

# Isaiah 64:1-9 PM

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[ 0 : 00 ] As Aaron has already mentioned, Advent is a four-week season of preparation for Christmas. By the way, it might be helpful if you open your Bibles to Isaiah chapter 64.

That's kind of where we're going to be landing most of our time. That's page 623, so you don't have to spend the next two minutes finding it. That's page 623. Advent is a four-week season of preparation for Christmas.

At Christmas, we do two things. We will celebrate the birth of Jesus in humility in Bethlehem, and then we will look forward to the return of Christ in glory in the new creation.

The birth of Christ in humility, the return of Christ in glory. Advent is the season of waiting that prepares us for the receiving. So the theme of our Advent series this year, as Aaron said, is the weary world rejoices.

And the person who's going to be our guide through this theme is the prophet Isaiah himself. Because Isaiah, in his book, speaks to a people who have been wearied by the changes and chances of this life to the point of almost total exhaustion.

[ 1 : 13 ] They're burnt out on the verge of depression and despair. Isaiah speaks to a people who are waiting for God to radically intervene in their lives.

They have come to the end of themselves, and they now know they need salvation. They need redemption. They need rescue from above. And I think for you and I, it doesn't take long to scan the news headlines of our contemporary news feeds to realize just how many people in our world are feeling this way.

Isaiah 64 comes to us as a communal prayer, a cry for help. And I'm going to suggest that we explore this prayer really simply through three questions.

First, what is the prayer? Second, why this prayer? And third, how is the prayer answered? So first, what is the prayer? And right away, Isaiah just gets to it.

Verse 1 of chapter 64. It's the heart of it. Notice that word, rend. To rend something is to tear it apart or tear it open.

[ 2 : 21 ] Think of the famous line in a wedding ceremony, or if you've seen this kind of on a movie before. What God has joined together, let no one rend asunder. Let no one tear apart.

So the prayer is, Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down. The prayer means, Open up the heavens, Lord, and enter into the earth. Lord, would you open up the heavens and would you enter in?

Would you open your realm to our realm? And would you invade our realm with your realm? It's a prayer for radical divine intervention. It's a prayer for a breakthrough in the world.

A divine breakthrough in the church. A divine breakthrough in our lives. Notice, it is not a prayer for peace and prosperity. It's not even a prayer for comfort and consolation, even though those are good things to pray for.

It is a prayer for holy fire. It is a prayer for prayer. The presence of the Almighty before whom mountains quake and nations tremble. Here we would do well to remember Isaiah's vision back in chapter 6.

[ 3 : 29 ] Isaiah sees the Lord sitting on a throne, and he sees a series of six-wings seraphs, which are these mythical and mysterious and majestic creatures surrounding the throne of Almighty God.

And each seraph has six wings. With two wings, they cover their eyes. With two wings, they cover their feet. And with two wings, they fly around the throne of God Almighty. And they call back and forth to one another, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory. And as Isaiah sees this, the very foundations of the temple shake. And the whole temple fills with smoke. And Isaiah says, Woe in me is me.

I am lost, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down. Are you sure about this, Isaiah?

Are you sure about this, Israel? Are you sure this is something you want to pray, St. John's, Vancouver? Because this prayer is not just for peace and prosperity and comfort and consolation. [ 4 : 36 ] Those are good things. It is a prayer for holy fire. For something awesome in the truest sense of that word. For something majestic and maybe even frightening. The people of God in Isaiah chapter 64 are so desperate that they are begging the one before whom seraphim hide their faces to come down in their midst.

And we are told that when he comes, in verse 2, the brushwood of our lives will burst into flames. And the tepid water of our souls will break into a rolling boil.

This is a prayer for holy revival. Comfort without holiness in the end will not heal us.

In Isaiah chapter 40, God speaks words of comfort over his people. But in Isaiah chapter 64, his people cry out for holiness to come down. Why?

Why do they cry for holy one to come in their midst? Why this prayer for drastic divine intervention? And we're given the answer, a two-fold answer, in verses 5 to 9.

[ 5 : 49 ] The first is because of who we are, verses 5 to 7. And the second is because of whose we are, verses 8 to 9. In other words, this prayer for God to rend the heavens and come down is motivated both by knowledge of self and by knowledge of God.

So first, because of who we are. This comes in verses 5 to 7. Have you ever heard that little line before? Sometimes maybe a pastor has said it to you.

I hope they haven't. If you want to find the perfect church, you better not join it. Anybody heard that line before? Sometimes we need a dose of honest self-awareness is the purpose of that line.

And here, that's precisely what God's people are doing. They're getting honest before God. In verse 5, the second half of verse 5, they're talking about the persistence of their sin.

Behold, you were angry and we sinned. In our sins we have been a long time. It's not just that we've occasionally messed up, Lord. It's rather that we've made sin a way of life.

[ 6 : 54 ] We have persisted in it. Then verse 6 talks about polluted spirituality. We have all become like one who is unclean.

And all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. And the literal imagery that's being used here is of menstrual cloths. It's quite graphic. Even our righteous deeds flow from an impure heart and are like discharge before God.

And then the second half of verse 6, it says that we all fade like a leaf and our iniquities like the wind take us away. So we are at the mercy of our iniquities like a leaf before the wind.

They have come to define our lives and determine the course of our lives. And then the worst of all seems to come in verse 7. There is no one who calls upon your name who rouses himself to take hold of you.

In other words, prayerlessness is the surest sign of spiritual trouble and disease. And then verse 7, the second half, You have hidden your face from us and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.

[ 8 : 02 ] It's this excruciating feeling that God has hidden his face and given his people over to their self-chosen prison. And so the people of God are crying out to him that he would open the heavens, that he would come down because of who they are.

It's like the first step of a 12-step AA program. What's the first step of an AA program? Admit your life has become unmanageable. And recognize that you are powerless to deal with your addiction on your own.

The people of God have finally reached a crisis moment, and they have come to see that their own hopelessness and helplessness, apart from God's direct action and intervention, is evident to all.

This is what Jesus calls in the Gospels poverty of spirit. Do you remember how he starts his great kingdom message, the Sermon on the Mount? He says, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Who are the poor in spirit? They are those who know they don't have what it takes to live the kingdom life, and they're honest with God about it. Blessed are the poor in spirit.

[ 9 : 13 ] This is a prayer where we are acknowledging that unless God does something for us, and unless God comes down and does something in our midst, there is no hopeful future for us.

It's a confession that we are not worthy of the grace for which we ask. We don't deserve the answer to the prayers that we pray.

And yet, here, the people of God are encouraged to pray anyways. Why? And that comes in verses 8 and 9.

It's because of whose we are. There is something more profoundly true about than who we are. It's whose we are. And in verses 8 and 9, we're shown that despite our sin, we still belong to God.

And I figure that this is one of the hardest truths for the Christian to fathom. Maybe one of the hardest, the sweetest truths for the Christian to savor. Despite our sin, we still belong to God.

[10:11] Look at verse 8. But now, O Lord, you are our Father. This is the basic truth that Jesus wants everybody to remember and reiterate every time they pray.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. And then we are given an image of a loving Father creating and crafting a people intentionally formed for him.

It says, we are the clay and you are the potter. We are all the work of your hands. And then in verse 9, be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not our iniquity.

In other words, don't let our sins get in way of your creative purposes for us. We are your people. Don't let us go. Behold, please look. We are all your people.

So in these verses, we get this acknowledgement that God answers our prayers for divine intervention, not because we deserve it, but because out of his loving kindness and the flow of his mercy, he wants to do it.

[11:13] We do not deserve it and we cannot demand it, but God delights to give it. And so this radical thing is happening in Isaiah chapter 64. Listen, let me back up a little bit here.

Who we are and whose we are are being placed side by side. And in that way, this prayer is taking us straight into the depth and the heart of the gospel.

Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Where we are faithless, he is faithful all the more. God shows his love for us and that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Or to summarize it as Tim Keller does, we are more sinful than we ever knew and yet we are more loved than we could ever imagine. This is precisely why this prayer is being prayed.

It's because God's grace always overcomes our sin. God's grace is more abundant than our sin.

God's grace goes deeper than our sin. Whose we are is more profound than who we are.

[12:20] So how is it that God answers the prayers of his people? When they know that they are not worthy of the answers that they ask for. But they believe that it might be in God's heart to give.

What is the answer to the prayer? Well, God does exactly what the text says. He opens the heavens and he comes down. Quite literally. But it may not be in exactly the way you think.

If you have a Bible with you, if you could turn to page 836. This is the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, which many believe was the very first of the Gospels to be written.

And so notice, these would have been the very first things that people ever heard about Jesus written down. Other than Paul's letters. Look at verse 9 with me.

In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. So we're dealing with Jesus' baptism here.

[13:21] In verse 10, Did you notice how Jesus' baptism was portrayed by Mark?

In every other Gospel, the baptism of Jesus is talked about the heavens were opened. It's a milder form of the verb. But Mark used a really strong form of the verb.

He says the heavens were torn open. They were torn apart. Why is Mark doing that? He is alluding to Isaiah chapter 64. He's saying that this baptism moment with Jesus is the answer to the prayers of God's people in Isaiah chapter 64.

This is the divine intervention into human history. Mark speaks of the heavens being torn open, the spirit descending like a dove, and a voice speaking, You are my beloved Son.

So what is God's answer to the prayers of his people? It is a Father's beloved Son. It is the Father's pleasure in his Son. And it is the Father's anointing of his Son for ministry to the world.

[14:41] Friends, this is like the world's burning bush moment. Holy fire has become a human person here. Radiating with the life and the pleasure of Almighty God.

At its core, we learn that the world does not need another something at Christmas. You and I do not need another something. We need a certain someone.

The world deep down is longing for a person. Isaiah 64 is crying out for a person. And you and I in this Advent season are waiting for a person.

We are waiting for the Holy One of Israel, the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, we don't like waiting very much. Think about a little child that gets up in the morning the weeks leading up to Christmas and goes underneath the tree and picks up a present and shakes it to hear what's inside.

Weights it to discern what it could possibly be. And if their parents are there, maybe unwraps it to get a sneak peek. We'd much prefer that our hopes and dreams be filled immediately.

[ 15 : 50 ] But in reality, we often find ourselves in life having to hold on to hope, sometimes even by a thread, while we wait. Sometimes the waiting can be counted as in months, as when Mary waited for the birth of her son, Jesus.

Sometimes the waiting can be counted in whole decades, as when Zechariah and Elizabeth waited on God to answer their prayers for a son, for an heir.

And sometimes waiting can be measured even in whole centuries, as when the Jewish people waited for God to break his silence and answer their prayers and send the Messiah.

And sometimes when we wait too long, we can feel like it's a waste. Prolonged praying can feel like a waste. But I think one of the things that this passage wants to bring bear in our lives is that God does not waste our praying as God does not waste our waiting.

Rather, he uses the waiting to prepare us for the receiving. That's why we have Advent before Christmas. So like Simeon and Anna in the Gospel of Luke, we are to learn that our true peace will come only when our eyes have finally seen the salvation that God has prepared in the presence of all people, Christ the Lord.

[ 17 : 13 ] And it's when we learn the goodness of what Isaiah 64, 4 says. From of old no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen a God like you who acts for those who wait for him.

My brothers and sisters, waiting for what our hearts most deeply long for can be an excruciating experience. But in the waiting, God prepares us for the receiving.

So come, Lord Jesus, come and bless us with your presence. I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.