

November 30, 2014
Advent 1

"Isaiah's Intense Prayer We Can Use for Advent"

ISAIAH 63:16B-17; 64:1-8

But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from old is your name.¹⁷ Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance.^{64:1} Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! ² As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! ³ For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. ⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. ⁵ You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? ⁶ All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. ⁷ No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins. ⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Have you ever had times when you wake up in the middle of the night and can't fall back to sleep? You wake up at 3:00 AM in the morning and your mind is reeling with problems you are facing at work, problems in your family or some struggle in your personal life.

The prophet Isaiah's mind was reeling with thoughts about his beloved people of Israel. In the words we just read to you, we hear him turn these thoughts into prayers, not casual prayers, but intense prayers. He pleads for the Lord God to do more to help his people, even tear open the heavens and come down if necessary. He pleads for these people to come back to the Lord because he is their potter and they are his clay.

I know a little about what Isaiah was praying for and so do you. There are nights when we can't sleep. Our minds are reeling with thoughts and concerns for people we know and love. We turn those thoughts into prayers. Often they are intense prayers similar to the prayers that Isaiah prayed for the people of his time. We want the Lord to step into the lives of people and help them with the messes they have made for themselves. We want the Lord to turn their hearts around and lead them to repentance. Let's take a closer look at this intense prayer of Isaiah and use it as our prayer for the beginning of this advent season.

With Isaiah we want the Lord to come down

Isaiah is praying for God's people as he says, "You, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer

from of old is your name. Why, oh Lord, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance."

It was hard for Isaiah to see firsthand how the Lord was hardening the hearts of the people that turned against him. The Lord told Isaiah his calls to repentance would make some of the people even more hardened in their hearts. "Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn and be healed." Isaiah had to deliver tough messages from the Lord such as these words in Isaiah chapter one, "I reared up children and they rebelled against me. ... Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption."

It is so hard in these last days to see Christians we know and love slowly harden their hearts against the Lord. They start lying to themselves about the sin that is taking over their lives. They lie to themselves, they lie to God and lie to other Christians. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to convict them of their evil ways, but they start resisting the Holy Spirit. We want the Lord to return to them, convict them, lead them to repentance and make them his own dear people. As Isaiah prays, "Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance."

The other night I was reading stories from the Bible to my grandson. He gave me some books to read and one was "The ABC Bible Story Book." One of the stories in that book had the title, "The Man in the Pig Sty." Who was the man in the pig sty? It was the son who had taken his portion of the family inheritance, run away and spent the money in wild living. It was not until he was in the pig sty feeding pigs that he suddenly came to his senses and thought about going home to his father. Sometimes the Lord lets people experience the full results of their sinful actions so that they reach rock bottom and come to their senses.

The people at the time of Isaiah were not living in a pig sty, but they were living in something much worse. They were worshipping false gods and making a stinking mess of their lives. The Lord humbled them. In verse 18 Isaiah reflects on how their enemies trampled down the sanctuary. The heathen Babylonians came and destroyed the temple of the Lord and the walls of Jerusalem. The Lord allowed this to happen to shock his people and lead them to repentance.

Listen again to how Isaiah prays for the Lord to rend the heavens and come down. "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down and make your name know to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you. For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you." The word for rending or tearing is used most often in the Old Testament for people tearing their clothes in grief after experiencing some great tragedy in their lives.

Isaiah is praying for the Lord to tear open the heavens and step into this world and save his people. He compares the power of the Lord to twigs and branches thrown into a fire. Throw dry twigs into a hot bed of coals and watch how fast they burst into flames. Watch

the water boiling in the pot. If only the Lord would deliver them from their enemies. Their greatest enemy of all was their own selves.

Isaiah prays for such deliverance from the Lord in the future because the Lord had delivered his people in the past. The Lord did awesome things in the past. "Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him." Open the Bible and read how God created the world in six days. Open the Bible and read how he delivered his people from the Egyptian by opening up the waters of the Red Sea, leading his people through on dry ground and then destroying the Egyptian armies. If God did these things in the past, he can certainly do them again in the future.

Do you have any doubts about the Lord stepping into the lives of people you know and love? Do you have any doubts that the Lord can step into your life and deliver you from your problems? Then look not only how he used miracles to deliver his people in the past, but look also at your own life. How many times has the Lord stepped into your life, heard your prayers and then delivered you? In Isaiah 41 the Lord says, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." The Lord has come through for you again and again and again. He will also come through for you in the future.

With Isaiah we want the Lord to fix our problem of sin

During the season of Advent we think of how we are waiting not just for Christmas to come but for the Lord Jesus to come again on clouds of glory. We are also waiting on him to fix our problem of sin because there is no place we can turn to for help. "You came to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?" Oh, there are sometimes when we gladly do right. There are some times when we remember your ways, but there are also those times when we continue to sin against your ways. There is no way we can find deliverance and help in our abilities to do what is right and compensate for what we have done wrong.

How desperate is our situation? God's Word dares to tell us that even our righteous acts, our good things we do in life, are tainted and fouled by sin. "All of us have become like who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins."

If you look at these words closely, you can quickly see that you have no reason to put any hope in what you try to do to save yourself. We are unclean. Even our righteous acts are like filthy rags. I was really nice to someone who called on the phone to sell me something I didn't need, even though he interrupted my lunch. And then comes the sinful thought of pride that says, "I sure wish other people were as good as I am and could control themselves as I do." "We all shrivel like a leaf and like wind our sins sweep us away." The leaves wither and perish and so will we. Isaiah 40 says, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them."

Where is our hope found? It is found in the Lord. Listen again to these comforting words. "Yet, O Lord, you are the Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." We are the work of God's hand. He created us and gave us the bodies that miraculously digested all that turkey and green beans and mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie. The Lord our God is the potter and we are the clay. He is the one that also make us new people who are his new creation, his dear children who are loved by him in this life and for all eternity. The hand of God transferred your sin and mine to Jesus. The hands of Jesus were nailed to a cross to make full payment. It is the hand of God who brought this forgiveness to you and created faith to believe. It is the hand of God that keeps you in your faith. It is the hand of God that works out everything for your good. It is the hand of God that will take you home to heaven when Jesus returns. And so we long for Jesus to come to us again this Advent season. We long for him to return in glory to take us home to the place prepared for us. Maybe this will be the first Christmas we all spend in heaven with Jesus. Even so Lord, Jesus tear open the heavens and come down. Amen.