

## RUF Bible Study – Attributes of God in Isaiah

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### Isaiah 1 – The Vision of God

**Isaiah 1:1-31** The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. <sup>2</sup> Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken: "Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. <sup>3</sup> The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." <sup>4</sup> Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. <sup>5</sup> Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. <sup>6</sup> From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil. <sup>7</sup> Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. <sup>8</sup> And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. <sup>9</sup> If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah. <sup>10</sup> Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! <sup>11</sup> "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. <sup>12</sup> "When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? <sup>13</sup> Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. <sup>14</sup> Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. <sup>15</sup> When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. <sup>16</sup> Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, <sup>17</sup> learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. <sup>18</sup> "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. <sup>19</sup> If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; <sup>20</sup> but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." <sup>21</sup> How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. <sup>22</sup> Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water. <sup>23</sup> Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them. <sup>24</sup> Therefore the Lord declares, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: "Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes. <sup>25</sup> I will turn my hand against you and will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. <sup>26</sup> And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city." <sup>27</sup> Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. <sup>28</sup> But rebels and sinners shall be broken together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed. <sup>29</sup> For they shall be ashamed of the oaks that you desired; and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. <sup>30</sup> For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water. <sup>31</sup> And the strong shall become tinder, and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them.

One of my favorite movies used to be *The Matrix*. I know it's old news now, and the sequels never quite lived up to the first one, but I loved it. I can remember sitting in the theater and having absolutely no idea what was going on. People were jumping all over the place, squeezing through telephones and dodging bullets. That first fifteen minutes blew my mind. Then, it started to make sense. Neo had to come to understand it too in the movie. He had to be transported, taken to another place – he had to *see* the Reality of things.

That's what God is doing for us here in Isaiah 1. He's showing us the true nature of life. He's giving us a vision of the way things are and the way things ought to be and will be.<sup>2</sup>

What do we find when we listen? God shows us we are an uncomprehending people.

We first see the *tragedy of his people's humiliation* ("Ah, sinful nation") in 1:2-9.

God tells us first of *his broken heart* in verses 1-3. "What hinders God's blessing in the world today is not Hollywood or Washington. What hinders God's blessing is his own children in rebellion against him."<sup>3</sup> He describes us as in rebellion, and worse off in that sense than the animals. And it hurts him to see us that way. He calls out the whole world and universe as witnesses against his people. Nothing hurts worse than having your children treat you that way.

We also see *our broken strength* in verses 4-8. "The prophet sees God's people are missing the point of life, are oppressed with failure, and are going from bad to worse. But he isn't railing, The word "Ah!" signals that this is a lament. Hear that in the prophet's tone. He is not nagging; he's weeping."<sup>4</sup>

The judgment words pile up here. Struck down. Rebels. Sick. Faint. Unsound. Bruised. Sore. Raw. Desolate. Burned up. Devoured. Overthrown. Left. Besieged. These are not nice images – we have forsaken God. "To forsake the Lord is to treat him as the last resort rather than the fountainhead."<sup>5</sup>

To state it another way, he gives four nouns of privilege – the unique *nation*, the redeemed *people* the seed or *brood* and *children*. Then he gives four descriptions of the lost ideal – *sinful, loaded with guilt, evildoers* and *given to corruption*.

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For this series, I used commentaries on Isaiah from Meyer, Webb, Ortland, Oswalt, Delitash and Motyer. I listened to sermons from Tim Keller 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.

<sup>2</sup> Another example might be the instant replay phenomenon – someone needs another look at what happened to determine if the right decision was made.

<sup>3</sup> Ortland, 27

<sup>4</sup> Ortland, 28

<sup>5</sup> Ortland, 29

God says his people are like a beaten man going back for more – he doesn't feel his wounds enough to get help. We're like an invaded country, like a shack in the middle of a field picked over by invading robbers. A lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.

Do you see yourself this way ever? Do you ever get some clarity and begin to identify with this picture of humanity, and find yourself in it? "None of Isaiah's kings were inept. They managed a sound economy and followed clever policies, yet the land was devastated, fragile internally and threatened externally. They key to national well-being is righteousness, i.e. what is right with God and this the prophet records as a dismal failure."<sup>6</sup>

What about your righteousness? In the midst of your classes, your grades, your career, how will you be evaluated? Are you striving to be competent or righteous?

But then in verse nine we get a little picture of *God's unbroken grace*. He has saved some, he has picked out a few survivors from the ruins. It's a miracle the church survives at all. It survives because God saves sinners. "Merit says one thing, but mercy says another."<sup>7</sup> "Isaiah intends to convict us of our sins. But we can feel convicted of a million sins without experiencing any healing from God. The only conviction of sin that ends up healing us is when we see how we have despised and forsaken the very One who died to save us. Conviction of that super-sin opens up healing for our other sins."<sup>8</sup>

Have you been truly humbled? Do you ever fall on your face this way and call out to God for forgiveness, understanding that he alone is your only hope?

Isaiah next gives us the ability to see *the hypocrisy of their worship* ("Bring no more vain offerings") in 1:10-20.

This is a challenging passage because God is saying that public worship is only pleasing to God when it comes from people who meet the conditions of Is. 1:16-18, and it never presented in an *ex opera operato* means of buying God's favor.<sup>9</sup> However, we must also state, as is usually the case, that *abusus usum non tollit*, the abuse does not nullify the proper use. Here, God is saying, I want you to repent of your worship. Your worship is unacceptable unless it is the overflow of repentance.

First, God *confronts* us in verse 9. You're like Sodom and Gomorrah. Hearing the protest, he says his people aren't *like* them, they *are* Sodom and Gomorrah. What have we become?

In verses 11-15, God *accuses* them, saying Woe! I've had enough! I'm sick of it! The people protest, But it's your form of worship, God... God responds, Yes, but your activity is not the same as worship. When you come before me – that is worship. The root of the problem is a hollowed-out worship God gets really sick and burdened by our false worship. When you think of Sodom and Gomorrah, what do you think of? What did God hate about that place? Here he tells us – he hated injustice and false worship. This should give us pause when we invoke the memory of Sodom and Gomorrah to attack sexual sin in our day, remembering that God invokes their memory to attack lip-service religion for His own people!<sup>10</sup> The ultimate in this is when we see that God even rejects prayer! He turns his ear from his people. That is a scary thought. It is the opposite of the blessing of the benediction, of God's approval.

God's people were extremely religious. "They expended time on monthly, weekly and other observances (13); the financial cost of sacrifices and offerings (11) was considerable. It would be strange if they did not ask why, since they did so much for him, the Lord seemed to be doing nothing for them. But that is just the point: their religion was 'what we do for God' and not 'how we enter into the grace he offers to us.'"<sup>11</sup>

I see this sometimes. A student will come in as a freshman or will come to us from another ministry and want to get busy doing stuff. Of course, a large part of me loves this. I have stuff that needs to get done. I like to see involvement and a hard worker. But there is a bad side too, and it shows itself. Often this person has to do things in order to feel good about herself. He starts to suck life out instead of breath life into the ministry. He becomes judgmental and demanding. She can't rest. The service is about her, about him. Is that you?

Then, in the midst of this tragic truth, God *offers his invitation* in verse 16-18. Well, you say, then I'll just stop doing stuff until I really mean it. I won't worship unless it's genuine. But that isn't what God wants you to do at all. Yes, he does want genuine worship, but it's not exactly an either or proposition for you.

"He is saying 'Clean up your lives.' He emphasizes our own active repentance, because our whole problem is our active worship concealing passive repentance. He is telling us that treating people well beautifies our worship of him. He is saying that true worship doesn't substitute for obedience; it inspires obedience."<sup>12</sup> Think about that – it doesn't substitute for obedience, true worship inspires obedience.

"Isaiah invites us to recall that in the Mosaic system redeeming grace, the gift of the law and the forms of religious observance followed one another in that order as parts of a single whole. The law was given so that those who had already been redeemed by the blood of the lamb would know how their Redeemer (Ex. 20:2) wished them to live. The sacrifices were provided to cover the lapses in obedience (cf 1 Jn 1:7). But as Isaiah looked around he saw people long on religion and short on morality.

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<sup>6</sup> Motyer, 44

<sup>7</sup> Motyer, 44

<sup>8</sup> Ortland, 31

<sup>9</sup> "The standing error of the ritualist is that if all depends on performing the ceremonial act, then the more you do it the better." Motyer, 46

<sup>10</sup> Twit's notes

<sup>11</sup> Motyer, 45

<sup>12</sup> Ortland, 37

They were as morally negligent as Sodom, their offerings were meaningless because the Lord cannot bear wickedness coupled with religious punctiliousness.”<sup>13</sup>

“True repentance makes things right. God is saying, ‘If you want your worship to please me, do this. Become actively creative in compassion and justice for the people you have hurt, especially the people nobody cares about, people who can’t pay you back, people who might not thank you. Set right again the wrongs you’ve been tolerating. Then your worship will be beautiful to me, and then I will be real to you again.”<sup>14</sup> God is saying, I love the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the fatherless. If you love me, you have to love them. If you don’t love them, you don’t love me.

“The problem with worship – it must take some form or other – is this: The more Biblical and beautiful its form becomes, the more useful it is as a mechanism for evading honest dealings with God and the more plausible a substitute for repentance.”<sup>15</sup> This quote is not about music style or the singing of praise songs. It is about public worship in all its form and liturgy. I think the operative words here are two: useful and plausible. It’s basically this I think - can we hide behind our worship so that we don’t have to deal with our hearts? Yes, is the answer of course and we would affirm that. Then we have to ask, HOW do we do that, what are our temptations to do that? We don’t say, oh, people do that, those bad people. What makes *me* do that? One of the best ways for me to avoid dealing with my own heart is to make sure that I do everything good and proper and right and Biblical (in a limited sense of the word). This is the Older Brother Syndrome in the Prodigal Son story. I have done everything you asked.

Ah, but that is reformed legalism nonetheless. The Older Brother doesn’t know the father. He is a Pharisee. His relationship isn’t real. It becomes more plausible for me to hide when I am involved with a good/better outer form of life and worship. It becomes more useful to me. This is where I live too much of the time. This is our temptation.

But God offers us forgiveness and redemption. He offers change. From scarlet sins, to white as snow. Scarlet is the color of guiltiness. From red like crimson to naturally white as wool. He can do this because of his justice and power. “The Lord calls his people to the bar of his justice where, of course, they can only be found guilty. But it is there that they hear words of free pardon based on the substitutionary death of a divinely appointed sacrifice.”<sup>16</sup>

God then calls for a *decision* in verses 19-20. He says, Repent and believe! He wants your willing obedience, not your outward conformity. This obedience, if you would agree and offer it, will bring you your best. All that keeps you is your stubbornness.

What about you? Will you refuse and rebel? Then, I assure you, you will be eaten by the sword. But there is an offer before you today of forgiveness. Don’t you hear it? Don’t you need it?

We could end there, with that great altar call, but chapter one goes on. God next gives us the vision of *the corruption of their character* (“Everyone loves a bribe”) in 1:21-26.

Our corruption, says God in verses 2, is like that of a whore. Think about that. Like a whore<sup>17</sup>. A prostitute. Someone who has sex for money.<sup>18</sup> That is a graphic description of something, one that should startle us. The standard place to go and understand this is the book of Hosea which you should read.<sup>19</sup> God wants all of us, and that is what sex pictures, and why he uses it as a metaphor for totality, fidelity and faithfulness. He wants to enter into the deepest places and deposit a part of himself there.

Righteousness is like a lonely traveler in hostile surroundings. The spiritual neighborhood has gone bad. Righteousness used to have a good place to go, but now murderers live there.

Unfaithfulness and murder reign when spiritual commitments fall apart.

God tells us in verse 22 that sin dilutes everything, not spices it up. The silver has become dull with sin. The wine watery. We think sin will spice up our lives and make it exciting, but the opposite is true. We will become sickening.

I just finished an extremely sad and discouraging book called *Jesus Land*. In it, a girl, Julia, has an adopted black brother her age, and another one a few years older. Her older siblings have moved out, and now the family lives in a small town in Indiana.

Their parents are Calvinists and complete idiots – the mom writes missionaries letters all day long and wishes she were somewhere else; the father is a doctor who is seldom home and when he is he beats the boys. Her older brother starts to come in and rape her when she is 12, and he does this for years. At one point the brother sets us a scenario where Julia is jumped by a group of boys who want to rape her but she escapes.

In their new school Julia and her black brother become distant, mostly because he is the only black kid at school, and she is embarrassed to be seen with him because of the names they call him and her. Things happen, she gets in trouble and then she chooses to go down to the Dominican Republic because she hates her parents so much and her same aged brother has already been sent down there. This place is a Christian boot camp, and you won’t believe the stuff they do down there. Sickening. She sucks it up, and finally gets out by following The Program, and of course, isn’t a Christian anymore.

It’s depressing to read about the injustice, the lack of concern, the unconnectedness of these parents who portray a life of outward conformity to Christianity. In church every Sunday. Giving money away to missionaries. Julie remarks that she wishes

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<sup>13</sup> Motyer, 45

<sup>14</sup> Ortland, 38

<sup>15</sup> Ortland, 39

<sup>16</sup> Motyer, 47

<sup>17</sup> And not Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, either.

<sup>18</sup> Here’s a question – if you don’t have a theistic worldview, why do you think prostitution should be illegal? Isn’t it the exchange of goods and services? If there is a market for it and there is a supplier, why should it be outlawed?

<sup>19</sup> Some people really like the Francine Rivers book, *Redeeming Love*, which tries to portray this.

her mom would just once pull out slides of her family instead of obsessing over those of the missionaries. And this school is no better. The punishments are way out of line. Many things are completely inappropriate. People are hurt and used.

This is not the way. From the bottom to the top we can find corruption. This corruption is a community experience involving leaders. Parents. Administrators. Presidents. David Palmer in the television show “24” keeps thinking that he can bend the rules of justice to protect his family and then things will be different when he becomes President. Is that true? God won’t go away. He will avenge himself. He tells us so in verse 24-27.

“The platitude that ‘God hates the sin but loves the sinner’ needs to be countered by the description of those who have hurt him as *my foes... my enemies*. Sin sets God at variance with the sinner. But sin also invites divine retribution.”<sup>20</sup>

And here we sit with all of that guilt and shame. Do you see yourself in any of these pictures of sin? Do you really think you’re a good person? Are you God’s enemy? What will God do with you? What does he think of you?

What we need is to see *God’s vision for our redemption - the alternative confronting God’s people* in 1:27-31.

The principle that we find, and it’s one that is surprising to us, is that God accomplishes redemption by paying a personal price for us to get out of bondage and Hell. He offers to get us out of trouble at his own expense. After all, we have just seen that we are helpless.

In verse 25-26, God shows us *our redemption*. “God is able to cleanse us, to remove the stains of our long-standing, well-established sins. He is able to recreate our lost purity... When God turns his hand against us, it isn’t a disaster, it is an act of restoration. The discipline of God achieves just what he intends, in purification and in restoration, both at the same time. We can expect the goodness of God to show up in unlikely experiences. When he turns his hand against us to purify us, let’s trust him to restore us.”<sup>21</sup>

Then in verses 27-29 he presents *the decision before us*. The price to be paid is his own justice and righteousness. It isn’t just swept aside. We are redeemed at a cost. Our part is to repent. There is no way around repentance. Repentance and forgiveness or forsaking and being consumed? Which will you choose?

Lastly, he finishes with *the reality confronting us* in verses 29-31. “God presses his point. Every moment matters to him. If we set the course of our lives by the earthly things we foolishly desire and choose, we will end up with nothing. The metaphors ‘oaks’ and ‘gardens’ are for human strength and potential and preference. The point is that our own brilliance and desire will be the death of us. But repentance opens up life. In the ways of God, the weakness of repentance is how we experience the power of redemption.”<sup>22</sup>

Let’s back up a second and remember that we’re looking at the Vision of God. Whether you are new here or this is your hundredth time, you need to have some sort of vision. We all need it. The vision of the world is this a cynical and materialistic one. It will tell you that you have to have money and status to be happy. A consumeristic culture is based on this belief and ideal. But statistics falsify this idea. People are not happy with more money. People are not happy with more status. They are more stressed and needy. People are happy when they are loved, when they have a family, when they are needed. Jesus offers this to you, and sets it inside the context of a very large, comprehensive vision of the whole world.

“Despite the overwhelming human opinion and evidence to the contrary, Jesus did not come to start a new religion. He did not come to create a two-hour-on-Sunday parasite culture that pious people can stick on the side of their otherwise busy lives. Jesus came to subvert every aspect of life and culture with the relational Word and will of God – what he announced as the kingdom.”<sup>23</sup> This is vision worthy of a God, a vision big enough to call a man or woman to die! The professional church marketers tell us to water-down the vision to get people in the door without scaring them off, but God seems to take a different approach.

This is a time in Israel’s history filled with political threats – the problems seem overwhelming, especially for ordinary people whose lives seem dependant on huge forces beyond their control. Isaiah, with its huge vision, is a good book for such a time as ours.

Instead of writing them off, God invites his people to repentance and restored relationship (vs. 18-20) even offering total forgiveness, their sins wiped away. The cleansing they tried to get (or thought they had secured) through empty religious duties is now offered freely to them. They are promised refinement and cleansing, not deserved destruction (vs. 25), although the basis for this offer will be further explained as the Book of Isaiah unfolds.

But is Isaiah teaching works-righteousness? Is He saying quit doing religious stuff and start serving the poor and then you’ll earn God’s favor? (vs. 19-20) No - the gospel is not a second chance to do better – that is not “good news” at all because we would fail once again. We have no hope if God requires our perfect obedience for a relationship with Him. Our hope is in the Messiah, Jesus, who as Isaiah will unveil, lives and dies in our place. The Lord invites us into relationship with Him totally by grace, without any merit on our part at all, it is an unconditional covenant in this sense. Yet, our obedience to His Word is the normal instrument or means through which blessing comes (as vs. 19 affirms.) His determination to bless us comes solely from His free grace, but tells us that our obedience (which the Bible tells us He deserves the credit for since it is His power at work in

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<sup>20</sup> Motyer, 49

<sup>21</sup> Ortland, 45

<sup>22</sup> Taken from Ortland, 47

<sup>23</sup> Charlie Peacock, *New Way To Be Human*

us – see Phil 2:13) is the channel through which He brings undeserved blessings into our life. And, as if to make sure that Israel knows her deliverance is because of grace alone, God reiterates the charges against her! (vs. 21-23)

What part is God calling you to play in this big vision? Is it to spread the word and tell others about what God has planned? Certainly, we are all called to do that. But how is God calling you to be involved beyond that? How has He gifted you? What providential doors has He opened? We mustn't be discouraged by only looking at the task ahead – we need to see the vision God sees! He is committed His glory covering the earth and has called us to work and pray toward that end with the promise that He will be with us to the end of the age.<sup>24</sup>

When I was in third grade, my parents noticed that I sat really close to the television. I wouldn't move back away from it. When I had my eyes checked, we realized that I needed glasses. My uncorrected vision was 20/400, which is legally blind. I couldn't read a book unless it were only a few inches in front of me. So I got my first pair of glasses. They weren't cool, I assure you. Eventually I also was able to get contacts and between glasses and contacts, I managed to see pretty well. I'd lose a contact in the shower or in the pool or on the basketball court. I'd break a pair of glasses or leave them somewhere. It was always a tremendous nuisance.

So when I got laser eye surgery five years ago, it was with both an anticipatory and frightened heart I went in there. I wondered, will this work? What if it goes wrong and I'm blind? I'd rather have glasses than be blind after all. This was a risk. What if he slipped on the laser and took out my whole face? Could that happen? What if I blink wrong and mess everything up? I had to sit there and trust him. I had to place myself in his care, not even fully understanding what was all involved and let him make me see. I had to withstand the few seconds where I could hear and even smell the flesh of my eye burning. I had to remain calm and let that not be my pervading thought. I wanted to see in a new way. And it worked. I almost cried tears of joy when it worked so well. It's amazing to be able to see.

But my eyes are still bad. They're just corrected in such a way that you can't notice. I needed vision correction and have received it. So do you.

Things are always as they appear. People aren't always good. You aren't good. But you are redeemable. The first step may be to see how sinful you really are. Isaiah 1 will tell you. But the next step is to see and understand his offer of forgiveness for you, to allow his justice to wash over you so that you can be restored, be made whole, be redeemed. So you can see. You need laser heart correction. You need to place your heart and your life into the hands of someone who knows it better than you and who can offer to change it for you. You need a new vision, and God offers it to you here and now. Will you place yourself with him? Will you take up his vision for your life, a city of righteousness, the faithful city?

### ***Laden with Guilt and Full of Fears*** (Isaac Watts)

1. Laden with guilt and full of fears,  
I fly to Thee, my Lord,  
And not a glimpse of hope appears,  
But in Thy written Word  
The volumes of my Father's grace  
Does all my griefs assuage  
Here I behold my Savior's face  
In every page.

2. This is the field where, hidden, lies  
The pearl of price unknown  
That merchant is divinely wise  
Who makes the pearl his own  
Here consecrated water flows  
To quench my thirst of sin  
Here the fair tree of knowledge grows,  
No danger dwells within.

3. This is the judge that ends the strife,  
Where wit and reason fail  
My guide to everlasting life  
Through all this gloomy vale  
Oh may Thy counsels, mighty God,  
My roving feet command,  
Nor I forsake the happy road  
That leads to Thy right hand.

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<sup>24</sup> This concluding section is taken from Kevin Twit's notes, slightly edited by me.