

# **ISAIAH:** **THE GLORY OF GOD IN A WORLD OF CHAOS**

Part 11: “The House of God”

Isaiah 56:1-8

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Sunday, November 29, 2020 (The First Sunday of Advent)

## **Scripture Reading**

*“Thus says the LORD: ‘Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.’ Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from his people’; and let not the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’ For thus says the LORD: ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.’ The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, ‘I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered’” (Isaiah 56:1–8, ESV).*

## **Introduction**

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Advent. For many, the Advent season is a synonym for December. It is often envisioned as a pre-extension of the holiday season, which most years is filled with a slew of Christmas parties and events.

But an extended Christmas celebration is not the heart or design of the season of Advent, as it has been historically observed by Christians. In reality, Advent is a season of *longing*. It is a season wherein we are called to intentionally acknowledge the brokenness of creation so that our hearts might be awakened to our deep need for restoration. It is a season in which we aim our imaginations toward a biblically formed vision for our true king and kingdom to come.

Typically, at the beginning of Advent, I give our congregation a little exhortation to slow down and refuse to be caught up in all the frenetic hurry and haste that this season typically brings. But this year is not a typical year. Indeed, this year, we acutely feel the

brokenness of our world. This year we have seen a global pandemic, race-based violence and riots, economic recession, and venomous political division. Deep in our bones, we know that the way the world *is* is not the way it should *be*.

But though our world is fractured with pain and sin, the Bible gives us a promise that one day all things will be made new; all sad things will become untrue.

The king who came into this world to redeem it will soon come again to restore it. For this better future, we lift our hearts in hope – this is the heart of Advent season.

But when we hope for the eternal future that awaits us in Christ, what is it that we are hoping for? Our vision of eternity must not simply come from our own desires or imaginations. Rather, our hope must be a biblically derived hope.

For the better part of this fall semester, we have been surveying the Old Testament book of the Prophet Isaiah. And as we draw near to the conclusion of this study, I believe Isaiah's final chapters are a perfect place to look for a picture of this hope.

Today, we will examine Isaiah 56 and the future vision it gives us of the “*House of God*.” As we walk through this passage, we will explore three key ideas in this passage that are all related to our eternal hope. They are: *1.) True Justice, 2.) True Sabbath, and 3.) The True People of God.*

## **Exposition**

### **1.) True Justice**

Verse 1 of chapter 56 begins with these words: “*Thus says the LORD: ‘Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed’*” (Isa 56:1).

Here the terms righteousness and justice are paired together. At the risk of oversimplifying these ideas, the term “righteousness” (הַקְּדוּשָׁה) most often refers to a right standing and a right relationship with God. The term “justice” (מִשְׁפָּט) most often refers to a right standing and a right relationship with one another. Righteousness is a vertical reality. Justice is a horizontal reality. In the Bible, righteousness and justice are not either/or concepts that are to be pitted against one another. Rather, they are complimentary concepts that empower one another.

However, in Isaiah's day and age, righteousness and justice were seldom seen as friends. In fact, many of the people of Judah – particularly the religious and political leaders – were very interested in outward displays of religious righteousness but utterly neglected matters of justice. For this reason, the call to justice becomes a dominant theme throughout Isaiah.

Look again at some of the words from the very first chapter of Isaiah, as the Lord confronts his people, “*Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they*

*have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isa 1:14–17).*

Again, in Isaiah 58, *"Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? 'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard" (Isa 58:5–8).*

Simply said, justice must matter to God's people because justice matters to God himself. Over and over again in Scripture, God calls his people to defend and promote the flourishing of the vulnerable and the weak. Why? Because justice is a representation of the character of God: *"Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation" (Ps 68:5).*

Remember, the people of Israel were not chosen by God only to be recipients of the blessing of God. Rather, Israel was chosen to be an instrument through which God's blessings would come to all the families of the earth (cf. Gen 12:2-3). Israel was chosen to be a kingdom of priests that displayed to the gentile nations what it looked like to live under the grace of God's holy rule (cf. Ex 19:6). Thus, when God's people keep justice, we are giving a previewed glimpse of the kingdom of God to a watching world. Likewise, when the people of God ignore, tacitly endorse, or perpetuate injustice, we dishonor the name of the Lord before the watching world.

Justice, then, belongs to the Christian tradition. Christians, we are of the tradition of John Chrysostom [show [1John Chrysostom before Eudoxia](#)], who, as the Bishop of Constantinople in the fourth century, preached against the extravagant greed and abuse of power of the Byzantine Empress directly to her face. We are of the tradition of William Wilberforce [show [2William Wilberforce](#)], the English evangelical politician who devoted his life to the dismantling of the North Atlantic slave trade at great cost to his political aspirations. We are of the tradition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer [show [3Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#)], the German pastor and martyr, who gave his life to oppose the Nazis and their genocide against the Jewish people. We are of the tradition of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. [show [4Martin Luther King Jr.](#)], who famously appealed to the power of the biblical gospel to oppose the sin of racism in the United States.

With that said, Christians must not see justice as something we do to earn God's love; rather, it is something we do in response to God's love.<sup>1</sup> Christians are called to love and defend the broken and the vulnerable because Christ chose to love and defend us when we were broken and vulnerable. So, Redeemer, this is why, as a church, we seek to honor the lives of the unborn as well as those born with special needs. This is why we seek to serve the refugees in our community, as well as address the deep wounds in our society caused by generations of the sin of racism. This is why we champion the cause of trafficking victims in Ethiopia and AIDS orphans in Kenya.

We do not engage in matters of justice because of a political platform. We engage in matters of justice because we are faithful to the Bible. Make no mistake: *a Christianity without a concern for justice is a sub-biblical form of Christianity.*

Now, about five years ago, I could have said everything that I just said, and it would have been considered totally non-controversial.

But now, we are living in a moment in which the term "justice" itself has become a polarizing term. There are many people today who view "justice" as a buzzword for Marxism, Critical Race Theory (CRT), or an inherently leftist political agenda. I want you to know such a secular vision of justice is *not at all* what I am arguing for.

The answer to a secular vision of justice is not *no justice*. The answer to a secular vision of justice is a robustly biblical vision for justice.

And here is a simple way to recognize the difference.

A Marxist vision for justice is fixated on retribution and revenge. A biblical vision for justice is focused on reconciliation and restoration. A Marxist vision of justice envisions the oppressed rising up to destroy or rule over their oppressors by the power of the sword. A biblical vision of justice looks to a day when Jesus reigns over all, and swords are beaten into plowshares (Isa 2:4).

Biblical justice is a signpost that points toward our future hope of the kingdom of God.

## **2.) True Sabbath**

Take a look at the next verse: "*Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil*" (Isa 56:2).

Sabbath is the term used for taking one day out of seven to be a day of rest and worship unto the Lord. The Sabbath is so important that remembering and practicing the

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<sup>1</sup> "Notice the causal construction in the verse: Justice and righteousness are to be done *because my salvation* is at hand. In other words, obedience is to be lived out as a response to salvation. It is precisely because of the gracious work of God in deliverance (*my righteousness*) that we humans are expected to live righteous lives." John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 455.

Sabbath is one of the ten commandments: *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”* (Ex 20:8).

The thing I want you to understand is that the Bible sees the Sabbath as an inherently good thing. However, by the time of Isaiah’s lifetime, the Sabbath had devolved into a dutiful religious observance and a marker of cultural identity for the Jewish people. Often in Isaiah’s day, people would observe the Sabbath according to strict and meticulous regulations, all the while having hearts that were utterly cold to the Lord (cf. Isa 1:13). Thus, one of Isaiah’s goals in his book is to call God’s people out of a false Sabbath and into a true Sabbath.<sup>2</sup> Isaiah desires to call God’s people from seeing worship as a begrudging duty to seeing it as a joyous delight.

I believe that, even though it is often the least observed of all the ten commandments, Sabbath is to be a Christian practice as well. The Jewish people observe Sabbath on Saturday because this was the day when God completed the work of creation. Christians have historically observed Sabbath on Sunday – the day of the resurrection of Christ – because this was the day God completed the work of redemption.

In our age of social distancing, mask-wearing, quarantines, and isolation, it may be tempting to view weekly worship as a chore. For those of you that are staying at home, it may be easy to fall out of rhythm with weekly worship, since you can now stream a service on-demand like Netflix.

Today, I want to argue that as COVID cases rise in our community and life becomes increasingly restrictive, your spiritual rhythms matter more now than ever. You need to be listening more to the word of Scripture more than you are the news. You need to pray your frustrations and your fears more than you post them on social media. And you need to be setting aside time each and every week to worship the living God and sit under the authority of his preached word.

Sabbath is not just about rest. Sabbath is about the restoration that only comes from connecting to the Lord in worship. As Augustine of Hippo famously said centuries ago, *“Our hearts are restless until we find our rest in God.”*

Through the spiritual rhythm of Sabbath, the Holy Spirit reminds us of our truest identity and reorders the desires of our heart toward that which good and true and beautiful.

We often convince ourselves that we are too busy or too tired or too overwhelmed to worship. For this reason, we must always remember that Sabbath rest is an act of faith. We do not enter into Sabbath rest because our work is finished. We enter into Sabbath rest because Christ’s work is finished.

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<sup>2</sup> Sabbath is not a dominant theme of Isaiah, but it is an important theme, which occurs in both the first and last chapters of the book, thus functioning as a framing device for Isaiah’s message. See: David A. Ritchie, “Isaiah’s Theology of Sabbath,” (2019).

Moreover, Sabbath rest is also designed to be a signpost that points beyond the present and into the future. There is a day that is coming when we will know true rest and restoration. We will know a true and better Sabbath in which we will be restored, our relationships will be restored, and all of creation will be restored.

### **3.) The True People of God**

Take a look at the next few verses. These are words that would have shocked and scandalized Isaiah's original audience: *"Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely separate me from his people'; and let not the eunuch say, 'Behold, I am a dry tree.' For thus says the LORD: 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples"* (Isa 56:3–7).

There are two groups of people that are mentioned in this text: foreigners and eunuchs. Foreigners refer to people from the gentile nations. Israel was God's chosen people; the gentiles were not. However, Isaiah 56 seems to suggest that God intends to bring gentiles into the community of people! Even more, God says that eunuchs will be able to draw near to his house and will be able to offer up sacrifices of worship.

From the standpoint of the Jewish law, this is all crazy talk. Even gentiles who converted to Judaism were not allowed to go inside the Jewish temple to worship (cf. Dt 23:2-8). Even more, eunuchs (men who were physically unable to have children) were not even allowed in the temple complex because they were considered ceremonially unclean (cf. Dt 23:1).

But Isaiah says there will be a day that comes when God will welcome the gentile and the eunuch into his family. There will be a day when not only will God gather the Israelites who were dispersed into exile across the world, he will gather people from all nations to his house: *"The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, 'I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered'"* (Isa 56:8).

God will call to himself the unlikely and the unworthy, and they will receive salvation. People groups who were once separated and at hostility toward one another will one day be united by the redemptive work of God.

The Apostle Paul shows how this came to pass. In his letter to the Ephesian church, he writes: *"Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called 'the uncircumcision' by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from*

*the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (Eph 2:11–16).*

Because of the cross, Christ has made a way for people of different nations and races and cultures to come together as one reconciled people. Later in the book of Ephesians, Paul says that when the church embodies the realities of different people finding oneness in Christ, it is a display of the manifold wisdom of God (Eph 3:10) [show [5One in Christ Service at RCC](#)]. Reconciliation is a signpost that points to a day when God will gather people of all nations into the new Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21:22-27).

## **Conclusion**

“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” If that phrase sounds familiar to you, it is because it is quoted by Jesus when he cleanses the temple of Jerusalem (Mt 21:13; Mk 11:17; Lk 19:49).

During the final week of his life, Jesus entered the holy city of Jerusalem, and the first place he went was the temple [show [6Jesus Cleanses the Temple](#)].

The temple was the one place where sacrifices were made so that sins could be atoned for. It was the one place where the priests served and mediated a relationship between God and his people. It was the one place where God’s presence dwelled on earth.

Sadly, even though the temple was designed to be a place built for the worship and glory of God, by the time of Jesus’s life, it had become a place built on the profiteering and pride of men.

Essentially, in order to worship at the temple, you would bring your own animal to make a sacrifice. But there would be guys at the temple who would say, “Your animal isn’t pure enough. You’re going to need to buy one of our pre-approved animals for sacrifice at a ridiculously high price.” Then, they would take your animal and re-sale it to the next guy. This practice was corrupt. It was common. And it was wicked.

In light of Isaiah 56, the corruption of the temple authorities is cast in even sharper relief. Instead of promoting justice, they perpetuated injustice by price-gouging the poor. Instead of honoring and keeping the Sabbath, they used the Sabbath to work and profiteer from people’s desire to worship the Lord. Instead of being a light to the nations, the temple authorities had twisted the temple into a vehicle of ethnic nationalism and exclusion.

So, in zeal, Jesus turns over the tables quoting Isaiah, saying, my house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.

The religious leaders saw Jesus's actions as a moment of sacrilege. But in reality, Jesus was preparing to restore the true purpose of the temple.

For soon, in giving his own life, Jesus would make the ultimate sacrifice that would end the need for all other sacrifices. His cross would become the ultimate revelation of God's *justice* and the source of our justification. His redemptive work would allow the people of God to enter into the true and better *Sabbath rest*. And through his shed blood and broken body, the wall the walls that stood between Jew and gentile would be abolished, so that people of *all nations* would be welcome in the house of God.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, in light of what Christ has accomplished on our behalf, may we reflect his righteousness and justice. May we find our rest and restoration in him. May we display the reconciling power of the gospel. May our lives shine like a signpost of our Advent hope, for the kingdom we long for is coming.

AMEN.

### **Discussion starters for Gospel Community**

1. *Read Isaiah 56:1-8 and summarize the big ideas of this passage in your own words.*
2. *Why is justice such an important theme in Isaiah's message (see: Isa 1:14-17; 56:1; 58:5-6)? What does it look like for God's people to "keep justice" and "do righteousness" today?*
3. *Much of the blessings that are promised in this passage are contingent upon the keeping of the Sabbath (Isa 56:2,4,6; cf. Ex 20:8-11). Why is it so important for God's people to set aside weekly time for rest and worship? What are the spiritual rhythms that you need in this trying season to keep your soul healthy?*
4. *That the eunuch and the foreigner would be welcome in God's house would have been a surprising statement for Isaiah's original audience (Isa 56:3-8). Why is it such good news that God welcomes the unlikely and the unworthy into his presence?*
5. *How should Isaiah 56:1-8 shape our Advent hope for the future?*