

**Isaiah 59:1 – 21**

- <sup>59:1</sup> Behold, the LORD'S hand is not so short that it cannot save;  
Nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear.
- <sup>2</sup> But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God,  
And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.
- <sup>3</sup> For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity;  
Your lips have spoken falsehood, your tongue mutters wickedness.
- <sup>4</sup> No one sues righteously and no one pleads honestly.  
They trust in confusion and speak lies;  
They conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity.
- <sup>5</sup> They hatch adders' eggs and weave the spider's web;  
He who eats of their eggs dies, and from that which is crushed a snake breaks forth.
- <sup>6</sup> Their webs will not become clothing, nor will they cover themselves with their works;  
Their works are works of iniquity, and an act of violence is in their hands.
- <sup>7</sup> Their feet run to evil, and they hasten to shed innocent blood;  
Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, devastation and destruction are in their highways.
- <sup>8</sup> They do not know the way of peace, and there is no justice in their tracks;  
They have made their paths crooked, whoever treads on them does not know peace.
- <sup>9</sup> Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us;  
We hope for light, but behold, darkness, for brightness, but we walk in gloom.
- <sup>10</sup> We grope along the wall like blind men, we grope like those who have no eyes;  
We stumble at midday as in the twilight, among those who are vigorous we are like dead men.
- <sup>11</sup> All of us growl like bears, and moan sadly like doves;  
We hope for justice, but there is none, for salvation, but it is far from us.
- <sup>12</sup> For our transgressions are multiplied before You, and our sins testify against us;  
For our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities:
- <sup>13</sup> Transgressing and denying the LORD, and turning away from our God,  
Speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving in and uttering from the heart lying words.
- <sup>14</sup> Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away;  
For truth has stumbled in the street, and uprightness cannot enter.
- <sup>15</sup> Yes, truth is lacking; and he who turns aside from evil makes himself a prey.  
Now the LORD saw, and it was displeasing in His sight that there was no justice.
- <sup>16</sup> 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.
- <sup>17</sup> 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.
- <sup>18</sup> According to their deeds, so He will repay,  
Wrath to His adversaries, recompense to His enemies;  
To the coastlands He will make recompense.
- <sup>19</sup> So they will fear the name of the LORD from the west and His glory from the rising of the sun,  
For He will come like a rushing stream which the wind of the LORD drives.
- <sup>20</sup> 'A Redeemer will come to Zion,  
And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,' declares the LORD.
- <sup>21</sup> 'As for Me, this is My covenant with them,' says the LORD:  
'My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth  
Shall not depart from your mouth,  
Nor from the mouth of your offspring,  
Nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring,' says the LORD, 'from now and forever.'

## Historical and Cultural Background

- *Norse Myth*: The *Poetic Edda* is a collection of poems in Old Norse. The oldest existing copy we have is the Codex Regius, written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Iceland. The leading gods are Odin and Frigga, Thor and Loki, etc.

‘The Norse culture, like many ancient ones, wasn’t a democracy, but a meritocracy. You had to work for your blessings from Odin; they weren’t just handed down freely. In tale after tale, men had to literally and metaphorically bleed themselves in order to attain their aims and transform into warriors — the only type of man who had a chance at accompanying the Allfather to Valhalla.’<sup>1</sup>

- *Isaiah*: A poetic preacher who lived around 800 BC, in the Southern Kingdom of Judah (after the nation Israel split into two kingdoms). He is among the ‘Hebrew prophets’ who put their hope in God to bring about a worldwide change through the Jewish Messiah (final king). The oldest existing copy we have is the Great Isaiah Scroll from among the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating from between 350 BC – 100 BC.
- *The Redeemer*: The title comes from Israel’s history of needing a champion from God who would rescue and deliver them out of the hand of a foreign power, so they could live under God’s reign. The note at verse 20 reflects a subtle but fascinating difference in ancient manuscripts.

## Guiding Questions

1. In Isaiah, the God of the Bible is interested in the rehabilitation of people, not just punishing them or making them prove themselves. Does that surprise you?
2. In the Norse story, we have an example of a god (or gods) who does not get involved to help human beings very much. Why would there be wisdom in letting human beings prove themselves? Why would there be drawbacks, if you were someone hoping for second chances?
3. In the biblical story, how does God get personally involved? If God had said that He was just going to isolate people and forget about them, how would that feel different to you than what He says here?
4. Did God *need* to be personally involved in order to solve this problem?

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Anderberg, ‘Viking Mythology: What a Man Can Learn from Odin’ (*The Art of Manliness* website, May 28, 2018) summarizing the Norse poems *The Poetic Edda*. Online: <https://www.artofmanliness.com/articles/viking-mythology-odin/>; last accessed May 30, 2018

## Questions

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2. In the Norse story, we have an example of a god (or gods) who does not get involved to help human beings very much. Why would there be wisdom in letting human beings prove themselves? Why would there be drawbacks, if you were someone hoping for second chances?
  - a. Wisdom in letting human beings prove themselves
    - i. Prove it to me. I don't just take you back. Prove you've changed or are capable of changing.
    - ii. Meritocracy of trust protects you if you're innocent
  - b. Drawbacks if you were hoping for second chances
    - i. How much sacrifice is enough? Odin suffered for a long time, and almost died! Maybe he did die, sort of. Is that what I have to go through?
    - ii. Why should people trust you now? When you were born, people welcomed you because you had a blank slate. When you come out of prison, you don't have a blank slate.
3. In the biblical story, how does God get personally involved? If God had said that He was just going to isolate people and forget about them, how would that feel different to you than what He says here?
  - a. STATE: The previous chapter, Isaiah 58, is a famous statement where God called Israel to do justice and not just religious ceremonies. The issues that get brought up there include: housing the homeless; clothing the naked; paying workers fairly and on time; giving them time off to rest on the Sabbath. Here, notice that God sees that He needs to do something more than just give commands. He needs to personally come down and show up.
  - b. What kinds of injustices are being perpetrated?
    - i. Violence in the streets (v.3)
    - ii. Bribery and lying in the court (v.4)
    - iii. Transgression and denying God, oppression and revolt (v.13)
  - c. What elements of this passage suggests that God is retributive?
    - i. It sounds retributive: 'According to their deeds, so He will repay, Wrath to His adversaries, recompense to His enemies; to the coastlands He will make recompense.' (v.18) That sounds like God is just going to pay people back for what they've done.
    - ii. But wait. He's just said that no one has done justly, and that there was 'no man' and 'no one to intercede' (v.16). If everyone gets what he or she deserves, and no one is on God's side, how does anyone survive?
    - iii. Notice that in v.17, God Himself will come, and be righteousness, salvation, vengeance, and zeal. He will uphold His own standards, and deliver people. He will be truly human, human the way He's always envisioned it.
    - iv. So people *do* get what they deserve: They get God. God gives us Himself. That means He purges out of us the sin and injustice, because that is what we deserve. And that means He gives us Himself, because He is what we deserve. God's wrath is against our sinfulness and injustice. God's love is for us as persons. If people keep resisting God and pursuing injustice, they will become addicted to something that won't be available to them, like an alcoholic who wants alcohol where it's not available.
  - d. STATE: The apostle Paul, in Romans 11:26 – 27, does NOT use this translation of Isaiah 59:20, which is taken from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible – called the Septuagint translation. Instead, Paul bypasses the Greek translation and goes back to the Hebrew original (or what I assume is the original). So he says,

Isaiah 59:20 'The deliverer will come from Zion,  
*He will remove ungodliness* from Jacob,' declares the LORD [quoted by Paul in Romans 11:26]

He does NOT say:

Isaiah 59:20 'A Redeemer will come to Zion,  
And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,' declares the LORD.

- e. What's the evidence that God reverses sin and injustice?
  - i. Verse 20: He removes sin from them! He doesn't just change His mind about punishing them. This is not a legalistic forgiveness. It's about changing them. He will *remove ungodliness* from Jacob, that is, sinfulness from His people.
  - ii. Verse 21: He changes how people speak. The Israelites had lips that spoke falsehood, tongues that muttered wickedness (v.3). They were 'speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving in and uttering from the heart lying words' (v.13) and 'truth has stumbled in the street' (v.14). But God promises that the Spirit that rests on himself (or the Messiah) will be on them, and God's words will be in their mouths (v.21).
  - iii. To see how Jesus fulfilled this, and brought about change, see below.
- 4. Did God need to be personally involved in order to solve this problem?
  - a. The Bible seems to be talking about human nature here. So can human nature be changed or healed?
    - i. If human nature is just the product of evolution, then won't competition, and sometimes ruthless competition, be okay?
    - ii. If human nature is not just physical, but also spiritual, then won't we need a spiritual source of change, too?
    - iii. For more examples of how to talk about human nature from a Christian perspective, see: resources on the New Humanity Institute blog site: <https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/sharing-jesus/>
  - b. Illus: Dr. Daniel Riesel gave a February, 2013 TED talk called *The Neuroscience of Restorative Justice*, about studying the brains of psychopathic murderers. Dr. Riesel says that the brains of offenders are further damaged especially by solitary confinement, and imprisonment when not accompanied by other humanizing, relational activities:

'It is ironic that our current solution for people with stressed amygdalas is to place them in an environment that actually inhibits any chance of further growth. Of course, imprisonment is a necessary part of the criminal justice system and protecting society... [But] because our brains are capable of change, we need to take responsibility for our actions, and they need to take responsibility for their rehabilitation.'

To reduce reoffending rates, and reimprisonment, Dr. Riesel recommends restorative justice practices:

'One way such rehabilitation might work is through restorative justice programs. Here, victims, if they choose to participate, and perpetrators, meet face to face in safe, structured encounters. The perpetrators is encouraged to take responsibility for their actions. The victim plays an active role in the process. In such a setting, the perpetrator can see, perhaps for the first time, the victim as a real person with thoughts and feelings and a genuine emotional response. This stimulates the amygdala, and may be a more effective rehabilitative practice than simple incarceration. Such programs won't work for everyone. But for many, it could be a way to break the frozen sea within.'

However, we face a challenge in embracing this option: our own thirst for retribution. Riesel says:

'Finally, I believe we need to change our own amygdalas. Because this issue goes to the heart not just of who [a murderer] is, but who we are. We need to change our view of Joe as someone wholly irredeemable. Because if we see [a murderer] as wholly irredeemable, how will see himself as any different?'

Another neuroscientist, Pascal Boyer, also argues that the human brain seems to respond to 'karmic justice' as a principle. That is, men and women seem wired to believe in retributive justice on the cosmic level. Journalist Casey Luskin writes a fairly readable summary of Dr. Boyer's argument:

‘Humans are pattern-seekers from birth, with a belief in karma, or cosmic justice, as our default setting.’

Karmic retributive justice! This brain wiring suggests why the most deeply philosophical forms of ancient Hindu and ancient Greek cosmology alike agreed about cycles of karma, reincarnation, and the principle of retribution. That view of the world just makes more sense to us intuitively. It also concurs with the more natural observations of how the world works: in endless cycles and circles.

Another journalist connects this neurological wiring for karmic justice to our taste for literature, both mythic and modern. When people ‘get what they deserve’ in a story, it touches a certain part of our brains:

‘Indeed, it appears that stories exist to establish that there exists a mechanism or a person—cosmic destiny, karma, God, fate, Mother Nature—to make sure the right thing happens to the right person. Without this overarching moral mechanism, narratives become records of unrelated arbitrary events, and lose much of their entertainment value. In contrast, the stories which become universally popular appear to be carefully composed records of cosmic justice at work.

‘In manuals for writers (see “Screenplay” by Syd Field, for example) this process is often defined in some detail. Would-be screenwriters are taught that during the build-up of the story, the villain can sin (take unfair advantages) to his or her heart’s content without punishment, but the heroic protagonist must be karmically punished for even the slightest deviation from the path of moral rectitude. The hero does eventually win the fight, not by being bigger or stronger, but because of the choices he makes.

‘This process is so well-established in narrative creation that the literati have even created a specific category for the minority of tales which fail to follow this pattern. They are known as “bleak” narratives.’<sup>2</sup>

Consider what (at least some) neuroscience is telling us about ourselves: Restorative justice practices work better than retributive justice practices in reducing criminal behavior. We see that empirically. We also understand why: Our amygdalas produce more healthy brain cells when we are in constructive relationships with others. And yet the ‘default setting’ (said tentatively) of our brain is karmic retributive justice! At least with some wrong-doers, and people we feel unable to trust, we simply desire to punish them. We isolate them in massive prisons. We put them out of our sight. We stop caring about them. Often, when they get out of prison, we continue to penalize them by denying them voting rights, food stamps, public housing eligibility, many types of employment, and relief from indebtedness. So ‘we need to change our own amygdalas,’ as Dr. Daniel Reisel says.

5. Why is this important for us? In confronting the problem of mass incarceration (see the NHI study of *The New Jim Crow*), once we call someone a criminal, it’s really easy to forget about them, and dehumanize them. Then we don’t think about sharing or showing God’s grace to them.
  - a. Currently, federal prisons are 40% overcapacity – does that bother us?
  - b. Jesus believed that the captive and the oppressed are everyone. We are captive in our own bodies to the oppression of sin. Paul said the same thing in Romans 7:25. Our human nature has become corrupted. Jesus came to heal us of that. That’s why in the passage right before this one, he went through the temptation experience. He was showing that he was going to be victorious over every temptation. Then he was going to conquer sin by dying and killing the thing in himself that shouldn’t be there. Because it shouldn’t be in us either. And in his resurrection, he comes back as a healed, new humanity. He shares himself with us by his Spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> Nury Vittachi, ‘Scientists Discover That Atheists Might Not Exist, and That’s Not a Joke,’ *Science 2.0*, July 6, 2014; [http://www.science20.com/writer\\_on\\_the\\_edge/blog/scientists\\_discover\\_that\\_atheists\\_might\\_not\\_exist\\_and\\_thats\\_not\\_a\\_joke-139982](http://www.science20.com/writer_on_the_edge/blog/scientists_discover_that_atheists_might_not_exist_and_thats_not_a_joke-139982)

- c. If Jesus entered into our deepest captivity and prison, how much more are we called to enter into the captivity and prisons of others, not in the sense of committing a crime or sinning, but to understand and support and be an encouragement?
  - d. Illus: Let me tell you just one story of how Jesus has touched people on the other side of the drug trade. Colombia in South America has long been known for its drug cartels, supplying the U.S. and other countries. Medellin, its second largest city, is the violence capital of Colombia. For a long time, there were ‘3,000 homicides a year in Medellín alone, by knife, machete, pistol, machine gun, grenade, and bomb.’<sup>3</sup> In Medellín stands Bellavista Prison. It is filled with ‘terrorists, guerrillas, paramilitaries, bad cops and soldiers, narcotraffickers, common criminals and sicarios (killers for hire).’ Once, inmates played soccer with a severed human head. And at one point, there were 60 deaths a month as rival groups fought it out among their cardboard and wood cubicles. Then in January of 1990, the prison guards walked off the job to protest the daily violence. A massive riot broke out among the inmates. The Colombian army was called in. ‘But days into the standoff, Oscar Osorio, a Bellavista convict who became prison chaplain, gathered a handful of Christian volunteers associated with [a Christian ministry called] Prison Fellowship International. Singing hymns and carrying white flags, Osorio and his volunteers marched in procession through the prison gates.’ They weren’t sure if they would make it out alive. Entering the prison was like Jesus entering our world, and offering to enter our lives. Osorio found the prison’s PA system was still working, so the chaplain preached. He called for repentance. The inmates laid down their weapons. And the riot was over, just like that. Not only that, a huge spiritual revival broke out in Bellavista Prison. Three hundred Christian inmates gathered as prayer partners. Prisoners began surrendering their weapons to Oscar Osorio and his team. But I want to make sure you know more details of the story, because it’s not that Oscar and his team just showed up one day. He had been working in the prison for three years – arriving at 8 a.m. and spending the entire day inside with the prisoners. In fact, Christian ministry there went back to 1976. So now, people’s lives are being deeply transformed by Jesus. Prisoners now in love with Jesus have even requested transfers to other dangerous prisons in order to go talk about Jesus there. Bellavista Prison now has a pastoral training program and is a missionary sending agency!<sup>4</sup> So that team of Colombian Christians demonstrated the love of Christ. Because they were walking with Jesus as he entered into places of darkness, in our world and in our hearts, to set us free from sin so we could be God’s people.
6. Application:
- a. We need to think of the church as a community of rehabilitation and restoration.
    - i. ‘In his 2000 thesis, *The Significance of Christianity in ‘Reforming’ Prisoners*, Arthur J. Bolkas reported on his research designed to determine the level of transformation in the lives 45 inmates and 15 former prisoners. Positively, the study concluded the following: Christian prisoners/ex-prisoners believed that being a Christian made a qualitative difference to life in prison, offering essential hope, meaning and purpose in life, a positive outlook, and productive use of time. Christianity provided a different way of life, with new morals, values, and a renewed sense of self that helped overcome guilt and generally enhanced relationships. Belonging to a religious group provided practical and moral/spiritual support, which assisted prison adjustment and personal security. Moreover, Christian inmates had more self-control and tolerance/respect (than they ordinarily would) for authorities and others, resulting in fewer institutional rule violations. (Bolkas, 2000)’ However, Christian inmates sometimes are stigmatized by staff and fellow prisoners. And going from prison to release and into a church context can feel like a hard cultural shift.<sup>5</sup>
  - b. We need to advocate for at least the option of restorative justice over retributive justice.
    - i. ‘According to Howard Zehr, retributive justice is when “crime is a violation of the state, defined by lawbreaking and guilt. Justice determines blame and administers pain in a contest between the offender and the state directed by systematic rules” (Zehr, 1990). On

<sup>3</sup> Deann Alford, “New Life in a Culture of Death,” *Christianity Today*, February 1, 2004

<sup>4</sup> David Miller, *The Lord of Bellavista* (Evangel Publishing House, 1999); Jeannine Bourbon, “God at Work in Colombia,” message given at the Heart-Cry for Revival Conference, April 2006

<sup>5</sup> George Walters-Sleyon, “Studies on Religion and Recidivism: Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan,” *Trotter Review*: Vol.21: Issue 1, Article 4, (July 21, 2013), p.35; [http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter\\_review/vol21/iss1/4/](http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol21/iss1/4/)

the contrary, restorative justice is when “crime is a violation of people and relationships. It creates obligations to make things right. Justice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions that promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance” (Zehr, 1990). Fundamental to restorative justice is holistic healing that involves different facets of human relationships and connections. For John W. De Gruchy, restorative justice implies justice that is “reconciliatory.” “Reconciliation,” he argues, “is, indeed, an action, praxis and movement before it becomes a theory or dogma... Reconciliation is properly understood as a process in which we become engaged at the heart of the struggle for justice and peace in the world” (De Gruchy, 2002). Restorative justice reconciles the offender and the offended in the presence of the community for the healing of all parties.’<sup>6</sup>

- c. We need to find meaningful ways of guarding prisoners’ rights, and opposing private prisons.
  - i. The Human Rights Defense Center is currently doing a Campaign for Prison Phone Justice. That’s a small part of the overall problem, but it’s a start. Check <https://www.humanrightsdefensecenter.org/action/>.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.37 – 38