

ISAIAH LESSON 55

The Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn^a
(Isaiah 59:1-21)

Isaiah 59:1-21 Revised Standard Version (RSV)

Injustice and Oppression to Be Punished^b

59 Behold, the Lord's^c hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,

or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;^d

²but your iniquities have made a separation

between you and your God^e,

and your sins have hid his face from you

so that he does not hear.^f

³For your hands are defiled with blood

and your fingers with iniquity;

your lips have spoken lies,

your tongue mutters wickedness.^g

⁴No one enters suit justly,

no one goes to law honestly;

they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies,

they conceive mischief and bring forth iniquity.^h

⁵They hatch adders' eggs,

they weave the spider's web;

he who eats their eggs dies,

and from one which is crushed a viper is hatched.ⁱ

⁶Their webs will not serve as clothing;

men will not cover themselves with what they make.

Their works are works of iniquity,

and deeds of violence are in their hands.^j

⁷Their feet run to evil,

and they make haste to shed innocent blood;

their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity,

desolation and destruction are in their highways.^k

⁸The way of peace they know not,

and there is no justice in their paths;

they have made their roads crooked,

no one who goes in them knows peace.^l

⁹Therefore justice is far from us,

and righteousness does not overtake us;

we look for light, and behold, darkness,

and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.^m

¹⁰We grope for the wall like the blind,

we grope like those who have no eyes;

we stumble at noon as in the twilight,

among those in full vigor we are like dead men.ⁿ

¹¹We all growl like bears,

we moan and moan like doves;

we look for justice, but there is none;
for salvation, but it is far from us.^o

¹²For our transgressions are multiplied before thee,
and our sins testify against us;
for our transgressions are with us,
and we know our iniquities:^p

¹³transgressing, and denying the Lord,
and turning away from following our God,
speaking oppression and revolt,
conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words.^q

¹⁴Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands afar off;
for truth has fallen in the public squares,
and uprightness cannot enter.^r

¹⁵Truth is lacking,
and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey.
The Lord saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.^s

¹⁶He saw that there was no man,
and wondered that there was no one to intervene;
then his own arm brought him victory,
and his righteousness upheld him.^t

¹⁷He put on righteousness as a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation upon his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and wrapped himself in fury as a mantle.^u

¹⁸According to their deeds, so will he repay,
wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies;
to the coastlands he will render requital.^v

¹⁹So they shall 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.^w

²⁰“And he will come to Zion as Redeemer^x,
to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the lord.^y

²¹“And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit^z which is upon you, and my words which I
have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth
of your children’s children, says the Lord, from this time forth and for evermore.”^{aa}

Revised Standard Version (RSV)

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STUDY QUESTIONS:

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the United States of America. Ralph Stanley/Emmylou Harris and David Crosby lyrics are property of their owners and are provided for educational purposes and personal use only.

^a **The Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn.** Jhan's title for this lesson likely comes from a line from a Ralph Stanley song subsequently recorded by Emmylou Harris, *Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn*: "The sun is slowly sinkin' / The day's almost gone / Still darkness falls around us / And we must journey on . . . / Like a shepherd out on the mountain / A-watchin' the sheep down below / He's coming back to claim us / Will you be ready to go / The darkest hour is just before dawn / The narrow way leads home / Lay down your soul at Jesus' feet / The darkest hour is just before dawn." But knowing Jhan, and his love for 60's and 70's rock, it might also be a reference to the David Crosby song, sung by Crosby, Stills and Nash, *Long Time Gone*. These lyrics include the lines, "And it appears to be a long . . . Yes, a long, long, long, long time before the dawn . . . You know there's something that's goin' on around here [that] surely won't stand the light of day . . . Speak out you got to speak out against the madness / You got to speak your mind if you dare . . . The darkest hour is always, always just before the dawn." Both references might be appropriate, and his Bible study recording does not make clear to which he was referring.

^b **Injustice and Oppression to Be Punished.** In this Chapter Isaiah develops the idea that "there is no peace . . . for the wicked" (Is 57:21) developed in the previous chapter.

^c **Lord - Yahweh, or Jehovah (יהוה), YHWH**, written without vowel markings, unpronounced by Jews and referred to as the Tetragrammaton. See Note in the Introduction to this Study. **YHWH** appears here and in verses 13, 15, 19 (twice), 20 and 21 (twice).

^d (1) Is 5:25, 6:10, 30:19, 41:20, 50:2, 58:9, 63:1, 65:24; Gn 18:14; Nu 11:23; Jr 32:17; Mt 13:15; Lk 1:37; Heb 7:25
Behold (הִנֵּה, *hen*), the Lord's hand (יָד, *yad*) is not shortened, that is, too weak or unable to reach far enough, to save (יָשַׁע, *yasha*), nor are His ears so heavy (כִּבֵּד, *kabed*) that they cannot hear (שָׁמַע, *shama*). The sense of the LXX is the same except that it is in the form of a rhetorical question, "Has the hand of the Lord no power to save? Or has He made His ear heavy, so that He should not hear?" The reference to the "hand" or "arm" of the Lord is always to God's power, most often for the protection of His people (___).

^e **God - Elohim (אֱלֹהִים)**, the plural form of the generic *el* (אֵל). See Note in the Introduction to this Study. אֱלֹהִים appears here and in verse 13.

^f (2) Is 50:1, 57:17, 58:4; Dt 31:17-18, 32:19-20; Jsh 7:11; Pr 1:28, 15:29; Jr 5:25; Ezk 39:23-29; Mi 3:4
Though God is not powerless or deaf, the sin (אָוֶן, *avon*) of His people has caused a separation (בָּדַל, *badal*, having the implication of a divide that results from an intentional action such as cutting or severing; see also, Gn 1:6) between them and God, so that God will hide (סָתַר, *sathar*) His face (פָּנִים, *panim*), that is, look away from them and not hear (שָׁמַע, *shama*), or perhaps given the metaphor, not listen to them. In the LXX, rather than not hearing His people, God turns His face away so as not to extend them mercy, "But rather, your iniquities separate between you and God, and because of your sins has He turned away His face from you, so as not to have mercy (ἐλεέω, *eleéō*) upon you." The people of Judah have, through their sin, abandoned God (Is 1:15-17, 58:4-5; Ps 18:41; Jr 5:23-24, 11:9-11; Ezk 39:21-24; Mt 23:37-39; Jn 9:31). The *Targum of Isaiah* states that in addition to the separation, God will take away the *Shakina* glory from them, and not listen to their prayers. Sin offends God who cannot excuse, tolerate or ignore it. Only through the work of Messiah and God's grace, acting through our faith and repentance can this separation of sin be overcome.

^g (3) Is 1:15, 1:21; Jr 2:30-35, 7:8, 9:3-6, 22:17; Ezk 7:23, 9:9, 13:8, 22:2, 35:6; Hos 4:2, 7:3, 7:13; Mi 3:10-12, 6:12, 7:2; Mt 27:4; 1Tm 4:2

The people's hands or palms (כַּף, *kaph*) are defiled or polluted (אָטַל, *gaal*) with blood (דָּם, *dam*), and their fingers (אֶצְבָּע, *etsba*) with iniquity, sin or guilt (אָוֶן, *avon*); Their lips (שִׁפְהָ, *saphah*) speak lies (שֶׁקֶר, *sheqer*), and their tongues (לָשׁוֹן, *lashon*) mutter or meditate on (הִגָּה, *hagah*) wickedness (עוֹלָה, *olah*). The very parts of the body used to "make many prayers" (Is 1:15) are used for evil rather than for the relief of injustice or aid to the needy. Blood here implies the death of the innocent (___) which cries out for justice (Gn 4:___) which may have been obtained through corrupt legal proceedings. The LXX implies that the injustice or wickedness is not simply a matter of carelessness or negligence, but of intentional and premeditated scheming, "For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with sins; your lips also have spoken iniquity, and your tongue meditates (μελετάω, *meletaó*; meditate, devise, plan, or scheme; Ac 4:25; 1Tm 4:15) unrighteousness." The *Targum of Isaiah* makes the explicit that the deaths are those of the innocent.

^h (4) Is 30:12; Jb 15:31-35; Ps 7:13-14, 62:4, 62:10; Pr 4:16; Jr 5:1-5, 7:4, 7:8; Ezk 22:29-31; Mi 2:1, 7:2-5; Jas 1:15
Literally the verse says that no one calls for (קָרָא, *qara*) justice (צְדָקָה, *tsedeq*), or pleads for or judges with (שָׁפַט, *shaphat*) truth (אֱמוּנָה, *emunah*). Instead they trust (בָּטַח, *batach*) in emptiness, confusion or vanity (הוּת, *tohu*; Gn 1:2 "without form") and

speaking lies (שָׁוִי, *shav*). They are pregnant (הָרָה, *harah*) with mischief (עָמַל, *amal*, also trouble, iniquity, sorrow, pain and, following the pregnancy metaphor, travail) and give birth (יָלַד, *yalad*) to iniquity (אָוֵן, *aven*). Most English translations render the Hebrew, probably correctly, as referring to unjust court proceedings, where clever lawyers find ways to circumvent justice and witnesses perjure themselves. *Shaphat* is clearly a legal term in Hebrew giving support to this rendering. As with the implication in the previous verse, the second half of this one, using the metaphor of a pregnancy, implies that these are schemes long intended, not a mere spur of the moment things. The LXX renders the various meanings of *tohu* using two phrases rather than one, “. . . they trust in vanities (μάταιος, *mataios*, vain, unproductive, godless), and speak empty (κενός, *kenos*, emptiness) words; . . .” Rather than trusting in God, they relied upon their own efforts, man-made idols and foreign alliances which are described in the Hebrew as being similar to the condition of the world before God imposed order.

ⁱ (5) Is 14:29; Jb 8:14; Pr 23:32; Mt 3:7, 12:34

Referring to those who plead falsely and tell lies, the prophet compares their deeds to the hatching (בָּקַע, *baqa*) of the eggs (בֵּיצָה, *betsah*) of poisonous serpents (צִפְפוֹנִי, *tsiphoni*), weaving (אָרַג, *arag*) spider (עַקְבֵּי־שׁ, *akkabish*) webs (קוּר, *qur*). Eating (אָכַל, *akal*) the eggs, that is when the schemes come to fruition, means death (מוֹת, *muth*). Trying to counter the scheme, crushing (זוּרָה, *zureh*) the eggs, will nevertheless result in evil, the hatching of a viper (אֶפְהָה, *epheh*). The LXX reads, “They have hatched vipers' eggs, and weave a spider's web; and he that is going to eat of their eggs, having crushed an addled egg (οὐρίον, *ourios*, “wind egg”), has found also in it a basilisk (βασιλίσκος, *basilikos*, basilisk, cobra or little king).” The weaving of spider's webs is evocative of attempting to ensnare others.

^j (6) Ge 6:11; Job 8:14,15; Ps 58:2; Is 5:7, 28:18-20, 30:1, 30:12-14, 57:12, 58:4, 64:6; Jer 6:7; Eze 7:11,23; Am 3:10; Am 6:3; Mic 2:1-3,8; Mic 3:1-11; Mic 6:12; Hab 1:2-4; Zep 1:9; Zep 3:3,4; Ro 3:20-22; Ro 4:6-8; Re 3:17,18

The webs woven by the unrighteous will not serve as clothing (בִּגְד, *beged*), that is, will not serve a useful purpose, and will not serve to cover anyone. Instead their works (מַעֲשֵׂה, *maaseh*) are of iniquity (אָוֵן, *aven*, or trouble, evil, sin, wickedness, vanity) and their deeds (פְּעֹל, *poal*, or act) of violence (חָמָס, *chamas* or *hamas*, or oppression or cruelty) in their hands (כַּף, *kaph*). The *Targum of Isaiah* states, “Behold, like a spider's web, with which no one can be covered, thus there is no profit from the works of the wicked . . .”

^k (7) Is 59:3, 60:18; Pr 1:16, 6:17, 15:26, 24:9; Jr 22:17; Lam 4:13; Ezk 9:9, 22:6; Mt 23:31-37; Mk 7:21-22; Ac 8:20-22; Rm 3:15-17; Rv 17:6

The feet (רֶגֶל, *regel*) of the unrighteous run (רוּץ, *ruts*) to evil (רַע, *ra*) and they hasten (מָהָר, *mahar*) to shed (שָׁפַךְ, *shaphak*) innocent (נָקִי, *naqi*) blood (דָּם, *dam*). That is, they are anxious, always ready, to do evil. Their thoughts (מַחְשָׁבָה, *machashabah*, or plans, schemes, plots or intentions) are of iniquity (אָוֵן, *aven*). And desolation (שׁוֹד, *shod*, or violence, havoc or ruin) and destruction (שִׁבְר, *sheber*, or crush) are on their highways (מַסְלֵחַ, *mesillah*, or paths or steps). In the LXX, the thoughts of the unrighteous were of thoughts of senseless ones (ἄφρων, *aphron*) meaning fools or perhaps people not having moral sense or wisdom.

^l (8) Is 5:7, 48:22, 57:20-21; Ps 58:1-2, 125:5; Pr 2:15, 3:17, 28:18; Jr 5:1; Hos 4:1-2; Am 6:1-6; Mt 23:23; Lk 1:79; Rm 3:17

The unrighteous do not know (יָדָע, *yada*) the path (דֶּרֶךְ, *derek*, or course of life or moral character) of peace (שָׁלוֹם, *shalom*; Lk 19:42; Rm 3:17). There is no justice (מִשְׁפָּט, *mishpat*) in their paths (מַעְגָּלָה, *magalah*, or goings or ways). They have made their roads (נְתִיבָה, *nethibah*; or paths) crooked (עָקָשׁ, *aqash*; or perverse) and no one who goes (דָּרַךְ, *darak*) in those roads will know peace. While most English translations divide the verse into three separate, though related, thoughts, the Hebrew might also be rendered, “They know no peace in their lives and have no justice and their paths, for they have made them so crooked no one can know peace who goes that way.” For the unrighteous, because of their deceit, there will be no security, peace or rest (Is ____).

^m (9) Job 30:26; Isa 5:30; Jer 8:15; Jer 14:19; La 5:16,17; Am 5:18-20; Mic 1:12; Hab 1:13; 1Th 5:3

ⁿ (10) Is 8:15; De 28:29; Job 5:14; Pr 4:19; Jer 13:16; La 3:6; La 4:14; Am 8:9; Joh 11:9,10; Joh 12:35,40; 1Jo 2:11

^o (11) Job 30:28,29; Ps 32:3,4; Ps 38:8; Ps 85:9; Ps 119:155; Isa 38:14; Isa 51:20; Jer 8:15; Jer 9:1; Eze 7:16; Ho 7:14

^p (12) Ezr 9:6; Ezr 9:13; Ne 9:33; Isa 1:4; Jer 3:2; Jer 5:3-9,25-29; Jer 7:8-10; Jer 14:7; Eze 5:6; Eze 7:23; Eze 8:8-16; Eze 16:51,52; Eze 22:2-12,24-30; Eze 23:2-49; Eze 24:6-14; Da 9:5-8; Ho 4:2; Ho 5:5; Ho 7:10; Mt 23:32,33; Ro 3:19,20; 1Th 2:15,16

^q (13) Ps 18:21; Ps 78:36; Isa 31:6; Isa 32:6; Isa 48:8; Isa 57:11; Jer 2:13,19-21; Jer 3:10; Jer 3:20; Jer 5:23; Jer 9:2-5; Jer 17:13; Jer 32:40; Jer 42:20; Eze 6:9; Eze 18:25; Ho 1:2; Ho 6:7; Ho 7:13; Ho 11:12; Mt 12:34-36; Mr 7:21,22; Ac 5:3,4; Ro 3:10-18; Ti 1:16; Heb 3:12; Jas 1:15; Jas 3:6

^r (14) Ps 82:2-5; Ec 3:16; Is 1:21, 5:23, 10:1-2, 59:4; Jer 5:27,28,31; Am 5:7,11; Mic 3:9-11; Mic 7:3-5; Hab 1:4; Zep 3:1-3

^s (15) Ge 38:10; 2Sa 11:27; 2Ki 9:11; 2Ch 21:7; Ps 5:9; Ps 12:1,2; Isa 48:1; Jer 5:1,2; Jer 7:28; Jer 29:26; Ho 4:1,2; Ho 9:7; Mic 7:2; Hab 1:13,14; Mr 3:21; Joh 8:52; Joh 10:20; Ac 9:1,23; Ac 26:24; Ro 8:36; 2Co 5:13; Heb 11:36-38; 1Jo 3:11,12

^t (16) Ge 18:23-32; Ps 98:1; Ps 106:23; Isa 50:2; Isa 52:10; Isa 63:3-5; Isa 64:7; Jer 5:1; Eze 22:30; Mr 6:6; Rm 11:26-27

While some commentators view this verse and the following one as references to God's intervention to return the Exiles from Babylon, a better reading would be that God finds no one able to return justice to Judah so that He must himself intervene through His Servant, the Messiah who will, himself, atone for sin and bridge the gap between God and man.

^u (17) De 32:35-43; Job 29:14; Ps 69:9; Ps 94:1; Isa 9:7; Isa 11:5; Isa 51:9; Isa 63:15; Zec 1:14; Joh 2:17; Ro 13:12-14; 2Co 6:7; Eph 6:14,17; 1Th 5:8; 2Th 1:8; Heb 10:30; Re 19:11

^v (18) Job 34:11; Ps 18:24-26; Ps 21:8,9; Ps 62:12; Isa 1:24; Isa 49:25,26; Isa 63:3,6; Isa 63:6; Isa 66:15; Jer 17:10; Jer 50:29; La 4:11; Eze 5:13; Eze 6:12; Eze 38:18; Na 1:2; Mt 16:27; Lu 19:27; Lu 21:22; Ro 2:6; Re 16:19; Re 19:15; Re 20:12,13

^w (19) Ps 22:27; Ps 102:15,16; Ps 113:3; Isa 11:9-16; Isa 11:10; Isa 24:14-16; Isa 49:12; Isa 66:18-20; Da 7:27; Zep 3:8,9; Zec 4:6; Mal 1:11; 2Th 2:8; Re 11:15; Re 12:10,15-17; Re 17:14,15; Re 20:1-3

^x **Redeemer** – *Gaal* (גַּאֵל), see note on the Names of God in the Introduction.

^y (20) De 30:1-10; Eze 18:30,31; Da 9:13; Ob 1:17-21; Ac 2:36-39; Ac 3:19,26; Ac 26:20; Ro 11:26-27; Tit 2:11-14; Heb 12:14

^z **Spirit** - *Ruach* (רוּחַ) usually translated as **Spirit**, can mean spirit, wind or breath. See Note on the Names of God in the Introduction to this Study.

^{aa} (21) Isa 11:1-3; Isa 49:8; Isa 51:16; Isa 55:3; Isa 61:1-3; Jer 31:31-34; Jer 32:38-41; Eze 36:25-27; Eze 37:25-27; Eze 39:25-29; Joh 1:33; Joh 3:34; Joh 4:14; Joh 7:16,17; Joh 7:39; Joh 8:38, 14:26; Joh 17:8; Ro 8:9; 1Co 15:3-58; 2Co 3:8,17,18; Php 2:13; Heb 5:14, 8:6-13; Heb 10:16