

RUF Bible Study – Attributes of God in Isaiah

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Isaiah 2:1-5 – The Hope of God

Isaiah 2:1-5 The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ² It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, ³ and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴ He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. ⁵ O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

I thought 2005 was a good year for movies, especially near the end. I liked *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *King Kong*, *Hotel Rwanda* (which I took Julie to see on Valentine's Day – oops), *Wallace and Gromit and the Ware-Rabbit*, and the latest Harry Potter. But my favorite movie was *Walk the Line*, the one tracing the early career of Johnny Cash.

I love Johnny Cash. I was a latecomer to his music, and perhaps that's one reason why I like him all the more. He drowns his songs with himself, with all the pain and agony of his life and his faith.

When asked about the music he'd listen to, Cash said, "I love songs about horses, railroads, land, judgment day, family, hard times, whiskey, courtship, marriage, adultery, separation, murder, war, prison, rambling, damnation, home, salvation, death, pride, humor, piety, rebellion, patriotism, larceny, determination, tragedy, rowdiness, heart-break and love. And Mother. And God." That's a good quote. It's an Isaiah quote, I think. Prophetic somehow. Cash's life is real in that it is an embodied contradiction – good and bad all swirled up together.

Johnny Cash was a surprise sensation in an age that was transitioning away from folk music to rock. He somehow bridged the gap. And along the way, he got himself in a heap of trouble. The movie shows him with his buddies – Elvis, Buddy Holly, Waylon Jennings and more – traveling and lonely. He started drinking and then doing drugs. He spiraled out of control until he couldn't even stand to sing. He was at his lowest point and even ready to die. If you can find it, you should watch his video from when he covered the song, "Hurt." "Hurt" was originally about heroin addiction, but Cash transformed it into a song about the hurt of life, of remembrances of the past and the certainty of death. The video shows an old, dying Cash thinking of his past, and often the pain of it. He was at the bottom many, many times.

But then, he received hope. Hope saved him. And at the end of his life, when he'd lost his wife, June Carter Cash, he still, in the midst of tremendous pain and suffering, held on to hope.

Isaiah 2 is about hope, and you need hope, don't you. Isn't that what you were looking for this Christmas? Isn't that what gets you up for this 2006 year, this spring semester? Don't you have some amount of hope that things will be better soon? What is that hope based on? Where does it come from?

Lasting Hope is Necessary

David Wilcox sings in his song "Show the Way":

You say you see no hope, you say you see no reason

We should dream that the world would ever change

You're saying love is foolish to believe

'Cause there'll always be some crazy with an Army or a Knife

To wake you from your day dream, put the fear back in your life...

If you look back to Isaiah 1 and forward to the rest of chapter two, it's a pretty bleak picture. We're brought low: *So man is humbled, and each one is brought low – do not forgive them!* The prophet doesn't pull any punches in telling us of our sin, rebellion, treachery, injustice, prostitution, hypocrisy, pride, haughtiness, arrogance and frailty.

If that is a true picture of humanity, and Isaiah assures us it is, then what hope do we have? If we look around and see war upon war, if we see abortion, murder, hatred, genocide, oppression, rape, abuse, tyrants – what hope do we have?

Isaiah says that if we truly understand our depravity and our need for forgiveness and redemption, then we are in a place to have a sure hope, a new vision of the future that can actually be realized. And he gives it to us.²

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For this series, I used commentaries on Isaiah from Meyer, Webb, Orland, 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.

² This outline comes from Rev. Fred Harrell's sermon found at citychurchsf.org.

On the recommendation of a few others, I read Victor Frankl's book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl, a prominent Jewish German psychologist of his day, survived the holocaust and concentration camps and wondered why some made it through and so many others gave up and died. In his book he gives four responses to suffering.

Some people get brutal and cruel. They fight back in kind and turn the anger outward to the world.

Others give up, lose all hope and give away. They decide to stop living and fulfill that quickly.

A third group said, "I'll get everything back soon and my hope will be restored to its fullness." Frankl observed that these people did make it through the worst of it, but when they got their freedom and possession, it was so disappointing and they remained bitter and unfulfilled throughout their lives. No earthly happiness was enough.

The last group had an inner strength based on a hope that suffering and even death cannot destroy. It was a person or God, but it was an infinite hope. Frankl says that finite hope won't ever be enough; it won't be able to stand up to suffering and difficulty because the object of hope has to have an eternal reference point.

When you sum all that up, Frankl says, along with Isaiah, that hope is necessary for survival, especially in the face of suffering.

That is really hard for us to relate to. No matter the worst of our lives here, it is nothing compared to what happened to the Jews in the Holocaust. Nothing. It's nothing compared to Rwanda or Bosnia or New Orleans and the recent flood. People lost *everything*.

But that's not where we are, and you have and will face suffering of different sorts. Just because it's not a tsunami, it doesn't mean it's not suffering. Your parents shun or drive you. You've been date raped or sexually abused. You failed your class. You have never been on a date. Your girlfriend has broken up with you. You lose a child. Your husband divorces you. Your parents die. You get laid off from the plant.

What will you do when you face suffering? Will you hope for something different? Where will your hope be placed?

If there's always some crazy with an Army or a Knife, wouldn't you be foolish to trust people? Isn't a cynical nature more helpful in this world? All guys are jerks. All men want is sex and to use women. All women are weak. Marriage is for losers. Don't trust anyone but yourself.

Those aren't hopeful statements. What would be and why would that help?

Lasting Hope is Promised and Provided

What we see is that *"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴ He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*

Most everyone wants a mountain home. There's something to being tucked away in the woods, up in the mountains, where you can transcend the earth. It's why, when you're skiing, you want to stop for lunch up on the top of the mountain instead of down at the base.

Mountains, just like in our day, represented height and prominence, and in mythology mountains are the homes of the gods. Mt. Olympus is the home of the Greek gods, of Zeus and of Gaea (mother earth), who gave birth to the Titans. Mt. Cassius is the home of the gods for the Phoenicians. Zaphon is the mountain of the Biblical Canaanites who worshipped Baal (Ps. 95:3-4). Over and over in the Old Testament, you'll read about the "high places," the places in the mountains where the other nations would place their temples and where Israel was always tempted to join in. God hates those high places when they speak of anything else but him. But he will build his house there.

The Lord chose Mt. Zion to make his house, though in the end, the whole earth will be the Lord's mountain home.

When God builds his cabin in the mountains, what will happen? Worship. Worship is to be in the presence of God and the promise is that we will receive *shalom* with God and others, to be right with everything and everyone. In other words, there will be a day when everything will be set right, a day when the means of war, the attitude of war, the practice of war will be ended, a day that will bring back and restore Eden, a day when all is made right, restored. There is a supernatural magnetism, as people from all nations and tribes flow uphill to him, a miraculous idea.

Here are several quotes from the commentators on this idea:

"Isaiah foresees the day when one holy mountain will stand supreme, reducing all others to utter insignificance. In this sense, Isaiah's vision is exclusive. It is also inclusive, however, because it envisages all nations and many peoples coming to Zion to share with Israel in the blessings of the Lord's rule."³

"He is promising a worldwide miracle as the nations, far from being forced, gladly hurry to worship him and learn his ways. They set no preconditions. They are eager and open. The miracle has already begun. It started at Pentecost 2000 years ago (Acts 2), it is going on today through Christian missions, and it will be consummated in the latter days with an overflowing river of conversions to Christ."⁴

"It is a vision of universal peace, described in terms which have reverberated down through the centuries. But Isaiah sees that this peace will become a reality only when the nations are willing to submit to the word that goes forth from Zion, where the

³ Webb, 45

⁴ Orland, 51

one true God has revealed himself. Peace on any other terms is a cruel delusion, a truth we need to bear in mind constantly as we seek to be faithful to God's word in our own, modern world of religious pluralism."⁵

"Though drawn supernaturally, they come voluntarily. Their unanimity in seeking the Lord nullifies nationalism. Something makes them willing to seek The God of Jacob, namely a hunger for revealed truth. They come to learn, to obey, to receive what cannot be had elsewhere and this teaching is nothing less than the actual word of the Lord."⁶

"Those who will not leave their own self-sufficiency and come to God cannot learn his (and their own) ways. But the learning is for the purpose of living. It is not an end in itself (2 Tim. 3:7). Here is one more way in which the scriptural picture of the interlocked partnership of divine and human is displayed. Unless God teaches we cannot walk, but unless we come he cannot teach. There is also the important implication that cultic, or positional, righteousness is worthless unless it is accompanied by realized, actual righteousness."⁷

So what do you think? Do you read this and scoff? I submit that this is promised and radical, but that this hope is substantially being realized right now. It's begun to happen with the advent of the coming Christ. In other words, this is somewhat of a Christmas message. Jesus' birth and entrance into this world began the work of the fulfillment of this hope.

One way that we see this is when we remember that Jesus called himself this temple of God. He says, "I am the temple. I am everything this passage is about. This realized hope begins with my coming."

Why is this? Because, the temple is a shadow pointing to God himself who comes down and tabernacles, dwells as it were, among us. This has always been the case from the very beginning. If you read and study in Exodus for the tabernacle and in the history books of Samuels, Kings and Chronicles for the temple, you'll see that every single thing had a purpose and all of it was to point to God dwelling with his people.

Then in John 4, Jesus says something really amazing to the Samaritan woman he had found by herself at the well. They had been having a heart to heart counseling session about her sexual and marital history, so she, as people are wont to do, changed the subject to a theological one concerning the temple for worship. The Samaritans (who held only the first five books of the Bible as authoritative) had build an alternate temple, which was one of the many reasons the Jews hated them. Jesus tells her, "*Woman, believe, me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the father.... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is a spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*"

Jesus is saying, "You are looking at the temple. I am the very presence of God in this world." Jesus says "It has begun in me – when you are connected to me, you are a part of this in Isaiah 2. It is partial but it is substantial and you are called to be a part of this."

All nations – that is a very inclusive idea.⁸ But they are going to worship One God, to receive his law and teaching, and he is the God of Jacob, a particularized, historical God – that is exclusive.

Is this world-gathering a large enough purpose and hope for you? Are you interested in this at all? Are you wanting to hear God's word, to see his face and to bring others with you on the way?⁹

Look around. People from all sorts of backgrounds, ethnicities, social status, intelligence and gifts are being drawn to Jesus and beginning to say, I think I know who I am. You are starting to say, I have hope and am beginning to taste how that has happened. I'd like to see more and more of this together and in our community.

Lasting Hope Must Be Embodied.

Wilcox, after setting up the tension for hope, the reason not to hope, continues:

*Look, if someone wrote a play just to glorify
What's stronger than hate, would they not arrange the stage
To look as if the hero came too late he's almost in defeat
It's looking like the Evil side will win, so on the Edge
Of every seat, from the moment that the whole thing begins
It is...Love who makes the mortar
And it's love who stacked these stones*

*And it's love who made the stage here
Although it looks like we're alone
In this scene set in shadows
Like the night is here to stay
There is evil cast around us
But it's love that wrote the play...
For in this darkness love can show the way*

⁵ Webb, 45

⁶ Motyer, 51

⁷ Oswalt, 117

⁸ From whence comes peace? From the recognition that God is the source of all good, that our needs and our destiny can be submitted to his judgment, and from the knowledge that he does all things well. Persons who have learned such truths and are walking in them can know shalom, or well-being, and when two persons are walking in this way they can know such shalom together because both can know that their interests are being cared for by God, and both know that the other will submit his or her needs to God rather than to attempt to satisfy them by force. When these principles are extended to nations, world peace can result."Oswalt, 118

⁹ "He first declares that the godly will be filled with such an ardent desire to spread the doctrines of religion that every one not satisfied with his own calling and his personal knowledge will desire to draw others along with him. And indeed nothing could be more inconsistent with the nature of faith than that deadness which would lead a man to disregard his brethren, and to keep the light of knowledge choked up within his own breast. The greater the eminence above others which any man has received from his calling, so much the more diligently ought he to labor to enlighten others.

This points us to the ordinary method of collecting a Church, which is, by the outward voice of men; for though God might bring each person to himself by a secret intelligence, yet he employs the agency of men, that he may awaken in them an anxiety about the salvation of each other. By this method he likewise strengthens their mutual attachment, and puts to the test their willingness to receive instruction, when every one permits himself to be taught by others."Calvin, 94

We skipped over verse 4: ⁴ *He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*

Is this appealing to you? According to White House figures, 368 billion dollars were spent on the United States military in 2003. If we can realize this hope and vision, “All that money and talent and genius and effort will be deployed for life-enriching purposes.”¹⁰ The weapons of war could be transformed into everyday garden tools.

Isn't this way we all want? Peace. Shalom. Goodness. How are we going to get there? Isaiah says that if you want verse four, then you have to have verses 2-3 and 5. Not a shallow or fake or hypocritical religion, but worshiping in spirit and truth. “Isaiah was not blind to present realities. He spoke out against injustice, faithless politics and hypocritical religion with a passion few could match today. But it was this vision of the future which inspired him. Religion for him was never an escape from reality, but the source from which he drew the strength he needed to face it squarely.”¹¹

In verse 5, we read, *O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.* He calls out to those who are believers, who are in the fold to walk in the light of the Lord.

“The poem is rooted in the universalism of the Abrahamic promise (Gen. 12:2-3; 22:16-18) but in its present context Isaiah makes it a challenge to his contemporaries: if the world is ever to say *Come, let us go up* (3), the Lord's people must heed the call *Come... let us walk* (5): the first requirement of evangelism is to have a church that is worth joining.”¹² “We Christians become the prophetic presence in our generation as the nations see their own most deeply desired future in our life together. ‘O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.’ In other words, ‘Let the promises of God have their full impact in us now.’”¹³ Even Wilcox calls us to some sort of a decision:

*So now the stage is set. Feel you own heart beating
In your chest. This life's not over yet.
so we get up on our feet and do our best. We play against the
Fear. We play against the reasons not to try
We're playing for the tears burning in the happy angel's eyes
... For in this darkness love can show the way*

How are we, who have met the true temple, to implement this and flourish? Do you want to be an implement of change in this world, to be used by God? People are going to temples in high places that hurt them, eat them and smash them – Wall Street, Hollywood, Memorial Stadium, the Paris runway, Miss America pageants, Silicon Valley, the Olympics, Washington D.C. – do you want to bring people to *this* temple of peace?

Then walk in the light of the Lord. Jesus said “I am the light of the Lord.”

Walk in the light. Be a people of light. What does this mean? It means obedience to God.

Take seriously that God's direction is for our life and for our good and as we taste it and give over to it, you will be pointing people right up that same hopeful mountain to the same true temple.

Examine yourself. Think. Ask hard questions. Do I really live in light of the reality of the light of God breaking into our world? Are you saying no to things in your life because you have met the true temple, because you love Jesus and for that reason alone? Deceit. Unforgiveness. Slander. Greed.

Is your reality being reordered because of the new hope you have with Jesus? If your hope isn't here where is it? Politics? Really? Education? Really? Grad school? The newest Supreme Court judge? The next tax break? Your job promotion? Marriage? A date for Valentine's Day?

I'm telling you that none of those will satisfy you.

Isaiah 2:22 says, “*Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?*”

That's what Frankl was saying. You have to have a hope bigger than yourself, bigger than mankind even. That's what David Wilcox was saying. You have to believe that it is love that wrote this play even when it seems to the otherwise. That's what Isaiah is saying. You have to see that there is a day coming when the world will be transformed and goodness will reign. Will you live for Christ and be a part of the river flowing to worship him? Will you bring others? Will you believe that as more and more of us do this, that we are beginning to achieve this very vision?

Johnny Cash got saved. He gave up, was at the end of himself and saw who he truly was – an unfaithful, drugged up drunk. That's pretty bad. What saved him? Where did he get hope from? Was it an idea? Was it a special word or book or the promise of fame and fortune or girls? No.

What saved Johnny Cash was a person. June Carter got into his world and showed him that he was worth loving. She did this unconditionally and without any apparent gain at the time. She got herself dirty and continued to sully her unflattering reputation by loving him. But she was Hope to him.

You need not just hope, but you need the God of Hope. He exists in the person of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ Orland, 52

¹¹ Webb, 46

¹² Motyer, 51

¹³ Orland, 52

One more important thing. In *Walk the Line*, Johnny gets sober and wants to sing again. He goes to the record executives and tells them that he wants to record his next record in Folsom Prison. Actually in the prison itself. They don't go for it. They try to talk Johnny out of it, explaining that everyone wants rock and roll to be electric now, not folk any more. He shakes his head and stands firm.

Exasperated, one of the executives tells him, "Your fans are gospel folk, Johnny. They're Christians, and they don't wanna hear you singing to a bunch of murderers and rapists, tryin' to cheer 'em up."

Johnny looks at him and says, "Then they ain't Christians."

He's right. Christians look at the worst of life and don't shrink back. We can face it. We shouldn't be surprised by sin. We believe in total depravity after all, and that doctrine says we're pretty bad. Thankfully, not as bad as we could be, because of God's restraining grace. But, as bad as we are, the gospel is bigger. We believe in a big gospel, one that has worldwide consequences. One that transforms the world. In the midst of all the brokenness of life, that gives us a real hope.

June Carter Cash embodied hope for Johnny. Her presence saved him. But then, as all must, she died on May 15, 2003. Johnny Cash had prayed, sung, wept and stayed by her side. He wasn't well himself. According to his biography, the song his family sang the most often was "Waitin' on the Far Side Banks of Jordan."

*I'll admit my steps are growing wearier each day
Still I've got a certain journey on my mind
Lure of this old world have ceased to make me want to stay
My one regret is leaving you behind*

*If it proves to be His will that I am first to cross
And somehow I've a feeling it will be
When it comes your turn to travel likewise don't feel lost
For I will be the first one you will see*

*And I'll be waiting on the far banks of Jordan
I'll be sitting drawing pictures in the sand
And when I see you coming I will rise up with a shout
And come running through the shallow water reaching for your hand.*

At the funeral of her stepmother, Rosanne Cash said this: "She looked for the best in everyone. It was a way of life for her. If you pointed out that a particular person was perhaps not totally deserving of her love and in fact might be somewhat of a loser, she would say, 'Well, honey, we just have to lift him up.' She was forever lifting people up.

It took a long time for me to understand that what she did when she lifted you up was to mirror the very best part of you back to yourself. She was like a spiritual detective: she saw into all your dark corners and deep recesses, saw your potential and your possible future and the gifts you didn't even know you possessed, and she 'lifted them up' for you to see.

She did it for us, daily, continuously. But her great mission and passion were lifting up my dad. If being a wife were a corporation, June would have been the CEO. It was her most treasured role. She began every day by saying, 'What can I do for *you* John?' Her love filled up every room he was in, lightened every path he walked, and her devotion created a sacred, exhilarating place for them to live out their married life. My daddy has lost his dearest companion, his musical counterpart, his soul-mate and best friend."¹⁴

June Carter Cash had been touched by Jesus, and, though she herself knew brokenness and pain in her own life, she transferred that hope to her husband.

I don't think that Hope is far fetched at all. It's real.

"In his final years, as Cash was gradually stripped of everything – his sight, his mobility, his strength, his looks and, finally, his wife – he became more confident than ever in the object of his faith. 'I think that after June died he was different,' says Kelly Hancock. 'He became even more compassionate towards people. He was kinder. He was more thoughtful. He worried about people. He took everyone in a bit closer and he treasured everyone.'¹⁵

"The realm Johnny Cash lived in was clouded by pain and colored by grace. He had the ability to transform the rough and commonplace into objects fit for heaven, just as he had been transformed."¹⁶

May we be the same.

¹⁴ *The Man Called Cash*, Steve Turner, p 10-11.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 229

¹⁶ *ibid*, 235