

HUMANIZE ME



Sometimes people say a public figure needs to be humanized. What could this mean except that there are things in this world that make us less than human? Jesus is on a mission to make you more human—the kind of human who looks more like the Son of God. This series tackles the forces that keep us from being just as human as God always intended us to be. And it leads us to discover that when we are humanized, we get to humanize others.

Progress. It means different things to different people. For parents of an infant, it's a night's sleep or a dry diaper. Progress! To a swimmer, it is taking seconds off the time. To an investment banker, it is a portfolio on the rise. To a city like ours, it is jobs and tax base and schools. To the Denver Broncos ... well, you tell me. I can't figure it out. What does progress mean to you? Some groups assume that their political and social perspective is the wave of the future, so progress always means going their way. But progress might mean taking a step back. During the Reformation, progress for the gospel meant "returning to the sources." The Renaissance had a similar attitude. Here at First Pres, we think progress right now means filling our four worship services back to the levels we saw a dozen years ago. We believe God is calling our church back to strength in the heart of Colorado Springs, and we are preparing to host a revival that impacts generations. That's progress for First Pres right now, growing the impact of worship every Sunday, reaching as many souls as we can for Jesus every week. Sometimes I think we are making progress. But progress can also just mean faithfulness. For an addict in recovery, progress is one more day sober. For a person fighting cancer, it is one more day up and moving. For a marriage in trouble, it is one more day faithfully hanging onto the covenant. There are lots of kinds of progress. Sometimes we make some, sometimes we don't. Listen, failure to make progress can be demoralizing, but progress blocked completely can be dehumanizing. Progress ultimately isn't yours to make; it depends on Jesus and his coming Kingdom.

There is something in us that needs to know we are making progress, some innate desire to know that a day spent is moving us forward, an effort made will move the ball. We need to know we are spending our lives on something that matters and, if we get at it, if we work hard, if we try, it will be worth it somehow. Our lives will be fuller, our impact will be greater, our families or kids if we have them will be better off for the effort. Progress. We were made to want it. If we don't understand that need, we can get blown off course by those moments when progress is hard or impossible. God wants us to know, Isaiah shows us, that whether you feel like you are cruising down the highway of life with the wind at your back or you feel like you are trudging uphill in the sand against the storm, progress

is being made, by God's hand, every day, every moment, toward a more beautiful end. The Kingdom of God is on the way; in fact, it's guaranteed.

This is the picture Isaiah gives us today. Here at the very end of the book of Isaiah, the prophet's life and ministry reach this apex, this crescendo moment when by the Spirit of God he gets a glimpse of the Kingdom on the way. Isaiah lived in a time when Israel was coming apart and threatened by rising empires of the middle east, back in the 700s BC. We think of prophets as people who announce bad news: "You guys really messed up and now it's gonna get bad!" But the message of Isaiah as a whole is that God has a surprising plan of grace and glory for His people, and even though it may get darker before the dawn, the promises of God to bless His people and bless all people through His people are going to come true. What's that going to look like? It's going to look like this: "See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more" (Isaiah 65:17–19).

That little statement, seven words in Hebrew: "I will create new heavens and a new earth." This is an earth-shattering statement. This has not yet been revealed or disclosed before Isaiah 65:17. It changes everything. The fulfillment of the promises of God doesn't just mean making things work in this world, making the best of the world as it is, or getting along in the present order. No. God is about a total recreation of all things. Weeping and crying no more. Pain and disappointment are things of the past. Gladness and rejoicing the order of the day—God will restore and recreate all things. Things won't just be as good as it gets, things will be as good as God gives. Jesus calls it the Kingdom of God. In Luke 4, He started his ministry by reading Isaiah and saying these things are coming to pass, then telling John the Baptist's followers in Matthew 11 that what they are seeing Him do, healing the blind, preaching good news to the poor, and the rest, are signs of this Kingdom come in Him. This is the prophecy John grabs again in Revelation 21 to describe heaven, the eternal Kingdom of

God. This. "I will create new heavens and a new earth."

Not only is it about joy over sadness, but there is justice and progress too. "They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit" (Isaiah 65:21). No more working to fill another's storehouse. Your work makes progress. I know, you'd like to see a Kingdom with no work, just lounging around. But it appears we work, just not the cursed, broken, frustrating experience of work we are used to. It's redeemed work. But do you see this need for progress being answered? My work, my sacrifice, benefits me and my kids. It isn't stolen from me. "No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune" (Isaiah 65:22-23). My heart breaks to think of any parent who looks at their child and thinks that, "my kids are doomed to misfortune," cursed for being mine. That's how it feels when your progress is stolen from you. No more. It isn't a world ruled by violence and danger anymore. It isn't a dog-eat-dog world anymore. It isn't even a wolf-eat-lamb world anymore! There will be peace.

That's why we long for this Kingdom. There is something in all of us that senses when things are not right. The Kingdom Isaiah, and then Jesus, put on display resonates with that sense. Things aren't right. But in this coming order, they will be. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we deepen the longing and aggravate the expectation. Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it this way: "In the second petition, which is, 'Thy kingdom come,' we pray that Satan's kingdom may be destroyed, and that the Kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it, and that the Kingdom of glory may be hastened." Your Kingdom come; this glorious Kingdom come. Let the disordered Kingdoms of the Deceiver be destroyed. Let the Kingdom of Grace gain ground. Bring me into it, bring others into it, keep us in it, and hurry it up. Because this kingdom I'm living in has problems. Not small problems. Big problems. Your Kingdom come. And hurry it up, because progress seems slow.

You might have heard the saying about how the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.

It came from an unorthodox abolitionist minister in the 1850s named Theodore Parker, who said, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways... But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice." It's as big as the horizon and the curvature of the earth. I can't tell which way the arc of history bends, but I think it's bending in a good direction. I hope it is. We hope for progress. But you know, I don't actually believe in what they call the "upward march of humanity." I don't believe things naturally get better. I don't believe that time plus education plus socialization plus economics plus technology plus whatever else is going to give us a better humanity. I think the problem is deeper than that, and by the way, so did Abraham Lincoln and so did Martin Luther King Jr., when they quoted Parker. What Scripture teaches is not that we can overcome the sicknesses of humanity by effort and resolve, but that we are lost without the saving grace of Jesus Christ. If the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, it's because God bends it. Not us. If the arc bends toward goodness, it is because the gravity of the coming Kingdom of God bends the arc. The Kingdom of God. Thy Kingdom come. Who will guarantee its coming?

It hurts when we can't make progress. It pains us when we feel stuck. But it is absolutely dehumanizing when progress is impossible. Jesus is our model for humanity. Jesus is the humanity the world needs. The more we act like Him, the more human we are, and the more we want to help others fulfil their God-given humanity. So, one of the fun things about this series is our ability to highlight mission partners we work with as a church that helps people find new life in Christ. Agencies that find stuck and hurting people, love and help them in Jesus' name, and restore humanity. One such agency is Family Life Services. You see, when we don't feel like we are making progress, we get discouraged; but when something, or someone, is blocking our progress entirely, we feel less than human and we need a humanizer to come along in Jesus' name.

What do I want for the world we live in? I want this picture painted by Isaiah. I want the Kingdom illustrated by Jesus, demonstrated by Jesus. I want an end to the demoralizing, dehumanizing, destructive, perverse and deceptive kingdoms of this world. I want the health. I want the wholeness. I want the humanity of the

Kingdom Jesus brings. Who will guarantee its coming? The last verse today is a big one: "The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the Lord" (Isaiah 65:25). The serpent will eat dust. This verse doesn't come out of nowhere. Back in Genesis we met the serpent. The serpent is the one who deceived us into this broken kingdom we live in right now. And God said something about this deceiver: "So the Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel'" (Genesis 3:14–15). See, the deceiver gets his shot. That ancient serpent will get his play. That old snake will bite the offspring of Eve, the Son of Man. He'll get to bite Jesus, on the heel, but that heel will crush his head and the lies and the deception and the death will be over. That's the cross. That's the bite, that's the poison, and that's the crushing defeat and glorious victory that guarantees the Kingdom Come.

The wolf, the lion and the serpent, they make their play. The flesh, the world and the devil, they get their time and we live in their mayhem for now. But in the end, they don't win and they can do no more harm. Why? Because one day on a small rocky hill just outside the gates of Jerusalem, Jesus, the Son of Man, received their bite and swallowed their poison, and all their harm, and all their destruction was poured out on Him. And He died. And He rose again. Because Christ emptied the poison of the serpent, bore the ravenousness of the wolf and received the bloodthirst of the lion, and all the hatred and sickness of all the flesh, the world and the devil was emptied out on Him, and because after that, He walked out of the grave, because of these things, the Kingdom of God is sure and certain. Because of Jesus, the moral arc of the universe not only bends, but it cannot escape the gravity. When your progress is slow, when your progress is blocked, remember and rest assured, the Kingdom is on the way. The King has guaranteed it.

STUDY GUIDE
HUMANIZE ME • "Progress"
Isaiah 65:17–25

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Isaiah 65:17–25.

- 1) What are some of the characteristics of God's new creation described in these verses?
- 2) This new creation will be a delight and its people will be a joy. Where do you see evidence of these sorts of things already in our world? Where is God's Kingdom already "breaking in?"
- 3) Throughout this passage, God has a lot of "no more" and "never again" statements. What would you add to this list? When you look at our world, what sorts of things will have no place in God's new creation?
- 4) Read Isaiah 2:3–5. Isaiah is bookended by these two visions of new creation. How might these visions serve as an encouragement to you in this season of life?
- 5) In what ways might this passage challenge you to think differently about what it means to be human?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Think of a person in your life who is "stuck." How might sharing the good news of God's coming Kingdom provide them a glimmer of hope?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Close your time with the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name.

Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever.

Amen.