

Introduction:

- A. You have heard of the fall of the Roman Empire. You have heard of the decline of Western Civilization. But in telling the great downfalls in history you never hear of the worst of them all—the fall of Israel. Unlike the Roman Empire or Western Civilization, it wasn't the vast reach of Israel that makes this story so terrible, but the heights from which that nation fell.

On the verge of their long-delayed entrance to the Promised Land Moses told Israel, *“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.”* [Dt 7:6,7].

No nation had a greater forefather than Israel had in **Abraham**, “the man of faith.” Theirs was the stunning **Exodus** out of the mighty hand of Egypt and the land flowing with milk and honey and divine **promises**. The **glory of God** inhabited their tabernacle. They had God's great **covenants** with Abraham, Moses, and David. They had the incomparable **Law of God**. They had the **temple worship** which mirrored both Eden and heaven. They had the promise of God's **Messiah**. No other nation on earth was so privileged, so blessed. As Moses put it, *“What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?”*

But again and again, Israel went off the rails. When Isaiah the prophet wrote 700 years before Christ he foresaw a day when Israel would be so far gone that they would

not—*could not*—come back to their God. **So Isaiah and his prophetic disciples were given a solemn, sobering word from God for that dark day.**

- B. **Turn to Is. 59.** Imagine a prophet standing in the temple courtyard, Israelites all around him. Imagine he has spoken of the lawlessness in their streets, of enemies encroaching on every hand, of the fact that half their country—the northern tribes—have long ago been carried into captivity. What can they do? Where is God? I imagine him growing quiet, looking around the crowd, and then he says, “*Surely, the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear to dull to hear?*” Oh, I’m sure these Jews had prayed. Their priests had prayed. Their prophets had prayed. But nothing happened. But surely it could not be because their God could no longer reach them nor hear their prayers. That couldn’t be the problem. So what then?

*But your iniquities have separated you from your God;
your sins have hidden his face from you,
so that he will not hear.*

You understand, of course, that no one is ever out of the earshot of God, but they had lost their connection with God. They were turncoats, traitors, trying to disguise their duplicity. But to God they were no different than the pagans. Their sacrifices served no purpose; their faithless prayers died on their lips. Israel had lost their voice and their memory. They had spiritual amnesia.

- C. In this chapter we look into Israel in those terrible days from three different vantage points—characterized in the text by the words *you*, *we*, and *he*. First, we hear the voice of the prophet as a kind of prosecuting attorney in **vv.3-8...** **The prosecutor points his accusing finger at Israel and says...**

I. **“YOUR INIQUITIES HAVE SEPARATED YOU FROM YOUR GOD”**
(59:1-8)

Bible readers, of course, are familiar with the idea that sin wreaks havoc in lives and societies, but godless people never make that kind of connection. They see the havoc but they will never connect what they see or experience with the anger of Almighty God. But the prophetic prosecutor lays out a devastating indictment straight from God himself.

A. **Vv.3-4**, *“For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. / Your lips have spoken falsely, and your tongue mutters wicked things. No one calls for justice; no one pleads a case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments, they utter lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.”* Picture them praying, hands outstretched, but God sees those hands dripping with guilt, red with death-dealing. Listen to their morning prayer, *“My Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise.”* But God heard, not a prayer, but a lie. He heard clearly the wicked things they said. And he heard their guilty silence when his righteous laws were broken, when people were hurt, and when justice was turned upside down by legal mumbo-jumbo. **We see all this in our society but how much worse that this was Israel, God’s chosen, beloved and blessed people!**

B. The Message puts that last line this way: “They get pregnant with mischief and give birth to sin-babies.” **Vv.5-6a**, *“They hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider’s web. Whoever eats their eggs will die, and when one is broken, an adder is hatched. Their cobwebs are useless for clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make.”* Two pretty disgusting comparisons—vipers and spiders. We’ve just read, *“they conceive [are pregnant with] trouble and give birth to evil.”* Now that evil is

pictured as the eggs of vipers. Ssssss. Eat the egg and die. Let it hatch and you face another poisonous snake.

They also, “spin a spider’s web.” Remember the line from a children’s fable, “‘Will you walk into my parlor?’ said the spider to the fly.” Spiders spin webs to catch their food, but God portrays these people as trying to weave clothes from spiders’ webs. Try to picture a shirt made from a spider’s web. It would be like the Emperor’s new clothes, plus it is a flytrap suit. It would be as if Spiderman forgot which way to point his fingers!

As one commentator summed up these pictures, “Sin is a contagion [the viper’s eggs] and a frustration [the spider web clothes].” And the whole society was this way, spawning vipers’ eggs and spinning spiders’ webs, only to trap themselves. **This could be our country, but this was Israel, God’s chosen, beloved and blessed people!**

- C. **Vv.6b-8**, *“Their deeds are evil deeds, and acts of violence are in their hands. Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. They pursue evil schemes; acts of violence mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks along them will know peace.”* These people were not only wicked, but they couldn’t sin fast enough. They *rushed into sin*. There was violence bloodstaining their society. Shalom—*peace*—had been their national blessing: *“The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.”* Shalom was the promise of peace with God, harmonious society, and personal fulfillment, but the roads they built were so twisted, that they dead-ended before ever coming to Peace Gardens. **We see this all around us but this was Israel, God’s chosen, beloved, and blessed people!** Lo, how the mighty fell!

Now in vv.9-15, the pronoun switches from *you* and *they* to *we*, for the prophet mournfully identifies with his wicked countrymen.

*So justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not reach us.
We look for light, but all is darkness;
for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.
Like the blind we grope along the wall,
feeling our way like people without eyes.
At midday we stumble as if it were twilight;
among the strong, we are like the dead.
We all growl like bears;
we moan mournfully like doves.
We look for justice, but find none;
for deliverance, but it is far away.*

II. **“WE LOOK FOR LIGHT, BUT ALL IS DARKNESS” (59:9-15a)**

- A. V.9 says, “*justice is far from us and righteousness does not reach us.*” Those are the key words in this chapter: *justice and righteousness.* *Justice* refers to the rule of law, both the spirit and the letter of the law. Its twin is *righteousness* which means adherence to what justice and truth requires. **These are meant to be society’s lights.** A crime-infested dark alley is a place where justice doesn’t shine. If lawmakers, police, attorneys and judges love and preserve the law, if citizens honor righteousness and truth, the society is well-lit and safe. People do right. Children and the weak are protected. But in Jerusalem, the City of Peace, there weren’t just some bad neighbor-hoods. Her people had become predators. The lights of righteousness and justice had gone out.
- B. If that isn’t dark enough, they were also blind! V.10, “*Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like*

people without eyes.” Words fail them. They sound like mourning doves or like growling bears. In a dark city with sightless eyes they “look for justice and for deliverance” but see nothing. They can’t even see the way back to their God.

- C. The prophet, sensitive to God and his Word, knows why their country of the blind is going to hell in a handbasket.

Vv.12-13:

*For our offenses are many in your sight,
and our sins testify against us.
Our offenses are ever with us,
and we acknowledge our iniquities:
rebellion and treachery against the LORD,
turning our backs on our God,
inciting revolt and oppression,
uttering lies our hearts have conceived.*

The folks in the streets and markets and courts don’t see this. As in our own society, people don’t see all their treachery and anger as having anything at all to do with God. **But it was all about their God.** They were guilty as a nation of *rebellion and treachery against Yahweh, the LORD.* They had stirred up a national revolt against the God who loved them, a whole nation of conspirators, of traitors.

- D. As the prophet pictures this rebellion he sees a kind of street fight in v.14-15a:

*So justice is driven back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
truth has stumbled in the streets,
honesty cannot enter.
Truth is nowhere to be found,
and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.*

Justice and righteousness lost the battle and were driven from the city and the country. Truth fled with them.

Anyone left behind who valued righteousness became public enemies. Spiritually speaking, it was like a nuclear winter. **They were the walking dead.** This wasn't America or Europe or China. This was *Israel*, God's chosen, beloved and blessed people **So do you see what I mean about Israel's collapse being the most terrible of them all? Because they fell from God.**

Now the scene shifts once more. We lift our eyes from the dark and violent streets of Jerusalem up past the clouds to the high, bright courts of God's heavenly temple. The pronoun now is *he*.

*The LORD looked and was displeased
that there was no justice.*

He saw that there was no one,

he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;

In other times God had looked and found Moses and Joshua, Deborah, Samson, Gideon, the mighty David, the prophets Elijah and Elisha. But this time not even God could find a champion to rescue his people, no one to stand in the gap. **How bad are things when not even God can find a deliverer?!**

*...so his own arm achieved salvation for him,
and his own righteousness sustained him.*

*He put on righteousness as his breastplate,
and the helmet of salvation on his head;*

*he put on the garments of vengeance
and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.*

III. **“SO HIS OWN ARM ACHIEVED SALVATION FOR HIM” (59:15b-21)**

A. When all was lost and God's people had completely forgotten him, God took matters into his own hands. If no

one else could be found as Israel's deliverer, no one else to champion righteousness, he would come down and do it himself. He would be their **Knight in Shining Armor**.

B. When? How? What would it be like when the LORD God Almighty, armored with righteousness and salvation, with vengeance and zeal, came down to the dark streets and the godforsaken land of his people? There was much the prophet *didn't* know but these things were clear:

C. When God comes to *achieve salvation* he will set this wicked place to rights. **V.18:**

*According to what they have done,
so will he repay
wrath to his enemies
and retribution to his foes;
he will repay the islands their due.*

No one will get away with their wickedness. Justice will finally shine in the streets because God himself will walk among us, *cloaked in zeal*. The enemies of God, in Israel and to the ends of the earth, will face his righteous wrath.

D. But that's not all, because God's salvation will not only bring righteous judgment on his enemies but he will also draw people to him, not only from Israel, but from the farthest corners of the earth. **V.19:**

*From the west, people will fear the name of the LORD,
and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his
glory.*

*For he come like a pent-up flood
that the breath of the LORD drives along.*

Imagine! Imagine a world where no matter how far west you go, you meet people who honor the Lord; no matter how far east toward the rising sun, people who revere his glory! The LORD will come flooding into this world as if a

dam has broken, the good news driven along by the breath—the Spirit—of the LORD.

E. **What’s happening??** God himself tells us:

*“The Redeemer will come to Zion,
to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,”
declares the LORD.*

God, the Knight in Shining Armor, is not bent only on retribution. He is also *the Redeemer*. He comes to pay for the freedom of enslaved and blinded people, people who never even cried out to him! The whole world will be drawn to him but he *will come to Zion*—to his holy mountain in Jerusalem, and *“to those in Jacob who repent of their sins.”* No one begs him to come! No one seeks him! In fact, his own people have revolted against him, **yet simply to satisfy his own love, he comes to redeem them and all who are drawn to him in that vast tidal wave of those seeking salvation.** Notice that last phrase: *“declares the LORD.”* This is the solemn and certain promise of God.

F. God has something else to say in v.21: “As for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD. “My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever,” says the LORD.

A covenant is serious business, a binding pledge, like wedding vows. Be careful, God! These are the people who forgot you existed, who revolted against you, whose sins sickened you. Think about this before you make a covenant with the likes of them!

But remember, God is doing this all by himself. *“His own arm achieved salvation for him.”* He does it all. No one meets him halfway. No one else signs this covenant.

God himself induces the willing repentance of his people.

No one in Zion or any other corner of the globe would turn to him—repent—if he didn't prompt them by his Spirit, by his Breath. **It is a revival, a resuscitation of a dead nation, a resurrection of a lifeless people**—not only in Zion but to the lifeless peoples as far as east is from west.

And God's Spirit, his Breath, "*will not depart from you and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips...*" God will put his Spirit and his truth on and in this new people of God. What's more, this life and truth will carry on from one generation to another, forever!

Conclusion

Surely, among all the kingdoms and dynasties that have fallen over the centuries, no fall was so great as that of God's own chosen, beloved, and blessed people.

But then this amazing picture of God! The people around us who might say, "*I believe in God,*" have never imagined God this way. Utterly scorned and ignored by his own beloved people; no, more than scorned: they *revolted* against him. Cut him off! But instead of leaving them, or of destroying them, God himself becomes their deliverer, their Knight in Shining Armor. He accomplishes the justice where there had been none, and he becomes their Redeemer—purchasing the salvation of all who repent and turn to the LORD God! And he covenants with them to breathe his life, his Spirit, into them, from one generation to the next, forever.

This the God we have worshiped this morning. This is the God to whom we pray and in whom we trust. And how could God accomplish such a thing? ***How, indeed!*** The answer is glorious, indeed! Next week, we turn the page.