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## **MINISTRIES, INC.**

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### **Advent – The Promise**

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Isaiah 59:1-21

I don't know if you've thought about this or not, but you're hardwired for hope. You don't live by instinct. Every decision you make, every choice you make, every response you have to the situations and relationships of your life is fueled by and motivated by hope. Your story, the story of your life is a hope story. Your happiest moments are hope moments. Your saddest moments are about hope dashed, hope destroyed. You're always looking for hope. You're always attaching the hope of your heart to something.

Now here's what hope is. Hope is always an object and an expectation. You're always hoping in something and asking that something to deliver something to you. That's what hope is. Hope is always an object and always an expectation. We tend to look for hope in all the wrong places. We look for hope where it can't be found, and so we're often disappointed, often frustrated and often confused. Because we want things to give us hope that just can't give us hope.

For me, that means I want to find my hope in the constant affirmation of the people in my life. Just make me feel good about me. I'm a father of grown children. I know I look way too young for that, but it's true. One of the things we like to do every few years is gather together our grown, married children again with us at Ocean City, New Jersey. That's the place we always did our family vacations. I'm the chef of our family. So one of the things I like to do is provide for my children those meals that they enjoyed when they were growing up. That week is just one big bungle of soupy nostalgia.

There's a particular thing that's going to be the glory of that week. It's the morning where I make for them the world's best cinnamon rolls, the best ones in the universe, no contest. And I know what's going to happen. I'm going to put those rolls in the oven and the smell will begin to waft through that vacation house. My children will lay in bed and say, "Blessed am I of all children in the universe that this man is my father." And one of them will walk down the hallway and say, "Blessed are you, father, for you give us this glory." I know that's going to happen.

Well, I've made the rolls on this morning, I put them in the oven and I'm now sitting rather smugly in the kitchen, waiting for the first of my children to show up and tell me how wonderful I am. Well my oldest son shows up, and he says these words. "Do you mind if I make something else for breakfast?" "What do you mean do I mind?" I'm thinking. What a dumb question. Of course I mind. And then he says this. "My wife (interloper in the family that she is) doesn't want something so sweet for breakfast." I'm

thinking, “How dare she? I’m Paul ‘Cinnamon Roll’ Tripp.” He says, “I’m going to make some scrambled eggs.”

Scrambled eggs! Eggs! Who is she? I know this shouldn’t bother me, but it does. I know it’s not important to me, but it is. Now we’re at breakfast, and she positions herself right directly in front of this glorious tray of rolls. She’s eating her stupid eggs. I can hear her chew every bite. I’m not supposed to be paying attention, but I am. I’m offended with every swallow. You see, we tend to attach ourselves to hope that just will never deliver what we’re asking it to deliver.

I want you to turn to your Bibles to Isaiah 59. The reason this is a brilliant hope passage is because it’s written in a dark moment. This is one of the darkest moments in the history of the nation of Israel. Before I describe this moment to you, I want to ask you the question: when life is hard for you, when it’s difficult and confusing, when you’re dealing with the unexpected, when your story is not what you would like your story to be, where do you run for hope? Where do you run for comfort? Where do you run for security? Where do you run and hide? Where is your functional hope?

The children of Israel had been in captivity in Babylon, and they have come back now to Jerusalem, and it’s a mess. There are no city walls. There is no more temple. There is no central government. There is no enforceable set of laws. There is no obvious leadership. There is no justice. There is violence in the street. There is massive poverty. There is complete, fundamental, widespread social breakdown. It’s a mess. And into that darkness, there is a brilliant discussion of hope, maybe one of the most brilliant discussions of hope in all of Scripture. Because in those dark moments, your true, real hope will be exposed. And your true, real hope will come through for you, or it will deeply disappoint you.

Now I don’t normally do this. This is a very un-Tripp moment. But I want to outline this chapter for you. Because I think that will be helpful. It divides itself into four sections that lead us to where real hope can be found. The first section begins with a false charge in verse 1. Verses 2-8 are a divine accusation. And when God accuses you, you had better listen. Verses 9-15 contain a very important confession. Finally in verses 16-20 is God’s answer – divine intervention.

Now I want to do one more thing before we unpack Isaiah 59. I want to say four things about hope that we’ll find in this passage. Here’s the first thing. The Christmas story is itself a hope story. It’s about hope created, hope lost and hope restored. The second thing may sound a bit confusing to you at first, but we’ll understand it as we look at this passage. The doorway to hope is hopelessness.

The only way you will ever find true hope is to give up on all those places where you’ve tended to put your hope that can’t deliver. The doorway to hope is hopelessness. The third thing is this. Hope, to be reliable, to be trustworthy, to be hope, must fix what is broken. Hope, to be hope, must address the biggest, deepest, darkest dilemmas of our

lives. If hope can't fix what's broken, why would you hope in it? The fourth thing, hope is not a situation, hope is not a location and hope is not an experience. Hope is a person, and His name is Jesus.

Now let's look at Isaiah 59. Verse 1, "Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;" You may not understand what this verse is doing, so I need to explain it to you. God, through the prophet, is answering a charge that God's people are making against God. You see, here's what often happens to us as well.

When life isn't working, when we're suffering in some way, when we're disappointed in some way, when the comfort and ease that we so often enjoy is interrupted, it's very tempting for us to bring God into the court of our judgment and question His faithfulness, question His goodness, question His wisdom and question His love. It's very tempting to say, "God, where are You? Where is Your faithfulness? Where is Your grace? Where is Your love? I thought You were near to me. I thought You answered my prayers. God, where are You?" That's exactly what these people in this moment were doing.

And here's what's devastating about this. When you allow your heart to begin to question God's wisdom, when you allow your heart to begin to question His goodness, when you allow your heart to begin to question His presence, you don't then run toward Him to help. Because you don't go for help to someone who you have come to doubt. Even if it's subtle, that accusation of God is very spiritual dangerous, because to the degree that you've convinced yourself that God is less than faithful to His promises, that God is less than loving and that God is not as near as you thought He was, you'll quit running to Him. That's exactly what was happening here.

So God says, "No, you've got it wrong. What's going on is not a sign that My hands are too short to reach you. What's going on is not a sign that My ears are so dull that I can't hear you. I'm not the problem." In fact, if you look other places in the Old Testament, what's going on in the lives of these people is exactly the opposite of that.

Look with me at Amos 4. Amos 4 is essentially a poem, and it's a poem that has this refrain that happens again and again of, ". . .but you have not returned to Me." What God is saying is, "I've brought these difficulties into your life in order to pry open your hands to let go of the things that you're putting hope in so that you would run to Me, so that you would place your faith and trust in Me, so that you would return to Me. These difficulties are not a sign of My unfaithfulness and inattention. In fact, these difficulties are a sign that I am near." They're actually tools of uncomfortable grace.

You see, often the grace of God comes to us in uncomfortable forms. That's exactly what's going on here. God says, "I love you. I'm seeking to wrap My arms around you. I'm seeking to get you to return to Me in real, true, living faith. So I have brought you through difficulty, not because I don't love you, not because I can't hear your prayer, not because I'm too weak to help, not because I don't care. I have done so precisely because

I love you and I'm near. You've got it wrong." It's a misplaced charge. In a group this size, some of you sometime were tempted to question God, tempted to doubt His goodness, tempted to wonder if He hears you.

That misplaced charge is followed by a divine accusation. In fact, it is a brilliant diagnostic that's in these verses. Look at it, starting in verse 2. ". . .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." And it goes on to describe the real problem.

Here's what I like to think. I like to think that my biggest, deepest problems in life are outside of me, not inside of me. They're problems of situations, they're problems of location or they're problems of relationships. I like to think I'm one of the good guys. And God says, "No, I'm not the problem. Let Me tell you what is the problem. You're the problem." The problem actually exists inside of you. It seems comforting to say, "I'm not the problem."

Isn't that why people like protests? We've seen a lot of protests in America the last few months. You'll never find somebody in a protest carrying a sign with an arrow pointing down that says, "I'm the problem." Because the reason we love to protest is because we get to say, "Ha ha! You're the problem! I'm not." And it's just baloney. Because at the base of all of those things that we think are problems, what do you find? People!

Think with me for a moment. There is no such thing as a bad marriage. As if something happens to my marriage that doesn't involve me. "How did I get in this bad marriage?" That's just craziness, isn't it? It doesn't make any sense. A bad marriage is a bad marriage because people in the marriage are doing bad things. At the bottom of a bad marriage, what do you find? Us!

What about a dangerous neighborhood? There is no such thing as a dangerous neighborhood. Neighborhoods never did anything bad. You've never been hurt by a neighborhood. Why are neighborhoods dangerous? Because there are people in the neighborhoods who do evil, violent, dangerous things. At the base of a bad neighborhood, what do you find? Us!

Philadelphia used to have this great, old-school, Italian mayor. He was a bit of a thug. We loved him. He was a mob sort of guy, Frank Rizzo. He was a "take no prisoners" mayor. He did not understand the concept of being politically correct. He was fundamentally politically incorrect all the time. He would have this Tuesday afternoon press conference that was just high comedy.

Everybody in Philadelphia would just stop to listen to his press conferences. Well there was one noble young reporter one day who asked Frank Rizzo what he was going to do about the street crime in Philadelphia. He stood up the microphone and said, "The streets in Philadelphia don't commit any crime. It's all done by people. Next question." Well he's exactly right. The streets have never committed any crimes. People do.

There is no such thing as corrupt government. The institution itself is not a problem. The problem is people in the government who use their power for personal gain and don't actually exercise their authority for the welfare of the citizens. You get to the bottom of corrupt government and guess what you find. Us!

And the minute you sit under God's charge, the minute you realize what He's saying, it's a brilliant diagnostic. We're the problem. We have taken God's beautiful, glorious, wisely created institutions and we've made a mess out of them. It's us! And that means you can't find hope by running to a new location, because guess what you find there. Us. You can't run to a new situation, because guess what you find there. Us. You can't run to a new relationship, because guess what you find there. Us. You'll never find hope that way. It can't be found. Because God's right. His diagnostic is right.

You see, the problem is that there is something that lurks inside of me that is dark and dangerous, that kidnaps my thoughts, that diverts my desires, that distorts my words, that drives my behavior. And the prophet here uses three words for this thing: iniquity, transgression and sin.

The first word is "iniquity." Iniquity means "moral uncleanness." I'd like to think that I'm pure, but I'm not pure. My motives aren't always pure. My desires aren't always pure. My purposes aren't always pure. My thoughts aren't always pure. There is moral uncleanness inside of me.

The second word is "transgression." Transgression is high-handed rebellion. It's willingly stepping over boundaries that you know are there. I willingly step over the boundaries of God's rules. I do it because I don't care. It's the moment when you park in the "no parking" spot even though you see the sign and don't care. If you're a husband and this week you yelled at your wife, you didn't yell at your wife because you were ignorant that that was wrong.

You yelled at you wife because at that moment you didn't give a rip what was wrong, because there was something that you wanted. If you cheat on your taxes, you don't cheat on your taxes because you're ignorant that that's wrong. You cheat on your taxes because at that moment you don't care what's right, you don't care what's wrong. You'll willingly step over that boundary because you want something else.

The third word is "sin." Sin is falling short of the mark again and again. It's pulling back the arrow with the bow as far as I can and every time it falls short of the target.

So because there is yet iniquity inside of me, because there is yet transgression inside of me, because there is yet sin inside of me, I make a mess of God's good creations. You can't just blame situations. You can't just blame locations.

You can't just blame other people. Because at the bottom of all of that is us. Our greatest problem, the thing that most needs to be fixed is inside of us, not outside of us. That's the truth. And you'll never find hope if you don't listen to God's accusation.

Well that accusation is followed by a confession. Look at verse 9 and following. "Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us; we hope for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope for the wall like the blind; we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among those in full vigor we are like dead men. We all growl like bears; we moan and moan like doves; we hope for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us."

Now what I have read for you is a description of people who have completely lost their way. It's a description of when you're in that moment when you've lost your way, where you're so lost all of a sudden it's like someone has turned off the lights of your life and you're in the dark. This picture is a picture of people who are groping along a wall. Have you ever been in a dark room and you're fumbling for the light but you just can't find it and you're using the wall to keep you going in the right direction? That's the picture.

When you've lost your way, you are at a very significant moment of decision. You will either point the finger or you'll make the confession. That's actually what happens next. Notice verse 12. "For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the LORD, and turning back from following our God (emphasis added)." "God, we accept it. I accept it. I'm the problem. It's me."

And once you're there, you are now in an utterly hopeless place, because you're saying, "I've got a big, deep, abiding problem that I can't solve. Because I can run from a situation, I can run from a location and I can run from a relationship, but I can't run from me." If you run from you as fast as you can, when you get to the other side, you're always there with you. I don't know if you've figured that out. You can't run from you, because you always show up at the end of the run.

So this is hopelessness. This is, "God, I've got a problem that I can't solve." That is the doorway to real hope. Because it tells you not only is it hopeless to hope in you, but it's hopeless to hope in anybody else too. Because they all suffer from the same condition. And all those locations, all those situations and all those places where you would run are populated by people who are desperately as hopeless as you are. There is no hope to be found.

And it's only when you give up on all of that horizontal hope that you're ready to find hope where hope can be found. Have you given up on all those other hopes? If you say, "If only I had \_\_\_\_\_, then my life would be. . ." what fills in the blank for you? I can tell you that, for some of you, it's false hope. Because you think that somehow some situation, some location or some person will be your personal savior, will be your

messiah, will give you the life, the peace and the security that you're seeking. Listen, creation has no ability whatsoever to be your messiah. No person can ever be to you the fourth member of the Trinity.

I've had over a hundred wives say this to me. "All I ever wanted was a man who would make me happy." I think, "Well he's cooked. Because that man doesn't have the ability to produce that for you. He can't. He should nourish you, cherish you, serve you and love you of course, but he cannot be the source of your happiness. That will never ever work." What's a biblical view of marriage? It's a flawed person married to a flawed person in a fallen world. Are you encouraged yet? But with a faithful God.

So some of you have to abandon hope. Abandon all that stuff. You're not going to meet a person who will give you life. You're not going to get a job that will make life worth living. You're not going to own a possession that will give you the happiness that you seek. You're not going to have an experience that will fulfill you. None of those things will ever do that. It really is hopelessness that begins to open for me the doorway to hope.

Look at the brilliance of where this passage goes next. Starting in the second half of verse 15, "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." Here's what God is saying. God looks around and says this, "There is no horizontal place for hope to be found, none. No one is able to give you the hope that you're seeking, no one."

In the light of this disaster, in the light of all the lostness, in the light of all the rebellion, transgression, sin and iniquity, look what God does next. He doesn't turn His back, He doesn't walk away and He doesn't say, "I've had it. I'm going to wipe you out."

Here's what He does. "Then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him." Whenever you see the phrase in the Old Testament "the arm of the Lord," that's one of the names of the Messiah the Lord Jesus. God is saying, "Now that you're at this moment where you utterly have no hope, nowhere to look, I'm going to send you hope, but it won't be a situation, it won't be a human relationship and it won't be a location. It will be a person, and His name is Jesus. Hope is going to come."

That's the Christmas story. The Christmas story is hope coming. That's why the angels sang those glorious songs. That's why the wise men came to worship. That's why the shepherds were blown away. Because hope had invaded the earth in the person of the Lord Jesus. Hope had come. Hope that had been so long lost, hope that had been destroyed is now returning in the person of the Lord Jesus.

And that promised hope would bring two things with Him: justice and grace. Look at the verses that follow. "He 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. According to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render repayment. So they shall fear the name

of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives.”

This God is going to deal with evil. He’s going to punish wrong. Evil will be repaid. Now the words that are here in these graphic word pictures should bring to you terror and comfort. They should make you serious and afraid and should comfort you at the same time. Why should they make you serious and afraid?

Because it’s very clear that the prophet is saying that this world is a moral world that is ruled by a holy God who takes sin seriously. Sin is serious, sin is evil, sin is disastrous and sin leads to death. And this holy God will never say, “It’s okay for you to sin. It’s okay for you to transgress. It’s okay for you to have iniquity. As long as you’re happy, I’m fine.” No, this is a holy God who hates sin. He will not tolerate it. He will punish every sin.

You see, the problem with me is I don’t always see sin as sinful. Sin doesn’t always look evil to me. If you’re a man at the mall and you’re lusting, you don’t actually see danger at that point. You see beauty. If you’re a teenager and you’re rebelling against your parents by doing something that they don’t want you to do, you’re not feeling the danger of sin at that moment. It doesn’t seem evil. You’re feeling the buzz of your temporary independence.

It is very clear that this is a God who is absolutely perfectly committed to justice. Sin will be dealt with. But there is comfort in these words. Maybe you’re sitting here thinking, “Well Paul, this doesn’t sound very comforting.” Here’s the comfort. You would not want to live in a world that was ruled by someone who didn’t care about justice.

You wouldn’t want to live in a world where the person ruling the world was incapable of being angry with evil. There is a way in which God’s righteous anger and His holy justice is the hope of the universe. God’s anger with sin and God’s commitment to justice means He will not rest until sin is forever defeated. He will not relent and He will not quit until every molecule of sin is delivered out of every cell of every heart of every one of His children.

There will be a moment where sin will be no more because there is a holy God committed to justice and we’ll be able to go to the one funeral we want to go to, the funeral of sin. Because sin will die and we’ll live forever in a place where there is no sin, there is no violence, there is no evil, there is no transgression and there is no sickness, suffering or any of those things. They will be forever defeated because this is a just God.

But He doesn’t just come armed with justice. He comes armed with grace. Look at these words. ““And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,” declares the LORD.” “I’m going to send a Redeemer.” Redemption is a beautiful term. To redeem means to buy something back. “I’m going to send My Son and He is going to live on your behalf the perfect life that you could not live.” He is going to

take your sin on Himself and die the death that you should die. But He dies as a perfect Lamb, a perfect sacrifice, and His death satisfies God's anger. And then He's going to rise again and conquer death so that He can give to you eternal life.

So by His life, by His death and by His resurrection, His righteousness is now given over to your account. So you can stand before a holy God as if you never sinned, be unafraid now of His wrath and have Him wrap His arms of acceptance around you and invite you into intimate personal relationship with Him. Because no longer does your sin separate you from Him. That's redemption.

Verses 16-20 are a prediction of the cross of Jesus Christ. They are actually an announcement of the cross. Because on the cross of Jesus Christ, the holy justice of God and the amazing grace of God kiss. Because in that moment, the justice of God is meted out against Christ, He bears the anger of God, He takes all that penalty that was ours and the grace of God explodes in abundant forgiveness and mercy. On the cross, the One who is hope brings together the justice and grace of God. And hope is returned, because that moment where justice and grace kiss delivers to us the one thing we need – help with our deepest problem, sin.

You see, these Old Testament saints were living in the messiness between the “already” and the “not yet.” Already they had been redeemed from Egypt, already the Law had been given, already the prophets had spoken, already the glory of God had lived in the center of the people of Israel, but not yet had the promised Messiah come. They were living in messiness and holding on to hope. You too and I with you live also in the middle of the “already” and the “not yet.” Already Jesus has come the first time, already He has lived, died and rose again on our behalf, already the Word has been given, already the Spirit has been given but not yet has sin been completely defeated, not yet are we yet in that final kingdom.

And in the messiness of life between the “already” and the “not yet,” you will reach out somewhere for hope. Hope can only be hope when it's placed in the person of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, who not only enters your difficulty in this moment but promised to you a place in eternity where there will be no sickness and there will be no suffering and there will be no sin. And we'll live with Him in a place of absolute peace, absolute righteousness and absolute joy forever and ever.

If He has guaranteed for you a place in eternity, then He must have also guaranteed for you all the grace you need along the way. Because if you didn't get that grace, you would never arrive in eternity. So the promise of future grace is the promise of present grace in the here and now. Now that's reason for hope. Because no matter how troubling those situations are, no matter how difficult this location, no matter how hard those people are, you can wake up in the morning and say, “I have met hope. Hope has invaded my life in the person of the Lord Jesus. There is hope in my world. Hope has come and hope will come again and deliver me out of the messiness between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’” Now there's hope.

Let's pray. "Lord, thank You for this passage which is a beautiful exposition of true hope. We are like those saints of old. We live in the messiness between the 'already' and the 'not yet.' And in that mess, we can get ourselves lost, we can wrongly accuse you or we can seek for hope inside of ourselves or in places where they can't be found in. I pray by Your grace that You would reclaim the hope of our hearts, that You would draw our hearts to find hope in You. In moments that are confusing or dark, may we run not away from You, but may we run to You for You, our hope. Hope has come, and hope will come again. Thank You. We pray these things in the name of You, You who are hope. Amen."

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