

God calls us to openness. But we are racist or sexist or elitist. We turn our backs to outsiders all the time. We feel threatened by them. We close our borders to them. We insist they speak our language. We close our groups to them and make them feel unwelcomed. Do you see how this is bigger, fuller and deeper than just saying we break God's law? I remember when we started RUF back early on. We gathered a group of about 25 students together – and some wanted to stay that size forever. They loved the small group feel and how everyone knew each other. I loved that too, but God calls us also to extend his kingdom, extend his family, extend his tent. So we must turn outward and invite others to join our community. That means not just sitting in our seats every week, but getting involved in lives and putting ourselves out there with people, taking an interest in their lives and sharing ours.

We don't comfort. We pick. We laugh at someone's pain, calling it stupid or immature. We tell them not to talk about it, trying to hide information. We insist on immediate change. We don't walk with people in their hurt. We rationalize the problem away instead of weeping hearing tears of love.

Glory? We don't want God's glory in the church, we want it all ourselves. We work and work to get fame and fortune, or just security and happiness. We don't invest in people, but in houses, cars, clothes and things. We don't give our money away, but we hoard it for ourselves. When we get around others we suck glory out of them and onto ourselves. We love the glory. We hate it when we're ignored or mistreated or taken advantage of. We want glory.

We don't think about the Jubilee too much. That seems like a fantastical idea where things get set right – in fact, many of us might even speak out against such a radical idea. It didn't seem that God's people practiced it in the Bible, and it would be tough for us now. So we just use our world. We continue in the ruts we're in. We don't even think about making the world a better place, unless we buy a pair of Toms or recycle our Crocs. We're consumers. The Jubilee is about restoration not consuming.

And instead of practicing grace, we dole out hatred. We're mad at our friends for this slight and that slight. We're mad at our professors and TAs. We're mad at the campus minister. We're mad at our parents. We're really mad at our boyfriends and girlfriends. We're furious with our roommates. We want to be treated with grace, because nothing is really ever our faults. But everyone else should listen to our accurate assessments. Forgiveness? How could I ever forgive that? Instead I will keep it in my heart and chew on it over and over. I will never let it go.

There is so much more. Isaiah talks about the irresponsibility of God's leaders, likening them to blind watchmen standing there and pretending to do their jobs. He says his people are idolatrous and his illustration is sex with a prostitute, that's how much it hurts him. Isaiah talks about false revivals where we get all worked up for a short time and then it all fades away. He writes about integrity, the intersection of our inner lives and our outer lives. So many of us are hiding secrets that we're ashamed of. It may be pornography addiction or an eating disorder. It may be something in our pasts that we hope no one ever finds out. It could be other practices we engage in. We stuff them in. We hide. We pretend. But we'll keep coming to RUF and the church, hoping everyone will believe in our goodness. Some people give up RUF and church altogether. We are to be people of integrity.

So are you with me in this more complex vision of our condition? Of our need? We have been designed in a way by God and when we go against that design, things break down – we call that sin. Sin is doing the things we shouldn't do according to how God has made us and it's also *not* doing the things we should do. Sin leads to death – in big ways like actually dying, but in small ways like hurting someone or hurting ourselves. Sin is a big deal and a big problem.

Many in our world say there is no such thing as sin. Sin doesn't really have a place in a naturalistic worldview. Problems are all just the strong feeding on the weak at some level or another.

I think sin is real. Sin is big. Sin is pervasive. Sin kills. It brings death.

Julie and I have read a book to our kids called *Tales of the Kingdom*, which continues Christian allegories. One story is about a baker who loved his bread so much that he would only give it to the king and the king's guards. No one else was worthy, so he hoarded it away. One day several people interrupted his work, all of whom he shoed off without giving them bread and while giving them a piece of his mind.

The rangers blew their horns, indicating that the king was in grave danger. He was sick, almost to death and they carried him into the baker's house to be cared for. He slowly came to health and the baker told him that he wished he could take revenge on whomever it was that had hurt the king.

The king told him that his wounds were not like normal peoples, and as he explained, the baker realized that it was he that had caused the king's pain when he had mistreated the people.

The king then told him, "The king's bread is for the king's people." And the baker from then on out joyfully gave his bread to everyone and anyone.

When we go against God's design for our lives, we hurt people and we hurt God himself.

The Unexpected King

All of it is really unexpected because we don't like to think of our sin in such a comprehensive way, and it's such a glorious vision of what God is. But there is an even more unexpected part to it.

Jesus used Isaiah 61 as the text of his first message. In Luke 4, we read about how he took the scroll and read from it: 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he rolled up the scroll and sat down. In the custom of that day, you would stand to read the Scriptures and then sit to preach. He sat down and said, "*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

Booyah! People would have been shocked. The crowd would have been sitting in sort of a stunned silence. Did that just happen?! Did Roulon just beat that huge Russian guy? Did that shot just go down to win the game? Did Kirk Gibson really just hit that home run? Did Blake Griffin really just dunk over that car? Did I see what I thought I saw? No way Jesus did that. The text says that all eyes were fixed on him.

Jesus was proclaiming that because of *his* presence, Isaiah 61 was fulfilled. *He* preached good news to the poor. A part of Jesus' ongoing work is preaching. Do you care about preaching? Good preaching? *He* fulfilled liberty to the captives, sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed. Do you care about liberty for all? Really? Do you care about sight for the blind and the oppressed?

Jesus was saying that *he* was ushering in the year of jubilee for the people. Most of the people in the crowd would have liked this message, wouldn't they? After all, they were the oppress-ees, they were under Roman rule, they were practically slaves of a pagan government. Wasn't Jesus saying that all would be reset, that they would have their land back, that the Romans would be kicked out?

If that is the message, then the people will speak well of him and marvel at him.

But Jesus kept going. His sermon didn't end there. He talked about two other things in that sermon, both wrapped together. He talked about the open grace of God and the lack of integrity of the church, two of our themes in Isaiah. As he taught, he used examples of when the people who responded to God weren't Israelites at all, but outsiders, a message which therefore indicted the insiders. He spoke of the outcasts, the ones who were truly spiritually needy.

And what was the reaction? The very same people who were minutes before marveling at his words and speaking well of him turned on him. *28 When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. 29 And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. 30 But passing through their midst, he went away.*

They were filled with wrath and wanted to throw him down the cliff. Huh. Why?

Because the gospel isn't for good people. We so wish it were. Then we could have the gospel and be good at the same time. The gospel isn't for the oppressors, but for the oppressed. We have to stop oppressing others and number ourselves as the oppressed in order to receive it. The gospel isn't for the insiders, but the outsiders.

The gospel strips away everything we might have, and that is very threatening. Can you feel the threat the gospel offers you? Do you see that to gain your life you must lose it? Is that easy?

Not if you want to save your life. It isn't easy at all if you cling to your own righteousness. But revival is giving it all away to this new way of thinking about justice, openness, possessions, truth, integrity, sin, repentance, glory and jubilee. It is the gospel.

Jesus is the only way to this gospel. He fulfills the tension. These Isaiah passages are about a great king who cares about every aspect of our lives and community. He brings in ultimate goodness with power and justice. Yet, yet he also binds our wounds and brokenness like a nurse. He's the warrior-nurse. He's the shepherd king. As we talked about in Isaiah 53, he is the suffering servant king. He had the strength and resolve to be led to his death like a lamb to the slaughter even though he could have wiped everyone out with a breath.

He took our death so we could have his life. He took the justice due to us so that we could be set free. He took the shutting away from God, God turning his back on him so that we could receive the openness of God's face and arms. He took the wrath of God's displeasure so we could be comforted and brought in. He took the damage due the world so we could have a jubilee. That is grace! That is unexpected grace. That is something to give your life to. It's something to receive with humble tears of gladness today, this Eastertime. Look to the cross. Lift high the cross and not your life. Give you life over to him. I know it's scary. You don't know what he will do with it – but he is the warrior nurse. He isn't just strong and powerful; he is also loving and sacrificing.

Let him have your ashes so you can have his headdress. Take his garment of praise, clothed in his righteousness and built up because he was nothing, clothed in shame and torn down. The gospel is for you today. Let it give you humility and confidence that God loves you.

I'm guessing you've seen *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. If not, you should watch it again, maybe even this week. I want you to especially hone in on the part at the end where Aslan dies on the stone table.

No one expected that. Aslan's army didn't. They expected him to win. I think the White Witch expected her side to lose to Aslan. But she didn't. She bound him, gagged him, poked and prodded and teased him, mocking him the whole way. People are thinking, Get up, Aslan! You have way more power than this! What are you doing?! Everyone went to be thinking death had won. And death did win. For a time.

That's the uber-surprising thing. Resurrection only wins by letting death win for a time. It's completely unexpected. Jesus wins by losing. God has to die. That is the unexpected result of Easter Sunday, which we celebrate this Sunday. Jesus is saying that all the hopes and dreams of Isaiah – all of them are fulfilled in his life, death and resurrection. He has come to set the captives free – by becoming a captive himself. He has come to break the bondage – by placing himself in them. He has come to proclaim the year of Jubilee – by taking the debts on himself. He is the one who brings comfort because he was stricken smitten and afflicted. Do you see? Do you see how Jesus' resurrection is the greatest thing of all?