

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

Part 12: “The City of the Lord”

Isaiah 60:1-14

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Sunday, December 6, 2020 (The Second Sunday of Advent)

## **Scripture Reading**

*“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house. Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows? For the coastlands shall hope for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the LORD your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has made you beautiful. Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I struck you, but in my favor I have had mercy on you. Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste. The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious. The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet; they shall call you the City of the LORD, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 60:1–14, ESV).*

## **Introduction**

Advent is a season designed to focus our hearts on the hope of the coming kingdom of God. The last few chapters of Isaiah offer us a vision of that hope.

Here, Isaiah speaks to an audience of Jewish people who will live centuries after his own life – a group of people who have lost their king, their kingdom, and their temple – he wants them to know that the hope of a brighter future is what will guide them through dark times.

Though God's people then were enduring the darkness of exile, the bright hope of restoration was coming. Though God's people now are enduring COVID and division and hardship, the bright hope of New Creation is coming, as sure as the sunrise.

Isaiah wants to awaken God's people to practice the spiritual discipline of hope. He wants us to learn how to envision the dawn of our future, so that it might be a guiding beacon in the depth of the present darkness.

In Isaiah 60, the dominant image of eternal hope is the city of God, or, as our text terms it, "*The City of the Lord.*" For the rest of our time today, I want to unfold three realities of redemption envisioned in this eternal city. The city of the Lord is a place where *1.) exiles are given a home, 2.) culture is redeemed, and 3.) the nations are welcomed into the people of God.*

## **Exposition**

### **1.) Exiles are given a home**

I'm currently re-reading *The Aeneid* by the Roman poet Virgil [show **"Aeneas fleeing from Troy" by Pompeo Batoni (1753)**]. It's an epic poem about Aeneas, a Trojan prince who survived the sack of Troy and escaped with a few ships and soldiers. After trial, tribulation, sacrifice, and literally going to hell and back again, Aeneas finally defeats the last of his enemies. He finds a settlement along the banks of the Tiber River on the Italian peninsula, where he will become the ancient patriarch of the Roman people. *The Aeneid* is about sea adventures and romance and epic battles, but ultimately the whole point of the story is that Aeneas and his people are homeless, and they are looking for a new homeland. And it is for that reason that *The Aeneid's* story still resonates with us today.

*Human beings long to be home.* In each of us, there is a sense of restlessness and eagerness to find that place where we belong, where we are at peace, and where we are at rest. Don't get me wrong: we love journeys. We love quests and adventures. But at the end of every journey is the hope of arriving at a place we can call home.

The Bible offers an account of *why* we hunger for home. Human beings were created by God in the garden of Eden. Eden was a place of peace, provision, and flourishing, but even more, it was a place where humankind experienced unbroken union and fellowship with our Creator. *This* was our home.

We lost this home because instead of living in submission to God, we chose to rebel against God. Instead of embracing loving fellowship with God, we chose fellowship with sin and the serpent. Instead of allowing God to define what is good and evil, we chose to

define good and evil on our own terms. Instead of worshipping the Creator, we chose to worship creation (cf. Rom 1:25).

So, man and woman were expelled from the garden of Eden [show 2“Expulsion from the Garden” by Thomas Cole (1828)]. Though we have never seen or been to the garden of Eden, the echo of Eden resonates in all of our souls. We long for a return to our true home.

We mistakenly try to find that true home through money, achievement, significance, and romance, but these created things never give us the rest and peace our souls long for. That is because the essence is Eden was never the garden itself, but the One who walked with man in the garden. Sin is not only a matter of breaking of the rules – it is the source of our estrangement from God, the source our cosmic homelessness, and the reason behind all of our anxious wanderings.

In losing Eden, we lost access to the presence of God. And the story of humankind’s exile and the longing for return is arguably *the* storyline of the Bible. From slavery to the exodus; from the wilderness to the promise land; from the downward spiral of the judges to the establishment of the house of David; from the destruction of the divided kingdom and exile to the hope of restoration; the Old Testament tells us over and over again about this pattern of exile and return from exile.

But Isaiah tells us that there is a day coming when the longing for home will find its completion. There will be a day when an eternal light dawns and the people of God will be given an eternal home.

Look at Isaiah’s announcement: *“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip”* (Isa 60:1–4).

The story of the Bible begins in garden and ends in a city; it begins with a scattering and ends with a gathering; it begins with an exile and ends with a homecoming. We long to be where God dwells. And our hearts will be restless until we find our rest in him.<sup>1</sup>

So today, if you are restless, if you are lonely, if your heart is hungering for your true and better home, hear the words of the One who summons us to his eternal city. Hear the words of Christ: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”* (Mt 11:28–29).

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<sup>1</sup> This is a paraphrase of St. Augustine of Hippo, from the first page of his *Confessions*.

## 2.) Culture is redeemed

In the world of Christian theology, there is an enduring question about how the church is to understand and engage culture. In 1951, theologian H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a seminal book named *Christ and Culture* [show 3 *Christ and Culture* by H. Richard Niebuhr (1951)] that summarized different ways that Christians throughout history have understood the church's relationship with culture.

Niebuhr defines *culture* as “*the artificial secondary environment that man imposes on the natural.*”<sup>2</sup> So, some of the examples he gives is that a river is part of God's creation that we call “nature,” but a canal is part of man's creation that we call “culture”; a quartz rock is a part of God's creation that we would call “nature,” but an arrowhead is a part of man's creation that we call “culture.”<sup>3</sup> Culture includes the arts and sciences, farms and cities, as well as militaries and governments.

Some Christians view culture as a fundamentally evil thing that should be retreated from and opposed. But the problem with this view is that it negates the Christian responsibility to be salt and light to the surrounding culture (cf. Mt 5:13-16).

On the other end of the spectrum, some Christians view culture as a fundamentally good thing that should be affirmed and celebrated. But the problem with this view is that it at times will confuse and conflate the Spirit of God with the spirit of the age.

A better view is to understand culture as something that God intended to be good, was stained by sin, but will be redeemed for God's glory.

After God created man and woman, he gave them a task. As the first chapter of Genesis states: “*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it..’*” (Gen 1:27–28a).

What this shows us is that human culture was a part of God's good intention for his creation. In some ways, we can view culture-making as a part of participating in the creative activity of God. God creates all of the animals, but he tells Adam to name them (Gen 2:19). God creates the earth, but it is Adam's job to unfold the latent potential that God has placed in the earth through cultivation (Gen 2:15)). This is part of how mankind is to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28).

Yet, after the fall, the culture made by humans has been influenced by the corrupting effects of sin. Governments can be twisted into structures of tyranny. Human ingenuity can paint the Sistine chapel ceiling but also concoct tools for genocide.

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<sup>2</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. Expanded 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ed. (New York: HarperOne, 1951, 2001), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr.,33.

For this reason, God will bring judgment upon fallen, idolatrous human culture. As Isaiah says way back in chapter 2: *“For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low; against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan; against all the lofty mountains, and against all the uplifted hills; against every high tower, and against every fortified wall; against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft. And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. And the idols shall utterly pass away”* (Isa 2:12–18). These are strong words of wrath against the evil of culture.

But destruction is not the end of the story for human culture. In fact, according to Isaiah 60, it seems that human culture will be redeemed and restored to its full purpose and glory. The *“ships of Tarshish”* and the *“cedars of Lebanon”* that were objects of judgment in Isaiah 2 are objects of redemption in Isaiah 60. Look back at our text: *“For the coastlands shall hope for me, **the ships of Tarshish** first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the LORD your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has made you beautiful... **The glory of Lebanon** shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious”* (Isa 60:9 & 13).

Isaiah seems to be inviting us to imagine what a fully redeemed culture might look like. Commenting on this passage, theologian Richard Mouw writes, *“God will stand in judgment of all idolatrous and prideful attachments to military, technological, commercial, and cultural might. He will destroy all of those rebellious projects that glorify oppression, exploitation, and accumulation of possessions. It is in such projects that we can discern our own ships of Tarshish and cedars from Lebanon. But the ‘stuff’ of human culture will nonetheless be gathered into the Holy City.... The earth – including the American military and French art and Chinese medicine and Nigerian agriculture – belongs to the Lord. And he will reclaim all of these things, harnessing them for service in the City.”*<sup>4</sup>

One theological takeaway from this is that God alone is the Lord and redeemer of culture. It is not in our wheelhouse to transform culture. With that said, I do believe that there is a call for Christians to bear witness to the city of the Lord with our lives.

A major way that we engage culture is through our vocations. When Christians are able to do their jobs with a sense of excellence, integrity, and values that intentionally exudes a love for God and people, we can offer the watching world a previewed glimpse of the city of God.

When Christian business owners are able to resist the temptations of compromise and greed but instead contribute to the common good of their communities, they bear witness to the city of the Lord. When Christian lawyers and judges are able to promote

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<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Mouw. *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*. Revised Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002)39.

justice for the poor, just as well as they do the powerful, they bear witness to the city of the Lord. When Christian artists create, not for self-indulgence or personal glory, but rather to unfold the gospel through beauty, they bear witness to the city of the Lord. When Christian nurses and doctors sacrifice their time and talent to heal the sick, when stay-at-home parents disciple and train their children, when retail-workers and baristas serve people with patience, kindness, and dignity, they bear witness to the city of the Lord.

I think of the land of Narnia in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* [show *4The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*], which was under a spell of endless winter due to the brutal reign of the White Witch. But when the Aslan, the true king, draws near to return, the ice and snow begin to melt, the sun begins to shine, and the flowers begin to bloom.

In the same way, we do not possess the power to fully remove the stain of sin from the world. We do not have the power to fully end the spell of winter. But when we submit our lives under the Lordship of King Jesus, the culture we create through our vocations shows a world yearning for spring what melted ice can look like.

### **3.) The nations are welcomed into the people of God**

In the age of the Old Testament, to be God's people meant that you belonged to the nation of Israel. There were some foreigners, like Ruth the Moabite and Naaman the Syrian, that converted to faith in the Lord. But for the most part, if you were not born as an ethnic Israelite, you were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, had no hope, and were without God in the world (Eph 2:12).

But Isaiah envisions a day, when hope dawns for the nations. Look back at the last few verses of our reading today, "*Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I struck you, but in my favor have had mercy on you. Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste. The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious. The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet; they shall call you the City of the LORD, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel*" (Isa 60:10–14).

Thus, in Isaiah's mind, the city of the Lord becomes a reversal of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. At Babel, men were united in rebellion against God. In the city of the Lord, men will be united in the worship of God. At Babel, man sought to work his way to God. In the city of the Lord, God graciously comes down to man. At Babel, the nations were scattered in judgment. In the city of the Lord, the nations will be gathered for salvation.

The light of the Lord will radiate a magnetic beauty that will call the nations to worship the living God. But now, on this side of eternity, we must recognize that the church is

called to go to the nations so that the nation might be drawn unto Christ in eternity. Moreover, we must recognize what actually draws people to worship the Lord. It is not our job to shame the world into repentance. It is not our job to coerce the world into submission to God. It is our job to display the beauty of the Lord with our lives. It is our job to lift up the Son of Man, so that he might draw people from all nations to himself (Jn 12:32).

And as we consider the church's task to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19), we must also understand what role we play in the story. For the vast majority of people who consider themselves a part of Redeemer Christian Church, we are not ethnically Jewish.

You know what that means? It means when we see the words "nations" (גוֹיִם) and "foreigners" (בְּנֵי-גֵר) in this text, we need to see ourselves. By race and blood, we do not belong to the people of God or the city of the Lord. But in Christ Jesus, we who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph 2:13). We have been granted citizenship in heaven (Phil 3:20).

We do not go into the nations because we smugly pity the poor people of the nations. We do not care about racial reconciliation because it is a popular thing to care about in this cultural moment.

We go into the nations because we *are* nations. We care about racial reconciliation because once we were at hostility toward God and his people, but now we are reconciled to God and his people through Christ Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

All throughout this passage, the imagery is not just of the City of the Lord, but the light that radiates from the city. It is this light that will push back darkness. It is this light that draws the glory of nations. It is this light that gives reason for hope.

But later in the chapter, Isaiah specifies that this light does not come from the sun or the moon. God himself is the source of light: *"The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended"* (Isa 60:19–20).

This vision is not unique to Isaiah the prophet. In fact, in the book of Revelation, John the apostle sees the same exact vision [show [5John of Patmos and the New Jerusalem](#)]. In both visions, there is a glorious eternal city. In both visions, the kings and nations are drawn to the city. In both visions, there is a radiant light that exudes from the city. But John's vision adds one crucial detail about the light source: *"And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes,*

*and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away'.... And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations” (Rev 21:2-4; 23–26).*

In Isaiah’s vision, the light comes from the Lord. In John’s vision, the light comes from the Lamb. That is because the Lamb that was slain and sacrificed upon the cross is the Lord of glory. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome him (Jn 1:4). He is the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:15). He is the light of the world (Jn 9:5).

We need to remember this truth in our time of winter and darkness. It is a dark time in our history. It is a dark time in our nation. It is literally the darkest time of the year. And yet, it is in that very darkness that hope of Advent shines most brilliantly.

Author Wendell Barry once wrote, *“It gets darker and darker, then Jesus is born.”*

So, Redeemer Christian Church, in the darkness this season, may the hope of the eternal city of the Lord shine in our hearts. May we anticipate the day when the exiles come home, culture is redeemed, and the nations are welcomed into the people of God.

*AMEN.*

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

- 1. Read Isaiah 60:1-14 and summarize this passage in your own words. For extra measure, consider reading all of Isaiah 60.*
- 2. One dominant theme in this passage is that of in-gathering. Those who were once scattered in exile will find a home in the city of the Lord. What role does the theme of exile and return from exile play in the Bible? In what ways do our lives reflect a longing for “home”?*
- 3. Some would say that Isaiah 60 presents a vision of the future that entails the redemption of human culture. What verses in this chapter support that view? What aspects of modern culture need redemption? What might that redemption look like?*
- 4. Why is it good news that people from the “nations” and “foreigners” seem to have a place in the city of the Lord? In light of this, how should the church view the “nations”?*



5. *Compare Isaiah 60 with Revelation 21. How do these passages parallel and illuminate one another? How should these passages form our hope in this season?*