

Isaiah 64: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Isaiah chapter 64. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence, as when fire kindles brushwood, and the fire causes water to boil, to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence.

When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down. The mountains quaked at your presence. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear. No eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.

You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you and your ways. Behold, you were angry, and we sinned. In our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, 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.

There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you. For you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.

[1:04] But now, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are our potter. We are all the work of your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever.

Behold, please look, we are all your people. Your holy cities have become a wilderness. Zion has become a wilderness. Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.

Will you restrain yourself at these things, O Lord? Will you keep silent and afflict us so terribly? Isaiah chapter 56 to 66 is the larger concluding section for the book of Isaiah.

This section can be broken down further into at least three subsections. Chapters 56 to 59, 60 to 62, and 63 to 66.

These subsections also follow a loose chiasmic structure, with the final chapters returning to themes in chapters 56 to 59. This was perhaps most noticeable at the beginning of chapter 63.

[2:10] The central chapters of the section, chapter 61 being the very heart, contain messages of salvation, of the restoration and glorification of Zion, and the good news brought by the anointed servant.

The community lament that began in the second half of chapter 63 continues and concludes in chapter 64. John Oswald breaks down its structure as follows.

Expanded historical reminiscence in chapter 63 verses 7 to 14, complaint in chapter 63 verses 15 to 19, confession in chapter 64 verses 1 to 7, and then finally appeal in chapter 64 verses 8 to 12.

Having spoken of the alienation of and the distance of the people from the Lord, the prophet now expresses his longing for the Lord's visitation of his people, demonstrating his sovereignty over his foes and in the sight of all the nations.

The imagery of verses 1 to 3 is classic theophanic imagery of the Lord overcoming the great divide between him and his afflicted people, tearing open the firmament and descending from the heavens, mountains quaking before him.

[3:17] We might here recall the description of the Lord's coming at Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 19 verses 16 to 19. On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended on it in fire.

The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder.

At Sinai the Lord descended in fire, and in Isaiah's request for the Lord to visit his people, fire is again the most prominent aspect of the imagery. Fire consumes kindling and causes water to boil, devouring or transforming all with which it comes into contact.

The same is true of the presence of the Lord. One of the immediate effects of such a coming, the prophet believes, is that the Lord's fame would be spread among the nations, and all might quake before him, just as the mountains before their creator.

[4 : 26] The Lord had acted in such a manner for his people in the past. In the preceding chapter the prophet had recounted the great work of the Lord in the Exodus, and as we have seen, the Theophany at Sinai matched the description of the longed-for descent of the Lord that Isaiah calls for here.

Indeed, the deliverance of the Exodus was an act of the Lord's own initiative, neither something that his people sought nor imagined. Looking at the great deeds of the Lord in history, it is evident that there is no other God like him, no rival comparable to him in power and in faithfulness.

The Lord is a God who hears and responds to the prayers of his people, delivering them from their oppressors and establishing them in security. Those who walk in the path of righteousness, committing themselves to the way of the Lord, trusting in him and expectant of his redemption, will enjoy the Lord's response when they seek him.

He himself will meet them. However, this is unfortunately not the position in which the people find themselves. Facing the anger of the Lord, they responded by sinning and persevering in sin, rather than by turning back to the Lord.

The prophet asks whether any hope remains for them of salvation. There is nothing in them that would merit the Lord's gracious acceptance, thoroughly defiled and polluted by their iniquities as they are.

[5 : 41] The rot is pervasive and deep, afflicting everyone in every part of their lives. The situation is comparable to that which existed prior to the Lord's destruction of the world in the flood.

It should also recall Isaiah's description of himself as a man of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips, in chapter 6 verse 5. Sin is like leprosy, and even the supposed righteous acts of such sinful persons are as defiled as menstrual cloths.

The polluting character of sin and the corruption of the flesh was one of the primary lessons of the sacrificial system, which constantly recalled people to this reality. Flesh is corrupt, but it is also frail and transitory.

It fades like a leaf, withers like grass, like chaff it is blown away in the wind, whipped up by man's iniquity. Wherever he looks, the prophet sees no source of hope in man, no exception to the rule of corruption, who might take hold of the Lord.

The message of the prophet here is that of total depravity, of the corruption of every part of man, and the utter inability of man to accomplish his own turning to the Lord. Unless the Lord acts to quicken their hearts, there is nothing residing in the people that would rouse them to seek God.

[6 : 55] Yet the Lord has hidden his face from his people, giving them over to their iniquities. The situation seemed utterly hopeless. Where might the ones seeking the Lord find purchase for his petitions in such a dire situation?

The prophet appeals to the Lord's relationship with his people as their father and creator, to the unilateral, unconditioned, gracious action by which the Lord first brought his people into existence, and to the way that their existence and fate is purely in his hands.

The Lord is compared to a potter, and his people to the clay that he is working upon. A familiar image from passages like Jeremiah 18, or Romans chapter 9, an image used elsewhere in Isaiah in chapter 29 verse 16, for instance.

The potter is over the clay, and can fashion it as he wills. However, as the potter is the master of the clay, his good creative intent can overcome the resistance of the clay, moulding it for his own purposes.

If the Lord were to treat people according to their sins, there would be no hope. Consequently, the prophet pleads that the Lord recall the fact that the people are his people, and that irrespective of their iniquities, he has graciously committed himself to securing their good, and has placed his name upon them.

[8 : 10] Indeed, the cities that are desolate and devastated are his cities. Zion, the city of David, the city of the Lord's delight, the site of his holy dwelling, is ruined and burned.

The Lord's own glory and name are also at stake here. Can the Lord turn a blind eye to all of this? Can he see the ruin of his own people and not act? The prophet never denies the justice of the Lord's judgment of his sinful people, but throws himself and his people upon the Lord's mercy, calling for the Lord to recognize them once more.

A question to consider. How does scripture teach us about the corrupt state of humanity here and elsewhere?

