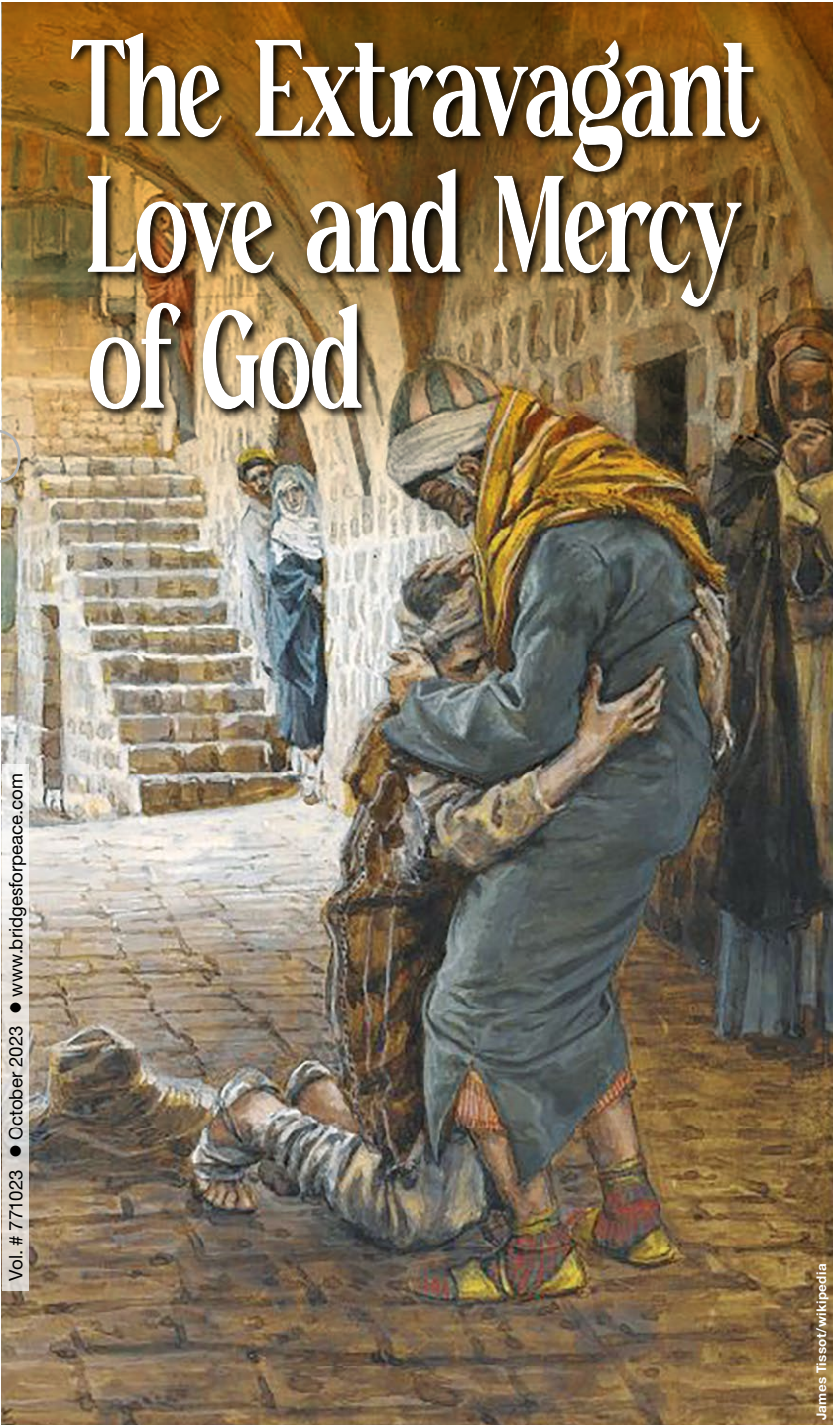


The Extravagant Love and Mercy of God



James Tissot/wikipedia

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THE BIBLE IS UNIQUE AMONG BOOKS. It is not a book, it is *the* book; not a collection of the words and thoughts of men, but filled with the living words of the Creator of all things. When I became a believer, I read the Bible constantly. I consumed it, I drank it, I couldn't get enough of it. But I also loved just to hold it because I could feel the life-giving energy contained in its pages every time I touched its cover.

Those pages were a treasure chest of the promises of God, each one revealing more of the myriad aspects of the character of the One who fashioned the universe. And I had no doubt that every one of them would be fulfilled. It was a simple proposition. The more I read about what God *did*, the deeper my realization of who God *is*. According to *All the Promises of the Bible* by Herbert Lockyer, the Bible contains over 8,000 promises. Some are those made between men and some are pledges men made to God. But over 7,000 are promises that God made to man, and the vast majority of them directly relate to Israel.

Some of God's Promises to Israel

Genesis 12:1–3

Genesis 12:7; 15:18–21; 28:13–15;
26:3–4

Exodus 23:31

Deuteronomy 1:8; 28:1–14

Psalms 102:13, 16–22

Isaiah 10:22; 11:12; 43:5–6;
49:22–26; 60:8–12

Jeremiah 16:14–18; 23:3, 7–8;
29:10, 14; 31:7–8; 32:37–40

Ezekiel 11:16–17; 28:25; 36:22–23


Amos 9:11–15

Hosea 3:4–5, 10–11

Zechariah 8:4–8

The Bible Contains God's Deepest Revelation of Himself

We are living in an incredible moment in history as we witness hundreds of those promises being fulfilled in full view of all the nations of the earth. Yet controversy abounds in the Church as to God's relationship with Israel and the validity of those ancient promises in our modern world. Perhaps some of that confusion occurs because we forget what we are reading. We go looking for answers to complex situations, deep theological principles or the latest word God has just for us as we face our day, losing sight of the fact that what we are reading is actually God's deepest revelation of Himself. Every word, every verse, every story exists to help us grasp the very nature and essence of the God who loves us passionately.



Let me give you a few examples. In Matthew 19:16–26, Mark 10:17–27 and Luke 18:18–27, we read the story of the rich young man who approached Jesus (Yeshua) and asked what he had to do to attain eternal life. Jesus’ reply was simple: obey the commandments. When the young man answered that he had always done that but was obviously seeking more, Jesus did not correct or condemn him. Instead, He explained the next step on the journey. *“Sell what you have and give to the poor...and come, follow Me”* (Matt. 19:21). According to the Gospel accounts, the young man walked away, sad.

At this point, most Bible study conversations devolve into condemnation of this foolish young man who walked away from his salvation because of his attachment to his worldly possessions. But that’s not what Scripture says. And in the ensuing verses, Jesus does not condemn the rich or chastise the young man. I believe we can hear the compassion in Jesus’ voice as He expresses how very hard it is for the rich to make that choice. Because the parable isn’t about the young man, it is about the extravagant love and mercy of God. And when I get to glory, I fully expect to meet that young man face to face!

The same is true of the day laborers in Matthew 20:1–16. Some began work at the crack of dawn, some at lunch time and some close to quitting time. Yet all received the same compensation. Our Bible study discussions focus on what is fair. How very unjust, we think. What about employment law? But the heart of the message is not about fairness. It is about the extravagant love and mercy of God.

And the same is also true of the parable of the prodigal son. The precocious young man asked for his inheritance well before he deserved to receive it. His father, who certainly didn’t have to, relinquished the money, undoubtedly knowing full well that his son would squander it. We cluck our tongues at the foolishness of youth as we read of the son’s sinful decisions and can’t help but think he deserved to end up in that pig pen. Yet his father stood watch every day, waiting for the return of his son. And when he finally saw him approaching in the distance, he ran to him, embraced his foul smelling body, kissed his soiled cheeks and poured out every imaginable blessing on this young man who deserved nothing. The story is not about the son. It is about the extravagant love and mercy of the father.

The Incomprehensible Mercy of God

Unfortunately, for nearly two millennia, Christians have made the same mistake when reading the prophets of the *Tanakh* (OT). That failure to recognize the heart of God's message has undergirded Christian anti-Semitism for nearly 2,000 years. Each prophet spoke during a dark time in Israel's history, when the Chosen People were making very bad decisions and turning away from the God of their fathers. Each time, a prophet came with accusations that were tragic in nature and accompanied by clear consequences should the people continue in their ungodly behavior. But without fail, each prophecy contained a nugget of grace, an encouragement to turn from their wicked choices and cry out to the Lord. Each one came with the promise of unmerited forgiveness and restoration.

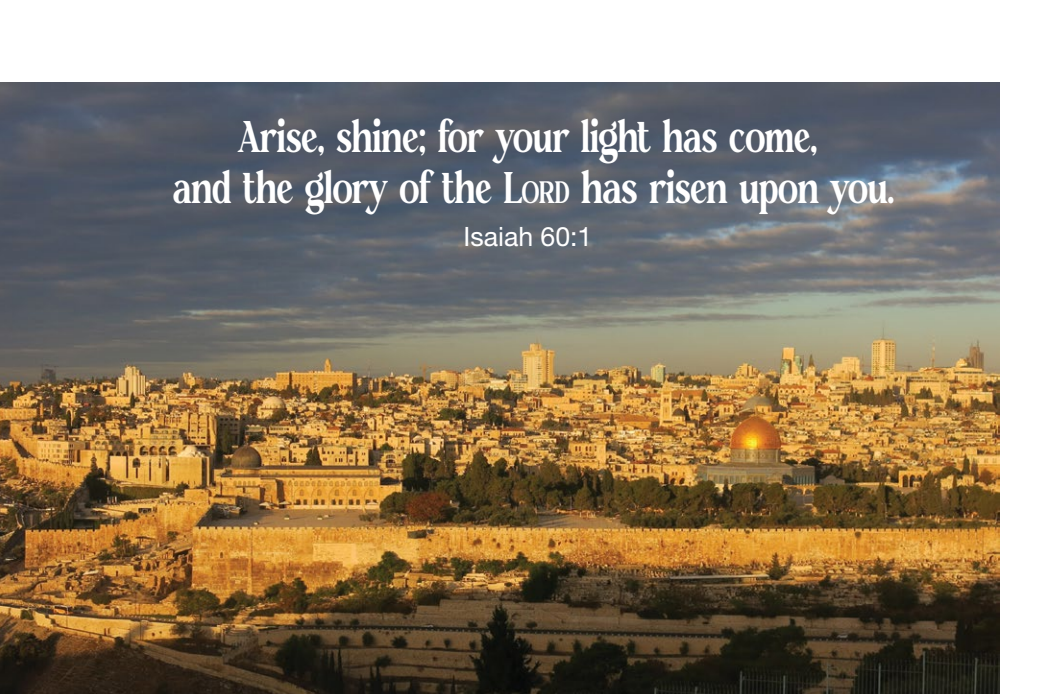
Yet when Christians have read these verses throughout the ages, their take-away has been condemnation of Israel. How could they have been so wicked? How could they have forgotten all that God had done for them? But that was not the message. God wasn't trying to tell us how wicked Israel was. He was telling us how inexplicably good He is. How could He reveal to us His unfathomable mercy without juxtaposing it against the depth of their sin? And how very sad that for 2,000 years, so many Christians have missed the heart of the message: the incomprehensible mercy of God.

Light versus Darkness

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Isaiah 60:1–3: *“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness will cover the earth and deep darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you and His glory will appear upon you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising”* (NASB).

The concept of light versus darkness is a common theme in the Bible and serves as a reminder of God's faithfulness even during the darkest of times. The prophet Isaiah, for example, speaks of a coming Messiah who will bring light to *“those who live in [a] dark land”* (Isa. 9:2b NASB). In the Gospels, Jesus Himself is referred to as the *“Light of the world”* (John 8:12) and His






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Isaiah 60:1

followers are called to be “*the light of the world*” (Matt. 5:14). In several places, God reminds Israel that His calling on them as a nation is to be a light to the other nations of the world.

Despite the fact that many think of the Exodus as a time of unfaithfulness on the part of the Israelites, others recall it as a time when God was with His people in an incredibly intimate way. As the prophet spoke the words of Isaiah 60, those listeners couldn’t have helped but hearken back to the Exodus when the light of God’s glory shone from Mount Sinai, or when Moses was forced to cover his face because of the brilliance of God’s reflection. Perhaps, the people hoped, this would be the case once more, that Moses’s incredible encounter with God would be the experience of the entire nation.

In the words of Isaiah and the other *Tanakh* prophets, light represented God’s presence, and with that presence came deliverance and blessing, justice and peace. And it is often clear that the people have no light of their own. God is the light who rises like the sun over them. The ancient sages of Israel told a wonderful *midrash* (rabbinic interpretation and elaboration of biblical texts) about the partnership between God and His people. “I have My light,” said the Holy One, “and I have given you light. Your light is a reflection of My light.



**As His people,
we are to be
His reflection.**

So let us be partners. Together let us bring our light to Zion and on to the rest of the nations.” Sometimes as Christians, we misread the message. We decide it is time to put on the boxing gloves and beat the darkness into submission. But that’s not who God is. He is light, and in His presence, darkness simply cannot exist. As His people, we are to be His reflection, and those who long for the light, like the rich young man, will be drawn to it.

Light Pushes Back the Darkness


God rarely, if ever, sent His prophets during times of peace, when the people were acting in righteousness and there was no calamity on the horizon. They brought their messages when the

nation was, or was about to be, engulfed in darkness. To be in darkness is a terrifying thing. It means to be in the midst of confusion and fear, chaos and destruction, turmoil, division and devastation. When the nations are in such darkness, God told Israel, they will be drawn to Israel's light.

Israel had many periods of darkness in her history. One such time was the Roman occupation of the land. Clearly, it was a time of turmoil and chaos, with instances of persecution and countless crucifixions. But during that time of darkness, as Christians, we recognize the dawning of light. In the midst of the chaos, our Messiah was born. Repeatedly, God has spoken through His actions in history: "This is who I am. I am the light that pushes back the darkness. I am the calm in your storm. I am your shield and your defender, no matter how circumstances may look."

We are living in days much like those the prophet Isaiah warned about. Darkness is covering the earth, and deep darkness—called gross blackness in Hebrew—is engulfing the people. It is a time of violence, division, fear and confusion, a time when good is being called evil and evil good. Freedoms are being eroded and governments are taking control in the name of health and safety. God's people—both Jews and Christians—are increasingly facing oppression and even persecution. And most alarmingly, many do not recognize the dire circumstances that the world is facing.

So what is our takeaway? The countless beautiful passages of God's love for His people, their redemption and deliverance, His blessings of rescue and safety were spoken directly to Israel. But were these messages for them alone? Can we take away concepts that apply to us as well in the midst of our own darkness? I believe that we can. God also spoke to Israel through the prophet Isaiah when He said, "*Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be not afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will also help you, I will also uphold you with my righteous right hand*" (Isa. 41:10 NASB). Because, God says, that is who I am. He encouraged Israel to be strong, to be courageous, to continue to let His light be reflected, to be a light to the nations, no matter the darkness that surrounded them. We just need to remember that when He said to Israel, "This is who you will be," what He was actually saying was, "This is who I am."



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Scripture is taken from the New King James version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT)—*Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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