

Everything Sad Coming Untrue
Part Four: The Hope of Righteousness in Society
Isaiah 9.6-7

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If you are at all familiar with the Christian tradition, you know that when we come to Christmas, there are just a few passages of Scripture that often make their way to the center of our celebration

From the gospel of Luke, a familiar passage from chapter 2

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

The other passage that we hear most often is one from the Old Testament, from the book of Isaiah, where that birth is predicted eight hundred years before it happens ... It goes something like this

Isaiah 9.6-7

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
And of the increase of his peace
there will be no end.

It goes *something* like that. But the passage actually says a lot more than that.

Isaiah 9.6-7

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
 Of the increase *of his government* and peace
 there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

I remember as a kid hearing those words government and justice and righteousness and thinking "Say what?"

And in the years following, even as an adult, hearing those same words and doing pretty much the same thing. What does that have to do with the birth of Jesus? What does that have to do with Christmas?

What's all that business about government and justice and righteousness? So we just kind of skip over those words.

There's a big cultural distance between the time and place when those words were first spoken to where we find ourselves today. The ideas they convey are probably pretty unfamiliar to us.

And a lot has happened across those years to our understanding of the hope we have as Christians. There's a gap of expectation that has slowly been decreasing over time, as the Christian hope has been truncated and whittled down. The version many Christians have is something along these lines

I am a sinful person. Jesus came from heaven to die for me. If I put my trust in Jesus, I am forgiven and promised eternity in heaven.

Every part of that is true. But the Christian hope that the Bible describes is so much wider in its scope and deeper in its reach than the small arc of our own individual lives. What God has in mind through Jesus is nothing less than the reclamation of the entire world, and of humanity itself – all of which is anticipated in these words from Isaiah.

I'd like to walk back through the passage and see if we can make more sense of it.

Isaiah 9.6-7

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,

This isn't a matter of one human being among the rest of us, one of us who is especially gifted or powerful or charismatic, rising up among us.

This is a matter of God *sending* us from outside of us a deliverer and King. It doesn't say *among us* a child is born. It says to us. *To us* a child is born, *to us* a son is given.

and the government will be on his shoulders.

The word government has nothing to do with political structures. It refers to his rule, his reign, his dominion as king. His kingdom. All the work that God is doing in this world centers on this one child who will grow to become a king, this son whose kingdom will swallow up all other kingdoms. .

*And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

The names used to describe him are divine names, names for God, because he will be a divine child, the son of God.

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.

His rule will widen and deepen until it absorbs all the globe and all of time.

And his will be a rule marked by peace. Not peace the way we think about it, not peace meaning just a shaky stalemate between warring and contentious powers, not just the absence of conflict, but *shalom*, which means everyone and everything flourishing together, in complete harmony and wholeness and fulfillment.

This is the state of Eden before Adam and Eve rejected God's rule in favor of self-rule – and we all know how well that turned out.

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,

In second Samuel 7.12-16, God promises David that someone from his own lineage who will also be God's own son, fully human, fully divine, will "establish the throne of his kingdom forever." In this coming King and in his coming kingdom all of God's promises will be fulfilled.

*He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness*

This is the part of the prophecy we might raise our eyebrows at, not really knowing what to do with it. Wait. righteousness and justice? When we hear justice we might think of a judge's pronouncement in a courtroom, and when we hear righteousness who knows what we might think . . . moral perfection? Holier than thou?

Or maybe it means being really good at something. One day our covenant group was together and one of the guys, Danny, backed a fourteen passenger van full of the rest of us into a really narrow space. Dave, another of the pastors in the group, said, "Danny, you have all backing righteousness."

Justice and righteousness. When I was in eighth grade I used to hang out all the time with a guy named Dave Williams. People would refer to us as Dave-n-Dave, or just the Daves. "Hi Daves." If you saw one of us, the other one was probably close by.

That's kind of like these words. If you find one of them in the Old Testament, you almost always find the other one nearby. Think, for example, of

Amos 5.24

Let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

So let's get to know these words a bit better.

Justice means "setting things right," putting things that are bent and broken in our society back to the way they were supposed to be, straight and whole.

When we hear the word justice, it might be helpful to think in terms of societal orthopedics. Orthopedics, as you know, is the art of straightening and healing what's bent and broken.

So justice is the thing that makes shalom a reality. Things need to be put right so everything and everyone can flourish.

The meaning of the word **righteousness** is hinted at in the first part of the word – "right." Righteousness means we are thinking right, our motives are right, our hearts are right, we're making right choices, we're doing the right thing.

It's not a vague theoretical word. It's a very practical, community-oriented word. It is always connected to relationships. Righteousness ultimately means treating each other the right way. What's that line from the song in the movie White Christmas? "You didn't do right by me." Righteousness is doing right by each other. It is treating each other right.

So justice is about putting things right. Righteousness is about treating each other right. So both justice and righteousness have to do with the idea of things lining up along some standard.

You know when you are writing a paper and you go up to your tool bar and click the alignment box that makes the beginning of each sentence line up along the left hand side of the page. That's called "left justified." That captures an important part of the meaning of the word justice. It means getting things straightened out, getting them lined up. along some fixed vertical line.

Justice is lining all the parts of our society up with the fixed point that is God's holy and loving character.

The meaning of **righteousness** is similar. It also conveys the idea of things lining up with some fixed and unbudging line.

For years, all through middle school, I wanted to be an architect, so I took a whole bunch of drafting classes. This was before CAD programs, so it meant doing old school drafting with paper and pencil and triangles and a T-square.

To make a vertical line, we would use our T-square to line up with the metal edge of the drafting table. That would give us a fixed horizontal line. Then we'd line up our triangle on that, at a right angle – which was originally called an "upright" angle, meaning it lined up with the original fixed vertical line and starting point that stood outside of the picture.

Listen to another one of the Messianic promises in Isaiah that brings these two words together with this idea of a line that serves as our fixed guide.

Isaiah 28.16-17

See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who trusts will never be dismayed.
I will make justice the measuring line
and righteousness the plumb line

Jesus comes to establish a kingdom defined by justice and righteousness.

All who are part of this new kingdom, this new society, that the Messiah is establishing will be righteous, living as God intends, with right motives and right actions, treating each other right. And all the structures of the new society will be just, they will line up with God's design, they will be free of sin and corruption, so that every citizen in this new society can flourish. That's what Isaiah means when he says

*He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness*

from that time on and forever.

This will not just be a global kingdom, wrapping its arms around the whole earth. It will also be an eternal one, stretching to the end of time.

We would be completely mistaken if we thought that we were somehow capable of bringing about a just and righteous society through our own effort. God will bring this about through the loving rule of his Son.

*The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.*

* * *

Now we come to the challenging part of this promise: it didn't happen.

Jesus came two thousand years ago, and inaugurated his kingdom, and there is hardly any place you can look in this world and find something that looks or sounds anything like that. Right?

The reason, as you know if you've read the rest of the New Testament, is that there is a second act in the great redemptive drama which is yet to come. In the first act, Jesus came and lived in our midst and died in our place and rose again from the dead, making it possible for us to be right with God.

But in the second great act, Jesus will come again. And when he does, he will put all things right. Listen to how he described this in Matthew chapter 13, beginning in verse 24

Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?'

²⁸ "An enemy did this,' he replied.

"The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?'

²⁹ "No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.'"

³⁶ Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field."

³⁷ He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The

weeds are the people of the evil one,³⁹ and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

⁴⁰ “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.

The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

Chapters 19 and 20 of the Book of Revelation describe this same moment in even more dramatic symbolic language. This moment at the end of human history is not a good-time-was-had-by-all triumph of universalism. Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, rides in on a white horse, followed by the armies of heaven, and we are told “he treads the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God” (19.15).

At the close of the age, he systemically rids the earth of all that opposes God or is contrary to God’s perfect will. The Evil One and every demon who ever served him is thrown out of God’s presence and into the lake of fire. And everyone who has turned his or her back on God and rejected his offer of new life in Christ, everyone whose name is not written in the book of life, is sent away from God’s presence as well.

Then God establishes a new realm of peace and justice and righteousness that will last forever.

Revelation 21.1

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

Revelation 21.3-5

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”

And in that is the substance of our hope as followers of Jesus.

Jesus came from heaven to earth to rescue us and put us right with God. But he also came to inaugurate his kingdom, and to begin to create a new humanity, making us into citizens fit for that new society.

He establishes his kingdom one subject at a time, as men and women and children entrust their lives to him by faith and give him their allegiance as king.

But Jesus will come again. When he does, he will establish a new humanity with new bodies living on a new earth under a new heaven, and we will enjoy forever a world in which all things – us included – have been made new, and everything everywhere will flourish in right relationship to God and one another.

* * *

Which leaves us in the difficult but hopeful, already but not yet, period of time between the first coming of Jesus and his return at the end of the age.

In this in-between time, we live in a world in which the people around us do not treat each other right, favoring and fawning over some, marginalizing and mistreating others, and we live in a society in which its structures are bent and broken, and our own hearts right along with them.

Ours is not a world of peace, in which everyone everywhere is flourishing, living in harmony and wholeness.

But into this broken world you and I are sent, and in this broken world, you and I, we who belong to God, we are called to lives of righteousness and justice, lives of doing right and of putting things right. During this in-between time, God intends for his righteousness and justice to find expression *in us*, and *through us*, as his people.

First God intends for his righteousness and justice to find expression *in us*, as our just and righteous God sends his son, whom he calls The Righteous One (Acts 3.14, 7.52, 22.14), to reconcile us to God and make us righteous in God's sight.

Romans 1.17

For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Romans 3.23-26

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness.

If we put our faith in Jesus, God sees us through the righteousness of his son, and declares us just and righteous in his sight.

Have you received the gift of God's forgiveness through Christ? That is central to any biblical understanding of what it means to celebrate the birth of Jesus into this world – receiving him into our own hearts.

Have you? Have you trusted Jesus the Righteous One as your Savior and entrusted your life to him as King, giving him your allegiance and your life? Don't let the day end without taking that step.

But God doesn't just desire for his righteousness and justice to be seen in us, in the way that we have been justified and declared righteous before God.

God intends for his righteousness and justice to find expression *through us*, as our just and righteous God sends *us*, as ones being transformed by the Spirit into the likeness of the Son - as he sends *us* into the world as his agents of justice and representatives of righteousness.

We can focus so much on the theme of our righteous standing as Christians that sometimes we can miss this call to a righteous life, but it runs all through the New Testament. Here are just three of many examples that you may hear in a new way this morning.

Matthew 6.33

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.

Ephesians 4.22-24

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Romans 14.17

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

We can't put our whole world right. Only God can do that. But we can treat others right and we can put things right in whatever small corner of this world God places us. And so many of you are already doing this!

Righteousness: treating each other right.

I see so many examples within this church family every day of the way you live your lives up with the life and character of God and treat each other right, even in the midst of covid clashes and societal divisions and short fuses and family members at odds and ungracious comments, living out the one another in your love for one another and your love for your neighbor: encouraging each other, serving one another, extending hospitality to each other, living in harmony with each other, building one another up, being patient with each other, forgiving each other, bearing each other's burdens.

Treating each other right. Doing right by each other.

What would it look like for you, more today than yesterday, and more tomorrow than today, to follow the example of your brothers and sisters around you, and to live a life a righteous life that reflects and points to the Righteous One who has transformed your life?

And justice: putting things right. Straightening and healing what is broken in our world.

There are so many examples of this within our church family as well. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list, but just to highlight a few of those who are faithfully seeking to put things right right where God has us, while we wait for God to come and make all things new.

The Sampsons and others who are part of Isaiah 1.17 house to provide shelter for children at risk at the moment they are taken into safety from unsafe homes

The Szabellas and Hydes and Greesons and so many other families in our congregation who are doing the amazing and sacrificial work of foster care and adoption

Individuals like Brently Jordan and other CASA volunteers who are advocates on behalf of at risk children in our courts

People like Tom Johnson and others who are seeking to serve needy families and underprivileged children through our partnership at Murdock Elementary School

The many such as Kathy Heid and Chris Wykoff who have been involved in prison ministries like Kairos

People like Bob Truitt who have built relationships across racial lines in an effort to help overcome some of the inequities that make full participation in our society difficult for African Americans.

Some like Daniel Pierce and Martha Riley and Julie Williams and Sherry Frey who have been seeking to provide care for orphans and at risk kids in other parts of the world such as Jamaica and Romania and Africa

Men and women like Cliff and Gail Johnston who are part of the fight against sex trafficking

People like Wes Tillet and Briton Weise and Pauline Wein and others whose work in our community is to provide for the needs of the poor and marginalized, and volunteers like John Grutzner who work alongside them

People like Jess Vandergraf and Alan Bartelt and others who have worked with Habitat for Humanity to provide affordable housing for disadvantaged families

People like the Shockeyes and the Covingtons and Beth Tucker who are seeking to provide a welcome and a home for displaced Afghan refugees who are coming to our community

All people who are seeking to make his blessings known far as the curse is found.

What would it look like for you, more today than yesterday, and more tomorrow than today, to follow the example of these brothers and sisters of yours, and to live a life of justice that reflects and points to the just heart of God?

None of us are perfect. But even as imperfect and forgiven people, we are called to be good and to do good in this world, through our actions giving glimpses of the Righteous One whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, and giving a foretaste of the government that is on his shoulders, the Kingdom of justice and righteousness and peace that he is ushering into this world.

Glory to God in the highest. And on earth, peace.