

Isaiah Part 37: “The Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save...”

Isaiah 59

Sin, evil and oppression (Isaiah 59 v 1 to 15a)

“Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save” (v 1) – God’s people must have wondered why God did not rescue them from their trials. Perhaps God’s strength had diminished, and his hand had become shortened. Isaiah assures them that this was not the case. “Or his ear dull, that it cannot hear” – it was as if they were saying, ‘Maybe the problem is that God does not understand our problems or listen to us, because he cannot hear’. Again, Isaiah reminds them this is not the case – God can hear just fine!

“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” (v 2) – the problem is not with God’s power, his knowledge, or his interest. The problem is with *our iniquities*: our sins have separated us from God. In what way does sin separate us from God? Sin does not necessarily separate us from the presence of God, because God is present everywhere (Psalm 139 v 7) and even Satan can have an audience with God (Job 1 v 6). Sin does not separate us from the love of God, because God loves all sinners (Romans 5 v 8). But sin still does separate:

1. Sin separates us from *fellowship with God*, because when we sin we are not thinking like God.
2. Sin separates us from the *blessing of God*, because when we sin we are not trusting God.
3. Sin separates us from some of the *benefits of God’s love*, just as the Prodigal Son (Luke 15 v 11 to 24) was still loved by the father but did not enjoy the benefits of his love when he was sinning.
4. Sin separates us from the *protection of God*, because he will allow trials to correct us.

“... and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear” – this explains why God’s people no longer felt the face of the LORD shining on them (Numbers 6 v 25). It was their sins, not the inability of God to hear. Habakkuk 1 v 3 says of God’s holiness, “You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong.” This also helps us to understand, at least in a limited way, the cry of Jesus from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27 v 46). As Jesus hung from the cross in the place of guilty sinners, including you and me, there was some way in which the face of God the Father was hidden from him. But that was for *our* sins, not his...

- Various sins are listed in these verses. What are the consequences in the personal, social and spiritual life of the people? With verses 1 and 2 see also Micah 3 v 4.

“Deeds of violence are in their hands. Their feet run to evil...” (v 6, 7) – both hands and feet are given to sin, but it doesn’t end there: “their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity... The way of peace they do not know... they have made their roads crooked” (v 8) – their choices and the consequences are plain: their crooked paths will never lead them into the way of ‘peace’, in the full sense of ‘Shalom’. Paul quoted these verses in Romans 3 v 15 to 17, using this passage, among others in the Old Testament, to demonstrate that every person is a sinner through and through. In light of all this sin and evil, it is amazing that God’s people could still believe (v 1) that the problem was with God, and not with them!

“Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us” (v 9) – because God’s people had no interest in justice, and did not care about righteousness God did not bless them with it. This is the principle of Jesus stated in Matthew 13 v 12, “For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

[MORE OVER...]

“Our sins testify against us... righteousness stands far away” (v 12, 14) – now God’s people are in a better place. They have had their ‘reality check’ and see things as they are. No longer do they blame God’s ‘shortened hand’, or his ‘dull ear’. They know it is because of their sins that “righteousness stands far away”.

Judgment and redemption (Isaiah 59 v 15b to 21)

- What is the motive for God’s intervention, as described in these verses?
- What is the purpose of this intervention, and what is the world-wide issue at stake?
- How does Paul understand this to be fulfilled for Israel (Romans 11 v 25, 26)?
- For believers in Christ, isn’t there at least a partial fulfilment of verse 21? See John 14 v 16 and 26.

“The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede” (v15b, 16) – the state of God’s people was no mystery to God. They cried out, stating how desperate their condition was – and God knew it all along. No one among them took the lead in getting things right. Where was the man who would lead the people in righteousness? Where was the intercessor who would plead God’s case to the people, and the people’s repentance to their God? No intercessor could be found. “Then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him” – God waited to work through an intercessor, but as none arose, God’s work would still be accomplished.

“He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head...” (v 17) – no one stepped forward to work with God, so God put on his armour and went to destroy his enemies, protect his people, and glorify his name. Many commentators miss the connection between these verses and Paul’s description of our spiritual armour in Ephesians 6 v 11 to 17. In that passage, Paul refers to ‘the whole armour of God’ – it is God’s armour in the sense that it belongs to him, and he allows us to use it to fight for him, and with him.

“So they shall fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun” (v 19) – the end result will be wonderful. In his ultimate victory, which he will accomplish with or without us, the glory of the LORD will be known and respected from east to west. “For he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives”, or in the King James Version, “When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him” – the enemies of God will never triumph over him. Even if they come in like a ‘rushing stream’ or ‘flood’, and seem unstoppable, God will lift up a battle-standard against them, and they will be stopped. God gives his people the glorious privilege of being more than conquerors (Romans 8 v 37), and will win the battle, with or without us.

“A Redeemer will come to Zion” (v 20) – the Hebrew word used here is גֹּאֵל (*go-el*), sometimes translated ‘kinsman-redeemer’, who had a specifically defined role in Israel’s family life: (i) the kinsman-redeemer was responsible to buy a fellow Israelite out of slavery (Leviticus 25 v 48); (ii) he was responsible to be the ‘avenger of blood’ to ensure the murderer of a family member answered to his crime (Numbers 35 v 19); (iii) he was responsible to buy back family land that had been forfeited (Leviticus 25 v 25); (iv) he was responsible to carry on the family name by marrying a childless widow (Deuteronomy 25 v 5 to 10, and consider Boaz in the Book of Ruth). So the ‘redeemer’ was responsible to safeguard the persons, property and posterity of the family. To whom does the Redeemer come? “To those... who turn from transgression”.

“My Spirit that is upon you, and my words... shall not depart out of your mouth... from this time forth and forevermore” (v 21) – the covenant God makes with his people promises an abiding Spirit and an enduring Word. God accomplishes his purposes in people and through all creation through the Spirit and the Word.

Prayer – Lord, as we read these verses, we are reminded that you, Lord Jesus, are the Redeemer who brings salvation to those who repent and turn away from sin, because through your death upon the cross you have redeemed us from sin and death. Thank you that you are with us by your Spirit, and your Word is eternal. Help us to walk by the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit and to be filled with the Spirit; help us to meditate on your Word day by day, and to obey your Word in all that we do. We ask these things in Jesus’ name, Amen.