

Preparing Our Hearts for the Cross

Isaiah 59 on April 6, 2025

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Please read Isaiah 59:1-4 before going further in this transcript.

These are some sobering verses from God's Word. Today we're going to look at a passage from the Old Testament that addresses the sinful wanderings of God's people. To be clear, Isaiah 59 isn't addressing the sin of the spiritually lost people who surrounded Israel, but rather the Israelite people themselves; the sins of those who claimed to be God's followers. Isaiah 59 was written to the Israelite people around the time when the southern tribes of Judah had narrowly evaded capture by the Assyrian army, but the Babylonians wouldn't be too far behind. In fact, history records that God's people living in Jerusalem and Judah were indeed eventually taken captive by the Babylonians. Isaiah 59 is a call for them to come to their senses, and stop sinning. God's people were straying, and God was well aware of it. Today's text records God's wakeup call for them to realize how their sin had separated them from fellowship with their God, and to realize that He was no longer listening to their prayers. God was calling them out, for their many sins, and urging them toward genuine, heartfelt contrition and confession, and a return to Him. Those of us who are living in the present can learn a lot from the sinful wanderings of Israel's past. 1 Corinthians 10:6,11 explain it this way, "6 Now these things occurred as examples to keep US from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.... 11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for US, on whom the culmination of the ages has come."¹

So many of the Old Testament lessons of faith carry over and apply to us, even still today. To be frank, we're simply not all that different than the people of Israel. We share a number of things in common with them, especially related to our human sinfulness, and our tendency to wander and drift away from the Lord. Unfortunately, this is true, even for those of us who claim to be His deeply devoted followers, who know better than to play around with sin, and who've been bought with the precious blood of Christ. In the words of the old hymn: "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love."² These words were written back in the mid-1700s. You see, God's people living some 300 years ago also struggled with sin in a very similar way to God's people in Israel, almost 3,000 years ago. So there's immense value in setting aside intentional time to examine our own

¹ Romans 15:4 explains, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope." See also Romans 4:23-24.

² *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* by Robert Robinson in 1758. #45 in our blue church hymnal.

hearts, and to consider our own need for remorse and repentance of any sins that have crept into our lives. Psalm 19:12-13 says, “12 But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults.³ 13 Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression.” Today we’re going to do a little “soul clean-up,” which is a good practice any time of year, but especially as we approach Easter, and our remembrance of the passion week, and Jesus’ death on the cross. Today’s text, and today’s sermon, is a call to “Prepare our Hearts for the Cross”; to worship God in a spirit of contrition and confession.

Isaiah 59:1 begins, “Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.” This reference to “the arm of the LORD” is a way of referring to His power.⁴ So Isaiah is declaring that God isn’t too weak to save His people; His arm is not too short to save, like some kind of a pathetic t-rex, with short little arms. No, the problem at this time in Israel’s history isn’t with the limits of Yahweh’s strength. It’s also not a problem with the Lord’s hearing. He hasn’t grown so old that He just doesn’t hear well anymore. No, there’s a different problem here...

Isaiah 59:2 goes on to chastise God’s people, “But *your iniquities* have separated you from your God; *your sins* have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” Earlier, Isaiah 30:19 had declared, “...How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you.” So what changes between Isaiah 30 and Isaiah 59? Certainly God doesn’t change, because His very essence is unchanging and immutable. What changes here is the attitude and behavior of God’s people, who abandoned their fellowship with the living God in order to live in sin. So it’s not that God didn’t want to hear His people’s prayers, or that He changed His gracious willingness to answer them, it’s that He won’t be mocked. He won’t put up with irreverent duplicity and hypocritical behavior.⁵ The Lord knows our hearts and He won’t be played for a fool.⁶

Just one chapter earlier, Isaiah 58:1-2 declares, “1 Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. 2 For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near

³ See also Psalm 90:8 and Ecclesiastes 12:14.

⁴ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1193 footnote on Isaiah 51:9.

⁵ See also Isaiah 58:1-2. “It is not God’s fault that the people are not experiencing the reality of a saving relationship; they are not sincere. They prefer to live in their sin while having the appearance of a relationship with God.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1437 footnote on Isaiah 59:1-2.

⁶ See 1 Samuel 16:7; 2 Chronicles 16:9; and Jeremiah 17:10.

them.” They *seemed* eager to enjoy sweet fellowship with God, to know His ways, and to come near to Him. But as it turns out, they really weren’t all that eager, nor were they all that sincere. God knows when we’re faking our faith, and trying to somehow manipulate His favor. Friends, we can’t spend our lives in open sin and rebellion, and then turn to Him in prayer and expect Him to answer us.

Isaiah addresses this kind of hypocrisy from the very beginning of his prophetic book, back in his first chapter. Isaiah 1:13-15 says,⁷ “13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. 14 Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I *hate* with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.

[Stop and just imagine here, if the Lord were to say that about our Sunday worship services here at E-Free, or our special Good Friday and Easter celebrations? May it never be.]

Verse 15 goes on, “When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am NOT listening. Your hands are full of blood!”

Isaiah 59 then goes on to list examples of their open and obvious sins: Isaiah 59:3 says, “For your hands are stained with blood,⁸ your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken falsely, and your tongue mutters wicked things.” This phrase “hands stained with blood” sounds pretty gruesome, especially for those who supposedly belong to God’s people. But this may just be a figurative way of illustrating that they can’t hide their sinful behavior from God. Isaiah goes on to say that their “fingers [are stained] with guilt;” so the evidence of their sin is obvious to God, they’re not fooling Him.⁹ Just a few verses down, verses 6-7 add, “6 ...Their deeds are evil deeds, and acts of violence are in their hands. 7 Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. They pursue evil schemes; acts of violence mark their ways.” So maybe this blood isn’t figurative after all. Perhaps some of God’s people had wandered so far from Him, for so long, that they’d gotten themselves into some pretty nasty stuff. Perhaps some of them had even committed *literal* acts of violence and bloodshed.

⁷ The context for this begins in Isaiah 1:9-10 which mentions Sodom and Gomorrah. To be clear, Isaiah is actually addressing Israel in these verses. “Just as Jesus addressed Peter as though he were Satan (Matthew 16:23), so Isaiah addresses his fellow Israelites as though they were the ‘rulers of Sodom’ and the ‘people of Gomorrah.’” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1117 footnote on Isaiah 1:9-10.

⁸ Isaiah 59:7 says, “...they are swift to shed innocent blood....” “Stained with blood” in verse 3 may be more than just metaphorical. *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 1437 footnote on Isaiah 59:1-2.

⁹ Consider Galatians 6:7.

The end of verse 3 doesn't get much better: "Your lips have spoken falsely, and your tongue mutters wicked things." The words of God's people should be righteous words, uplifting and encouraging words, not wicked ones. And our LIPS should be used for speaking the truth, not for lying.¹⁰ (*Wicked words reveal wicked hearts.*)

The prophet Isaiah then goes on to list not only sins of commission, but also sins of omission. In other words, God's people were not only sinning by doing wrong things, but they were also sinning by not doing the right things that God expected of them. Isaiah 59:4 goes on, "No one calls for justice; no one pleads a case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments, they utter lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil." Verse 14 later picks up on this same theme, "So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter."¹¹ Not doing justice is a sin of omission. We could also call it a "sin of silence" or a "sin of passivity". "No one calls for justice," means that no one speaks up when they should speak up.¹² The direct result of this inactivity, is that injustice is allowed to rule and run wild. The old saying comes to mind, "all that's necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."¹³ (*And to be clear, this holds equally true for good women; evil triumphs when good women and good men do nothing in the face of injustice.*)

Yahweh, the LORD Himself, responds to this injustice by taking things into His own hands. Isaiah 59:15-16 says, "15 ...The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. 16 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." You see, in reference to what we talked about back in verse 1, "the arm of the LORD is not too short." His *own* strong arm achieved salvation, and His *own* righteousness sustained Him. Fortunately for all of us, God's work in this world has never been dependent on human strength, or on our righteous actions, but rather on His.

Verses 17-18 go on, "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. 18 According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes; he

¹⁰ Consider James 3:1-12.

¹¹ See also Isaiah 5:23.

¹² Proverbs 24:11-12 says it this way, "11 Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. 12 If you say, "But we knew nothing about this," does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay everyone according to what they have done?" (Also consider Psalm 82:4.)

¹³ "often attributed to Edmund Burke, emphasizing that inaction by those who could act against evil allows it to flourish." Google Search.

will repay the islands their due.” In other words, God is perfectly righteous, and His righteous response to sin... is vengeance. He will repay sinful and wicked behavior with wrath and retribution. He will judge all people, including those claiming to be His people, “according to what they have done” And, as we discussed earlier, according to what they’ve left undone. So we all need to heed Isaiah’s warning, lest we find ourselves having wandered far from God, and on the wrong side of His righteous anger.

Now, admittedly, we’re jumping around a bit this morning in Isaiah 59, but let’s jump back to something more encouraging. We find a refreshingly honest confession in verses 12-13:¹⁴ “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: [*Finally! An honest admission of sin, “we acknowledge our iniquities”; a sign of contrition (remorse and regret over sin) and an act of confession (“We have sinned!”).*]

Verse 13 goes on with some specifics: “rebellion and treachery against the LORD, turning our backs on our God, inciting revolt and oppression, uttering lies our hearts have conceived.”

In stark contrast to those who were uttering lies, the prophet Isaiah makes an honest declaration by acknowledging sin for what it is: an offense against God.¹⁵ The first step for anyone who truly wants to contend with sin, is to acknowledge that it’s there, and that it’s ours. We need to own up to it; We are the ones who have allowed this separation to happen between us and God. Hebrews 3:12-13 warns us about the treachery of sin, “12 See to it, brothers and sisters [*notice how this is addressed to those within the faith community*], that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”

Even as deeply devoted followers of Jesus, sin is still our greatest threat; sin still has the ability to deceive us and to lead us astray. Now, to be clear, if we’re a believer in Jesus Christ, then sin no longer has mastery over us. Thanks to Jesus, we’re no longer under its condemnation.¹⁶ Even so, until we get to heaven, our sin nature still wars against us. Unconfessed sin can still rob us of our sweet communion with God, and our close fellowship with Him.

¹⁴ Though Isaiah himself is God’s righteous prophet, he confesses the sins of the people. Notice how he says “our” rather than “your” or “their.”

¹⁵ In the Hebrew Old Testament, offenses, sins, and iniquities, are the three most common words for evil thoughts and deeds. See 2011 *NIV Study Bible* text note on p. 1204.

¹⁶ See Romans 8:1 and following.

Isaiah 59:20 declares, "The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins," declares the LORD." Not many of us reading this transcript are Israelites, but we do serve the same God of Jacob. And all of us need to address our sin in the same way: through repentance. In Isaiah 59:20, a mighty warrior steps in to save the day! God redeems those who repent of their sins.

As New Testament recipients of God's grace, we know full well that we'll never be able to be good enough on our own. Just like God's people back in Isaiah's day, you and I have absolutely no personal capacity for holiness; it's completely beyond us, out of reach apart from Christ. And that's why we need to remember the cross of Jesus Christ, through which we've been given the gracious gift of salvation, and through which we also receive God's gracious gift of daily sanctification. This ongoing process in a believer's life includes ongoing honesty about sin; ongoing acknowledgement of the times when we fail. And once we've acknowledged it, and taken personal responsibility for it, we then need to repent of it, by sincerely/genuinely turning away from it.

What better time to do this, than this time leading up to Easter? What better time to prepare our hearts for the cross, by embracing a renewed attitude of contrition, and heartfelt repentance. With this in mind, I'm going to lead us in a Prayer of Corporate Confession, and then we'll each have some time for personal, silent confession after that.

Prayer of Corporate Confession:

"Dear Heavenly Father, we confess our sins before you today.

We know that You are a Holy and Righteous God,
and that You desire for us to be a holy and righteous people.

Lord, You are our Shepherd, and like sheep we have gone astray,
we have wandered from Your ways.

We have followed the desires of our own selfish hearts,
and we have disobeyed your good and holy commandments.

We've done things which we should not have done.
We've left things undone which You have called us to do.

Please have mercy on us, O God; deliver us from the heavy burden that
our sins have brought upon us.

We've drifted away from You; please draw us near once again.

Rescue us, as we confess our faults, and as we admit our great need for
Your grace.

Please restore us to close fellowship with You,
as we humble ourselves with repentant hearts.

Please heal us from our sin-sickness, according to Your great promises given through our Lord Jesus Christ...

- And now, with your head bowed, take some time for personal, silent confession.

...Lord, thank You for hearing our prayers. And thank You for Your mercy and grace. Thank You for forgiving our sins through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.”

In closing, read the words from this Responsive Reading from Psalm 32:¹⁷

Pastor: Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Congregation: Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them, and in whose spirit is no deceit.

Pastor: When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

Congregation: For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.”

And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Pastor: Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them.

Congregation: You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

Pastor: I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;

I will counsel you with my loving eye upon you.

Congregation: Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding, but must be controlled by bit and bridle, or they will not come to you.

Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD’s unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him.

All together: Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!”

Proverbs 28:13 offers this encouragement: “Whoever conceals their sins, does not prosper, but the one who confesses, and renounces them, finds mercy.

¹⁷ Psalm 32:1-11 lays out 3 main ideas. Verses 1-2 talk about the blessing of God’s forgiveness. Verses 3-5 give personal testimony of why confession is so good. Verses 6-11 then give a call to receive and be glad for God’s righteousness. See also Acts 3:19.