

# Our Greatest Threat

Isaiah 59

January 7, 2018

What is our greatest threat in 2018? What do you think? Some people might say, our greatest threat is the Stock Market. At my last check, the DOW was at 25,295, after a 220-point gain. This graph is actually a little old. But what goes up must come down. Recent gains in the marketplace seem to good to be true. How long can things remain bullish before our economy does a reset? Plenty of us still remember all too well the severe dip of 2009. Just that thought raises our level of stress and anxiety. So, is the stock market perhaps our greatest threat in 2018?



Some might say our greatest threat is Global Warming.<sup>1</sup> This is a picture of Robert Swan. He is a British man who was the 1<sup>st</sup> person to walk to both the north and south poles. In November 2017, Robert and his son, Barney, began an adventurous journey to the South Pole. It's called the Energy Challenge because it's a 600-mile journey, surviving only on renewable energy sources.<sup>2</sup> There are some who see Global Warming as our greatest threat in 2018. They feel that failing to act soon will be catastrophic for our planet. So, is this our greatest threat, the potential death of our planet?



Still others might say that our greatest threat is a nuclear war. North Korea is working toward developing a nuclear arsenal. Recently, President Donald Trump tweeted in response to Kim Jong-un, "...I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is just saber rattling, but perhaps we are on the verge of our greatest threat?



Certainly, there are many ideas as to what our greatest threat might be in 2018.<sup>4</sup> Let's consider that it may be something far bigger than just one or two particular global or political issues. It may actually be the same threat that God's people faced back in the prophet Isaiah's time. Isaiah 59:1-2 says, "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." Simply put, I'm suggesting that our greatest threat is being separated from God; losing our personal communion with Him. Communion can be understood in 2 ways:

- 1) a Christian worship service at which bread and juice are shared in remembrance of Jesus' amazing sacrifice on the cross.
- 2) the sharing of a close, intimate relationship, particularly at a deep or spiritual level.

<sup>1</sup> Learn more about Robert Swan at <https://www.2041.com/robert-swan>

<sup>2</sup> 2041. "SPEC". [www.2041.com](http://www.2041.com) retrieved 2017-08-17.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/367149-trump-i-have-a-much-bigger-button-than-kim-jong-un>

<sup>4</sup> This makes me think of the song by Billy Joel, "We didn't start the fire." In around 4.5 minutes, it recounts an amazing litany of history and human joys and struggles.

Communion is about connection and fellowship with God. Our communion service on Sundays is an important time for us to reflect on our walk with God and to evaluate any priorities in our life that we need to realign with our first-love devotion to Him. Communion is not just something we celebrate during a Sunday service, it is a daily relationship with our God.

Our greatest threat has always been sin because it separates us from God. I believe that, as Christ-followers, we will be able to handle it if the stock market crashes, if global warming destroys our planet, or if the threat of a nuclear attack becomes a reality. We can handle all of these things, and even more, as long as we remain near to our God! It's important to recognize that Isaiah is written to believers, or at least to professing believers. He is not addressing lost sinners and their need for salvation. He is addressing God's people. Just one chapter earlier, Isaiah 58:1-2 declares, "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to MY PEOPLE their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. 2 For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them." They SEEMED EAGER to enjoy sweet communion with God, but, it turns out, they really weren't all that sincere. Isaiah goes on to list multiple examples of their open and obvious sins. He lists sins of omission and commission; thus, they were sinning not only in the wrong things that they were doing, but also in the right things that they were not doing.

Let's jump back to Isaiah 59:2, "But YOUR iniquities have separated you from YOUR God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." If we want to enjoy close communion with our God, we must contend with our very own iniquity which separates us from Him. Now, there can be other factors in life, besides sin, that make God feel distant. It's not always an issue of sin. God can sometimes feel distant when we've encountered a long string of financial struggles or health problems or something else. Or perhaps we're experiencing some mental health challenges or a bout of depression during these cold, dark winter days. But perhaps, for some of us here this morning, the barrier between us and God is sin. That's worth contemplating. After all, all of us are sinners, so sin comes naturally to us.

Isaiah 59:3-8 goes on to mention evil deeds, acts of violence, lying, and wickedness. Again, these are actions being committed by God's people, not by pagan nations or those outside the faith community. And Isaiah not only calls them out for this, but he makes it clear that their wandering has left them in a tough place. Isaiah paints a bleak picture of God's people stumbling in darkness, with no deliverance. In 59:9 he says "...We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows." God is far from them, they've been separated from Him. I shudder to imagine myself getting into this kind of situation where God is this distant, where He would ever feel this far away. How will I ever handle the challenges of 2018 if they were to come during a time when I was wandering far from God?

On behalf of God's people, Isaiah makes a refreshingly honest and genuine admission of guilt in Isaiah 59:12-13:<sup>5</sup> "For OUR offenses are many in your sight, and OUR sins testify against us. OUR offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge OUR iniquities: rebellion and treachery against the LORD, turning our backs on our God, inciting revolt and oppression, uttering lies our hearts have conceived." In stark contrast to those who were uttering lies, the prophet Isaiah makes an honest declaration by acknowledging sin for what it is: an offense against a holy God.<sup>6</sup> The first step for anyone who truly wants to contend with their personal sin is to acknowledge that it's there and that it's OURS. We need to own up to it; we are the ones who have allowed this separation from God.

Hebrews 3:12-14 encourages us as Christ followers to protect our communion with God: "See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end." The greatest threat to the human race has always been sin; sin has

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<sup>5</sup> Though Isaiah himself is God's righteous prophet, he confesses the sins of the people.

<sup>6</sup> In the Hebrew Old Testament, offenses, sins, and iniquities, are the three most common words for evil thoughts and deeds. See 2011 *NIV Study Bible* text note on p. 1204.

the ability to deceive us and lead us astray. As believers in Jesus Christ, sin no longer has mastery over us. Thanks to Jesus, we are no longer under its condemnation. And yet, until we get to heaven, our sin nature still wars against us. Unconfessed sin can still rob us of our communion and close fellowship with God.

Coming into the holy presence of God makes us realize just how destitute and sinful we really are.<sup>7</sup> Later on, Isaiah asks, “How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins. Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.” (Isaiah 64:5b-9) There comes a point where we as humans need to recognize that all we can do is fall on God’s mercy. We are not able to be good enough or to do good enough on our own. In our limited, human capacity; holiness is beyond us, out of reach. We are separated from God and completely incapable of doing anything about it. And this is precisely where God’s grace intercedes.

God graciously overcomes this threat of separation for those who repent. This is more than just honestly acknowledging our sin, although that’s an important first step. But this is repenting of our sin, genuinely turning from it. God is never complacent about sin and we should never let ourselves become complacent about our own sin. We can’t afford to say to ourselves: “Well, this is just the way I am. After all, “to err is human.” I’ll never be perfect so what’s the big deal if I go out and sin a little more?” NO, this is not taking sin seriously.<sup>8</sup> Offending the God of the universe is no small thing. A deep reverence for and fear of God is what humans need. As one author writes, “People don’t want a god of holiness and wrath, they only want a god of love and peace. They don’t want a god who hates their sin, they want a cuddly, teddy-bear god who’ll be their buddy. The reality is that people don’t want to fear God because they don’t want God in their lives.”<sup>9</sup>

In order to have communion with God, we must get sin out of our lives. All sin is dealt with in 1 of 2 ways: **wrath or repentance**. Isaiah 59:15b-20 goes on to say, “The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak. According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes; he will repay the islands their due. From the west, people will fear the name of the LORD, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory. For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the LORD drives along. “The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,” declares the LORD.”

In 2018, we serve this same God of Jacob. And, our sin is dealt with in the same way: **wrath or repentance**.<sup>10</sup> Too often we think we can choose some 3<sup>rd</sup> option, but we don’t get to make the rules. We are not God. He is the potter, we are the clay. If Isaiah 59 ended at verse 19, we’d just have to go home today very depressed and without hope. But, verse 20 is right where a mighty warrior steps in to save the day! God redeems those who repent of their sins. He does this because He is a God of grace. He does this for us because we can’t do it for ourselves. Yes, God has high standards, but He graciously helps us meet those standards. This is why Isaiah 59:16 said, “...so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.” God desires to be in communion with you and me, so He graciously provided what we cannot do for ourselves.

In 2018, what’s threatening to drag you away from communion with God? Could it be greed, lust, busyness, over-confidence in yourself, hanging out with the wrong crowd, being deceived by the

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah is a lot like you and me. When he saw his own sin in light of the holiness of God, he knew that he was done for. In Isaiah 6:5, he says, “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

<sup>8</sup> See Romans 6:1-4.

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Burk Parsons writing in *Tabletalk*, Ligonier Ministries, Sanford, FL, January 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 1:27-28 says, “Zion will be delivered with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness. But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the LORD will perish.”

world's values, self-delusion that your sin is "just a little sin," or could it be something else? Whatever sin may be dragging you away from God, I urge you to repent of it today. Psalm 32:1-5 says this, "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin."

Brother or Sister in Christ, I encourage each one of us to keep short accounts with God. Let's confess our sins to Him early and often. Don't let your sin pile up or linger on and on. Acknowledge your sin; repent of it. And by doing so, you'll keep in close communion with YOUR God.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
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