

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

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. We are a redeemed community under the authority and leadership of the King, and yet 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 pagan 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.

Justice – 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.

Justice presupposes the Biblical idea of *shalom*. *Shalom* isn't just a 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.

Openness – 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."

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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.

² Plantinga, 10

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."*

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

Sin Interlude –irresponsibility and idolatry

Isaiah interrupts his picture of revival to remind us that the redeemed people aren't perfect. This is important, as we might start to believe our own press. We might begin to think that WE are the ones who are great. That WE are the ones doing all this good. That God wouldn't be able to really get anything done without us around.

Ha. God reminds us that not all is fixed quite yet. The church's leaders are too often like blind watchmen. Blindness may be the worst quality a watchman could have. It renders him unqualified. But he can still stand there and pretend. There is selfishness and sin among God's people that still needs to be dealt with.

In addition, his people still follow idols, which God likens to sex with a prostitute. It breaks the marriage covenant in the most heinous of ways. God sees it all, and is sad. He asks, why do you go after such things. Do you think they will save you?

The application for us is to remember that we are sinners saved by God. We are never too good to sin. We must always be on guard, repenting early and often before our God. We should pray for our leaders that they would be wise, not foolish, shepherds. We should keep ourselves from idols, purging them from our beds.

Comfort – 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? Then come to Christ alone for comfort.

If you do not come to him, then you will not receive peace at all. There is no peace for the wicked.

Integrity – fasting and Sabbath keeping

Isaiah next tells us about integrity by using the negative example of falsifying following God.

Isaiah 58:1-4 "Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. 3 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

What God longs for is an integrity of the heart and life. That the inside and the outside would match – in righteousness. This is never a perfect balance of course, for maintaining the match is difficult. There are times I don't want to go to church, but I do anyway. There are times when I want to, but am prevented from doing so. We don't wait around for the perfect integrity, but we allow one side of our emotions/actions to lead and then call the other side to follow.

Recognizing this tension, this dance of emotions and actions is paramount. What we must not do is ignore it and think that merely our deeds will be counted as righteousness before God. This is dangerous, and this is what Isaiah attacks here.

Fasting is a good thing. We don't do it enough in our circles. It reminds us that we are not dependant on our bodies alone for food, that we can discipline our bodies and have mastery over them, and that when we are hungry we are to think of our spiritual food and hunger as superceding our physical food and hunger. We would do well to fast more.

Sabbath keeping we've discussed already. It is an act of faith to believe that not working is more beneficial to us than working. A real part of faith is resting, which Sabbath pictures for us. When we stop striving on the Sabbath and rest, we show our faith in God.

Ah, but we can also show our faith in works. If I can fast enough, or keep the Sabbath enough... or – share the gospel more, or read the Bible more or go to church every week, or memorize Philippians, or stop cussing or – whatever, then God will love me and I'll be a good person and acceptable.

God says, Stop it! You see, their fasting was for them. He says an acceptable fast should be for others. Following God isn't a way for us to gain happiness. It's a way for us to die. Fasting should (from 58:6-7): *loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the straps of the yoke, let the oppressed go free and break every yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house, to clothe the naked, to hide yourself from your own flesh.*

That sounds an awful lot like what Jesus said true righteousness will look like. Matthew 25: 34 *Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'* 37 *Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'* 40 *And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'*

Julie and I are reading a book to our kids called *Tales of the Kingdom*, which continues Christian allegories. We recently read a story 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. 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.

We must not hide behind our piety and self-righteousness, but we must go out in love and peace to share and break down injustice wherever we find it.

Sin Interlude – evil and oppression

Isaiah again interrupts his revival talk to remind us that there is such a thing as false revival and also that we should remember that the kingdom is not yet all here.

We need to remember this because if we don't hear it, then we get so easily discouraged. We swerve between hopelessness and wild, fantastical hope. But real hope takes into account that sin has marred our world. We cannot forget that. We cannot be surprised by sin. When you interact with people, when you really get to know them, you will hear crazy stories. Stories that will break your heart. Don't cut those people off. Be sad. Cry. Hurt with them.

When we are in these stories, whether they are our own or someone else's we growl like bears, we moan like doves, we grope along the wall like the blind, we stumble at noon as in the twilight.

Friends, you will feel this way. There are dark days ahead. Do not believe the liars that tell you that if you only had more faith than you will never experience this. We live in a broken, fallen world and bad stuff happens in it. Physically, mentally, socially, economically – in every arena. You will feel that justice is far from you, that righteousness is long gone, that light is darkness. But it isn't true. Hold tight to the promises of God on your behalf. Pray them for yourself. Cling to them as they are your hope and your salvation.

Evil is real. Oppressors surround us and it looks like they will win. But they won't! God will set things right! All will be restored one day, even though it doesn't look like it right now. He will repay according to their deeds. He will come down in righteousness as a warrior and judge the oppressors, the wicked, and all will be right again. Hallelujah.

Glory – 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.

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.

You 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 – 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.

Grace – 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 gets your shame. You get a double portion. 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.

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. 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."*

It's interesting that he used this, because he 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 the year of jubilee was upon the people. Now, 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, and he talked about two other things, both wrapped together. He talked about the openness of God and the lack of integrity of the church. 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 live 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.

Will you be filled with wrath? Will you marvel but not be changed?
Or will you give over and thus receive the double portion?