

## Our God Saves: Live

Hope for Dark Days

Isaiah 59

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*Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness. No one enters suit justly; no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity. They hatch adders' eggs; they weave the spider's web; he who eats their eggs dies, and from one that is crushed a viper is hatched. Their webs will not serve as clothing; men will not cover themselves with what they make. Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace (Isa. 59:1-8, ESV).*

Would you recognize the meaning of ...\_ \_ \_...?

If you heard it, some of you might simply think that someone was at the door. Or you might wonder why someone is making that annoying tapping sound. But if you know Morse code, you'd recognize the distinct pattern of three short taps, three long taps, followed by three short taps. It stands for SOS.

In 2020 three men were rescued from a deserted island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean after they scrawled out the three letters on the beach. It was the signal that allowed rescuers to find their location after they went missing. SOS saved their lives.

SOS is the universally recognized distress signal, but do you know what it means? Why the letters SOS? Historians suggest that it represents "Save Our Ship" or "Save Our Souls." You could compare it to the term "mayday," which comes from a French word *m'aider*, which means "help me."

Both SOS and mayday are used in moments of desperation. They are symbols of helplessness.

The 59<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah is a spiritual "mayday" text. It's an SOS call for help. But the problem is not being deserted on an island; it's the problem of depravity. Isaiah highlights the extent of sinful corruption in the world, and he points the people of Israel to God as their only hope of deliverance and rescue.

Remember, the theme of the entire book of Isaiah is Our God Saves. And now in the 59<sup>th</sup> chapter, we see this theme once again.

The message of this chapter is that when the days seem dark, don't forget: **God can do what we cannot do.** Let me invite you to make this personal: "God can do what I cannot do."

Can you think with me about the last time you made that statement? Perhaps you can remember a crisis in your life or something that seemed impossible or a situation where you felt absolutely helpless. But God intervened. One of the joys of a deep prayer life is seeing the way that God specifically marshals the resources of heaven to help us.

If you are a Christian, I want to remind you that your relationship with Jesus began as you came to embrace your helplessness. It sounds like this in Ephesians:

*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Eph. 2:4-5).*

Now, it's important to understand that our helplessness is directly connected to the presence of sin in us and in the world. And this text is designed to turn us to God for help by putting a spotlight on our helplessness.

It may be that you are here today feeling helpless. This text will be a great reminder that God can do what you cannot do. Others of you, if you are honest, may not have considered your helplessness or vulnerability lately. This text will be a good reminder. Still more may feel deeply weary because of the brokenness of the world. This text will give you a way to think about a world deeply corrupted by sin.

## **Four Considerations About Helplessness**

### **1. Helplessness Identified (vv. 1-2)**

This chapter begins with an important summary statement. The first two verses highlight the nature of the problem that the people of God face. They are helpless for a reason. Isaiah identifies the issue clearly. That's why he uses the word "behold." There's a significant statement to follow.

First, he tells them what isn't the problem. The issue isn't because of some shortcoming of God. The issue isn't that their plight is due to a lack of power or compassion on God's part.

Verse 1 makes two statements about God:

- His hand is not shortened that it cannot save.
- His ear is not dull that it cannot hear.

These human-oriented descriptions are designed to push back against two common objections when hardship comes: (1) God can't help me and (2) God doesn't listen to me. Isaiah says that there's never a time when you are out of God's reach. You're never in a place where the Lord doesn't hear you.

The problem isn't God—either his strength or his compassion.

The issue is clearly identified in the second half of verse 2. Our distance from God is directly related to our sins. The word “separation” means that there's a barrier between us and God. Since God is holy, our rebellion creates a problem—both individually and collectively.

It's important for us to see the two dynamics in play. Sin is a personal issue. We sin individually. We're guilty of dishonesty, greed, lust, anger, covetousness, self-centeredness, and many other sins. In Galatians 5, Paul warns that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:21). But sin is also collective. When Adam sinned, the entire human race fell. Romans 3, a text we will see again in this sermon, highlights the individual and collective nature of sin:

*What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips” (Rom. 3:9-13).*

This is an essential starting point to understand humanity, relationships, society, and culture. The problem in the world isn't God's inability to change things. Nor is the problem his compassion. The problem is the presence of sin. And it makes humanity in desperate need of help.

As we start our study of Isaiah 59, it is good to be reminded that underneath the challenges in our culture and the brokenness in our lives is the issue of sin. It is what's wrong with the world, and it is what's wrong with us.

Charles Spurgeon said:

“Man, as he is, before he receives the grace of God, loves anything and everything but spiritual things! If you need proof of this, look around you. There needs be no monument to the depravity of the human affections. Cast your eyes everywhere—there is not a street, nor a house, no, nor a heart which does not bear upon it sad evidence of this dreadful truth! We love that which we ought to hate, and we hate that which we ought to love! It is but human nature, fallen human nature—that man should love this present life better than the life to come. It is but the effect of the Fall that man should love sin better than righteousness and the ways of this world better than the ways of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the mercy and grace of God, we are absolutely helpless.

## **2. Helplessness Described (vv. 3-8)**

Isaiah puts some additional color on this helplessness with six descriptions. He provides numerous examples so that we can fully understand the depth of the problem. This is important because our

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.spurgeongems.org/tulip-bf1.pdf>

natural tendency is to minimize the extent of our helplessness. We're prone to down-playing our need for God's help.

You might think of this as how you approach getting sick or getting lost. For some of us, it takes a while (too long) to admit that we need to see a doctor or ask someone else to navigate. Isaiah adds some specificity to be sure that we don't keep this at a distance:

1. **Actions (v. 3a)** – Isaiah links their hand and fingers to sinful actions. Commentator Gary Smith says: This imagery could represent actual involvement in violent crimes against another person, or it could refer to people who facilitated the demise of others (indirect involvement).<sup>2</sup>
2. **Words (v. 3b)** – they were guilty of sinful speech as well. Their words were marked by lies and “muttering wickedness,” a term for malicious words designed to injure people.
3. **Legal system (v. 4)** – the collective sinfulness affected how they resolved conflicts in the courts. They used the “system” against one another and to take advantage of people. There were frivolous lawsuits, false testimony, and schemes designed to benefit themselves.<sup>3</sup>
4. **Accomplishments (vv. 5-6)** – attempts to do things that are productive only prove to be dangerous or pointless. They hatch the eggs of poisonous snakes and weave webs of iniquity. The best attempts prove to be destructive. One example of this is social media and content algorithms. Something originally created to connect people together is today driving some people even further apart. Human advancement is always tainted by our sinfulness.
5. **Motivations (v. 7)** – Not only are human beings sinful, but we are quick and creative. We're proficient and effective sinners. Verse 7 describes us as running to evil, swift to shed innocent blood, regularly thinking about iniquity, and our ways of life lead to a pattern of destruction. For those of you who know the book of Romans, this verse might sound familiar. Paul quotes it in Romans 3:15-17: “*Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known*” (Romans 3:15-17). Isaiah 59 was relevant in the eighth century. It was relevant in the first century. And it is relevant in the twenty-first century. Humanity hasn't changed.
6. **Conflicts (v. 8)** – Our sinfulness leads to a consistent lack of peace. Conflict rules the day. Whether it's personal relationships, between communities/political parties, or between nations, everything human beings touch is marked by consistent conflict.

It's quite a list! And it might be really depressing if our only hope in life was our ability to change the world. It might also be really discouraging if you believe that it's up to you to make other people better. It can be downright debilitating if you want there to be peace and justice if you think it's up to you.

Now, this doesn't mean that you shouldn't be a godly person, do what's right, try to live at peace with people, and love your neighbor. But the starting point is really important! We start from a position that

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Smith, [Isaiah 40-66](#), vol. 15B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2009), 590.

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human beings are totally depraved. This means that we take our sinfulness with us everywhere we go. It's a miracle that anything good happens, and it's only because of the grace of God.

The other reason Isaiah wrote this is because we need regular reminders of how spiritually helpless we really are. Our tendency is to minimize our sinfulness. Through comparison with others or our blind arrogance, we can convince ourselves that we're not all that helpless—that things aren't that bad.

When that happens, we not only don't have a realistic picture of who we are, but we also cut ourselves off from the help we so desperately need.

### **3. Helplessness Mourned (vv. 9-13)**

After the sobering description, the text shifts toward a personal response. Isaiah imagines the people of God responding in some way. That's why there's a shift from "they" to "we." Isaiah's description has resulted in its intended effect. The people are mourning. They're heart-broken over the presence of sin in the world and in them.

Notice the emotionally oriented language.

**They feel lost (vv. 9-10).** Their condition seems hopeless. They say "justice is far from us...righteousness does not overtake us." Their society doesn't reflect the heart of God, and it's deeply distressing. They longed for light but only embraced darkness. They looked for brightness but only received gloom.

Isaiah describes their spiritual condition like those who grope for the wall or those who stumble in the dark. But they are stumbling in the daylight. They are more dead than alive. It's a dark picture, and they are taking a careful look in the mirror.

**They are grieved (v. 11).** Isaiah uses vivid imagery to paint this picture. The condition of the world and their own hearts creates grief. They growl like bears and moan like doves because of the consequences of sin. We're not sure if they are truly repentant. But they certainly are experiencing deep sorrow. Justice and salvation seem very far away.

**They are overwhelmed (vv. 12-13).** Isaiah shifts to a courtroom metaphor. He identifies the overwhelming failure of God's people. Transgressions are multiplied. Their sins testify against them. They are aware of their iniquities, denial of the Lord, their backsliding, oppression, rebellion, and their deceptive practices.

This section in Isaiah 59 is striking because of its emotional connection to the helplessness created by sin. Ray Ortlund sees parallels to this text and the historic pattern of revival. He says:

“Revival thrives amid an honest reappraisal of ourselves and our weaknesses. And we can risk honesty with him because of the cross of Christ, where his sacrifice absorbs our guilt. God has relocated us in his favor. It’s safe now to get real with him.”<sup>4</sup>

To be a Christian means that we mourn over sin—both ours and the world’s. We don’t hold the brokenness of the world at a distance and become pharisaical. We’ve come to understand our hopelessness apart from God’s help. We see our collective rebellion as something to bring close and not push away. We find ourselves saying, “The world is broken. I’m broken. Our world needs help. I need help.”

Do you mourn the presence of sin both in yourself and in the world? Did you find yourself becoming a bit “judgy” last week? Are you starting to look down your nose at people? Or do you have a perspective informed by your understanding of how much mercy you’ve needed?

#### **4. Helplessness Resolved (vv. 14-21)**

Our text ends with the resolution of the problem of our collective hopelessness. Isaiah 59 doesn’t leave us in a position where this issue is left open-ended. The prophet helps God’s people to see that being helpless doesn’t mean hopeless. Rather, it means that we need to look again to God for our deliverance.

Once again Isaiah summarizes the problem. In verses 14-15 we find that justice, righteousness, truth, and uprightness do not characterize their culture. Notice that truth is lacking, and those who do what is right are attacked. So, what now?

God himself is going to resolve this. More specifically, a redeemer is needed.

The hope of this text is that God is going to be the one to intervene and bring true, divine justice. No one else can help! That’s the point of verse 16. No human is able to intercede. God does it! “Then his own arm brought him salvation and his righteousness upheld him.”

He’s going to come with power and justice. Verses 17-19 highlight his character and his ability to make things right.

And then there’s a glorious hint at how this is going to happen. Our chapter resolves in verses 20-21 with a promised redeemer and the presence of the Spirit. Isaiah promises that there will be someone who will rescue God’s people as they turn from their transgressions. And he promises the presence of the Spirit that will put God’s words in the mouths of God’s people, in their children, and in their grandchildren. Verse 21 promises an eternal completion of this divine intervention.

God will rescue helpless people. He will do what they cannot do. Through the provision of a redeemer and the provision of the Spirit of God, the people of God will receive the help they so desperately need.

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [\*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners\*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 394.

And in the New Testament we see how Jesus becomes our redeemer and how the Spirit comes to empower God's people. God helps the spiritually helpless.

Do you see what this text does? It doesn't just identify our helplessness. It celebrates it! Isaiah 59 shows us that **God can do what we cannot do**. Or if we make this personal: God can do what I cannot do.

Let me ask you a few questions:

- If you are not yet a Christian, does this make sense to you? Do you see that the problem in the world is also the problem within you? This is the foundation of what Christianity is all about. We needed a redemption that we couldn't provide. Jesus made forgiveness possible by his death. Perhaps God is calling you to turn to Jesus today. He can help you.
- If you are a Christian, notice how helplessness is celebrated in this text? Christians are a people who rejoice in our inability. I just want to remind you that embracing your helplessness is how the Christian life is lived. Freedom doesn't come from you figuring it out. It comes from God pulling you out.
- Are you in a position of helplessness today? This text invites you, Christian, to put your trust in God's ability to help you. He can do what you cannot do.

If you are on a deserted island and you have no ability to rescue yourself, no one will shame you for waving your arms and shouting for help when you think you see a rescue plane. It's what you need to do because of your helpless condition.

Isaiah 59 reminds us that God can do what we cannot do. So, ask him. Call upon him to rescue you.

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