

Prayer for Mercy
Isaiah 64

June 10, 2012

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^A Isaiah 63:15

^B Exodus 19:3-6, 8, 18

^C Job 42:7-8, Luke 2:25-26, Acts 10:31

A. Introduction

1. An Outline of Isaiah

a. Isaiah can be divided into three major sections

(A) chapters 1 to 35, are prophecies to Israel and Judah

(1) concerning the surrounding nations

(2) in the face of the threat from the growing power of Assyria

(B) chapters 36 to 39, form a transition from the current threat of Assyria to the future threat of Assyria's successor, Babylon, as the ruler to the Mesopotamian empire

(C) chapters 40 to 66, to Judah as a people, who are already in Isaiah's prophetic view, exiled in Babylon

(1) they are messages of comfort

(2) they are messages of coming, Messianic deliverance

b. properly speaking, the messages of those last chapters, end with Isaiah 63:6, which describe God's final great judgement upon the nations

c. Isaiah 63:7 through the end of the current chapter 64 consist of a prayer by Isaiah on behalf of the nation he foresees as in exile

2. The Prayer of Isaiah

a. recounts first the repeated disobedience of Israel in the face of God's deliverance and goodness to them

b. then, as we looked at last Sunday, a prayer for the restoration of this people to being the people of God in deed

c. today, that prayer concludes, calling upon a prayer for God's mercy upon this people who are going to go into exile

d. and, Lord willing, next Sunday, we shall look at the first part of God's answer to Isaiah's prayer

e. but now, Isaiah prays,

B. O God, Come to Us! 64:1-5a

1. O God, Show the Nations Your Might (1-2)

a. By Signs in Heaven and Earth – verse 1 – *Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, That the mountains might quake at Your presence –*

(A) in the preceding chapter, God seemed remote from His people: 63:15a – *Look down from heaven and see from Your holy and glorious habitation; Where are Your zeal and Your mighty deeds? ...*

(B) and heaven, is like a great canopy or tent barring God from His people – let God tear through this barrier and again show Himself as dwelling in their midst

(C) the last part of this verse is repeated in verse 3 and forms a border about this part of the prayer; we shall come back to this thought

b. For Your Name's Sake – verse 2 – *As fire kindles the brushwood, as fire causes water to boil – To make Your name known to Your adversaries, That the nations may tremble at Your presence!*

(A) this will be as inevitable as the results of the presence of fire

(1) if you introduce fire to a pile of brush, it quickly consumes it

(2) if you put fire under a container of water, the water boils

(3) these things result from the nature of fire

(4) the nature of God is such that similarly

(B) His Presence will make His Name known to the nations

(1) and if it does not bring them to obedience

(2) it will bring them to fear and respect Him; so Isaiah prays,

2. O God, Repeat Your Covenantal Acts! (3-5a)

a. As You Startled Us at Sinai – verse 3– *When You did awesome things which we did not expect, You came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence.*

(A) the laying out of God's covenant with Israel begins in Exodus 19 and there are described the awesome, unexpected things which God did – first looking back to Egypt – for God tells Moses:

(B) *3b ... 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: 4 "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. 5 Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own*

possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; 6a and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” ... Exodus 19:3-6

- (C) to this Israel responded in Exodus 19:8, ... ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do!’ ...
- (D) and later in the chapter, before the assemble people of Israel, it says ‘Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently.’ Exodus 19:18
- (E) for that kind of Divine intervention Isaiah prays
- b. For Your People’s Sake – verse 4 – For from days of old they have not heard or perceived by ear, Nor has the eye seen a God besides You, Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him.
 - (A) the God we worship, in Ralph Carmichael’s words, is ‘more than just a God who didn’t care That live away out there...’¹⁻².
 - (B) but we worship the living God, the God who steps down to do mighty things on behalf of His elect, His chosen people
 - (C) it was true throughout the OT; it was true in the NT as God entered humanity in the person of Jesus Christ; it is true today
 - (D) so Isaiah prays on this basis, that God will intervene
- c. For the Righteous Remnant’s Sake – verse 5a – You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, Who remembers You in Your ways.
 - (A) in the Bible, God repeatedly meets with those who are righteous – that is, those who by faith seek Him and seek to please Him – by walking in God’s ways
 - (B) Job was such a man, and at the end of his testing, God had this commendation of him: ‘... you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has. ... go to My servant Job, and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves, and My servant Job will pray for you. For I will accept him so that I may not do with you according to your folly, because you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has.’ (Job 42:7b-8)
 - (C) Simeon was such a man at the time of Jesus’ birth: ‘... and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.’ (Luke 2:25-26)

(D) such a man was the Gentile Cornelius, to whom God's angel said, Acts 10:31, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God' & God met him through Peter

d. But on this point, Isaiah encounters a difficulty in his prayer; there is a shortage of the righteous among Israel; he has to confess,

C. O God, Your Covenant Does Not Help Us! 64:5b-7

1. God's Wrath and Ways – verse 5b – is difficult to put into English as you will discover if you compare translations, but here is a translation that attempts to follow the Masoretic division of the verse: Behold You, You were angry that we sinned; in them (that is, in your ways) is eternity, that we might be saved.

a. this morning in our Bible Class we looked at the provisions God made for forgiveness of sin and for worship – foretelling Christ in type

(A) these provisions were to be a testimony to both Israel and the surrounding nations of the holiness and righteousness of God

(B) they were there so that the worship of God's people might be a pure and holy worship

b. but how did the nation of Israel use those provisions?

2. Israel Abused God's Ways – verse 6 – For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

a. the way that they abused God's ways – His means for their worship – is described here in its effect, and Isaiah 1:11-15 gives the reason: '11 What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?' Says the Lord. 'I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle; And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. 12 When you come to appear before Me, Who requires of you this trampling of My courts? 13 Bring your worthless offerings no longer, Incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies— I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. 14 I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, They have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them. 15 So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood.'

- b. They did want they wanted, killed a lamb, thought that this made everything alright with God, and returned to doing what they wanted
- c. mere external religious practice has no merit before God
- d. without heart worship, righteous acts are but like dirty rags, they do not impress God nor draw us to Him, but rather separate us from Him

3. Israel Punished for Ignoring God – verse 7 – *There is no one who calls on Your name, Who arouses himself to take hold of You; For You have hidden Your face from us And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities.*

- a. in the face of Israel’s sin, the faithful remnant had failed to pray
- b. God had a two-fold response to His people who disregarded Him
- c. this then, is Isaiah’s difficulty in His prayer: God’s people, Israel, cannot claim God’s help based upon His covenant with them.
- d. what was a covenant? the Hebrew and Greek words used in the Bible can variously be translated as covenant, testament, agreement, treaty, alliance and compact – a covenant formed a solemn contract; as such
 - (A) it laid out various obligations and responsibilities of the parties to the covenant
 - (B) it also detailed the benefits or blessing to be received
 - (C) and, it specified certain penalties and remedies upon the failure of a party to live up to the terms of that contract
 - (D) we have already read Exodus 19:10 which is one place where it is recorded that Israel as a nation gave agreement to the covenant
- e. since, as a nation, Israel had failed to live up to their responsibilities under the covenant, they were no longer in a position to benefit from it; instead; instead they find themselves governed by its penalty clauses and so, Isaiah can only pray,

D. O God, Then Your Mercy Instead! 64:8-12

1. O God, Because We Are Still Yours (8-9)

- a. You Are Our Father and Former – verse 8 – *But now, O Lord, You are our Father, We are the clay, and*

You our potter; And all of us are the work of Your hand.

- (A) that Israel had sinned was indeed true; but that did not negate the historical fact that as a nation they belonged to God
 - (B) like all humanity who are but clay or dust and were formed from that to become living beings, so also collectively was the nation of Israel, being formed by God the one who forms things (that is the literal meaning of the word rendered as 'potter')
 - (C) as a Father gives life to his children, so God gave life to this nation
 - (D) in every aspect of their being a unique people – as we read, His 'own possession among all the peoples' and 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nations,' it was His hand who had accomplished it
 - (E) on this basis, Isaiah prays for mercy
- b. Your Mercy Is Our Only Claim – verse 9 – Do not be angry beyond measure, O Lord, Nor remember iniquity forever; Behold, look now, all of us are Your people.
- (A) because, we have nothing we can expect, says Isaiah, except the exercise of your wrath, your just punishment for our sin
 - (B) if the covenantal law will not help us, all that is left is that we throw ourselves upon the mercy of the court
 - (C) we are Yours, O God, to do with as you see fit; but now look upon us as your possession and from that perspective, save us
2. O God, Because Your Name Suffers (10-11)
- a. By the Desolation of Your Land – verse 10 – Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation.
 - (A) this prayer is based upon a fundamental truth found in the OT
 - (B) the land of Canaan belonged to God
 - (1) 'The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are [but] aliens and sojourners with Me.' (Leviticus 25:23 NAS95)
 - (2) Psalm 78:54, 'So He brought them to His holy land, To this hill country which His right hand had gained.'
 - (3) its pastures and cities were the holy possession of God

- (4) and Israel were but tenants for life within it
- (C) so if the land were desolated, because it was God's land, then the reputation of God, that is, His Name, was suffering – on this basis Isaiah prays that God may show His mercy to His people
- b. By the Desecration of Your Worship – verse 11 – *Our holy and beautiful house, Where our fathers praised You, Has been burned by fire; And all our precious things have become a ruin.*
 - (A) by the context, the 'precious things' here are those things which were associated with the worship of God: the choir, instruments and musicians; the sacred festivals and thanksgivings – all these ceased for the people when they went into exile
 - (B) Isaiah sees prophetically the destruction of the temple which the army of Nebuchadnezzar burnt with fire after stripping it of all its vessels and ornaments of value
 - (C) the place upon which God had put His Name, as the mark of His Presence with His people – gone; razed to the ground
 - (D) and God's Name suffered thereby, the voice of worship silenced
- 3. O God, Because We Are So Afflicted – verse 12 – *Will You restrain Yourself at these things, O Lord? Will You keep silent and afflict us beyond measure?*
 - a. Isaiah sums up his prayer by the pitiable condition of God's people
 - b. claiming, when all else may fail, God's compassion or pity
 - c. *'Just as a father has compassion on his children, So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.*
(Psalms 103:13)
 - d. and so Isaiah's prayer ends. Lord, have mercy on us.

E. Conclusion

- 1. when you witness to people of sin, salvation and Jesus Christ as Saviour
 - a. you inevitably hear these responses
 - (A) 'how can you say I am a sinner?'
 - (B) 'I live a good life,' 'I keep the 10 commandments,' 'I follow the teaching of the sermon on the mount'
 - b. but the reality is that you cannot live up to these standards

- c. A.J. Jacobs, an editor-at-large for Esquire magazine and a non-religious secular Jew, did a special assignment of living for one year by the precepts of the Bible, as literally as he could.
 - (A) The result was his book 'The Year of Living Biblically.'
 - (B) One of the things he learned about himself was how much he sinned. That was a little disturbing to him, but once he started to pay attention to the amount that he lied and gossiped and coveted and even stole – he was taken aback. It really opened his eyes.^{3}.

- 2. the truth is that all of us are thrown back upon God's mercy
 - a. the Pharisee and the tax-collector went up to the temple to pray
 - b. the Pharisee told God how righteous he was
 - c. the tax-collector cried, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'
 - d. Jesus said, 'I tell you, this man {the tax-collector} went down to his house justified rather than the other.' (Luke 18:9-14)
 - e. thank God that we have a merciful Saviour in Jesus Christ, to whom our closing hymn gives praise.

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AV Authorized (King James) Version

NAS New American Standard version © 1960, 1995 The Lockman Foundation (usually the 1995 edition)

NIV New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society

NKJV New King James Version © 1979 Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers

Some of my favourite commentaries and resources used in the preparation of this message are identified as follow:

BM – Biblical Museum, Editor James Comper Gray, ca 1870

EBC – The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, © 1986 Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 49530, Michigan

Volume 6, Isaiah, by Geoffrey W. Grogan, Principal, Bible Training Institute, Glasgow, Scotland;

EJY – The Book of Isaiah by Edward J. Young; © 1965; Wm. B. Eerdmans

K&D – Commentary on the Old Testament, by Keil & Delitzsch; Volume 7, Isaiah, by Franz Delitzsch

Kerux – The sermon & illustration data base compiled by Rev. David Holwick at the web-site,

www.holwick.com.

2. *He’s Everything to Me*, by Ralph Carmichael, © Lexicon Music, Inc. 1964.

3. *Fine-tuned To Sinning*, adapted by Rev. David Holwick from Christianity Today International/LEADERSHIP Journal. Winter 2008, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, Page 17; copyright © 2008 – Kerux illustrations # 35316