

Desire of Nations



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isaiah 59; Isa. 59:15–21; Isa. 60:1, 2; Isaiah 61; Isa. 61:2.*

Memory Text: “The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (*Isaiah 60:3, NKJV*).

We must learn in the school of Christ. Nothing but His righteousness can entitle us to one of the blessings of the covenant of grace. We have long desired and tried to obtain these blessings but have not received them because we have cherished the idea that we could do something to make ourselves worthy of them. We have not looked away from ourselves, believing that Jesus is a living Saviour. We must not think that our own grace and merits will save us; the grace of Christ is our only hope of salvation. Through His prophet the Lord promises, ‘Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon’ (*Isaiah 55:7*). We must believe the naked promise, and not accept feeling for faith. When we trust God fully, when we rely upon the merits of Jesus as a sin-pardoning Saviour, we shall receive all the help that we can desire.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 36.

This week we can see more of this great truth as revealed in the writings of the prophet Isaiah.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 20.

The Effects of Sin *(Isaiah 59)*

In Isaiah 58:3 the people asked God: “ ‘Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’ ” (*NRSV*).

In contrast, Isaiah 59:1 implies another question, something like: “Why do we call for the Lord’s hand to save us, but He does not? Why do we cry to Him, but He does not hear?” Isaiah answers that God is able to save and hear (*Isa. 59:1*). His failure to do either, however, is another matter entirely.

Read Isaiah 59:2. What message is being given here that answers the question in Isaiah 59:1?

God chooses to “ignore” His people, not because that is His desire but because “your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God” (*Isa. 59:2, NRSV*). Here is one of the clearest statements in the Bible regarding the effect of sin on the divine-human relationship. Isaiah spends the rest of chapter 59 elaborating on this point, which is seen all through human history: sin can destroy our relationship with the Lord and thus lead to our eternal ruin—not because sin drives God away from us but because it drives us away from God.

Read Genesis 3:8. How does this example reveal the principle expressed in the above paragraph?

Sin is primarily a rejection of God, a turning away from Him. The sin act actually feeds upon itself in that not only is the act a turning away from God but also the *result* of the act causes the sinner to turn away even more from the Lord. Sin separates us from God, not because God wouldn’t reach out to the sinner (indeed, the whole Bible is almost nothing but the account of God’s reaching out to save sinners) but because sin causes us to reject His divine overtures to us. That is why it is so important that we tolerate no sin in our lives.

In what ways have you experienced the reality that sin causes a separation from God? What, in your own experience, is the only solution to the problem?

Who Is Forgiven? (*Isa. 59:15–21*)

Isaiah 59 presents a startling picture of the problem of sin. Fortunately, the Bible also presents the hope of Redemption.

To begin, the first question is, How many of us have sinned? The Bible is unequivocal: all of us have. Redemption, therefore, cannot be based on lack of sin; it must be based on forgiveness (*Jer. 31:34*). Paul agrees. All have sinned (*Rom. 3:9–20, 23*); so, there can be no distinction on that basis (*Rom. 3:22*). Those who are justified can be judged as just, only because they receive by faith the gift of God’s righteousness through the sacrifice of Christ.

Read Romans 3:21–24. What are these verses telling us about how we are saved? What hope should they give us in the judgment?

Most people think the question in the judgment is: Who has sinned? But that is not a question that needs to be asked, because everyone has sinned. Instead, the question is: Who is forgiven? God is just when He justifies “the one who has faith in Jesus” (*Rom. 3:26, NRSV*). The deciding factor in the judgment is, Who has received and continues to receive forgiveness by having faith in Jesus?

Now, it is true we are judged by works—but not in the sense that works save us. If so, then faith is made void (*Rom. 4:14*). Instead, our works reveal whether we truly have been saved (*James 2:18*).

Why can’t works save us, either now or in the judgment? (*See Rom. 3:20, 23.*)

It is too late for good works, or obedience to the law, to redeem anyone. The purpose of the law in a sinful world isn’t to save but to point out sin. Instead, “faith working through love” (*Gal. 5:6, NRSV*), love that is poured into the heart by God’s Spirit (*Rom. 5:5*), demonstrates that a person has living faith in Jesus (*see also James 2:26*).

Works are an outward expression, the human manifestation of a saving faith. Hence, a true Christian experience is one in which faith is expressed in a daily commitment to the Lord that is revealed by obedience to the law. In the judgment, God uses works as evidence for His creatures, who cannot read thoughts of faith as He can. But for the converted person, only works following conversion, when the life is empowered by Christ and the Holy Spirit, are relevant in the judgment. The preconversion life of sin has already been washed away by the blood of the Lamb (*see Romans 6*).

Universal Appeal *(Isa. 60:1, 2)*

What is Isaiah 60:1, 2 talking about? What principle do you see at work there that's seen throughout the Bible? What hope does it offer?

In Isaiah 60:1, 2, we are given a picture of God's deliverance of His people, following the exile, expressed with the imagery of God's creating light out of darkness and pointing forward to an ultimate fulfillment in salvation through Christ.

In Isaiah 60:3, to whose light do nations and kings come?

In Hebrew this person is feminine singular (*see also Isa. 60:1, 2*). It must be "Zion," personified as a woman, who is mentioned near the end of the previous chapter (*Isa. 59:20*). So, the people of the earth, who are covered in darkness, will come to Zion. They will be drawn by the light of God's glory that has arisen over her (*Isa. 60:2*). "Zion is summoned to enter into the light that is hers and then to observe and react to the nations as they gather to the same light."—J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 494. Notice that although Zion is Jerusalem, the emphasis is more on the people than on the physical location of the city.

The rest of Isaiah 60 develops the theme introduced in verses 1–3: The people of the world are drawn to Jerusalem, which is blessed because of God's glorious presence there.

How does this prophecy compare with God's covenant promise to Abraham? (*Gen. 12:2, 3*.) Are they not saying the same thing?

God had a universal purpose when He chose Abraham and his descendants: Through Abraham all families of the earth would be blessed (*Gen. 12:3, Gen. 18:18, Gen. 22:18*). So, God's covenant with Abraham was ultimately intended to be a covenant with all humankind *through* Abraham. He and his descendants would be God's channel of revelation to the world.

Isaiah sought to bring his people back to their ancient, universal destiny. As the representatives of the true God, they were responsible not only for themselves but also for the world. They should welcome foreigners who seek God (*see also Isa. 56:3–8*), for His temple "shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (*Isa. 56:7, NRSV*).

In this context, how do you understand the role of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, or your role in that church?

“The Year of the LORD’s Favor” (*Isa. 61:2, NRSV*)

Who is speaking in Isaiah 61:1?

The Spirit of God is on this anointed Person, which means that He is a messiah or *the* Messiah. He is to “bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (*Isa. 61:1, NRSV*). Whom does that sound like? Compare Isaiah 42:1–7, where God’s Servant is described in very similar terms.

Isaiah 61:2 talks about the “acceptable year of the LORD.” The Messiah, who is anointed as the Davidic King and Deliverer, proclaims a special year of divine favor at the time when He proclaims liberty. Compare Leviticus 25:10, where God commands the Israelites to proclaim liberty in the holy fiftieth year: “It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family” (*NRSV*). This means that persons who had been forced to sell their ancestral land or to become servants in order to survive hard times (*Lev. 25:25–55*) would reclaim their land and freedom. Because the jubilee year began with the blowing of a trumpet on the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 25:9*), we have mentioned this passage before in connection with Isaiah 58.

While “the year of the LORD’s favor” (*NRSV*) in Isaiah 61:2 is a kind of jubilee year, it is not simply an observance of Leviticus 25. This year is announced by the Messiah, the King, when He reveals Himself through a ministry of liberation and restoration. This is similar to some ancient Mesopotamian kings who promoted social kindness by proclaiming release from debts during early years of their reigns. The Messiah’s ministry goes far beyond the scope of the Leviticus 25 law. Not only does He “proclaim liberty to the captives” but He also binds up the brokenhearted, comforts those who mourn, and brings about their restoration (*Isa. 61:1–11*). Furthermore, in addition to “the year of the LORD’s favor,” He proclaims “the day of vengeance of our God” (*Isa. 61:2, NRSV*).

When was Isaiah’s prophecy fulfilled? (*Luke 4:16–21*.) How did Jesus’ ministry accomplish this? Also, ask yourself this important question: we, of course, are not Jesus. But we are to represent Him to the world. What are the things the Messiah does, as expressed in Isaiah 61:1–3, that we, in our limited capacities, should be doing, as well? And what are some of the practical ways in which we can do these things?

“The Day of Vengeance of Our God”

(Isa. 61:2, NRSV)

Amid all the good news, why does the Messiah, as depicted in Isaiah 61, proclaim God’s vengeance? When is this prophecy fulfilled?

When in Nazareth, Jesus, the Messiah, read Isaiah 61 as far as “to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor” (Isa. 61:2, NRSV; Luke 4:19, NRSV). Then He stopped and said, “ ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ ” (Luke 4:21, NRSV). So, He deliberately and specifically avoided reading the next words in the same verse: “the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa. 61:2, NRSV). While His ministry of good news, liberty, and comfort was beginning to set captives free from Satan’s tyranny, the day of vengeance was not yet to come. In Matthew 24 (compare Mark 13, Luke 21), He predicted to His disciples that divine judgments would come in the future.

Indeed, in Isaiah 61 the day of God’s vengeance is the “great and terrible day of the LORD” (Joel 2:31, NRSV; Mal. 4:5), to be fulfilled when Christ will come again to liberate planet Earth from injustice by defeating His enemies and setting the oppressed remnant of His people free (Revelation 19; compare Dan. 2:44, 45). So, although Christ announced the beginning of “the year of the LORD’s favor,” its culmination is at His second coming.

How do you reconcile the notion of a loving God with a God who also promises vengeance? Are the ideas incompatible? Or do you understand vengeance as a manifestation of that love? If so, how so? Explain your answer.

Though Jesus has told us to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39), elsewhere He is very clear that justice and punishment will be meted out (Matt. 8:12). Though Paul tells us not to “render evil for evil” (1 Thess. 5:15), he also says that when the Lord is revealed from heaven, with flaming fire He will take “vengeance on them that know not God” (2 Thess. 1:8).

The difference, of course, is that the Lord in His infinite wisdom and mercy can alone bring both justice and vengeance in a completely fair manner. Human justice, human vengeance, comes with all the faults, frailties, and inconsistencies of humanity. God’s justice, of course, will come with none of those limitations.

Which of the following incidents would make you more likely to want to see vengeance returned upon someone who does evil? (1) A person who hurts someone you do not love or (2) a person who hurts someone you do love? How do we understand the link between God’s love for us and the warnings of vengeance?

Further Thought: See also Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 376–378; also *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 236–243.

“Jesus stood before the people as a living expositor of the prophecies concerning Himself. Explaining the words He had read, He spoke of the Messiah as a reliever of the oppressed, a liberator of captives, a healer of the afflicted, restoring sight to the blind, and revealing to the world the light of truth. His impressive manner and the wonderful import of His words thrilled the hearers with a power they had never felt before. The tide of divine influence broke every barrier down; like Moses, they beheld the Invisible. As their hearts were moved upon by the Holy Spirit, they responded with fervent amens and praises to the Lord.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 237.

“The day of God’s vengeance cometh—the day of the fierceness of His wrath. Who will abide the day of His coming? Men have hardened their hearts against the Spirit of God, but the arrows of His wrath will pierce where the arrows of conviction could not. God will not far hence arise to deal with the sinner. Will the false shepherd shield the transgressor in that day? Can he be excused who went with the multitude in the path of disobedience? Will popularity or numbers make any guiltless? These are questions which the careless and indifferent should consider and settle for themselves.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 33.

Discussion Question:

A Seventh-day Adventist pastor thoughtfully stated that his number one problem in ministry is the exclusiveness of church members who do not want others to join them. How can “Christians” take the love, hope, and good news of Christ’s kingdom to all the world so that others can have an opportunity to be saved before the end comes (Matt. 24:14) when they do not even want to accept people who go out of their way to show up in their church?

Summary: God purifies an unjust society by removing the rebels and by restoring the remnant who turn from the sins that have separated them from Him. Due to the blessings of God’s presence, people from other nations are drawn to God and His people so that they also can enjoy the time of God’s favor that is proclaimed and delivered by the Messiah.