

Isaiah 63:7 – 64:12

David H. Linden, revised August, 2021

The last chapters of Isaiah (56-66) deal with issues which are much like our day. The work of Christ has been accomplished in 53, and we look forward to his second coming to finish the transformation we and the world need. Godly people waited and prayed for the first coming of Christ (Luke 1:13). We pray for him to come again (Revelation 22:20; 1 Thessalonians 1:10). Meanwhile the world is composed of believers and rejecters mixed together. Only at the end will the wicked be separated from the righteous (Matthew 13:47-50). God commands prayer, and trouble stimulates it. One would expect with 63:1-6 speaking of the final end of sinners, that Isaiah would end his prophecy there, but God only spoke of the end; he has still not brought it about. The eventual world-wide worship has certainly advanced, but is far from total fulfillment (2:2-4; 11:9-16; 19:18-25). Sin has not yet been put down. Isaiah pleads for God to do his cleansing work in us and around us. We hope in God's promises and pray about our circumstances.

The entire passage of 63:7 – 64:12 is a prayer. We might miss that it is all prayer because it speaks so much of the Lord in the third person, until the sudden switch to "you" in 63:14. Some prayers in the Psalms review events, as in Psalm 41:4-13. A long quotation of God's words may be brought back to him in remembrance, as in Psalm 89:19-37. Psalm 104 is a prayer that oscillates between 'you' and 'he'. This passage has Isaiah speaking to God about God. In 62:6 Christ set watchmen to *remind* the Lord and give him no rest. Now in 63:7 this is fulfilled as the one praying 'causes' the Lord to remember. (The same Hebrew verb for 'remember' is used in 62:6 and 63:7). The Lord wants us to bring the present to him, to review his past actions before him, and to plead for his agenda for the future. The praying man rejoices in the Lord's past kindnesses. He intercedes about the appalling need of the present, including confession of sin and repentance. He waits in patient faith for full salvation in the future.

63:7-9 The praying man reviews the kindness and provision of the Lord, especially his past deeds and care for them. The story moves from covenantal faithfulness and love on God's part to covenantal treachery on Israel's. The expectation of reciprocated loyalty (v.8) is met with rebellion (v.10). He became their Savior (v.8) in the sense that he saved them from Egypt (Exodus 14:30). It does not mean that God becomes the Savior only for those already faithful to him, for then no one would be saved. He became their Savior when Israel's cry for help went up to God (Exodus 2:23-25).

The Trinity appears in Isaiah again. In vv.7, 8 we have the Lord, in v.9 the angel of his presence (Christ) and in v.10, the Holy Spirit. In vv.11, 12, it is repeated. The Lord (the Father) set his Spirit among them, and sent his Arm (Christ, 53:1) to be at Moses' side. The Rock who met their need in Moses' day was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4). The One who sent 'the Arm' is the Father, whom the Lord Jesus often referred to as the One who sent me. (John 8:16-42). (For an earlier text on the Trinity, see Isaiah 48:16.)

63:10 In spite of God's tender care they rebelled, so God became their enemy. God's stern response (Romans 11:22) is especially directed to covenant breakers (1 Peter 4:17, Matthew 11:20-24). Note 'grieving the Spirit' (Ephesians 4:30). We can anger anyone; we grieve only those who love us.

63:11-14 Their rebellion explains their trouble. V.11 should be translated "And he remembered". So the flow in v.10 is "they rebelled, he turned, and he remembered". He remembered Moses and his people; he still claims them and maintains a commitment to make them truly his own. The prayer asks, "Where is he? Where is he who did all these things for us; where is he now?" The list of his deeds covers from the Exodus from Egypt to the rest in the promised land. He had removed all obstacles so that they could move the way a horse can in open country with nothing in its way (v.13). They were brought to the land of Canaan, which here in v.14 is likened to a good pasture.

The Holy Spirit was among them on earth (vv.10, 11, 14) just as he is today (John 14:15-17). Christ was the glorious Arm at Moses' side (v.12). God gained a good Name (vv.12, 14) by delivering Israel from Egypt.

The implication of the prayer is that if God was glorified in what he did for Israel in the past, would it not be the same today? The praying man asks God to remember all he did in the past. If God who cannot change (Malachi 3:6) still has eternal love for his people, then it makes sense to ask God to intervene now. His good Name and the beauty of his grace will be shown in the salvation of his people even though they are very sinful. Thus he prays for God to act for them again. Isaiah moved past a return from Babylon after chapter 48 as he came to focus on the work of the Servant. Likewise, the plea here is not for deliverance from Egypt or any other power, but from sin. If we miss this emphasis, we will not understand why Jesus made no effort to resist the power of Rome when he was here; he concentrated on the real enemy – Satan and our sin (Matthew 1:21; 12:28; Luke 10:18-20; Colossians 2:13-15).

63:15 Isaiah's prayer speaks of the glorious dwelling above (v.15) and the trampled sanctuary below (v.18 & 64:11). This is a serious disorder that cannot continue; it moves Isaiah to prayer. (Every abnormal situation should make us pray.) Earlier the prayer looked at God's actions; now it dwells on his nature: his zeal, glory, tenderness, compassion, and lofty position above all created things. God's compassion is only withheld; it has not disappeared. God has not changed; when willing, he can show compassion again.

63:16 Abraham cannot help. (This ought to make clear that prayers to departed saints are inappropriate.) God always wants to be God alone with no competing gods, and Savior alone with no one else trusted to save us. Isaiah says, "You are our Father". The covenant has been broken, but God by this prayer shows that in repentance, he should still be appealed to as Father and Redeemer.

63:17-19 When people are devoted to sin, Scripture teaches that God may give such a person over to it in an irrevocable judicial decision. The punishment is that they are locked into the domination of their sin (Romans 1:24, 26, 28; 11:25). Hebrews 6:4-6 speaks of those who are impossible to bring to repentance. Isaiah pleads that his people not be left to wander in their sins, because if God does not intervene, they will remain in just such a lost condition. The way of speaking in 63:17 is odd to us. Of course, God does not and could not prompt anyone to sin (James 1:13-15). But if God does not save from it, and he has no obligation to do so, it is just as if he made them wander. Isaiah pleads, if there is no intervention by the Lord, their helpless condition will be just as Jeremiah prayed in Lamentations 5:19-22. Change comes when God is put in remembrance of their need, and appeal is made to his commitment to be their God. (Appealing to their commitment is useless.) When Christ appointed people to pray (62:6, 7), he did not do this in order to disappoint them; he did it so that they would glorify him by intercession. Whoever we look to in prayer, that one is our real God.

They are servants (54:17), but his servants have no independent strength (John 15:1-11). He speaks of tribal inheritance, a reference related to Joshua 13-21. Yet the prayer speaks of God's inheritance in them, as in Ephesians 1:18. Isaiah wants God to have his inheritance in his people. Isaiah speaks as if he were present in the captivity that God had predicted through him, when God's sanctuary was trampled by the Babylonians. Both the people and the sanctuary were his, so the appeal is for God to take up their cause as his because it is. He wants God to remember he chose Israel and to distinguish them from those God had never taken as his own, and to whom he had never given his name (Numbers 6:27). The praying man knows God cannot be passive about all these things. God challenges his people to seek, knock and ask – a way of life taught by Christ (Matthew 7:7-11).

64:1-3 The praying man, reviewing the past says, "Oh if only you had come down ..." He ponders what a difference God coming down would make. "Come down" is used of the Lord defeating the Assyrians in 31:4. David speaks the same way in Psalm 18. God's coming down would be like fire, as God would make himself known among sinners. The coming of the Holy Spirit was a baptism of cleansing fire. One effect of Christ's coming will be a fire of judgment (Luke 3:16, 17). Isaiah is still speaking of past interventions by God, in which God's actions were not anticipated by men. God works beyond what we can imagine (Ephesians 3:20, 21).

64:4, 5 Isaiah speaks of there being no other God besides God. There is none, and we are not to create any (Exodus 20:3). This is the one unique God unlike all false competitors. He is One who acts on behalf of all who patiently wait for him because they believe in him. He never disappoints those who trust him (26:3, 4). However, there is a problem – he helps those who do right, and none of us do right! The coming down of God to do something in vv.1-3 probably has in mind dealing with the nations. That is only one problem God would react to in this world. Now Isaiah raises the sensitive question, ‘What about us?’ We are sinful; how can we be saved? Why should a holy God ever help a people so sinful? If God acts on behalf of those who do right and none of us do right, we have not met his requirement. Isaiah sees that he and his people are those who sin even though it angers God. God has reason to be angry, so his coming down to deal with all wrong would not be good news for his people. Earlier in Isaiah, we saw that he sent Jesus to be a covenant for us (59:21, 42:6, & 49:8), thereby meeting the conditions of vv.4, 5. He is our only hope (Acts 28:20, Romans 15:20, Ephesians 1:12, Colossians 1:27, 1 Timothy 1:11).

64:6, 7 If God would show his face, the nations would tremble. Because of sin, God hides that same holy face from his people (v.7). All are ‘unclean’, the language a leper was to use of himself (Leviticus 13:45). Our righteous acts, instead of impressing God and winning his favor, are like a woman’s menstrual cloth to him. Fading leaves (1:30) show the tree is dying; they fall, and the wind drives them away (Psalm 1:4). His people do not stir themselves, as in Psalm 103:1, 2, to seek God by calling on him in prayer and worship. Failure to worship is shown here to be part of the ugliness of sin (James 4:17). God hides his face from them and they waste away in sinfulness. The Bible was not written to impress us with compliments, but to save us with truth. Continuing sinfulness is a fact about us which we must continue to acknowledge and confess. With this sobering reality we continue to rest in Christ and his righteousness.

64:8, 9 It is clear they have no basis to plead for God’s favor, as if he did not demand holiness. But there is another factor, one that God created. He had committed to them in covenant to be their God. With God as their Father, though they were extremely sinful, they were sinful children, not sinful heathen. So Isaiah under God’s Spirit pleads the covenant relationship. He pleads for mercy and grace. Isaiah calls his nation “your people” (v.9). It should be clear that God saves people not because they are good, but because they are his – by his choosing them in Christ. The analogies are of power and weakness; the potter is able to do what he wishes with the clay. Isaiah’s implication is that God can do in transformation of them whatever he wishes in spite of their sin. He pleads that they not come under the weight of what their sins deserve. He offers no defense for sin, but seeks forgiveness. This is seeking the Lord, as in 55:6, 7. In response to such seeking God has promised to pardon.

Isaiah’s words are fully in line with God’s call to sinners everywhere to repent and believe: God’s holiness is never diminished; man’s sin is never defended; God’s mercy is never deserved. Hope lies in a covenant relationship that God has opened beyond Israel (Ephesians 2:11-13; 1:11-14). Gentiles were promised the covenant mercies that come from union with Christ the Son of David (55:3-5). We are saved by a mercy that comes through faith in Christ (Hebrews 4:14-16; Titus 3:3-7). He alone is Savior.

64:10-12 Isaiah foresees that God’s sacred cities, including Jerusalem, would be desolate; his house among them would be burned. God brought on them the consequences of their sin and withheld compassion due to their sin, but now they have confessed, repented, and called on God to forgive. Would he still hold back from coming down to finish all that needs to be done in the world to create a new heaven and a new earth (65:17-25)? Will his people be part of it? The answer is Isaiah 65 and 66.