

“Prayer in Dark Times”

Isaiah 63:15-64:12

Context: The ruins and rubble of Ezra’s post-exilic Jerusalem serve as a backdrop for Isaiah’s prayer of penitence. The oppression of foreign enemies, like Rehum, forcibly stopped the restoration of the city (cf. Ezra 4:23). This setback caused the Remnant to raise the question: Why does God remain silent to our prayers and not deliver us? This section is part of the final eleven chapters that serve as an example of the Remnant’s ongoing struggles, hopes, successes, and failures while in the world. The chapters also serve as a foreshadowing of the Remnant’s experiences during the Church age as they live under structures of sin and spiritual darkness.

Life Principle: **The type and timing of God’s answers to our prayers of distress are contingent upon His mercy and our need, not upon our merit and our want** (cf. Isaiah 64:4-5).

1. A plea for God to remember His own – Isaiah 63:15-19

Isaiah pleads with God, who seems distant in the heavens. Isaiah challenges God to cause Himself to take regard of His people’s distress. Looking around at the Remnant’s plight, Isaiah feels no salvation, no paternal love, and no compassion from God their eternal Father. He suggests that it is as if God never had a relationship with the Remnant in the first place; hence, they are “not called by your name.” Isaiah proposes that their sense of abandonment by God is hardening their heart and causing them to sin.

2. A lament about sin’s dark consequence – Isaiah 64: 1-7

Isaiah affirms that though God is mysterious in the timing and manner of deliverance, He consistently acts on behalf of those who unshakably lay hold of Him, serve Him, and fix their hope on the memory of His past deliverance. God’s deliverance remains consistent even when He has permitted the consequences of sin to take their toll.

3. An appeal to God for mercy – Isaiah 64: 8-12

Isaiah appeals to God for mercy and so gives us an example of the bold content of this kind of prayer. Isaiah reasons that God should deliver because He is the Father of children whose very existence depends upon Him. Further, if God is indeed forgiving, He shouldn’t be angry with our sins forever. Also, the praise of God by His people should be precious to Him. Finally, when God measures these reasons along with the prayer’s earnestness, His silence would only afflict the people all the more.

Further study:

- Isaiah 63:17 suggests that the Father’s apparent abandonment is causing the Remnant to be tempted to sin. Isaiah challenges God to repent, that is “to turn back” to the Remnant. Does God tempt a person to sin (cf. James 1:13-15)? Is the answer from James compatible with the Lord’s answer to Isaiah in chapter 65:1-16? Did God tempt Pharaoh to sin in Exodus 4:21? *Nota Bene:* Calvin describes God’s hardening of the heart by saying that “the delaying of Divine direction, distancing of the Spirit, and removing of illumination is a means wherein God makes sin possible or permits it.”

- Isaiah 64:4-7 reveals that the faithful and righteous shall be saved, yet discloses that neither Isaiah nor the Remnant of that day qualifies because of their sin. This sinful state of radical human woundedness is described in our doctrinal statement (cf. footnotes 5-9 ‘**On Mankind**’ in our **doctrinal statement** under **what we believe** at www.gracepointfellowship.org). The question is then raised by Isaiah and later the disciples: “Who can be saved?” How would you answer a discouraged realist who raises this question (cf. Matthew 19:16-26; Ephesians 2:3-10)? Does this answer lead to “cheap grace” (“I can sin all I want because I am forgiven, so let the grace of God flow” - cf. Romans 6)?

- Is it appropriate to “get in God’s face” with a prayer like that of Isaiah? As a **Bible study method**, look up prayers of the distressed using the term “prayer” or “prayed” (i.e. 2 Chronicles 33:11-19; Nehemiah 1:1ff; Psalm 88; Jonah 2:1; Matthew 22:41ff). What content and hope can be taken from these examples for times of prayer in the soul’s dark seasons?

Transformation exercise:

Read Isaiah’s prayer in chapters 63-64 and God’s answer in Isaiah 65. Is there an encouragement you can take away from the text and bring to someone in their distress?