All my life I have read about the people's disobedience and the Lord's punishments because the people wouldn't obey. It always sounded like He was trying to coerce them into submission to Him. Sure, I knew God loves in a perfect way, but why was He always whipping His chosen people? Compassion and justice seemed to be a odds with each other. There was a disconnect there. That disconnect has begun to be reconnected with my reading of Isaiah this time around.

*The contents of this article come directly from my study of the Come, Follow Me lesson for Day 2 of week 41 on Isaiah 59:9-21; 61:1-3; 63:1-9, The Redeemer Shall Come to Zion.*

Isaiah 59:1-2

> 1 Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear:
>
> 2 But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.

The teaching that God loves us perfectly never changes, nor is it ever modified or cut off. His love simply is. It is eternal, constant, and everlasting. That being the case then why does the Lord spend so much time punishing Israel? I think that if I chose to be wicked, but was wicked all by myself, I would have one punishment from the Lord, for we all have to answer for our individual rebellions. But when I choose to be wicked, and in my wickedness I harm the other children of God, well now I have to answer for the injuries and suffering I have inflicted on others whom God loves as perfectly and completely as He loves me. Now He must step in and defend the weak, the innocent, and put the bully in his/her place.

In verses 1 and 2 of Isaiah 59 the Lord assures us that His power has not slackened nor abated, "that it cannot save." He still hears the cries of His people, whether it is when they are righteous or when they are wicked. He hears them all, all of the time. So why is God angry with Israel in these verses? Here are the reasons spelled out.

3 For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue hath muttered perverseness.

4 None calleth for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth: they trust in vanity, and speak lies; they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity.

5 They hatch cockatrice' eggs, and weave the spider's web: he that eateth of their eggs dieth, and that which is crushed breaketh out into a viper.

6 Their webs shall not become garments, neither shall they cover themselves with their works: their works are works of iniquity, and the act of violence is in their hands.

7 Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths.

8 The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths: whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace.

This is quite a list of wrongs Isaiah accuses Israel of being guilty for. They are liars, have forgotten what justice and honesty are. They are no longer interested in truth. The cockatrice is a mythical animal that has the head and wings of a cock (rooster) and the body of a snake. Supposedly it is made when a male chicken, the cock, lays an egg that is fertilized by a snake. In other words, it is a complete perversion of nature. Comparing Israel's behavior to a cockatrice is hardly complimentary. Isaiah says Israel runs to evil, and they are quick to shed innocent blood. They have no knowledge of peace, nor sound judgment. This is why the Lord is so upset with them.

Israel's wrongs are further illustrated by Isaiah's descriptions of their spiritual state of being. They are like the blind who grope from place to place. They seek for spiritual enlightenment, but have pursued only that which has plunged them into spiritual darkness and obscurity.

9 ¶ Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us: we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness.

10 We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noonday as in the night; we are in desolate places as dead men.

11 We roar all like bears, and mourn sore like doves: we look for judgment, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far off from us.

> 12 For our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us: for our transgressions are with us; and as for our iniquities, we know them;
>
> 13 In transgressing and lying against the Lord, and departing away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood.
>
> 14 And judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter.

So what does this all have to do with my original premise that God is eternal in His love for His children? And by this I also include Christ, because there is no difference in the quality, quantity, and consistency of their love for us. What we can say of one is equally true of the other as well. In the rest of the chapter Isaiah describes God's distress that love, honesty, honor, compassion, and peace were no longer to be found among His people. Isaiah tells us that God had to come Himself to show Israel what salvation and righteousness looked like.

Unfortunately, you can't have compassion and justice without judgment, especially when the people are wicked. So Isaiah tells us in verse 17 that Christ "put on righteousness as a breastplate, and an helmet of salvation upon his head; and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak." God's complaint about His people was that they were being cruel and oppressive to each other, especially the vulnerable, the weak, and those who couldn't defend themselves, like the widows and orphans. They were grinding the faces of the poor into the dirt, and committing all manner of evil to line their own pockets for their own benefit. Their punishment was coming because of their evil to others more so than because they chose to turn away from God personally. The cries of the innocent filled the ears of the Almighty day and night. Eventually, those causing this suffering would have to answer for their crimes.

The Book of Mormon is very clear that our judgment is not based on a tally sheet of checkboxes. Our judgment will be a recompense for the life we choose to live in mortality. Those who live with mercy toward others will have mercy shown to them. Those who live lives of violence will have violence returned to them again. Judgment is a restoration of what we have chosen for ourselves. In this life we demonstrate what kind of people we really are. Life was designed to bring that out in us.

God's love never waivers. If we find ourselves estranged from God it is because we have turned away from Him, or we have wandered off and need to repent and come back. The judgment Israel faced when the Lord finally scattered them to the four corners of the earth for literally thousands of years, only happened because they had proven that they would not be faithful to the covenants they had made with Him. They willingly made the covenants, but then stubbornly chose to follow the philosophies and practices of the world instead. Time and time again the Lord offered them mercy and forgiveness, if they would just repent and come to Him. Happiness was His goal and commitment. Happiness was their desire. But they wanted happiness in sin, not in obedience to God's laws.

We are no different from anyone else. We all want happiness. Some of us have discovered that it is God's supreme joy to give us all the happiness we can handle when we repent and come to Christ and keep God's commandments. But some of us still seek happiness the way the world preaches happiness, in the things of this world, in prestige, money, power, influence, and pride. Eventually, we who pursue this second course of action will come to discover that true Godly happiness can only be created by keeping the Lord's commandments. Each of us will have to discover for ourselves how much worldly sorrow we are willing to go through before we learn that lesson. Wickedness never was happiness. Only obedience can bring the kind of happiness that lasts.

Reading Isaiah's descriptions of God's desires to bless His people, His love for them, and His yearnings for their happiness has shown me that He does not, in fact, delight in punishing His people. He does hold off as long as possible, giving us every opportunity to repent and return to Him before punishments are finally meeted out. He is merciful beyond anything we can comprehend. He is charitable, loving, sweet, and forgiving. But all things must be answered for. In the end, every act in this life will have its eternal reward. The good will have good restored to it, and the evil will have evil restored to it again. Isaiah has shown me how consistent the Lord has always been in His loving kindness towards His people. It really is up to us as to the kind of relationship we will have with God. We choose that relationship by choosing our attitudes and behaviors each day of our lives. He always abides by our decisions, for He will never force His love upon us. If we want His love we must seek it out by our own choice.

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Compassion and Justice Require Judgment