

AN EXAMINATION OF ISAIAH 64: 1-11

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Synthesis and Outline of Isaiah 64:1-11

Summary: Isaiah laments the desolation that has overtaken God's people, and pleads for the Lord to act on their behalf as he has done in the past.

Outline:

- I. The Prophet cries out to the Lord, describing His omnipotent power in vivid imagery (64:1-3).
 - a. Isaiah expresses His great desire that God would demonstrate His greatness to the Lord's enemies, through miraculous and destructive acts (64:1-2).
 - b. Isaiah recounts God's great interventions of the past (64:3).
- II. Here the writer recognizes the uniqueness of Yahweh among the other, false, pagan gods (64:4).
 - a. Since all other gods are false gods who do not exist, none of them have ever made themselves known through mighty works as the Lord has done (64:4a).
 - b. The powerful acts which God has done, are not mere random phenomena, but interventions done on behalf of His covenant people (64:4b).
- III. In this section, Isaiah acknowledges that God accepts those who do right, while also recognizing that no one really does right, leastwise His own people.
 - a. God gladly accepts those who act in a righteous manner (64:5a)
 - b. Nevertheless, the prophet states that there is no one among the Lord's covenant people who truly does what is right (64:5b-7a).
 - c. Due to this sinfulness of men, God has "hidden His face" so that men cannot find Him (64:7b).
- IV. In these last verses, the prophet laments over the condition of God's holy Cities, and pleads for Him to forgive his people, and act on their behalf (64:8-11).
 - a. Isaiah recognizes God's sovereignty over His people (64:8).
 - b. The prophet pleads with God to avert His great wrath, and encourages Him to see that the people are all those who are part of His covenant (64:9).
 - c. Isaiah directs God's attention to the horrible condition of His cities (64:10-11).

Exposition of the Text

Introduction

In Chapter 64, an interesting tension is developed. The prophet Isaiah, who has just recounted God's past loving kindness to His people in 63:7-14, recognizes the destruction and wickedness that has now overcome the people of God, and realizes it is within God's power to change these circumstances. He laments over the condition of Jerusalem and the Lord's "holy cities," precisely because he knows that God could, with a word, set these things aright; yet He has not chosen to do so.

At the same time, Isaiah understands that the deplorable condition of the covenant people and their cities is their own doing. They have continually turned from the Lord and His ways; continually allowed themselves to be swept up in sins, so that God has "turned His face" away from them. Because of this wickedness, the prophet pleads with God for forgiveness, and restoration.

Isaiah Calls for God to Demonstrate His Presence (64:1-3)

Chapter 64 opens with Isaiah's lament; he pleads with God to work among his people, and let his presence be known to their enemies. The situation within which the small remnant of God's people finds themselves in, has a decided lacking of God's felt presence.¹ They feel neglected, abandoned and powerless, in the face of their enemies, and earnestly desire for God to "come down" and make a personal appearance (a theophany, if you will).

The imagery in the first two verses is meant to inspire awe, using the form of poetic language to describe what the nation desires from the Lord. The first part of this, is a

¹ Roy W. Howard. "Isaiah 64:1-9." *Interpretation* 62, no. 4 (October 1, 2008): 418. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 1, 2010).

hypocatastasis in verse 1, which compares the heavens to cloth, or curtains; the people ask that God would “rend” (tear²) the heavens in two.

The mountains “quake” at the Lord’s presence, due to His great anger, as demonstrated by the burning wood, and boiling water described in verse 2. Not only the mountains, however, but the nations also would “tremble” should the Lord choose to come down. God’s people desire that His enemies know that He is God; they wish for his presence to strike a proper fear and respect of Him in the hearts of all those who have oppressed His people.³

In verse 3, the writer acknowledges God’s past actions. He is not desiring that God act in some new way, but instead he and God’s people with him, desire God to act as He always has in the past: on behalf of His people. The “awesome things” which are spoken of, most likely refers to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16-19), and His working among His people in the past.⁴

The Uniqueness of Yahweh (64:4)

It is here that the uniqueness of God is shown. None of the other false gods of the pagans has ever acted on behalf of their people the way that God has acted on behalf of His people. No one has “heard” their god in the way that the Jews have heard their God speak. Yahweh is absolutely unique, in that he is not some idol carved by the hands of men, impotent and powerless; he shows Himself, demonstrates His existence, in undeniable ways! It is this

² F. Brown, and S. Driver, and C. Briggs. *The Brown Driver and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. E-Sword, electronic ed. Strong’s # H7167.

³ James E. Smith. *The Major Prophets*. (Joplin, MO :College Press, 1992 Logos Library System), §Isaiah 63:13-64:5.

⁴ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), S. 1:1118-1119.

continual presence of God among his people which justifies the intervention which they are seeking; God has done it before, He can do it again.⁵

Notice, however, that God's mighty hand does not work haphazardly. His favor is not directed at all men, in this passage, but is specifically directed to "those who wait for Him" (verse 4, ESV). This divine favor points back to Isaiah 40:31, where the prophet Isaiah, speaking on behalf of the Lord, assures God's people that their current sufferings are temporary, and those who endure them patiently will be delivered. This message would be particularly poignant to the people of Israel at this time.

The Issue of God's Righteousness and His Relationship with His People(64:5-7)

A simple principle emerges in verse 5a; God rewards those who do what is right. The object of this reward is not gold or riches, though, but God's presence. The Lord "meets" with those who work righteousness, who abide in God's commands, and "remember" the Lord in His ways (ESV). The righteous man's cry for God's presence will not go unheard or unanswered.

More than this, God's meeting with the one who acts justly, is not for the law keeper. It is not for those who seek to earn God's intervention, as if God is providing His presence out of some law of reciprocity. God abides with those who are "joyful" about Him and His commandments, those who desire God himself, rather than the result of his presence (such as material blessings, deliverance from enemies, and so on). The word speaks of exultation, cheer, and mirth.⁶ This person, who possesses God's company, performs the duties which God has assigned, with a broad smile and a cheerful heart.

⁵ Carl Friedrich Kiel and Franz Delitzsch. *Commentary on the Old Testament*. (Peabody, MA : Hendrickson, 2002, Logos Library System), § 7:607.

⁶ Brown, Driver and Briggs. Strong's # H7797.

Such information does not help the remnant. They are exceedingly wicked; they have continually broken God’s commandments, and are deserving of His judgment, not His deliverance. This disobedience evoked God’s fierce anger, and is assuredly the reason for their present sense of separation from Him.

The latter portion of this verse is a bit troublesome. Translators have taken a wide array of different interpretations of this text. For example, Holman’s *Christian Standard Bible* has a declaration of intent on the part of God’s people, rendering the last part of the sentence “*we will remain in Your ways and be saved.*”⁷ By contrast, the *English Standard Version* renders the words as a statement of incredulity, “in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?”

Arguably the superior translation, which fits the context of the surrounding passages, is that which is given in the *New English Translation*. It expresses the verse in a rhetorical question, “Look, you were angry because we violated [your commandments] continually. How then can we be saved?” The answer to this question is given, in a latter verse.⁸

Israel’s Wickedness Described (64:6-7)

In this section the sinfulness of Israel is laid bare in all its ugliness. No one is spared from this self indictment; every single one of God’s remnant has lived a life of continual rebellion against their covenant partner. They have chased after idols and ignored the Lord’s commands.⁹ They are completely guilty and without excuse.

The depths of this depravity are so great, that even the good that they try to do, their “righteous deeds,” are wholly polluted and unclean. The words “polluted Garment” (ESV), refers

⁷ Emphasis added.

⁸ See verses 8-9.

⁹ Isaiah 57:13 and 48:18, respectively.

to a used menstrual cloth, a truly vivid picture of how disgusting Israel's most righteous acts have become to the Lord.¹⁰ This is a particularly telling indictment for the city which was once called "faithful."¹¹

The reference at the end of verse 6, comparing the people of the remnant to a "withered leaf" (ESV), is a perfect picture of the decay and ruin that iniquity brings about upon men. Like leaves in the autumn, the people caught up in sin are drained of strength, vigor, and beauty, drained of life and useless. Their sins carry them away, out of the presence of the Lord, and scatter them, like a fall wind scatters the leaves which have fallen away from their source of nourishment.¹² The picture in this verse of leaves being swept away in a tempestuous wind is undoubtedly a reference to the sin that has caused God's people to be swept away into exile.¹³

It is important to remember, though, that this was all a self-inflicted misery. The people were not putting forth effort to seek out the Lord, or to follow him. No one "roused" himself (ESV), that he might take hold of the Lord. The word used here that is translated "rouse" refers to the effort needed for someone to shake themselves free of a heavy slumber.¹⁴ Because Israel had not bothered to seek out the Lord, He has "hidden his face" from them.

The idea of the remnant "melting" in the hands of their enemies, refers to the way a defeated army is scattered before their conquerors.¹⁵ A similar phrase can be seen in Exodus 15:15, where the inhabitants of Canaan are seized with fear and "melt away" before the

¹⁰ Friedrich and Delitzsch. §7:610.

¹¹ Isaiah 1:21.

¹² Albert Barnes. *Notes on the Old and New Testament*. Originally published 1875. E-Sword electronic ed. §Isaiah 64:6.

¹³ Carl Wilhelm Nagelsbach. "Isaiah": *A Commentary; Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*. John Peter Lange, ed. Translated by Phillip Schaff. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1878), 684.

¹⁴ Barnes, §64:7.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Israelites, or in Joshua 2:9, where all the opponents of the Israelites “melt away” before them. Due to their sin, the tables have now turned, and in stark contrast the Jewish nation is now the one who “melts away.”

The People plead for Forgiveness from a Sovereign God (64:8-11)

Who has the power to change the hearts of the remnant of God? This is the question which is being asked and answered in verse 8; the House of Israel is ultimately no more than clay in the hands of God. It is God who has hidden His face, it is he who is the “potter.” Unless He chooses to forgive the sins of His people, they are powerless to help themselves, neither in regards to their physical condition, nor in regards to their moral/spiritual condition. The sense here is that they are “wholly in his hand and at his disposal.”¹⁶

This is not to say that God is responsible for their sin, however. The people are responsible for their own wrongdoing, and are completely lacking in any excuse. It would be completely inappropriate, then, to use this verse to ascribe their iniquities to the sovereign work of God.¹⁷ Yet it must be understood that ultimately it is God who “declares the end to the beginning” saying, “My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.”¹⁸

God’s overwhelming omnipotence is not just spoken of in terms of molding inanimate objects here. Much more than that, God is also “Father” to His people. This familial relationship between God and the Jews is continually affirmed throughout the Old Testament, and is the basis

¹⁶ Barnes §64:8.

¹⁷ Nagelsbach, Isaiah, 685.

¹⁸ Isaiah 46:10. Notice the sovereignty of God is so complete, that He determines not only the course of men, but of birds(verse 11)!

by which His people can cry out for forgiveness and renewal.¹⁹ God is not some uncaring tinkerer in the sky, but a loving Father who desires to restore those whom He has called.

And forgiveness is precisely what the people plead for. “Please, look, we are all your people” is the remnants cry of petition. God has promised in the past forgiveness and renewal for His people if they will humble themselves, turn from their sins, and seek His face.²⁰ The phrases “remember our sins no more” and “please look” are obvious anthropomorphism. God, as omnipresent, omniscient creator has no need to “remember” or to focus his concentration to “look” upon his people. The Prophet is using figurative language to beg forgiveness from the Lord.

The prophet then points to the condition of the nation, reminding God of His past relationship with the people of Israel. This section has Isaiah looking forward with a “prophetic eye” towards the total devastation which would overcome all of the land.²¹ The Holy Cities once ruled over by David, with equity and justice, are now overrun with pagans who make their appeals to false gods. The “Holy Cities” in this verse, according to some commentators, refer to the upper and lower sections of Jerusalem.²² Others disagree, stating that this expression refers to all the cities of Canaan, which was a possession of Jehovah.²³

The most detestable of the atrocities, though, is undoubtedly the destruction of the temple. The house of God, to which men came from all over the land to worship, has been

¹⁹ Friedrich and Delitzsch. §7:610.

²⁰ 2 Chronicles 7:14. There then raises the question: is there a point when the people have moved past the possibility of forgiveness?

²¹ Sennacherib and the Assyrians were unsuccessful in taking Jerusalem. See 2 Kings 18-19.

²² Robert Jamieson and A.R. Fausset and David Brown. *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), S. Is 64:10.

²³ Friedrich and Delitzsch. §7:611.

burned to the ground. The temple is a “house” in that it is a dwelling place for the Spirit of the Lord, “Holy” in regards to purity, and “beautiful” in the sense of its physical magnificence.²⁴ This loss is horrific, since it is only here that sacrifices can be made, and sins atoned for.²⁵ Moreover it is where “our fathers praised you”; the very place where the people of Israel come to fellowship with God has been removed from the scene. This physical separation from God’s presence, caused by Israel’s enemies, parallels their spiritual separation from God, which is caused by their own sinfulness. Israel pleads with the Lord to recognize their plight, and deliver them.

Theological Principles of Isaiah 64

Isaiah 64 is a theologically rich text, which helps its readers better understand the nature of God. Not only does the careful reader learn to better understand God’s nature, but they will also get a glimpse into God’s sovereignty, and how this relates to His relationship with His people. Also, God’s attitude toward sin, particularly His intolerance for it, is demonstrated.

God’s Sovereignty and Man’s Will

How does anyone solve the tension between the will of man and the sovereignty of God pictured in this chapter? Clearly, Isaiah believes that God is in absolute control of His creation. The condition of Israel is ascribed without any doubt, to the will of God as the “potter” who molds the clay.²⁶

Yet the *fault* is leveled squarely at Israel, and their continual sin and rebellion. God did not force His people to reject Him, they did that all on their own. This presents a tension which

²⁴ Barnes §64:10.

²⁵ Friedrich and Delitzsch. §7:611.

²⁶ Isaiah 64:8

has been commonly seen in the Arminian/Calvinist debate, where the Arminian sees God “anxiously looking on, wringing His hands,” while the Calvinist “consults His vast blueprint” to determine what each one of us will be “compelled to do next.”²⁷ Neither of these views are biblical; instead both aspects are equally true, and could be summarized by saying “Everything that happens according to God’s sovereign plan, yet everything that happens is our fault.” This tension must be preserved, rather than solved.

Theological Principle; God Blesses the Righteous, and Punishes the Wicked

In Genesis 4:7, God explained an important principle to Cain. “Do well,” God told Cain, “and you will be accepted.” God was trying to tell Cain that His reproach was not for Cain himself, but for Cain’s sinful offering of what was essentially leftovers. God cannot tolerate sin.

This same principle is seen in Isaiah 64. God dwells with the one who joyously serves Him. Those who live righteous lives, will not be neglected by the Lord. This is a hard saying to bear, though, for Isaiah himself states that there are no truly righteous people.²⁸ This leaves mankind in a bit of a quandary; one which can only be solved by Christ, and the application of His righteousness to the believer.

Contemporary Application; An Unspeakable Joy

These theological principles lead to a singular thought for the Christian; an unspeakable, joyous exaltation. For the believer, the idea that God meets with the one who acts righteously, is a great comfort, for the believer does not possess his own righteousness that is as “filthy rags,”

²⁷ John N. Oswalt. *The Book of Isaiah*. NIV Application Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 673.

²⁸ Isaiah 64:7. Compare to Romans 3:10.

but the very righteousness of Christ Himself. We possess this, not through some kind of self effort, but by simple faith.²⁹

More than that, even the Christian's moment by moment failures can be viewed with a measure of comfort. God has "ordered the steps" of the righteous; the believer is the "clay" of the potter.³⁰ This means that even the sins of the believer, have been allowed by a sovereign God, and this means they have a purpose. Again, this does not mean that God is the author of sin, but what it does mean is that sinful stumbles of the faithful are used ultimately for the good of the believer, and the glory of God.

²⁹ Romans 3:22.

³⁰ Psalm 37:23.

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