

Our God Saves: Live

Pleading for Forgiveness

Isaiah 64-65

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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 in 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. 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? (Isa. 64:1–12, ESV)

Most movies and books follow what's often called a "story arc." Are you familiar with this concept?

It's the chronology of a story that follows a similar path. And it's one of the reasons if you miss the first ten minutes of a movie or skip the first two chapters of a book, you'll be lost—understanding what is going on, especially if it's a complicated plot, will be quite challenging.

The story arc usually follows these steps:

- The characters are introduced and a problem is identified
- The problem gets worse
- The conflict reaches its climax
- The problem starts to be addressed
- The issue is resolved and the characters are changed

When you watch your next movie or start your next novel, see if you can identify this arc.

But did you know that the Bible has a story arc to it as well? It's quite similar to what I just described. You see, while the Bible has 66 books (39 Old Testament and 27 New Testament books), written by 40 different authors and over 1500 years, there is a singular theme. Or you could think of it as a single message woven throughout the Bible.

Theologians often described the narrative of the Bible with four key words:

Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration

This is grand narrative of the entire Bible – from Genesis to Revelation. Every book in the Bible fits into this big-picture theme. Some books highlight these themes in different ways. Since June of last year, we've been walking through Isaiah, and this glorious book helps us to see all four.

We've heard Isaiah marvel at God's creative power in Isaiah 40:21-31, read how deeply he mourned over sin in Isaiah 1:10-20, and witnessed the prophetic promise of a Redeemer in Isaiah 43. And in our text today (Isaiah 64-65) we see the progression of salvation history toward its ultimate fulfillment in the new heavens and the new earth.

We are coming to the last chapters of Isaiah, and our series will conclude on June 12. Over the summer we're going spend eight weeks studying the book of Ecclesiastes with the title: *Nothing Matters: But What If It Did?* The series will help us know how to live faithfully in a confusing, frustrating, and cynical world. And then, starting on August 14, we'll launch into a sermon series on the book of Revelation that should take us up to Easter.

Last week we looked at what it means to marvel at the justice and mercy of God such that we long for more of him. The aim of that sermon was to create an appetite for more of God. And there was an unfortunate chapter break after 63:19—chapters 64-65 carry this focus to its conclusion.

In our text today we'll see the conclusion of the narrative arc of Isaiah. There's a request, a response, and a resolution to the justice and mercy of God in the previous chapter. Or you could think of it this way through the form of a question: "What does wanting more of God lead to?" Isaiah 64-65 provides the answer.

1. The Request (64:1-12)

The tension of chapter 63 now turns to a longing for God to intervene. In verses 1-12 we find a request for the powerful presence of God. The hardship and the brokenness of the world and the people of God creates a passion for the intervention of God.

That's what verse one is all about: "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down. . ." Isaiah imagines the sky to be like a curtain, and he wishes it could be split in two as God comes to make everything right. This is not only a request for God to be near to his people, but for his powerful glory to be seen and felt.

Take note of the powerful imagery in vv. 1-3:

- “the mountains might quake at your presence” (v. 1)
- “as fire kindles brushwood...fire causes water to boil” (v. 2)
- “you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence” (v. 3)

Throughout biblical history, the presence of God was accompanied by powerful signs. Consider the burning bush in Exodus 3, the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 20, and Isaiah’s encounter with the glory of God in Isaiah 6.

The presence and glory of God are both glorious and frightening. That’s why verse two is particularly focused on those in opposition. This request is for God to come and make things right in the world—to “make your name known to your adversaries. . .that the nations might tremble at your presence” (v. 3).

Isaiah highlights how deeply the people of God need help. There’s a clear sense of dependency in the text. You see, when God’s glory and his power are understood, you become even more aware of your powerlessness and need. Notice what Isaiah says in verse three: “. . .you did awesome things that we did not look for. . .”—God moved in the past in ways that were confounding.

Christian, can you think of a time where God brought a solution, deliverance, assistance, or help out of nowhere? Can you think of a time when God surprised you with a surprising solution? That’s what Isaiah is celebrating here. And it leads to a very important affirmation in verse 4:

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 (Isa. 64:4).

God works for those who wait for him. Waiting on God means trusting God with what I know is true about him when I don’t know what’s true about my life. Isaiah is appealing for God to come near—to come down—because he knows that God can do what he cannot do. So, the role of the people of God is to be seeking God for help as they acknowledge their weakness and inability.

This week I attended a retirement celebration for Reese Kauffman who has faithfully led Child Evangelism Fellowship for thirty-three years. After he sold his business in Indianapolis, he took the leadership reins for the largest ministry in the world committed to reaching children for Christ. Reese made a statement that struck me, and it fits with this text. He said, “If dependency is my goal, then weakness is an asset.”

One of the goals of Sunday morning worship is to remind each other that we need God. There are so many reasons that we need this reminder every week: our self-sufficiency, pride, desire to achieve, and our consumption—our need for more. I’m listening to Andy Crouch’s new book *The Life We’re Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World*. He suggests that part of the problem with technology at any level is that it gives us a misplaced sense of superpower which leads to higher self-sufficiency and distance from real relationships. The more humans advance, the easier it is to be arrogant and isolated.

With the request for God to come near, there's also an awareness that God's glory and power also relate to the waywardness of God's people. As Isaiah considers global justice, he's reminded of Israel's rebellion. In verses 5-7 he recounts the failures of God's people. They need deliverance from a broken world in which they've contributed to that brokenness. Some of their suffering is directly due to their need for divine discipline.

A right view of God creates a right view of self. When you consider the sinfulness of the world, what does it do to your soul? Are you led to be smug, judgmental, and condescending? Or does the presence of sin in the world create a mirror for self-reflection?

Notice how Isaiah's request for God to "come down" now turns back to an affirmation of who God is. "You are our Father. . .we are the clay, and you are our potter" (v. 8). Isaiah grieves the destruction of the nation (vv. 9-11), and he appeals to the mercy of God.

Isaiah requests the presence of God because he knows the presence of God can change things!

One word to describe this in American history is "revival." It's a season where the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit is sweeping and life-changing. And often those times have been preceded by national crisis. Some of the greatest revival moments in American history have taken place during times of great national distress.

What if God wants to do that again? What if he desires to move but in ways that we do not anticipate? What if we began to pray, "God, rend the heavens and come down! Bring righteousness to our society and repentance to your people!"?

2. The Response (65:1-16)

This request creates a response on God's part. Isaiah gives us the words of God after the people of God have asked for his intervention. It's a fascinating and instructional section in Isaiah because we hear directly from God.

The divine response here oozes with grace. Verses 1-7 detail the mercy of God as he is willing to reach out to those who are not seeking him. We get an Old Testament reminder of the work of God that will extend beyond Israel to all nations.

Notice the following:

- v. 1 – God is ready to seek those who don't search for him
- v. 1 – He appeals to those who are not called by his name: "Here I am"
- v. 2 – God welcomes those who are rebellious
- vv. 3-5 – He's merciful to the idolator, the superstitious, the defiled, and the hypocritical

God takes their rebellion seriously. They have sinned individually, and their pattern fits with the sins of their fathers. They are confirming that they are no better.

Behold, it is written before me: "I will not keep silent, but I will repay; I will indeed repay into their lap both your iniquities and your fathers' iniquities together, says the LORD; because they made offerings on the mountains and insulted me on the hills, I will measure into their lap payment for their former deeds" (Isa. 65:6-7).

Some people will heed the divine warning. There's always a remnant! Verses 8-10 highlight the blessings that come to the faithful and the way that the Lord preserves them. Throughout the history of Israel and global Christianity, there's always a remnant. People who are called to live godly and righteous lives as the world and culture turn increasingly hostile. Verses 11-13 offer yet another warning about the foolishness and danger of embracing idolatry.

God's response to the people's request for him to come down is to identify two distinct paths in life. It sounds similar to the wide and narrow path in Matthew 7. Or the separation of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. Look at the contrast:

- v. 13 – eating versus going hungry
- v. 13 – drinking versus being thirsty
- v. 13 – rejoicing versus living in shame
- v. 14 – singing versus crying out in pain
- v. 15 – receiving a new name versus rejecting your name

It's quite a contrast, and this distinction is a familiar theme throughout the Scriptures. When God comes down, there's an outpouring of grace but there's also a dividing line that's drawn. This new community lives by the "God of truth."

When God responds to his people's request, it results in a new community. Or you could think of it as a new kingdom—a realm in which God's people receive what they long for. The presence of God creates an environment marked by God's glory, grace, and truth.

And it begs the question if this is the kind of kingdom that we long for. Is this what we really want?

3. The Resolution (65:17-25)

Where is history headed? What is the arc of God's plan? Well, we get a hopeful picture of the finish line of human history in the closing verses of chapter 65. It's a glorious picture, and it's designed to be a deep motivator for God's people.

God promises to act decisively and fix what is wrong in the world: "I create new heavens and a new earth" (v. 17). And this new realm is going to be so new and glorious that the former things will not be remembered. Just think of that! There's so much joy and gladness that there isn't room for the memories of the past pain.

But central to the glory of this new realm is God's ability to make it happen. He's the one who creates it. Verses 18-19a make this point very clear. God's plan through redemption is for a new creation—a return to the environment in the garden but this time with a city: the new Jerusalem.

Take note of the beautiful descriptions:

- v. 19b – no weeping or cries of distress
- v. 20 – no death or short-lived lives
- v. 21-22 – no more pointless work
- v. 23 – no activity that leads to more pain

Isaiah is using language here to help us see that what makes this present life incomplete or painful will be gone. What's more, this life will be marked by divine blessing (v. 23b).

God will be near his people. Before they even call out to him, he will answer (v. 24). God anticipates their needs and provides. In other words, there's never any lack, gap, or need. The created order is radically changed with a wolf and lamb lying down together (v. 25).

And the concluding summary is found in at the end of verse 25. It captures the essence of what the realm of God is like: "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain." Everything that damages or creates destruction is completely removed. And all of this is guaranteed by the word of the Lord. The text concludes with "says the Lord."

This is the arc of salvation history, and it's designed to shape the lives of those who know and love Jesus. How this text is helpful:

First, it reminds us that what we need, more than anything else, is the powerful intervention of God. When life becomes hard or difficult, we ought to use the opportunity to renew our commitment to seek God's help. We should say, "God, we need you."

Second, it shows us that divine intervention creates two paths. There's a choice that must be made. It's a choice between living according to God's way or our way. It's a choice between God at the center or God at the margins of our lives.

Third, this text reminds us of where history is headed so that we don't become too attached to the world or live as if this is the only realm. Christians are called to live on earth with heaven in mind. It's what Peter said in 2 Peter 3:10–12:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!

This is the plan of history. This is the hope of every Christian. This is how we live, knowing that we are part of the divine story being written.

A story that begins with God and ends with God. A story that shows us that "Our God Saves."

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