

# The King of Zion and the Epicenter of God's Salvation

## The Book of Isaiah

### The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor, Part 1: The Cry of the Worker

#### Isaiah 58 – 59

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Last modified: September 5, 2021 for Neighborhood Church of Dorchester

#### Introduction: Pandemic Realizations

This Labor Day weekend, I think it's important to reflect on what we've learned about the state of working people in the U.S. Since the start of the COVID pandemic in 2020, we have seen people who were called "essential workers" being told to work, but without essential support. Teachers were asked to suddenly manage classrooms of kids online, even while their own young children were at home. It's hard being a teacher. It's hard being a parent. Our society told people to do both at the same time, in a pandemic.

Then there were the workers at the Tyson Foods meat processing plant in April 2020. Their bosses told them to keep working and keep standing right next to each other, with no social distancing, no hazard pay, and little to no personal protective equipment. That plant became a COVID hot spot at the time. But President Trump invoked the Defense Production Act to tell Tyson Foods to keep working, because meat consumers need to feel like everything is normal and the executives need to keep making big bucks. One protesting worker said, "We out here risking our lives for chicken."<sup>1</sup> In December, Tyson supervisors made bets on how many workers would get COVID.<sup>2</sup> Only two days ago, on September 3, 2021, Tyson Foods announced that they will be giving their workers paid sick leave for the first time.<sup>3</sup>

The pandemic spotlighted an ironic reality. The people who are considered "essential workers" sure aren't paid like they're essential, or treated like they're essential. Princeton professor Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor wrote this in March, 2020:

"There are more than forty million poor people in the U.S., but they almost never merit a mention. While black poverty is presented as exemplary, white poverty is obscured, and Latinos and other brown people's experiences are ignored. As many as four in five Americans say they live paycheck to paycheck. Forty per cent of Americans say that they cannot cover an unexpected four-hundred-dollar emergency expense.

"This is a virus that will thrive in the intimacy of American poverty. For years now, even in the midst of the economic recovery from the 2008 financial crisis, rising rents and stagnant salaries and wages have forced millions of families to improvise housing; nearly four million households live in overcrowded homes. This is the cruel irony of the San Francisco Bay Area's shelter-in-place mandate: the region is at the epicenter of the U.S. housing crisis, as exemplified by its growing unsheltered homeless population. How do you practice social isolation without privacy or personal space?  
[...]

"A society that allows hundreds of thousands of home health-care workers to labor without health insurance, that keeps school buildings open so that black and brown children can eat and be sheltered, that allows millionaires to stow their wealth in empty apartments while homeless families navigate the streets, that threatens eviction and loan defaults while hundreds of millions are mandated to stay inside to suppress the virus, is bewildering in its incoherence and inhumanity."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Krystal Ball, "Will Workers Strike Back After Trump Bows to Corporate Masters?" *Rising | The Hill*, April 29, 2020; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTnNNAkgnmU>.

<sup>2</sup> Krystal Ball and Saagar Enjeti, "Tyson Food Managers Bet Money On How Many Workers Would Get COVID," *Rising | The Hill*, December 22, 2020; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GUjbBnJieA>.

<sup>3</sup> Associated Press, "Tyson Foods Workers Get Paid Sick Leave as Union Backs Vaccine Mandate," reprinted by *New York Post*, September 3, 2021; <https://nypost.com/2021/09/03/tyson-foods-workers-get-paid-sick-leave-as-union-backs-vaccine-mandate/>.

<sup>4</sup> Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor, "Reality Has Endorsed Bernie Sanders," *The New Yorker*, March 30, 2020; <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/reality-has-endorsed-bernie-sanders>.

Which brings me to why my family and I have stopped using Uber and Lyft, and limited our interaction with Amazon. Not only that, I've gotten more invested in policies that help working class people. Which I will explain later, because I want to make that case to you.

### **Relevance**

The title of this series is, *The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor*. So who are the poor? We're going to take different slices of how Scripture answers that question. And if the Lord hears their cry, then how does He answer? And what does Jesus have to do with it? We will deepen in our love for Jesus, because we'll see him from multiple angles. Jesus is God's response to the cry of the poor.

It's fitting that we are starting on Labor Day, which is one way that Jesus has worked on behalf of the poor. Now Pastor Val was a labor union organizer, as chapter president of her local SEIU union. I would have loved to hear her stories. But Val is at a conference and couldn't be here today, and unfortunately we'll have to wait to hear more of her stories!

God's vision of shalom impacts every aspect of our lives. And as a community, as Neighborhood Church of Dorchester, we can really help each other by learning together and trying not to be judgmental but appreciating the principles that each person can express.

### **Context**

I'm going to move throughout the whole biblical story throughout this series. But I'm going to start the series with the book of Isaiah. Isaiah the prophet lived some 800 years before Jesus. The Jewish people had been a people for about 400 years. Isaiah served in the royal court at Jerusalem. He wrote mostly in poetry -- poetry so beautiful that when I took a college course on modern Jewish poetry, my professor brought up Isaiah and said, "Ah, Isaiah!" The writings of Isaiah were very important to the ancient Jewish community. In the Dead Sea Scroll collection, we have complete scrolls of Isaiah preserved. They have been dated to about 300 years before Jesus. And Isaiah is long! We know the writings of Isaiah were important to Jesus. When Jesus started his public ministry in Nazareth, he opened with a quote from Isaiah (Isa.61:1 - 2 in Luke 4:17 - 18).

### **Text: Isaiah 58 - 59**

So it's powerful that Isaiah says God hears the cry of the poor. Here is just a small part of Isaiah 58:

“Declare to My people their transgression  
And to the house of Jacob their sins.”  
They say: ‘Why have we fasted and You do not see?  
Why have we humbled ourselves and You do not notice?’  
[Then God responds:] “Behold, on the day of your fast you find your desire,  
And drive hard all your workers.  
Is this not the fast which I choose,  
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,  
To undo the bands of the yoke,  
And to let the oppressed go free  
And break every yoke?” (Isaiah 58:1, 3, 6)

So clearly, God hears the cry of the poor. When the people of Israel were in Egypt, there was a Pharaoh who made them slaves. They were held by bonds of wickedness and bands of the yoke, threatened by whips and made to build cities. But God brought them into a garden land, to restore what Adam and Eve were supposed to be in the original garden land. When God partnered with the people of Israel, He expected that the people would care for each other, because God cared for all of them. So why should some people have the power to make the garden land into a repeat of Pharaoh's Egyptian slavery for others? Isaiah is definitely comparing the conditions of his day to the time in Egypt under Pharaoh. God heard the cry of the poor under Pharaoh. He heard the cry of the poor under Israelites. He hears the cry of the poor now.

So what does God do about it? He gets personally involved. Here is the very next chapter:

We hope for justice, but there is none,

For salvation, but it is far from us.  
Now the Lord saw,  
And it was displeasing in His sight that there was no justice.  
And He saw that there was no man,  
And was astonished that there was no one to intercede;  
Then His own arm brought salvation to Him,  
And His righteousness upheld Him.  
He put on righteousness like a breastplate,  
And a helmet of salvation on His head;  
And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing  
And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle.  
“A Redeemer will come to Zion,” declares the Lord. (Isa.59:11, 15 - 17, 20)

That sure sounds like Jesus. The New Testament quotes Isaiah 59 in multiple places as being about Jesus. Now in later weeks, I will explore these two chapters. But let's just notice the relationship between them. Isaiah 58 is about what we could call “labor justice,” or social justice for the vulnerable, or the poor. Then Isaiah 59 is about God hearing the cry of the poor, and coming personally as Redeemer. Why is this here? How do we respond to God?

### **God Deals with the Root Cause of Injustice**

Fundamentally, Isaiah says that God comes near and intervenes to bring justice and shalom for the poor. God is a Redeemer, says Isaiah. “To redeem” means “to deliver something or someone out from.” God redeemed Israel out of slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. But now, God has to do a deeper work of redemption. Because Israel was no longer in slavery to someone like Pharaoh who was external to them. They were not in Egypt. They were in the garden land. And yet, they were reproducing the slavery of before. Because the corruption of sin wasn't located only along the Nile River, or on the throne of Pharaoh. It is found in every human being because of the fall in the original garden. And no matter where we go, and no matter who sits in the halls of government, the corruption of sin in our human nature makes us selfish, greedy, and unjust. So God had to redeem people from the corruption of sin, from something inside of us. And God has to keep strengthening the image of God in us, and our desire to be true to Him.

So when God says no one else could do it, God says He has to do it Himself. But how? God can't keep moving people around, because the problem is in us, so injustice follows us wherever we go. The bigger problem is that God loves us, so God does things with our partnership. He doesn't just wave a wand, because He can't. So if God wants to redeem us from our self-inflicted wound, heal us from the sin-sickness, and transform us, then God would have to become one of us, win the battles we could never win, pour out the wrath of God against the sin-sickness in his own human body, so that He could help us share in His victory on our behalf. And that is what Isaiah is saying here. God put on righteousness -- not divine righteousness because as God, He was always righteous, but human righteousness as one of God's own people. God put on salvation -- not for Himself as God, because God doesn't need saving, but salvation for humanity, because human beings and human nature and human relationships need saving. Jesus came into the world. He shared in our broken humanity, so that we could share in his healed humanity through the power of his Holy Spirit.

This is what the fourth century Syrian Christian poet Ephrem the Syrian wrote about Jesus:

Blessed be He Whose own will brought Him to the Womb and Birth,  
To arms and to increase [in stature].  
Blessed He whose changes purchased life for human nature.  
[...] Glory to Him Who loosed us, and was bound for us all!  
[...] Glory to the Beautiful, Who conformed us to His image! Glory to that Fair One, Who looked not to our foulnesses!  
Glory to Him Who sowed His Light in the darkness,  
[...] He also stripped and took off from us the clothing of our filthiness (Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns of the Nativity* 2)

When we read about Jesus, we see that Jesus started dignifying people right from his birth. His angel drew shepherds to his manger; shepherds were the low-paid workers who were kind of outcast because they had to work on the sabbath, so the rest of Jewish society looked down on them. But the infant Jesus wanted them to show up on

his birthday, or close to it. And that had an impact on people. Jesus engaged with everyone. But he especially cared for those who were poor or had lower status: outcasts, children, women with health issues, household servants, marginal people, people who didn't "deserve" better, people considered to be traitors.

Let me put it this way. Jesus shows us what it means to be truly human, and pours his life and his love into us by his Spirit to be the same way. Jesus is who God always meant for you to be: the beauty of his life, the power of his love, the wisdom of his mentorship. God always intended for us to be like Jesus, and be with Jesus, never alone, never by ourselves.

### **Did Jesus Have an Impact, Especially for the Labor Movement?**

Okay, so did Jesus actually make a difference in both people and policy? Since this is Labor Day weekend, I just want to go through a short list of history because we need to bear witness to Jesus. I think this will help us love Jesus more.

How many of you like having weekends off? How did that start? God gave the Jewish community Saturday as the Jewish Sabbath day of rest and worship. Then Roman Emperor Constantine made Sunday the Christian sabbath, so that people could rest. That eventually meant that not just Christians but everyone got to rest. And different societies carried that over. In the 1800s, British and American unions fought for the weekend -- not the Ethiopian Canadian singer and rapper The Weeknd -- but the actual Saturday and Sunday weekend. And they won that policy battle because of the tradition. They made it official for everyone.

What about freeing people from slavery? Slavery is the most oppressive form of labor. And there are different forms of slavery in history. But slavery as in being kidnapped and forced to work? Christians freed people from that, and abolished slavery like that. All throughout Northwestern and Northern Europe, Christian faith abolished kidnapping-based slavery, like the Viking raids. And we in the United States need to be clear about this. From 1102, England developed a Christian tradition that any enslaved person who stepped on the soil of England would become free. That's why when the African man called James Somerset stepped off the slave ship in England in 1771, he won his freedom in an English court case called *Somerset v. Stewart* in 1772. It was the American colonial settlers who wanted to commit heresy and preserve slavery. Colonialism made the colonies a legal gray area, not just about slavery but labor rights in general.

So what about fair wages? Yes: Jesus said the commandment, "Do not steal" is still in effect. And paying unfair wages was seen as stealing. The Christian tradition said the rich were robbing from the poor by withholding what God wanted for them. And Christians developed ideas that we use today: fair wages and just prices. They protected people from debt.<sup>5</sup> In the 1800's, Christians fought against child labor in the factories.<sup>6</sup> In the 1960s, two very Catholic farm workers groups allied in California: Filipinos and Mexicans. They marched to Sacramento to demand fair wages, and people took turns carrying a large wooden cross, all the way to Sacramento. Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huertas were the most famous labor organizers, but there were many, like Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz. They formed the United Farm Workers, a union that made a big impact. They drew on the Catholic Social Teaching, like Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, which was subtitled, "On the Condition of Labor." He said:

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Franklin Cooper, "Ideological History: The Fourth International Take on 1619," *The Heavy Anglo-Orthodox*, December 5, 2019; <https://heavyangloorthodox.blogspot.com/2019/12/the-1619-project-and-left.html>. Cooper writes, "In Europe itself, the two institutions – the slavery of Antiquity, and the chattel slavery of the Age of Exploration – were separated by a good half millennium of gradual abolition and humane developments in law, like those undertaken by Adamán of Iona in the British Isles and by Eike von Repgow on the Continent. This gradual abolition happened in large part because of the building reliance of the agrarian economies of the late-antique barbarian kingdoms on arable land and its produce rather than on labour. This economic structure, which was still largely in place on the continent during the capitalist revolution, was the source of a great deal of the early resistance to the new institution of modern chattel slavery, and made up a significant element of the abolition movement going forward. This is something I have laid great stress on over the course of my writing on this blog. The old feudal resistance to the new money-based, urban and mercantile economy provided an early basis for the proletarian resistance that was as yet in its germinal stage."

<sup>6</sup> Darren Cushman Wood, *Blue Collar Jesus: How Christianity Supports Worker Rights* (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 2004), ch.4 especially p.57 - 64.

“...wages ought [to be sufficient] to support a frugal and well-behaved wage-earner. If through necessity or fear of a worse evil the workman accept harder conditions because an employer or contractor will afford him no better, he is made the victim of force and injustice.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Practical Challenges**

But buying something is like voting, but with your dollars. United Farm Workers asked Americans to not buy California grapes. And that’s why I’m asking you to consider the question: Even if something is cheap, what would make you not buy it? Even if something is cheap, what would make you not buy it?

Now here’s where not using Uber or Lyft, and limiting interaction with Amazon. I know these are not the most radical examples that we could talk about. But they’re examples that all of us can relate to and consider. I’d be happy if you went far beyond me in your own learning and action. But let’s start with this.

I know there’s a lot of convenience to ridesharing companies; I know some of us have driven for them; I know there’s money to be made, and money to be saved. But here are the reasons. From a worker perspective, and an ecological perspective, ridesharing causes big problems. Uber and Lyft cause a race to the bottom. They treat drivers as independent contractors, to get around labor laws, and to get around paying benefits. So that causes people to use public transportation and taxi companies less often, and that’s unfortunately because the MBTA and taxi companies do treat workers better. They have regular employees and worker unions. And several studies have shown that ridesharing increases traffic congestion,<sup>8</sup> including a 2018 study commissioned by Uber and Lyft.<sup>9</sup> So I’ve decided that unless I need to get someone to the hospital and Uber and Lyft were the only way to do that, for some reason, that I’ll avoid ride-sharing companies. And I like legislation that prevents the race to the bottom.

There’s also Amazon. Amazon is the second largest private employer in the U.S. Jeff Bezos, its founder and until recently CEO, stockpiled billions, and made even more money during the pandemic than before. It’s true that Amazon pays \$15/hour minimum, but they did not start doing until November 2018 after Bernie Sanders led the charge against Jeff Bezos by collecting story after story from workers. And the stories just keep coming. Warehouse workers walk 15 miles a day because the warehouses are so huge. Amazon fired pregnant women working in the warehouses because they needed more bathroom breaks; seven of those fired workers filed lawsuits.<sup>10</sup> Warehouse workers have gone on strikes in multiple countries, complained about overheating (one warehouse had 100 degree heat), dust in their eyes and lungs, being given fans that don’t work, water fountains that don’t work, premature aging, and suicidal thoughts. And drivers say they are under such tight schedules that they have to urinate and defecate in their vehicles. Amazon supervisors admitted they knew about this, after they denied it. And Amazon negotiates with states and cities to get tax benefits, even though they bring down wages for other warehousing workers. We have to recognize this. Before Amazon, you had to physically go the store, and things cost more. How does Amazon get stuff to your door for *less*? It’s by squeezing their workers. Especially if you’re an Amazon Prime member and get next day delivery? And of course, Amazon emits lots of fossil fuel carbon because of their driving, although they are looking into electric vehicles. But then again, they give to climate change deniers like the Competitive Enterprise Institute, and politicians who deny climate change. Amazon’s own workers went on strike in 2019 to protest Amazon’s climate impact. So for my family, we try to use Amazon less by planning more. If I just plan to run my errands better, life is good. And I used to use Amazon to buy books for my work as a curriculum developer. Now, I use eBay and libraries.

### **Objections**

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, p.45. See also Wood, p.77 - 91.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Schaller, “The New Automobility: Lyft, Uber, and the Future of American Cities,” *Schaller Consulting*, July 25, 2018; <http://www.schallerconsult.com/ridesharingservices/automobility.pdf>. Summarized by Sean Wolfe, “Uber and Lyft Are Creating More Traffic and Congestion Instead of Reducing It, According to a New Report,” *Business Insider*, July 27, 2018; <https://www.businessinsider.com/uber-lyft-creating-traffic-cities-bruce-schaller-2018-7>.

<sup>9</sup> Melissa Balding, Teresa Whinery, Eleanor Leshner and Eric Womeldorff, “Estimated Percent of Total Driving by Lyft and Uber in Six Major US Regions,” *Fehr & Peers*, September 2018; <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1FIUskVkj9lsAnWJQ6kLhAhNoVLjffDx3/view>. Summarized by Andrew J. Hawkins, “Uber and Lyft Finally Admit They’re Making Traffic Congestion Worse in Cities,” *The Verge*, August 6, 2019; <https://www.theverge.com/2019/8/6/20756945/uber-lyft-tnc-vmt-traffic-congestion-study-fehr-peers>.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Ng and Ben Fox Rubin, “Amazon Fired These 7 Pregnant Workers. Then Came the Lawsuits.” *CNET*, May 6, 2019; <https://www.cnet.com/features/amazon-fired-these-7-pregnant-workers-then-came-the-lawsuits/>.

But let me deal with some objections. Christianity is about saving souls for heaven. It's about souls and not bodies. That's not true. God cares about our souls and bodies -- the whole human being. That's why in Isaiah 58, God cares about bodies, work, wages, and community. It's why in Isaiah 59, God comes into a human body and called himself Jesus of Nazareth. We are not just souls. We are also bodies. And God cares about your whole being. That is what shalom means.

The second objection is that Christians should only focus on personal issues and not policy issues. But that's not true either. Colonialism is the reason why we have that divide. People in Europe came to the Americas to find a safe space to practice their heresies. They didn't want to respect what the Church said about not stealing other people's land, not stealing actual people, not stealing wages, and not stealing other people's health. Colonialism said, "If you want to protest all this stealing, just focus on the personal and not the political."

So we have to keep our eye on both. When British Christian abolitionists fought slavery, and eventually shut down the slave trade in 1807 and then abolished slavery in 1833, they not only rallied people to oppose slavery politically, they called for people to make a personal choice: to not buy sugar, because who produced the sugar? Enslaved people in the Caribbean. They put the policy change constantly in front of people by making it personal, too.

So let's be on this journey together. God hears the cry of the poor. May Jesus help us to hear as well.