

A God's Eye View: Of You, Pt. 4
The Redeemed of the LORD
Isaiah 59: 1-2; 15b-16, 20; 61: 10-11; 62: 12a

**First Presbyterian Church
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This morning we're considering what it means that the LORD I Am is our Redeemer. In the book of Isaiah, God speaks his desire that we should know him this way: "You shall know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob" (60:16). And he tells us that another one of our new names will be "The Redeemed of the LORD." To redeem means to deliver, to buy back, to make up for a situation that went all wrong, to rescue or ransom or otherwise get someone out who is in trouble. So this will be our response question for the day. "From what do you long to be *redeemed*?" We'll be returning to that question at the end, but I wanted you to have it in mind as we work our way through these extraordinary verses. "From what do you long to be redeemed?"

Now I'd like to tell you a Tolkien story I've never told you before.



At the age of four, the boy who would become the author of *The Lord of the Rings* lost his father. Eight years later, he lost his mother. At age 12 Ronald Tolkien and his younger brother Hilary were orphans. Tolkien's mother had named her spiritual mentor, Father Francis Morgan, as guardian of the boys. Father

Francis saw to it that the boys were educated at the fine catholic school in Birmingham. Through those years, he found them suitable lodging, including a stay at a lodging house where another young orphan was staying: Edith Bratt.



Tolkien fell deeply in love with this beautiful girl three years older than he. She returned his love and these were blissful days for the young couple. Long talks through their windows. Cycle rides in the country, and hours in tea shops. The great loneliness of losing parents began to be filled in. But when Father Francis found out about their relationship, he feared that Tolkien would be distracted from his studies and miss out on a

scholarship to college. He had the boys moved to a different house. Tolkien continued to correspond with Edith. But then Father Francis, as Tolkien's earthly guardian and father in faith, forbade all contact until Tolkien should turn 21. Those three years seemed an eternity away. But all his life, Tolkien possessed a great determination to do the right thing. He once wrote, "I owe all to Father Francis and so must obey." The Christian worldview from his mother had taken deep root in Tolkien. He trusted patiently in the sovereign providence of God.

As the clock struck midnight beginning his 21st birthday, Tolkien wrote Edith a long letter, declaring his undying love. His heart had waited these thousand days. But for Edith, it had been 1000 days of silence. She didn't know what Tolkien felt. She wrote back that she was engaged to the brother of a school friend. Tolkien was alarmed, but undaunted. Free at last to pursue her, he did. He went to see Edith face to face and by the end of the day, Edith was still an engaged woman, but now it was to her true love, Ronald Tolkien. Another three years passed before Tolkien finished at Oxford and they could be married. The emptiness of their long denial and the frustration of dutiful patience was redeemed by 55 years which brought forth four children in a close family. These orphans were redeemed out of loneliness into fruitful love.¹

Israel in exile was enduring not three but seventy years of waiting for deliverance. To encourage them, God sent prophets who were both convicting and full of promise. To a people frustrated with their circumstances, Isaiah said

Behold the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save.
Or his ear dull, that it cannot hear.
But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God,
Your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear (59:1-2).

When our life is a wreck and everything has changed, we may well think there is something the matter with God. Maybe he's not real. Maybe he just doesn't have the power to do anything. Maybe he's distracted. But the prophet gets quite real with a hurting people. This exile happened because of your unfaithfulness as a nation! Your sins, both personally and collectively, brought this disaster upon you. The infidelity in each heart leads to chaos in the whole culture. Lies, greed, violence, self-focus and empty words—they undo a society and cut you off from God.

We grieve the consequences. We languish under such disarray. Isaiah describes our plight, "We hope for light, but there is only darkness. We grope

around like we are blind. We growl with hunger like bears who can't be satisfied. We moan with loneliness for connection like lonesome doves. We've turned away from God and so justice eludes us. We've trampled each other and truth has stumbled in the streets." We are a chaotic, yelling, polarized mess!

Isaiah smacks the people, and us, pretty hard. Then, midway through a verse, everything changes. He pivots. "The LORD saw it, and it displeased him, that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man [to help]. *Then his own arm brought him salvation.* His own righteousness upheld him. The LORD put on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak" (59: 15-17).



You remember how it was as a child. The voice came from upstairs, "Don't make me come down there!" Or maybe it came from the front seat, "I will stop this car if you two can't work that out. I will pull over and stop this car. I mean it!"

God had simply had enough of the corruption and the resulting affliction and pain of his people. He realized, "They can't do this on their own. They can't clean this up. They can't fix themselves. I'm coming down. I'm coming down there myself." And so God suited up for battle. He took off his fancy royal robe and for a moment his mighty arm was bared. Then he put on his armor. But the LORD's warrior gear was donned in order to save. His helmet was not metal, but made of salvation. His breastplate was made not of iron but righteousness. He was coming to squash resistance to his rule of love and get his people back on the right footing. "A Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from their transgressions" (59: 20).

Our sin separated us from the LORD our God. This gap led to all manner of suffering and loneliness and injustice. We could not ever close this gap. So God determined to cross the distance between us. God wanted the gap between us closed. The problem was not God's heart. His heart was open to us. It is we who had turned away. So God came to our side of the divide in order to close the gap within our hearts. In order to take away what separates us, to heal our hearts.



How the LORD did this explodes our minds. Curiously, Isaiah tells us *both* that the LORD himself would come but also that a Redeemer would come. The Redeemer was the LORD, but not the LORD! He was a man. He was God come to us *as* a man. In vs. 21 the LORD God actually spoke to the Redeemer. “This is my covenant with them [the people]. My Spirit that is upon you, [the Redeemer], and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth or the mouth of your offspring...from this time forth forever more” (59: 21).

Here was an enticing promise of hope: the LORD himself was coming to save us. Here was a strange mystery: but it’s not the LORD himself but a Redeemer he is sending. The LORD will put his own Spirit on this Redeemer who is not the LORD but somehow is every bit the equivalent of the LORD. The LORD is coming *as* this Redeemer, a man who has the fullness of God’s Spirit upon him.

How could they have understood this? For centuries this must have remained a puzzle. The mystery only got solved when Jesus showed up. The eternal Son of God took up our humanity and lived his human life in the power of the Holy Spirit. Even after Jesus, it took us years to figure out this solution to the puzzle. There is a reason we say that God is love. Because God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is the Father who sends his Son to live as one of us in the power of the Spirit. In order to redeem us out of bondage to sin. To buy us out of slavery to chaos, wrath and disorder. To call us out of darkness into his marvelous light. The one God as Father, Son and Spirit enacts redeeming love for us.

But wait, there’s more! This prophecy sounds like the Redeemer is coming in order to exercise the wrath of God against sin by bringing repayment to his enemies. Indeed, he was. But here’s the twist. A second astounding solution to the rest of the puzzle. The Redeemer came to exercise judgment against human sin by *taking it on himself*. He came over to our side of the divide to destroy sin. But not by obliterating us, the sinners. Rather by entering the deep, hellish divide between us and God, experiencing radical separation from his Father, so that he might in himself close the gap between us. He lived obedience and faithfulness on our behalf. He took the wrath we deserved as his own. He brought God and man together. His vengeance on sin was to bear sin and wrath as his own, so that we might be redeemed out of condemnation. He saved us from everlasting death. He bought us back from slavery to sin.

The story of Jesus solves a third mystery in Isaiah's prophecies. What is God's interest in this plan? What's his endgame? Jesus as the Redeemer reveals the full heart of God toward his lost and wayward creation. He wants to be intimately united to us. He wants to marry us. God married our flesh in coming to us as the man Jesus. He pledge himself to us. He made himself a fit bridegroom for us. Now he wants us to pledge ourselves to him, To be joined in return.

A bit further on in his prophecy, Isaiah records the Redeemer rejoicing in his role as our savior. Imagine Jesus exulting in his Father's plan as he said:

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD. My soul shall exult in my God.
For he has clothed me with the garments of his salvation.
He has covered me with the robe of his righteousness.
As a bridegroom decks himself with a beautiful headdress,
And as a bride adorns herself with jewels (61: 10).

The garments of vengeance from Is. 59 have become garments of salvation. The robes of war have become wedding robes. The warrior's helmet is a groom's wedding headdress.

And we are the intended bride. We are the ones called to come to the waters and drink. We're called to come and eat what satisfies, though we have no coin. We're called to come and marry our bridegroom, our redeemer. Though we have no wedding clothes, he gives us the garments of his righteousness. He adorns his bride out of his own inexhaustible, beautiful holiness.

For Ronald and Edith Tolkien, their marriage was a powerful symbol of a redemption. Through long patience, they were redeemed out of loneliness. Through persistent wooing, through wars and illness and danger, the two came at last to the oneness that would bring forth the new life of their children and the flowering of his writing that would so bless the world.

So it is no wonder Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 that marriage symbolizes the union of Christ and his bride the church. No wonder Paul describes what happens when we are redeemed by Jesus: we are made members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones (Eph. 5: 30, KJV). He married our flesh by becoming one with us that we might be joined to him in faith and become his beloved bride.

One of Paul's early sermons was recorded in the book of Acts. It includes these extraordinary verses:

Let it be known therefore, brothers, that through this man [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses (Acts 13: 38-39).

God came down here. He crossed the divide between us. He came to bring wrath against sin and the righting of the wrong in the human heart and the wrong in the world. He did it by taking that wrath as his own. He did it by creating a new humanity in himself. He longs to share it with us. To marry us and make all people part of his fruitful bride, the church. He offers to give us his own beauty to wear as our own. He dresses us in the wedding garment of his righteousness. And he assures us, “You can be freed from all the things from which you could not be freed.” All the things that bound you. Trying to work out your own rightness. Trying to fix your life yourself. Trying to be good enough. Trying to be enough in yourself. All that is bondage. I have come to redeem you.

You will be called A Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD. Because the Father has sent his Son in the power of the Spirit. He is your Redeemer. He joins you to himself by sharing his Spirit and uniting you to himself as a bride. Jesus as our Redeemer, the sin-bearer and the Bridegroom is the solution to the mystery of Isaiah’s prophecy.

So, then, we are back to our question. “From what do you long to be redeemed? Having heard the news of your Redeemer who has come to you, what stirs in your heart? Where do you want him to act? Where do you need to be set freed, bought back, made new? From what do you long to be redeemed?” I’ll pray, and then maybe you could send me some answers to that question.

¹ Catherine McIlwaine, *Tolkien: Maker of Middle Earth* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2018), pp.12-14, 146.