

## Lesson 39 Isaiah 59:1-21 The Conqueror Comes

### Introduction

Where are we in the Book of the Conqueror? Isaiah 59 overlaps our first major section and second major section of the book. The Book of the Conqueror covers chapters 56-66. There are two key structural features. First, the beginning and ending of the book depict the inclusion of Gentiles. Second, there is a parallel reference to the coming conqueror on either side of the book's center. One of those references occurs at the end of our present chapter, chapter 59. The other occurs at the beginning of chapter 63.

Following Motyer's structure, those two references to the coming conqueror make up the beginning and end of the book's middle section. That means our first section ends half way through chapter 59, and the middle section starts half way through chapter 59. We are going to do the whole chapter in this lesson, so that we can see how the condemnation of sin in Judah transitions into the vision of the coming conqueror.

The first major section of the Book of the Conqueror has contrasted the ideal vision of God's people with the actual reality of Judah in Isaiah's present context. We've seen two kinds of idolatry. The idolatry on the left, that embraces the progressive, multitude of pagan gods espoused by the nations surrounding Judah; and the idolatry on the right, that maintains conservative forms of worship while treating God as a force that can be manipulated through prayer and fasting.

Chapter 58 described the kind of fast that pleases God, the putting aside of time and money to feed to poor, shelter the homeless. Good works are not a more positive way to manipulate what we want out of God. The chapter ended with a realignment of desires. Religion is not about asserting our agenda. True religion is submission to right relationship with God, where we acknowledge His desires, His agenda, His glory as central. We want to bring our desires into line with His.

That is true religion. The people of Judah are far from this desired spiritual state. They are after personal well-being; the fulfillment of their own desires; their own agenda, whatever it takes, whether it's pagan idolatry or hypocritical Yahweh worship. In chapter 59:1-13 Isaiah lifts the veil from the sinful human heart. We are all separated from right relationship with God. There is no hope to be found in human society, and so God arms Himself for justice. He girds himself to bring salvation. That's going to be the vision of 59:14-21.

So, we start first with the denunciation of Judah: 59:1-13. We will address this denunciation as accusation, description, and confession.

### Accused, guilty, penitent, helpless (59:1-13)

#### *Accusation 59:1-4*

Here's the accusation, Isaiah 59:1-4. Isaiah accuses the people directly using the second person plural "you" in the first three verses, and then summarizing in the 4<sup>th</sup> verse.

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| <sup>1</sup> Behold, the LORD's hand is not so short that it cannot save;                     | Nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear.                                     |
| <sup>2</sup> But your iniquities have made a separation<br>And your sins have hidden His face | between you and your God,<br>from you so that He does not hear.                 |
| <sup>3</sup> For your hands are defiled with blood<br>Your lips have spoken falsehood,        | And your fingers with iniquity;<br>Your tongue mutters wickedness.              |
| <sup>4</sup> No one sues righteously<br>They trust in confusion and speak lies;               | and no one pleads honestly.<br>They conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity. |

In chapter 58, the people of Judah fast and pray for God's protection and provision. Then they ask, "Why have we fasted and you do not see?" Isaiah gives them the answer, "You fast in hypocrisy." Here is the answer again. Let's be very clear about why you do not experience the goodness of God. Verse 1, it is not because the Lord's hand is too short to save. God can reach you. His power has no





*Confession 59:9-13*

And in this confession unclean lips are not the only fault of this people. Unclean lips are representative of a corrupted heart. That connection is going to come out in the last phrase. The confession is verses 9-13.

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| <sup>9</sup> Therefore justice is far from us,<br>We hope for light, but behold, darkness,             | And righteousness does not overtake us;<br>For brightness, but we walk in gloom.            |
| <sup>10</sup> We grope along the wall like blind men,<br>We stumble at midday as in the twilight,      | We grope like those who have no eyes;<br>Among those who are vigorous we are like dead men. |
| <sup>11</sup> All of us growl like bears,<br>We hope for justice, but there is none,                   | And moan sadly like doves;<br>For salvation, but it is far from us.                         |
| <sup>12</sup> For our transgressions are multiplied before You,<br>For our transgressions are with us, | And our sins testify against us;<br>And we know our iniquities:                             |
| <sup>13</sup> Transgressing and denying the LORD,<br>Speaking oppression and revolt,                   | And turning away from our God,<br>Conceiving in and uttering from the heart lying words.    |

Justice, righteousness, and salvation are used as parallel terms in 9a and 11b to create an inclusio.

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| <sup>9a</sup> Therefore justice is far from us, | And righteousness does not overtake us; |
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that's 9a. 11b,

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| <sup>11b</sup> We hope for justice, but there is none, | For salvation, but it is far from us. |
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This was the question that followed the hypocritical fasting of chapter 58. They had fasted as a nation that had done righteousness. They expect the blessing of the righteous. But they are not a nation that has done righteousness. Far from it. They say, "We have fasted," and they ask, "Why have you not seen? Why have you not blessed us?" Where is justice? Where is salvation? That lack of blessing is described here, between 9a and 11b. Verset by verset, the people are pictured as a man groping in the darkness. Isaiah's imagery stands out for itself. As I read it again, imagine each verset as a frame-by-frame movement, like a short video clip. Each verset gives you one frame of a video, adding just a little extra information as you go, and there is movement.

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| We hope for light, but behold, darkness,  | For brightness, but we walk in gloom.   |
| <sup>10</sup> We grope along the wall like blind men,<br>We stumble at midday as in the twilight, | We grope like those who have no eyes;<br>Among those who are vigorous we are like dead men. |
| <sup>11</sup> All of us growl like bears,   | And moan sadly like doves;  |

The people cannot find protection from evil. Evil is not punished, it's not stopped. People continue to hurt people. That is true within the society of Judah and it is true outside the society of Judah. They have no protection in their society. They have no protection from other societies. They will oppress and hurt each other, and by others they will be hurt and oppressed. No one will bring about justice. No one will bring about righteous action. No one will bring salvation. And they can do nothing about it. They grope in darkness, they stumble about. Blind to how moral reality works, they can only growl in distrust of fellow man and moan in despair at their own plight.

The language of gloom here takes us back again to chapter 8: those who walked in gloom cursed their king, they cursed their God. Similar to the beginning of chapter 8, the confession of the prophet has given up blaming God and owns responsibility for the failure of society. Blame does not belong to God. The repentant man understands where fault lies. Verses 12-13,

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| <sup>12</sup> For our transgressions are multiplied before You,<br>For our transgressions are with us, | And our sins testify against us;<br>And we know our iniquities:                          |
| <sup>13</sup> Transgressing and denying the LORD,<br>Speaking oppression and revolt,                   | And turning away from our God,<br>Conceiving in and uttering from the heart lying words. |

A person must come to this point before they can move any further. It is the poor in spirit who will be blessed. We are all poor. We just have to realize it. We cannot stand on our own good works, pointing the finger at the corrupt, because we are all corrupt. So this righteous man's prayer for society recognizes his

own failures together with the failures of his society. We are all bankrupt. What can we do? Where does hope come from?

This is how we end the first major section of the Book of the Conqueror. We begin with an ideal vision of the people of God in 56,1-6. It cannot be accomplished by human beings, because we always bring evil with us. Who is going to defeat the evil? Who is going to establish justice?

A divine conqueror comes. We will address this vision of the coming conqueror in three sections. We begin with the state of human affairs. Then we have a vision of divine commitment. And we end with the presence of a Covenant mediator – one who will mediate between God and man.

### **Divine Commitment to Salvation and Vengeance (59:14-21)**

*The State of Human Affairs 59:14-15a*

The three lines of 59:14-15a sum up the current state of affairs already described in the prophet's confession.

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| <p><sup>14</sup> Justice is turned back,<br/>For truth has stumbled in the street,<br/><sup>15</sup> Yes, truth is lacking;</p> | <p>And righteousness stands far away;<br/>And uprightness cannot enter.<br/>And he who turns himself aside from evil makes<br/>himself a prey.</p> |
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This is human society. This is the city of man without God. How does God respond to this fallen, broken, evil state of human affairs?

*Divine Commitment to Salvation and Vengeance 59:15b-20*

He responds with divine commitment to salvation and to vengeance. This is 15b-20.

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| <p>Now the LORD saw, and it was displeasing in His sight<br/><sup>16</sup> And He saw that there was no man,<br/><br/>Then His own arm brought salvation to Him,<br/><sup>17</sup> He put on righteousness like a breastplate,<br/>And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing<br/><sup>18</sup> According to <i>their</i> deeds, so He will repay,</p> | <p>that there was no justice.<br/>And was astonished that there was no one to<br/>intercede;<br/>And His righteousness upheld Him.<br/>And a helmet of salvation on His head;<br/>And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle.<br/>Wrath to His adversaries, recompense to His<br/>enemies;<br/>To the coastlands He will make recompense.<br/>the name of the LORD<br/>And His glory from the rising of the sun,<br/>Which the wind of the LORD drives.<br/>And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,"<br/>declares the LORD.</p> |
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God's astonishment that there is none to intercede cannot mean that God is somehow unaware of the spiritual state of His people. Attributing astonishment to God is a way to picture how clearly a morally good vision sees the absurdity and self-destructiveness of wickedness. The good is always somewhat astonished by evil. And evil just does not get it.

That there is no man to intercede elevates the problem to one of ultimate justice and righteousness. When God asked who would go for Him back in chapter 6, Isaiah said, "Here am I." He became a human intercessor for his people. But he is not enough. When God decided to free His people from Babylon, He raised up Cyrus, a human redeemer. But what human can fully solve the problem of human wickedness and oppression? Who can establish fair and lasting justice? Who can banish evil once and for all? No one.

Just as the need for righteous and lasting government requires an ideal King and the need for righteous atonement requires an ideal Servant, so also the need for impartial, absolute and lasting justice requires an ideal Conqueror.



The Conqueror comes. When will He come? How will He come? On whom will He pour out His wrath? What will be the result?

These are questions Isaiah will develop more in chapters 60-62. We do have one bit of very intriguing information left in the last verse of chapter 59. This is 59:21.

*The Promise of a Covenant Mediator 59:21*

<sup>21</sup> “As for Me, this is My covenant with them,” says the LORD: “My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from now and forever.”

Jewish scholar Robert Alter affirms what you will probably see when you look at the text in your own Bible. This verse is not formatted as poetry. Alter calls it, “a prose epilogue.” Also, if you’re reading in English, that only has one “you” which could be plural or singular, you might not notice that we have just switched to the singular “you.” Unlike the “you” of accusation at the beginning of chapter 58, which was plural, this “you,” all the way through, is singular. “This is my covenant with THEM.” “My Spirit which is upon YOU” - that’s one person. “My words which I put in YOUR mouth.” It’s a singular “you.” “From the mouth of your offspring.” So, who is the “you”? Alter rejects the claim that the “you” is the prophet and the offspring are his “disciples.” He understands the “you” and the “offspring” to be the Jews. He writes this, “Similar formulations in Deuteronomy and elsewhere clearly indicate the spirit of God that will continue to invest the covenanted people for all time, and there is no warrant for the use of ‘seed’ in the sense of ‘disciple’ rather than as a term for biological offspring. ‘Seed’ in precisely this sense repeatedly figures in the covenantal promises to Abraham.”<sup>2</sup>

First, I find it interesting that Alter does not give any space to critical scholarship that this prose verse is a later insertion into Isaiah’s text. That’s what a lot of scholars will say, this verse just doesn’t fit. But Alter knows literature. He is a professor at Stanford, and he is not getting into the Christian view of the text. Still, he finds the verse a fitting epilogue where it is. That’s interesting. Second, I find it interesting that in that quote I just read he does not actually explain the singular “you”, except to say that it is not Isaiah because the verse is clearly using the language of Old Testament Covenant, and “offspring” are not the disciples of Isaiah, because “offspring” in Old Testament Covenant language indicates the biological children of Abraham. And that makes sense.

The term, “seed,” does point to the Abrahamic covenant, particularly the language God used to reaffirm the covenant in Genesis 22:17-18. Speaking to Abraham, God says,

<sup>17</sup> indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. <sup>18</sup> “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

“Seed” in that context, what Abraham would have understood is that “seed” refers to his descendants. New Testament writers can understand the term “seed” with a range of meaning. In Galatians 3:16, Paul understands “seed” as singular, referring to Jesus Christ. He is the promised child, the seed through whom the nations will be blessed. That use of “seed” points even further back to God’s promise to Eve in Genesis 3:15, that her seed would crush the serpent’s head. Paul does not use the word “seed” in Romans 4 when he describes the offspring of Abraham. But he does say that Abraham is both the father of the circumcised and the father of the uncircumcised. He is the father of all who believe. He is not just the father of the biological children. I think it fair to say that Paul could understand a singular use of “seed” as referring to Jesus; plural use of the word “seed” as referring to those who are of the bloodline of Abraham; and a plural use of the word “seed” that refers to all who have become children of God by faith, Jew and Gentile. All those uses of “seed” are fair, depending on the context.

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<sup>2</sup> Alter 1993.

Now, because of Alter I've skipped ahead in our verse to talk about seed. I need to come back to the two more striking aspects of the verse: the reference to covenant, and the singular use of "you". They are connected, so we start with covenant. Isaiah uses the word "covenant" four times in the Book of the Servant. All four uses occur in the confirmation text that comes right after one of the four Servant Songs. Covenant is connected every time to the singular Servant.

So, starting in 42:6, which affirms the first Servant Song, "...I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations."

49:8, affirming the Second Servant song, "...I will keep you for a covenant of the people, to restore the land..."

54:10, affirming the fourth Servant Song, "...My lovingkindness will not be removed from you and my covenant of peace shall not be shaken..."

And 55:3, a second instance affirming the fourth Servant Song, "...I will make an everlasting covenant with you according to the faithful mercies shown to David."

The covenant references connect us back to the Suffering Servant. And something else also does that in this verse. The assertion, "My Spirit is upon you," points us back both to 42:1, "I will put My Spirit upon him." And also back to the Messianic King in 11:2, "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him." The Messianic King, who is also the Suffering Servant, he is the singular "you" of this text.

Okay. Listen again to the promise God makes in verse 21, "As for Me, this is My covenant with them," says the LORD. This is a God thing, a God Covenant. "As for me." There was no man. So God took on Himself to act. This is "My covenant with them," says the Lord." He goes on, "My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth." He is speaking to the Messianic King, to the Suffering Servant. There is a singular Covenant mediator, the "you" of this text. And He is the Messianic King. He is the Suffering Servant.

But the promise is not only about Him, but also about His offspring, His seed. And this is not the first time that seed is connected to the Suffering Servant. Chapter 53:10, "He will render himself as a guilt offering, he will see his offspring, he will prolong his days." How does He see His offspring and prolong His days when He is clearly going to die for the sins of humanity? He dies and He lives. His offspring are those who have believed. This promise here in 59:21 also applies to them. Just as the Spirit is upon Him, the Covenant mediator, and the Word of God will not leave His mouth, nor will it leave, "the mouth of His offspring, not even from the mouth of His offspring's offspring," says the LORD, "from now and forever."

God will establish a Covenant of peace. A Covenant that fulfills the covenants to Abraham and to David. He will establish that Covenant through a mediator who is the Messianic King and who is the Suffering Servant. God's Spirit and Word will be on His Covenant mediator. But not only on Him. God's Spirit will be on His offspring – those who believe in Him - and His Word will proceed from their mouths. These offspring are the New Covenant people of God, established on the day of Pentecost as the Church, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the preaching the word of Good News. This is not the last time we are going to see this vision. We are going to come back to it at the very end of chapter 66.

But for now, let's conclude with a final thought on how this final verse is going to transition us from this vision of God as divine warrior, which has come before verse 21, to a light rising in Zion, which is where we began in chapter 60.

### **Conclusion**

So in chapter 59, it is God who puts on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation is on His head. But as New Testament theology makes clear, there is no easy separation between nature and work of God the Father, and the nature and work of God the Son.

So, here we are told, "God saw that there was no man, and was astonished that there was no one to intercede." Will there always be "no man?" Will there always be "none to intercede?" No. The ideal

King we saw is both man and God. The ideal Servant is both man and God. The coming Conqueror is both man and God.

The reference to the arm of the Lord most immediately communicates the strength of God. But it is also used as the introduction of the fourth Servant Song, "Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" The Suffering Servant is the arm of the Lord. Here in Isaiah 59 it definitely implies God's strength as He takes on Himself the task of abolishing evil and establishing justice. But I cannot escape the echo of the son of God in these verses, especially when we get to verse 21 and the Covenant mediator.

And it's not a stretch to imagine this divine, anointed Conqueror as Jesus Christ. Yes, He is the Lamb. He is also the Lion. The Suffering Servant who died on the cross in the Gospel is also depicted as divine Conqueror in the book of Revelation. Listen to Revelation 19:11-16 and wonder if this is Jesus we are talking about in Isaiah.

<sup>11</sup> And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it *is* called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. <sup>12</sup> His eyes *are* a flame of fire, and on His head *are* many diadems; and He has a name written *on Him* which no one knows except Himself. <sup>13</sup> *He is* clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. <sup>14</sup> And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white *and* clean, were following Him on white horses. <sup>15</sup> From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. <sup>16</sup> And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS."

At His first coming He arrayed Himself in the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation to do war with the serpent of old. He broke the power of sin at the cross. Satan is defeated. The war is won. And though the outcome may be inevitable, there are still battles to fight before the end. We who are His offspring have been included into a covenant of God's own making. We have been anointed by His Spirit. The word of Good News has been put into our mouth. Following His example, we are to put on the breastplate of righteousness, and the helmet of salvation, and pick up the shield of faith. Doing so, we stand firm against spiritual attack by the Evil One. But our armor is not only defensive. Just as the Lord our God moves forward in action against the forces of evil, the Word of God has been put into our mouths as the sword of the Spirit, to participate with Him in His redemptive mission to set captives free. He has come once. He will come again. We do not wait for Him passively, because He does not wait passively. He is feeding the hungry, healing the sick, restoring the broken hearted, proclaiming the Good News of forgiveness, restoration, and eternal life. He is the coming Conqueror, who defeats evil and restores humanity. We are called to join Him in His mission before He comes again to consummate the eradication of evil for all time, and to establish eternal justice, eternal righteousness, eternal salvation. The end is sure. The coming of the Conqueror makes it so.