



UNDERSTANDING GOD PART 10: The God Who Saves

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In 1516 Sir Thomas More wrote a book titled: *On the Best State of a Republic and on the New Island of Utopia*. This book was his attempt to portray what he thought as an ideal civilization and its government through the story of a fictitious island community of Utopia. What More was after was the liberation of the governed and a government which supported the flourishing of humanity. However he weaved in some beautiful irony into this work as well. He created the word Utopia out of two Greek words which when combined literally mean: Not a place, or "Nowhere."

In a sense this idea of Utopia has pervaded so much of our thoughts, dreams, films and imaginations yet without the honest end which More himself conceded. A perfect civilization is a pipe dream. It cannot happen. Ruler's become corrupt, citizens become materialistic and greedy, and politicians are blinded to their original duties.

But this has not stopped our longings. In 1982, sixteen years after the death of Walt Disney, one of his pet projects was opened up to the public as the second of his two parks: EPCOT Center. Though he never lived long enough to see his park open, EPCOT was Disney's idea of More's utopia. It stood as an acronym for the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. It was supposed to be a showcase of an international community dedicated to planned and intentional living where: "human achievements are celebrated through imagination, the wonders of enterprise, and concepts of a future that promises new and exciting benefits for all."

Today we still have these longings and these hopes for grand ideals. Ideal communities, ideal politicians, ideal parks, homes, schools and healthcare. But no matter if the dreams are spinning in our modern minds, 16th Century Britain, First Century Rome, or the Middle East in the eighth century B.C., our ideals are often crushed by the unchanged realities of the human condition.

As we have been working through the book of Isaiah we have seen foreign contexts, but similar problems to our own day. Similar hurdles which impede our ability to create the ideal world we would like to see, and even cause us to stumble when it comes to being the ideal person we perceive that we ought to be. In the book of Isaiah we have seen opulent and corrupt rulers. We see oppression and injustice among the people, we see political situations and rumors of war bring clouds and confusion into our ideas of hope and peace. And at the heart of all of this stood two interlinked issues: first because their circumstances did not lead them to trust God they turned to false hopes, corruptible saviors, and less than ideal solutions. And because of their failure to trust God, they incurred his due anger. It was right for God to punish his people because in their quest for ideal living, they fell short of the creator God's ideal for humanity.

But if it is easy to see the same problems Israel experienced in Isaiah, then it should also be true that we can see the same hope that God gave Israel. Contrary to public opinion, Christianity has not become outdated, because humanity has not outgrown its problems. The core problem of sin has remained unchanged through the ages, we are broken. But God wants to restore us.

What we are going to see today is in a sense the culmination of our last two weeks in Isaiah, and also it is the reason why we have dreams and hopes for ideal and universal experiences in our own hearts. In looking at God's unfolding salvation we are going to see, **God's salvation is ideal in every way to solve the human problem.**

Two weeks ago we looked at God's right wrath towards sin, last week we looked at God's control over sin and judgment, and this week we are going to look at God's mighty act of bringing people into salvation. Through the

intersection of God's ultimate control and our own responsibility, God is going to bring about a wonderful salvation for those who repent.

This is the big presupposition for what it is we are going to look at today. We are going to see wonderful ideals which are the mallet that cause our hearts to resound with thoughts of human flourishing. While these ideals are accessible, they are not universally accessible. There is one way to be granted access to them. The way in which we lay hold to any of these utopian dreams of Isaiah is by doing what Isaiah has called us to do all along: trust in God. Hope in him. The remnant which will enjoy the blessing of God is the remnant we look at last week: **Is. 10:20**.

Maybe there are people in here who think that this exclusivity or this aspect of faith is silly. But there are really only two reasons you would not hope in God: 1. That you do not think that his claims are true, 2. That you do not think that his claims are what is best.

In one sense we are going to answer both of those today by looking at the four ideals in Isaiah 11-12. We are going to look at God's Ideal Leader, God's Ideal World, God's Ideal Restoration, and Our Ideal Response. Yet distinct from our own pipe dreams, God's ideals are accomplished by his own might. First let's examine **God's Ideal Leader**. Let's look at **Isaiah 11:1-5**.

Israel's problem was poor leadership, but here God is going to solve this. It is through the cutting down of the corrupt tree that the sprout of a new ruler will come. One who has the qualities to lead well and beautifully. This is where it is hard for us to wrap our minds around this type of ruler. We know by experience the creed: absolute power corrupts absolutely. Because of this we cringe at ideas of someone being in ultimate control. Perhaps last week's sermon on God's sovereignty made you feel this way. But what if the one who is in ultimate control is incorruptible? What if this dictator is benevolent?

Who wouldn't want to be led by someone who embodies these qualities? We see characteristics which are admirable and also actions which flow from the character of this ruler. He is able to judge wickedness because he knows justice not by eye or by ear, but by righteousness. He will deal equally with all people according to a standard of perfect equity because he is infinitely wise. Flourishing comes to those who are righteous and justice comes to those who are wicked. This type of ruler doesn't rely on a perfect people to rule well, instead he makes his people perfect through his rule. He makes them just by leading them to their right and just end either in punishment or success.

There would be a handful of great Kings who would temporarily meet some of these requirements in Israel, but the New Testament helps us understand who this King because the King himself speaks: **Revelation 22:16**. Jesus is all of these things incorruptibly because Jesus was both man and God. This is what it means that Jesus is the Christ, he is the anointed one, the messiah sent from God. All figures of authority are only shadows of the King who is meant to rule humanity. This is why so many of our fairy tales include aspects of a good and kind King who is celebrated in his rule. We were built to be ruled by something glorious.

We don't have to look even past our own election this year to see that the problem with humanity is that often times our choices are to sacrifice morality for the sake of power, or power for the sake of morality. But in Jesus we see a King who will one day rule everything in power and morality: ruthlessness towards sin and righteousness towards his people.

So why is it that we still have issues in this world? It is true that Jesus is right now ruling and reigning. That's what the resurrection implies. He is not a dead king, he is a ruling one sitting on the throne.

However, the time in which he will judge the living and the dead is still yet to come. This is because our gracious king is still granting us time to turn to him in faith. This is the point Paul makes in **Romans 2:2-5**. Jesus is on the throne, and one day he will step from the throne to his judgment seat. And on that day you will either accept the punishment for your own sins, or you will accept the Jesus himself, who took your punishment for sins. Today all things point to Jesus, but one day all things will be measured according to their relationship with King

Jesus.

Depending upon your relationship to Jesus either enter into eternal punishment [through disbelief] or eternal joy [through faith]. Even today you may choose to be ruled by passions and slave masters, or you can turn to this King of Righteousness and enter into his eternal glory. And Isaiah is actually giving us a picture into this new and joyful world in **Isaiah 11:6-9**. This is **God's Ideal World**.

In one sense we might love the characteristics of our ruler, we might appreciate his justice, but if his attributes do not shape his whole kingdom, he is not the King we would wish him to be. But here we see that Jesus' qualities spill over into the entire sphere of human existence. John Lennon wanted us to imagine all the people without a heaven, but Jesus wants us to imagine the whole world inside of a heaven. What I love about this text is that it shows a holistic and pervasive redemption of the world. It is one thing to imagine a globe where there is peace between people, but Jesus came to offer a universe where there is peace between God and man, man and man, man and nature, and nature and nature.

John Lennon's greatest dream was too small a dream on the scale of God's salvation. Humanities most inventive dreamers fall short of imagining the glory of God's eternal city. In one sense idealistic communities like Disney's, or More's, or Lennon's reflect one of the most pervasive truths about our existence: it has to get better. There has to be something more. This cannot be all that man was meant to experience or employ.

That's because there is not one stream of human hope which doesn't empty in the harbor of God's grand salvation. There will be moments in Israel's history where they will experience a time of flourishing and international peace, but it is never on this scale that Isaiah is describing here. That's because this is a scale which will be met only in eternity after judgment has been doled out, sin has been destroyed, the remnant has been saved by faith in Jesus Christ and God is most glorified among his people.

We get a glimpse of this city in Revelation 21 [also Isaiah 62]. And I encourage you to go and read that later, but I'm not going to spend time looking at it right now. And as you read it you will find amazing echoes of Eden in this city. That's because this hope that Isaiah holds up, and the reality which John tries to capture in Revelation are portraits into what humanity was meant to be. They are not windows into a foreign and strange existence where we somehow find ourselves as aliens, like Peter and Lucy find themselves in Narnia. They are glimpses into a restored picture of what it truly means to be human; closer to Tolkien's restoration of Rohan. It is a return to what is natural and what is most real. We have these longings because this is what we were made for.

Humans were made to be in a right relationship with God forever. If you desire a world where there is no harm, no destruction, no cancer or corruption, no violence nor venom, then I want to invite you to turn to the God who created us for such a world. But here is what I want you to do. I want you to take a moment and think about what emotions you would feel if the things which you most to feared were eliminated. Now I want us to hold on to those soaring emotions and look at **Isaiah 11:9-10**.

These verses communicate something which in our current state should leave us dumbfounded. And that truth is this: that all of the emotions we would feel at the removal of harm are secondary to the emotions we would feel at the presence of God.

Why is there no fear, no pain or no destruction? Because the knowledge of God is there in the fullest. It is the present and real knowledge of God and his glory which drives away the darkness of our world. He displaces danger. And look back at **Is. 11:10**. Nations will inquire about him. They will hear of, or see, this world which Isaiah just described and yet what captures them is not the peace but the prince of peace. What stirs their affection is not the glory of the new world, but the glory which makes the new world glorious: the resting and ruling presence of Jesus Christ.

If your ultimate hopes for redemption or salvation are not in the person of Jesus Christ, then you will miss out on the glory which will be ours for eternity. To quote John Piper, "the gospel is not a way to get people to heaven, it is a way to get them to God." He will be our prize.

My prayer is that in looking at God's ideal ruler and God's ideal world you have a desire to experience those things. However our hearts are fundamentally cut off from these. We are born into rebellion against God's ruler and therefore we have no access to God's eternal kingdom. That is why we must understand this next point: **God's Ideal Restoration**. We only have access to this king and that kingdom because God has set forth a plan to restore us to him. **Isaiah 11:11-16**

So let's remember the historical context of Isaiah here. God has told the Northern tribe of Israel (also called Ephraim) and the Southern Tribe of Judah that they are going to be punished for their refusal to turn back to God. But God himself is the one who is going to extend his hand and he is going to call his own people out from the nations who have conquered them. He is going to raise a signal where all of God's people will return from where they have been carried off and be restored to God.

And I love the illustration he uses in reference to Egypt. That's why he opens this with "I will extend my hand a second time." He is in essence saying that as I brought you out of Egypt, I will again bring you back. And he says that the path back to him will be a highway: broad, wide, and direct. This gathering back of God's people will be epic.

And sure enough we see a restoration of God's people in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, as the Babylonian exiles are summoned back to Jerusalem to restore the temple. This text is immediately fulfilled in that context. However it is interesting to note how the New Testament applies this text. Whereas this text in Isaiah is immediately about a gathering of Jews from the nations, look at how Paul interprets this: **Romans 15:8-12**.

Paul sees this text of Jews coming from the nations as a foreshadowing of God calling the nations themselves to worship him. How, how does God expand his call to salvation? How does God seek to redeem a people who are not merely a specific ethnicity? How do we get access to God? Look at these three texts side by side: **Isaiah 11:12, Romans 15:12, John 12:32-33**.

If you want this salvation, you must turn to this savior. In Jesus, God has gathered a people from the nations. The story of God includes judgment, but it is ultimately a story about salvation through Jesus Christ to the glory of God in the whole world. To the nations God has held up Jesus as the icon and instrument of salvation from sin and the means of a restoration back to God. He is the path back to humanity because he took of flesh to save humanity. All humanity falls under the scope of God's saving call.

So where do you see yourself in God's restoration? If you have desires for ideals in your life, you are proof that God's attributes are attractive even to your heart. And in Jesus God is reaching into history and calling out his people through faith. Has God grasped you? Will you respond in faith? Will this reality be your reality? If you are a non-believer this is what you must apply from this sermon, repent and believe in this Jesus.

But Isaiah also wants to help believers respond better. This is where Isaiah helps us process our emotions towards God. **Our Ideal Response**.

Let's read together, **Isaiah 12:1-6**. I almost want to just walk away right now with this text acting as Isaiah's wonderful mic-drop of worship, but I think it would be wrong to not point out three truths when it comes to our response. It is easy to see that the right response to this message is worship. To sing, to make known, to celebrate. But it is also true that while we know we should feel rightly, we know we should want to share God's news, we know that we should seek to go to the nations with this song of praise, we often fall short of responding or feeling the way we think we should ideally feel.

So instead of heaping a burden of, "do better" on us I want to look briefly at three truths about our response in this text. Truth one: We will not be thankful to God if we do not know what God saved us from. A lack of thankfulness is often equated to an insufficient view of what we were saved from. Just in staff meeting this week one of our pastors mentioned the celebration of verse 2, "Behold God is my salvation, I will trust and will not fear." For him this was always a celebration of God's salvation delivering him chiefly from external enemies.

But look at the context which verse one provides: **Is. 12:1**. Our salvation is not a most significantly salvation from what is outside us, it is a salvation from the sin which is inside of us. Our sin warrants God's anger. We are due damnation in hell. But for those who are saved through Christ, God has turned his anger towards his son. If we think we are only saved from hardship or hopelessness we will be disappointed when trial and doubt come. But if we realize we are saved from our sin and its due penalty then we can rightly rejoice in all circumstances because we know we will never have to face the wrath of God because Jesus faced it for us.

The second truth is this: Joy in God takes work. Look at **Is. 12:3**. In this passage we see something which is natural, wells filled with water. You don't put water in wells, wells have water. Wells exist because water exists. The same is true with the joy we have in our salvation. We do not need to conjure up joy, it exists because salvation exists.

However, it takes effort to lower our buckets into the depth of God's well. Joy is naturally available to the believer because God has opened himself to us, however sometimes we must lower our buckets lower and longer than we did the day before. Sometimes before God gives us the relief of joy, he calls us to lose more rope, to spend more strength, to trust that at some point the bucket will be filled and your soul will be made joyful. But God's promise is that our salvation will always be a source of joy. This is why it is essential to understand how God saved you. To not understand this truth is to cut short the rope with which you seek to find joy.

Let's not forget the context of this passage is a people staring down the barrel of suffering. The goal of this passage is to provide an eternal hope which brings immediate perspective to our lives.

Our response to God is to find joy in his salvation even when it lies deep beneath our experience. But God's promise is true look again at **Revelation 22:16-17**. The water is there, and the wells are many, so take heart and lower your rope.

Lastly, if we want to respond rightly to God we must know: That our greatest joy is in God's glory. In More's book Utopia there is conversation a man has with the king, and this is what he says **"Why do you suppose they made you king in the first place?" I ask him. 'Not for your benefit, but for theirs. They meant you to devote your energies to making their lives more comfortable, and protecting them from injustice. So your job is to see that they're all right, not that you are - just as a shepherd's job, strictly speaking, is to feed his sheep, not himself.'**

But now look with me again at **Is. 12:4**. Give thanks to the Lord, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim his name that [in order that, for the purpose of] his name being exalted.

You see More's ideology is a false dichotomy. In his mind he thinks that if the king lived for his benefit it would be no good to his people. If the king lived for his glory it would be to the detriment of his people. But the King even of Utopia holds no candle to the King of all things.

For it is when God is exalted and when God is glorified that the people find their greatest good. It is when God is made glorious among the nations that the nations see and respond and are saved. It is when God is made glorious through the worship of his people that his people are most satisfied by the very object they worship. It is when God is made glorious that we realize no experience or economy, no idol or ideology will every compare to the beauty and ideals of the God of scripture. It is when God is made glorious that our ropes are deep and our buckets are brimming with joy. If you want to live an ideal life, a life which truly satisfies you, serves others and honors God, seek to worship God in all things so that in all places God might be glorified.

This is the work of the church. We worship the glory of God, so that the glory of God might feed our worship. And we proclaim the salvation of God, knowing that it is exactly God's saving of us through Christ which makes him most glorious.

The greatest ideal for humanity is salvation according to God. And in his beauty he has raised up Jesus so that we might repent, believe, worship, rejoice and know his glory.