

Mighty to Save

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- [0 : 0 0] Thank you, Esther, for reading. If you're here in the building, there's an outline inside the notice sheet, so you can see where we're going as we look at this together.
- If you're at home, please do keep your Bible open at Isaiah 59 as we look at that chapter together with the first six verses of chapter 63. And let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word.
- Let's pray. Heavenly Father, your word speaks to us with clarity that we find very challenging about the way the world really is and what you will do about it.
- May you give us ears to hear your message, heads that can understand and hearts willing to respond rightly. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.
- I put on the sheet there a world of worry. I heard an American journalist say this week, he feels like the whole of America has gone into a panic attack.
- [1 : 0 3] And we could say the same for Scotland, that anxiety is a very hot topic. I don't mean anxiety as a medically diagnosable condition. I just mean the kind of general level of anxiety that any of us might feel at any time.
- And the thing is, it's hard to measure these things, but people are saying that we seem to worry more than we used to. Now we might think that's because there are plenty of things to worry about. The Indian variant being one of them.
- The Gaza Strip. Lockdowns. But people are saying that even without the pandemic, we're more anxious today than people were during the Second World War and during the Cold War and during the financial crisis in 2008.
- So why do we seem to get more anxious today about situations than we might have done a generation ago? One big factor is a decline in belief in God, that fewer people believe in God.
- And it leads to two things that heighten our anxiety. One is that we think this life is all there is. So if you think this life is all there is, all your bets are on this life.
- [2 : 1 2] And if things are not going well, that heightens your anxiety about it. But the bigger problem is that when we lose belief in there being a powerful God in control, it makes us more anxious when we see things going wrong.
- For there's no one to turn to, no one powerful to put things right, no real confidence that things will work out well in the end. No one has got the whole world in his hands.
- So when we have an election result we're not happy with or a referendum result we're not happy with, we see this kind of visceral fury because there's a sense of underlying panic or deep anxiety that no one is in control when we feel things are not going in the right direction.
- So what does God say? Well, we're in this sermon series in Isaiah and the first hearers were not so different to us. They're living before Jesus came. They're living around the 6th century BC.

They're living around Jerusalem. They trust God and he's called them to live a life that displays his character, his goodness, his love, his righteousness to the world so that people would see his people, God's people, and through their lives be drawn in to know the living God.

[3 : 28] That was the vision. But we see in Isaiah's words this morning that they're failing to do that. And so God speaks very condemningly about the whole world's behavior without God.

And as the world is described then here, it shows us what God sees when he looks at our world really in any generation. So our first point is there is blood on their hands.

The Lord looks at humanity and he sees our whole bodies tainted by wrongdoing. So look at verse 3 and the language is your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt, then it's lips, your lips have spoken falsely, your tongue mutters wicked things.

If you look down at verse 7, he says their feet rush into sin, they're swift to shed innocent blood. This is describing how humanity treats each other without God and when God gives up on them.

Now immediately there is a little bit of dissonance when we hear that verdict because we see people all around the world who don't know the living God and don't acknowledge God but do wonderful things, kind things, loving things.

[4 : 38] The Bible does have a big place for that. The Bible talks about how everyone is made in God's image and that God restrains our evil desires and Christians use this term common grace to talk about the kindness of God to all of mankind who he's made.

Common grace. That people are capable of great acts of love that reflect God's character, his generosity. But in these verses, what we're hearing is God's verdict on the world when it ultimately stands against him and turns its back on him.

So look at verse 4 and he says, no one calls for justice. No one pleads a case with integrity. And we've thought in recent weeks about how that Bible word justice isn't just about courts being fair.

It's about people living in such an other person-centered way with such generosity and concern and mercy for others and care that we don't need law courts because everyone is flourishing and everyone is marked by this other person-centered love.

That's God's desire. That's his way for humanity to live. That's his path to flourishing. So that in verse 8, he looks at us not living that way and says, the way of peace, his path, they do not know.

[6 : 00] There is no justice in their paths. They've turned them into crooked roads. No one who walks along them will know peace. And I think one of the problems we have feeling the weight of this is that because of God's kindness, lots of us in a place like Glasgow can live very sheltered lives from the way the world really is.

Obviously, there's places in Glasgow you can't do that. And some of you will feel you're unable to do that. But some of us find this verdict jarring because we are able to live in a relatively sheltered environment.

And that's because our culture is still enjoying the benefits of a Christian worldview. That this was the land of the book. That God's values are still reflected in people's values in our world even when it's not acknowledged.

At the same time, we're called here to recognize that this is what things are really like in our world when we reject God. This is what God says it's like without him.

And we do see that around the world. If you think about children being trafficked to be exploited or countries in Africa where people bear the scars of civil war, the conflict in Sierra Leone that left children with hands cut off because people had gone into their villages and dismembered them.

[7 : 24] Americans saying that the race divides in America now are worse than they've been for generations. Very pessimistic. Russian agents coming to the UK to poison people. Or maybe we think about the UK and the Everyone's Invited campaign that's been going on in recent weeks where we're finding this cascade of people declaring on the Everyone's Invited website that they were harmed by sexual violence in their school or in their university and it was normalized.

It was part of the culture. In verse 5, God describes it as like having viper's eggs. If you've got a viper's egg, you are quite stuck because you can't eat it or you get poisoned.

If you break it, there's a viper. He describes it in verse 6 as like trying to take cobwebs and use them for clothing. This is trying to build your society on a foundation that's not the living God.

And the positive feeling, the positive of feeling anxious when we look at the world is there is something right about feeling concern and helplessness, knowing we can't fix the problems ourselves.

So when, I remember when Barack Obama was elected president, he had this, he rolled this tidal wave of optimism, progressive liberal optimism. And he used this language of, if you disagreed with Barack Obama and his liberal values, you were on the wrong side of history.

[8 : 56] It was a very telling phrase. You see what he's saying? The future is going my way and they'll look back at you who disagree with me and say you were on the wrong side of history. But history itself says that that kind of optimism in human progress is really naive.

So at the turn of the 20th century, lots of people in the West were optimistic like that about human progress. And by midway through the 20th century, they were devastated as they saw the two world wars and were so disillusioned by the way that humanity turns in on itself and we harm each other.

So that's the first thing Isaiah teaches us this morning. There is blood on their hands when God looks at the world. And the turning point comes in verse 9. So our second point is this.

We are part of the problem. There seems to be two ways we might respond to the state of the world in the passage. One is to say, it's God's fault.

Either it's God's fault or there is no God for things to be this bad. Another way to respond is to admit it's our fault. And you can see people saying it's God's fault behind what Isaiah said at the beginning in verse 1.

[10 : 10] They're saying that the arm of the Lord must be too short to save us. God's ears don't hear us. Do you see what's going on there? People looking at the world thinking, well we see that today, don't we?

People seeing the world in a mess and saying there can't be a God. Because if there was a good God, He would solve the problems of the world. So there can't be a God. Or God isn't good.

Or God can't hear us. But actually, the truth is, if we hear God speak about it here, verse 1, His arm is not too short to save. His ear is not too dull to hear.

So what's the problem? Verse 2, we've got a problem with God. Verse 2, your iniquities have separated you from your God. Your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear.

We're meant to look at the state of the world and think, for God to have handed us over like this, we must have a problem with God and we're to turn back to Him. So we see the change in verse 9 in attitude among the faithful people of God.

[11 : 16] You can see that in verses 1 to 8, it's them. From verse 9 onwards, it's us. It's not them and us anymore. They acknowledge their own involvement. So you look at verse 7, it's about their feet, their swift to shed blood, they pursue evil schemes.

Then look at verse 9, it's us. Justice is far from us. Righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness. For brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.

There's the anxiety in verse 11. We all growl like bears. We moan mournfully like doves. We look for justice, but find none. For deliverance, but it's far away.

And then verse 12 is key here. Look at the confession. Verse 12, for our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us.

Our offenses are ever with us and we acknowledge our iniquities. It's so easy to get self-righteous, isn't it, when we look at the world?

[12 : 16] Especially, actually, if we're religious. Because sometimes people think, well, that divides me off and I can say, well, at least I'm not like them. The hard truth is that we can't divide the world into good people and bad people because, as Solzhenitsyn said, the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

And so it's why religion can't be the answer to putting the world right because you can go to church every week and get baptized and have communion and it doesn't mend our hearts and it doesn't do enough that we would actually genuinely live the lives of other person-centered love that really would change the world.

And so we, you know, we need to be willing to admit there's an appropriate humility in these verses of saying, I can't fix this. If you put me and the world put right, I would spoil it the way I am.

That's the model response we see in these verses. The model response for how any of us should react when we hold up our lives against the benchmark, the yardstick, of God's moral perfection, His will, His commands so that we turn to Him and say, the world is in a terrible state and I'm anxious about that but I realize that I'm part of the problem.

And if the Bible were to end there and Isaiah was to end at verse 13 of chapter 59, then there wouldn't be any hope.

[13 : 46] There'd be truth and despair. But that brings us to our third point. So we've seen there's blood on their hands. We're part of the problem. And then our third point, meet the divine warrior.

God's response starts in verse 15, just where there's that paragraph break there, halfway through. The Lord looked and was displeased that there was no justice.

He saw that there was no one. He was appalled that there was no one to intervene. So his own arm achieved salvation for him and his own righteousness sustained him.

Now it's written in the past. It's sometimes called the prophetic past. What's happening here is that it's so certain, the future, that it's written as though it's in the past. But it's still a promise.

We're waiting to be fulfilled. And the arm of the Lord, if you're reading Isaiah through and you get to this bit and it talks about the arm of the Lord, it rings a bell for us because God's arm was described for us in chapter 53 as a suffering servant he would send into the world, the Messiah.

[14 : 58] But here, the arm of the Lord looks very different. There are two portraits of this Messiah in this section of Isaiah. and because of the way he structures it, there's the first one is this bit in chapter 59 from midway through verse 15 to the end of the chapter.

And then he describes him in a new portrait in chapter 63. That's why you've got that printed there as well. Verses 1 to 6. It's a parallel passage about the same man.

And together they give us a picture of how God is going to save the world through one man. And he answers three questions for us. Who is he? What does he do? And why does he do it?

So first, who is he? You see, that's the question that's asked in chapter 63 verse 1. Who is this coming from Eden? From Bosra with his garments stained crimson.

Eden was a nation next to Israel but this is symbolic language. It doesn't literally mean Eden. It's that Eden was the epitome of the world taking its stand against God.

[16:11] And so we're to picture a man returning from there. And how is he dressed? Verse 1. Who is this robed in splendor striding forward in the greatness of his strength?

He's magnificent. He walks into the room and you think, at last, here is a man I can put my hope in and he'll never let me down. And then he speaks, it is I proclaiming victory mighty to save.

God sends the divine warrior because he can put things right in God's world. So what does he do? Well, back in chapter 59 we get introduced to his work and what we see is that God's deliverance of our world, his salvation of the world and his judgment of the world run together.

It's judgment day because it's salvation day. Just have a look at verse 17. He put on righteousness as his breastplate and the helmet of salvation on his head.

He put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak. According to what they have done, so will he repay the wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes.

[17:34] He will repay the islands their due. And then chapter 63 gives us a picture of that same work of God and it is an awesome and horrible picture.

So in verse 2 if you have a look, he's asked as he approaches this magnificent warrior, why are your garments red like those of one treading the winepress? Now there's a play on words here because Bosra, where he's come from in verse 1, means vintage.

It was probably a town or an area known for its wine. And so it takes up that image, verse 3. He says, I've trodden the winepress alone from the nations no one was with me.

I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath. Their blood spattered my garments and I stained all my clothing. Folks, I know this is difficult for lots of us that God promises that Jesus will return, the return of Christ and he's not going to come as gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

He'll come to win a great victory for goodness and truth and he'll do that as a mighty warrior who defeats his enemies. Now we know from Jesus' teaching and from the New Testament that principally the enemies of God are spiritual.

[18:56] That actually our world, there are spiritual forces at work in our world and that there's a prince of this world, the devil, who takes people captive and that Jesus, the mighty warrior, will come and he will put an end to evil.

But where we're not aligned with Jesus and his kingdom, these are grave warnings for us and I know these are very difficult images but this is the victory that our world needs.

It's described here as a day of vengeance but God's vengeance is not a sudden outburst of rage. It's not Denzel Washington in The Equalizer.

I don't know whether you've seen that film but basically in that film there's injustice happening all around, people doing bad stuff and getting away with it and Denzel Washington just plays this guy who in his fury just beats people to smithereens.

And interestingly, I mean when you watch the film, I'm not saying you should watch it but you're meant to be on his side because there is something in us that deeply longs for justice but God's vengeance is not like that.

[20 : 02] It's not rage. Justice is putting things right. Vengeance is when things are put right by the victim or by someone closely aligned to the victim and this is what God is like that he closely aligns himself to victims in our world so that when he brings his justice it's vengeance because it comes from the one who has been harmed by our wrongdoing.

Ultimately, wrong behavior is against him and it's worth saying it's not the heart of God's work. The heart of God's work is to save people otherwise he would have given up already.

God longs to redeem people and he takes no pleasure from people dying without turning to him. We see that contrast here in verse 4 in the passage chapter 63.

Look at the contrast in time. He says, it was for me the day of vengeance the year for me to redeem had come. You see that? See what he's saying? God is a God of redemption.

The year of redemption. So he has to bring justice the day of his vengeance. He sends his divine warrior so that he can redeem everyone who trusts him.

[21 : 19] So what about our third question? Why does he do it? He does it because no one else can. So have a look at verse 5. He says, I looked but there was no one to help.

I was appalled that no one gave support. So my own arm achieved salvation for me and my own wrath sustained me. Now almost exactly the same verse is in chapter 59 in verse 16.

Do you see it there? As he looks and there's no one and he's appalled that there's no one to intervene. But at the end of the verse he changes one word. He says, his own arm achieved salvation for him and his own righteousness sustained him.

So in verse 16, it's his righteousness that sustains him. In verse 5, it's his wrath that sustains him.

God's wrath is an expression of his righteousness. The way that people treat each other in our world, for God not to feel controlled, settled hostility against that, to be angry at that, would be for him not to be righteous.

[22 : 37] And the message of these verses is that God acts because no one else has the power to put things right. So this is the gospel according to Isaiah and it changes us.

He gives us three big portraits of the real Jesus in the book of Isaiah. He's speaking 700 years before Jesus came. And in the first 39 chapters, we meet a Messiah who's coming, who is the shepherd king, who comes in the line of David, to rule with peace and righteousness.

And then in chapters 40 to 55, we meet the same Messiah as a suffering servant who is pierced for our sins, for our transgressions, whose God places his punishment on him for our sin and it brings us peace.

And then here in this last section of Isaiah, we meet him, the same Jesus, on his returning glory, as the mighty, victorious, divine warrior who comes in from the battle against evil and says, it is I proclaiming victory, mighty to save.

This is Ridley Scott's gladiator taking on the tyrant Roman emperor because no one else can. Or it's Skywalker taking down the empire in a galaxy far away.

[23 : 53] Or it's Aragorn the king riding in when everything seems lost on Middle Earth. It's why we love those stories because the Bible says it's the story of our world.

That God is the one who can put it right and he will send his divine warrior so that he can crush evil forever and tell the people who were waiting for him, it's done.

And any of us can be part of that hope for a new future so that we're ready for his return. You just turn to Jesus and you meet him as your saving, suffering servant who died in your place out of love for you and you do that today before you meet him as the victorious divine warrior so that you can be in his kingdom now and waiting for that kingdom fully and finally to come.

And for the people who are waiting for him, he is the great redeemer. So at the end of chapter 59 we get this promise, verse 20, the redeemer will come to Zion to those in Jacob who repent of their sins and then a promise to him, verse 21, this is my covenant with them, my spirit who is on you, the Lord says to his servant, my spirit who is on you will not depart from you and my words that I've put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants from this time on and forever.

In other words, God will always have a people until Jesus comes again. No matter how bad the world seems, there'll be a people waiting, trusting his words.

[25 : 35] And if we struggle to trust in this God and his divine warrior, let's hold this picture of him next to the one we heard of in Isaiah 53. That this same warrior who will judge the world described here with garments stained with his enemies' blood came first time to be stained with his own blood because he came not to bring judgment but to bear judgment for us so that he could stand between us and the righteous wrath of God and redeem us.

So Isaiah says, see the world in a terrible state, there is blood on their hands, but admit you're part of the problem, don't be self-righteous about it, turn to God and confess the ways you've not lived a life of other person-centered love and then take your anxiety about the world and cast it on the Lord so that we look for the coming of the real Jesus because he will come and he'll come like a roaring lion in magnificent splendor to do what no one else can and he'll put right every injustice and he'll establish a world of righteousness and peace that our hearts yearn for.

So that instead of hand-wringing anxiety when things go wrong in the world, the cry of his people is, come Lord Jesus, come soon. You might have questions about that, do send them in, we'll have a quick Q&A; and we can talk more and do talk to friends about this.

But let's pray together, let's have a moment of quiet and then I'll lead us in a prayer. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. We praise you, Lord Jesus Christ, now risen and ascended, that God's promises find their fulfillment in you.

We look with helplessness at the state of our world from our own lives and all the sadness and harm and bullying and abuse that we see to our own city and then on to global conflict and the greed and war and evil we see around our world.

[27 : 56] And we acknowledge that we ourselves are part of that story of human failure, that our sins are many in your sight. but we thank you that you are mighty to save.

We thank you that these promises are for us as good news, that your day of justice will come and it will bring your year of redemption. And so we pray, come soon, Lord Jesus, and when you come would you find us trusting you for our forgiveness and waiting in faith for you.

We ask for the sake of your name. Amen.