

An Appeal To God's Heart

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[0 : 00] Back to the passage in Isaiah where we read chapter 63 and into chapter 64, looking at that passage as Isaiah's great prayer.

And there are a few prayers in the Bible that are as remarkable as this prayer of Isaiah. In Isaiah's situation, we know that he was facing a tremendous struggle to present God's truth in his day because, as we read in chapter 6, where you find an account of his call to be a prophet of the Lord, the Lord revealed to him then the kind of situation that he was sending him into and that as he actually presented the truth of God, the people would have dull hearts and heavy ears and blinded eyes and they would eventually come, as did happen to be taken into captivity, having continued to spurn the Lord's address through the likes of Isaiah and later Jeremiah as well.

Well, here is an anticipation, really, of that judgment that God was threatening to bring upon the people for their sin, for their waywardness, for their disobedience, for their flouting of his ways and, in many ways, for their just paying lip service to God and to his service and to his worship.

And, indeed, in verses 10 and 11 of chapter 64, you can see there that, in a remarkable way, as you find sometimes with the prophets, they're speaking as if this judgment has already taken place.

He talks there about the holy cities becoming a wilderness, Zion's become a wilderness, a holy and beautiful house where our Father has praised you has been burned by fire, and all of that happened in the days of Nebuchadnezzar.

[1 : 49] But here is Isaiah giving the people a picture of it as it's going to happen to see if that, in its own way, will actually stir them into turning to the Lord.

But he presents it to the Lord, really, as a reason why he's appealing to God himself to come to the rescue and to come to help them. That is his situation.

Briefly, as you see, throughout this great prophecy, you find different ways of presenting that dilemma that Isaiah had and the people were in in their relation to the Lord.

And our own national situation is one that calls us to take note of the kind of prayer that Isaiah has here, that we will bring all of these things into our petitions to the Lord, because we are praying to the Lord.

We need to go on praying to the Lord. We seem to be directionless, though people are, I suppose, in a way, trying their best as government to lead us into the future.

[2 : 51] But there's so many different opinions. There's so much uncertainty. And especially there's so little regard for God's truth and for guidance through the Bible, through these principles of righteousness.

And along with that, as you know, for years there have been a steady decline in morality, steady decline in righteous living, and a steady increase in sinful living and sinful practices.

And a lot of all of that, as you know yourselves, has multiplied and caused us the problems that we find ourselves in as a nation and as a people. So we want tonight to take this prayer of Isaiah and see how appropriate it is and how much we can take from it and base our own thoughts and our prayers on it as we look at the situation for our own nation as well.

Now, this prayer was based, actually, as we'll see, on the nature of God's covenant commitment. It's really something that he mentions a number of times.

The Lord, having made a covenant with his people, is committed to that covenant. And in many ways, Isaiah bases or makes his prayer stand on that foundation of God's own commitment to his covenant, to his promises, to the blessing of his people.

[4 : 06] And he's appealing to the Lord. We could call our study tonight an appeal to God's heart because that's really what Isaiah is doing. And that's what we ourselves, indeed, can do in our petitions as well.

When we wrestle with God, we're appealing to God's heart. We're appealing to God's own commitment to his covenant, to his blessings, and appealing to him to act on that basis in times of crisis such as Isaiah was facing.

Well, there are seven points that we want to look at as the prayer is set before us. Just very briefly, each of those. There are seven points that we're going to look at as the prayer is set before us. Verses 15 and 16. Where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me.

There is Isaiah asking this question of God. Where are your zeal? Where are your compassion? Where is your compassion? Where are the stirrings of your heart, of your inner parts?

[5 : 10] And as he began really thinking of this in chapter 63 at the beginning, he really plunges straight into the greatness, the glory of God, the fullness, if you like, of God and his beauty.

And you can take that forward into the New Testament, into what's been revealed in Christ and done by Christ, and see that that really is applicable to him, this one who is splendid in his garments, in his apparel marching in the greatness of his strength.

It is I speaking in righteousness mighty to save. The wondrous beauty and power and the fullness of God, as Isaiah came here just to prepare himself to address him in this prayer.

And what he's saying now in verses 15 and 16 is, this is how it was with us in the past. We once knew of your zeal and your might, and the stirring of your inner parts and your compassion.

But they're not now here. We don't know them presently. So where have they gone? Where are your zeal and your might? What's happened, Lord? How is it that you're not acting as you once did act?

[6 : 23] When he uses these words zeal, it's a word that's, again, attached to God's commitment to his covenant promises. The zeal that God has in fulfilling his promises, in seeing them coming to be accomplished, Isaiah is appealing to that.

Where is the zeal? Where is this covenant commitment? Where's the evidence of it, Lord, in our day? We need that you should exercise that zeal again. And the word might that he uses there, the might that he's referring to there is, in verse 15, is often used in the Old Testament as the strength of someone really heroic, a hero, a mighty warrior, something like that.

And here is, of course, the picture of the Lord himself as the mighty warrior of his people. And here is Isaiah in prayer, boldly as he is in prayer, as we can be in prayer.

He's saying, Where is your strength, O Lord, our hero? What's happened to it? And then the stirring of your inner parts. The word that's used there is a very strong word.

The Lord's inmost parts, if you like, is picturing God as stirred up inwardly in his heart, in the movement of his heart. And that follows on then into, where he speaks there about compassion as well.

[7 : 49] And you're stirring of your inner parts and you're compassion. That word compassion is a word, we've seen it already in the Hebrew of the Old Testament. It's the same word, really, in essence, as the word womb.

A woman's womb, where a child is conceived and where the woman has the child develop for the months prior to birth. And the compassion of a woman, as back in 49 of Isaiah, you find that even they may forget, but I will not forget you.

Well, this word that's used here is a word, the whole thing goes together. The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion. That which is the most tender affection, the strongest affection, the affection of God for his people, the affection that in this life can only be somehow imaged in a woman's affection for her unborn child.

Sadly, it's not always like that, is it, in our society as well. It's one of the blights in our society, the blight of abortion, the blight of that evil that so many people treat so lightly.

Well, here is Isaiah saying, this inward compassion of God, this moving of God's inner parts, as it were, where are they, Lord? What's happened to them?

[9 : 09] We haven't actually had this for some time. And he's appealing to God to help them. You see, he's saying here, Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us.

Why is he using the word Abraham there and the word Israel? The word Abraham, of course, the one to whom God gave the covenant promises. There were some before that, but he's the main figure in the Old Testament.

You can see the way the book of Genesis develops, that all the chapters really up to chapter 12 of Genesis are gone over in something of a hurry, if you like.

Why is the writer of Genesis in such a hurry in the first 11 chapters or so? Because Abraham comes then to loom large in the book. That's what he wants to get to.

That's the main figure at that moment and developing the covenant promises of God on from that. Well, here are the people that Abraham belongs to, that Isaiah belongs to, the people of Israel, the people of Judah, and he's calling them Abraham just to remind them, you are the covenant people, you're the descendants of Abraham.

[10:21] And Israel, of course, the name that God gave to Jacob having wrestled with the angel and prevailed. Israel, a prince with God.

And it's really a conviction for their conscience that they've come to what they are despite the fact that they bear or as a people who bear these great names in their ancestry and in the promises of God.

So that's the first thing, the question, the first point he makes. Where are these? What's happened to these? Then he moves on to verses 17 to 19 where he says, Why do you make us to wander from your ways and harden our heart so that we fear you not?

Return to us, O Lord. Well, he's not saying there, although this is very difficult theology, he's not actually there blaming God for the way things are.

When he says, O Lord, why do you make us to wander from your way and harden your heart so that we do not fear you? Well, the answer to that really is in the fact that it's a confession of the disobedience and the guilt of the people and the way that as a judgment in itself, after prolonged sinning against him, God has come to judgmentally harden their hearts and really withdraw his power.

[11:46] And if God withdraws his power, that's what happens. Our heart becomes hardened even under the gospel. And so he's appealing really to God in this way that he's not blaming him, but there's only one way out of this for us, Lord.

He's saying, Lord, you are our Father and return, he says in verse 17, for the sake of your servants. The only way out for ourselves as a nation too is if God returns to us.

We speak about our return to God, of course, that's important, that's necessary as a people that we'd see that happening throughout our land, but this is what Isaiah is saying, Lord, return.

You return. Please return to us. Because he's appealing to sheer mercy. He's really saying, out of the darkness of his day, Lord, this is where our hope must be in your return.

Please come back to us. Return for your servant's sake. And then he comes thirdly to what you find at the beginning of chapter 64.

[12:56] Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down that the mountains might quake at your presence. Down to verse 3 where he speaks about the awesome things that God did, even that were not looked for, and the way that the mountains quaked at your presence.

Well, of course, that's, again, a depiction or a picture for us on an image of the way that God, when he comes in power, really gives people a shake up.

Here it's the physical creation, possibly going back to Sinai, even the mountain quaking as God came down on Mount Sinai. But when God comes, then he shakes up a people. When God comes in his power, this is what happens.

People take note. People actually start asking serious questions about themselves. People don't find it as easy to dismiss the truth of God or the people of God or the witness of God's people anymore. Because God is impressive in the way that Isaiah presents him to us here.

And this is his appeal to him, Lord, or that you would rend the heavens and come down, that you would do it again. Now, the words there can be translated or could be translated, if only you had come down.

[14:07] And that would make sense as well. Because Isaiah, as he is looking back, is really, also you could say this is part of what he is saying, what he means. What a difference, Lord, it would have made if you had come down.

We would not be where we are now if you had demonstrated your power. But of course, he's already acknowledged that the situation is as it is because God has been seeing their prolonged sin and wickedness against him.

And in many ways, this was drawn his power and left them to that, to develop. And aren't we seeing so much of that in the thinking and in the actions of our own age as well?

So he's asking the question, where is your zeal and your might? He's asking the question, why do you make us to wander from your ways? But nevertheless, answering it in the way that they have prolonged sinned against him.

And this is what has come as a result. And I was appealing to him that he would come down again and show his mighty power once again. And then verses 4 and 5, you are angry and we sinned.

[15:20] When he comes to think of how the sin that the people had prolonged practice in, behold, you are angry and we sinned. In our sins we have been a long time.

And that's so true of ourselves, isn't it, as a people? Of course, we're not saying this in any way to try and discourage people like yourselves who are committed to God, who are committed to praying to God, who are praying to God, and every other person and group of people in our nation who tonight, like we do, come together to worship God and come to think about God and pray to God and all of that.

That is still a source of great thankfulness that we have such a people left in our land. But nevertheless, you look out beyond that. You look at the masses that are still in darkness and in opposition and in antagonism to the word of God.

And you can see it even in our own locality increasingly that that is the case. So here he's saying, having appealed that he would come down, he's now answering his own question by saying, Behold, you are angry and we sinned.

In our sins we have been a long time. Shall we be saved? You know, one of the remarkable things about the prophets, and you find it again with Daniel in chapter 9, is how when they come to plead with God and make an appeal to God's heart, you don't find him saying, Lord, they have done this.

[16:50] We have done it. He's including himself in this confession. You might say, Daniel wasn't like the people he belonged to. No, of course he wasn't. Isaiah wasn't like them.

Wasn't he obedient to God? Yes, but he's putting himself as one of these people. He belongs to this community. He belongs to the people of Judah, to whom God has given these promises.

And therefore, he sees himself as he belongs to these people. He sees himself as within this confession of their sin. Though he's not directly involved in sinning against God and rebelling against God.

Nevertheless, this is how he puts it. Lord, I belong to these people. And we should do that as well.

And we do that. We don't just come to the Lord and say, Lord, please forgive them.

Forgive everybody else that I see is sinning against you. And I'm thankful that I'm not like that. Well, we are thankful that we're not like that. But we still say, Lord, we have sinned.

[17:46] We have sinned as a people. And as he says here, we have indeed our sins and our sins we have been a long time.

Too long. And we appeal to God's heart that he would come and come down to rescue us. here is the fixed anger of God against the fixed sinning of the people.

And that's what Isaiah is confessing. And of course, the people went on sinning despite the fact that they knew that they were making God displeased or angry.

The prophets were telling them this and appealing them to turn from that way, but they didn't. And so, you can see what it's like in our own day. How difficult it is for yourselves to commend the gospel, to speak about God in a way that doesn't meet with rejection, with utter contempt sometimes.

Nevertheless, that's what we're facing. And then he comes in verses 6 and 7 to say, we have all become like one who is unclean or an unclean thing.

[19:01] And all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf and our iniquities like the wind take us away.

It's the imagery of soiled cloth that's no use for anything but to just get rid of it, to bin it. Or as he puts it here, the fading leaf, the leaf that has fallen and has shriveled and the wind takes it away. And what he's saying here in that imagery is our iniquities like the wind take us away. You look at what's happening in our land and the sinful course that people are set upon. Well, it's just the wind of sin just like faded leaves taking them away.

And they're oblivious at many times that they're in the way of death. That's the way of death, what he's talking about here. This soiled cloth that's probably soiled with blood or something like that is

certainly polluted and a faded leaf, a leaf that's no longer attached to the life-giving tree so it is taken away by the wind.

And in consequence, you have hidden your face from us and made us melt in the hand of our iniquities. Just like a snowball, like the snow this morning came so quickly to melt once the temperature rose.

[20 : 25] well, that's the picture he has there of melting in the hand of our iniquities. When you take a lump of snow into your hands, you can soon find it melting through the warmth of your hands.

This is what he's saying happens when iniquity really takes a hold of a person. That person morally just begins to melt away. The strength saps away.

There's no fibre. There's no backbone left to stand against the ways of sin. And that's, again, what he's confessing there. We are this and you have hidden your face from us.

Again, the response of God to their continuous sinning against him. But then in verse 80 comes to appeal to the Lord now again more directly.

But now, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay and you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand. In other words, he's saying, yes, Lord, you are angry with us.

[21 : 28] We deserve your anger. We appeal to your mercy. But we know that you are still our Father. Now, you don't often get the word Father used of God in the Old Testament. That was waiting for the coming of Christ to reveal the fatherhood of God as nobody else could.

But here is Isaiah saying, now, you are our Father, Lord. You have fashioned us. You have created us. You are the one who cares for what you have created. We are your people. We are the work of your hand.

We are the clay. And you are the potter. Potter is a word there which means something not quite as cold, if you like, as you find a potter working clay.

It has a warmth to this word. It's the idea of really careful fashioning, which, of course, a potter does as well. And what he's saying is, Lord, despite what we have become, you have remained the same.

You are still the one who is able to refashion us as you fashioned us in the beginning. You are the one who is able to recreate, to bring about again a refashioning of our lives.

[22 : 34] And he's pleading, Father, God, be not so terribly angry. Remember, not iniquity forever.

Behold, please look, we are all your people. And despite the ravages of sin, he still appeals to the unchanging fatherliness of God.

And then verses 10 and 12, where he sees, as we've seen, the state of what would actually come to be the case, and yet present it there as if it's already happened.

But he finishes with another question, or two questions, really. Will you restrain yourself at these things, O Lord? Will you keep silent and afflict us so terribly?

The word restrain, there takes you back to chapter 63, verse 15, where we began. The restraining, the holding back of God's zeal and God's power and God's compassion.

[23 : 36] Now he's appealing to him at the end of all this. Will you restrain yourself at these things? And probably that's better translated, in response to these things. Here is the prophet, he has put all of these things before the Lord in prayer, the state of the people, the reason why they are as they are, the Lord's face hidden from them, the Lord's displeasure rightly against them.

He's described all that to God, oh God of course knew it all already, but now he's saying, will you restrain yourself in response to these things, in response to what I've confessed, Lord, in response to how you see, things, will it be further restraining?

Or just to move into the final question, will you keep silent and afflict us so terribly? In other words, he's appealing to God to hear his prayer and to respond, to answer his prayer.

The opposite of that would be for God to keep silent. It would be as if he never heard him, or as if he wasn't prepared to answer him. and here is his way of appealing finally to God as he closes the prayer with that, will you keep silent?

Will you not hear me? Will you not respond? Will you not actually show yourself again to us? He's appealing to God to hear this prayer of appeal to his heart.

[25 : 07] I'm going to leave it at that and then finish with that.