

GOD'S VENGEANCE AND MERCY AND ISRAEL'S FERVENT PRAYER FOR HELP

By Andy McClish

Isaiah 63-64¹

Introduction

In general, it is accurate to think of the book of Isaiah as dealing with both history and prophecy relative to the nation of Israel, its relationship to Jehovah/God, and the promise of the coming Messiah. In a larger context, however, Isaiah's writings may be seen as having relevance for God's people in any time period; emphasizing God's control over His creation and the ultimate triumph of His will. The last nine chapters of Isaiah are concerned with the wickedness of Israel as a whole, God's work of redemption, and the future glory of His people.

This passage (chapters 63–64) naturally divides itself into three sections. In 63:1–6 Isaiah discusses God's vengeance and judgment against (and complete triumph over) His enemies, Edom in particular. In verses 7–14 of chapter 63, the prophet recalls God's wonderful care and mercy for the nation of Israel throughout its history (in spite of nearly continuous rebellion). Finally, in 63:15–64, the people, through the prophet, offer an earnest, pleading prayer that God will once again come to their aid as in times past.

God's Vengeance Against and Triumph Over His Enemies (63:1–6)

Throughout the Mosaic period of history, the nation of Israel, though often rebellious, was a symbol of the one true religion/worship of the one true God. Conversely, the Edomite nation represented fierce and hateful opposition to God, His way, and all who walked in it (cf. Is. 34:5–15; Amos 1:11–12; Obad. 20–21; Ezek. 35:1–15, et al.). God could not and would not tolerate this evil people indefinitely. For their perpetual animosity, Edom would ultimately be destroyed.

In Isaiah 63:1–6 the prophet sees a vision in which this judgment is carried out. The vision involves a "strong and mighty warrior" who comes from Edom, specifically from Bozrah, which was for a time the capital of Edom. This warrior is quite an impressive figure from the description Isaiah provides. His clothing appears dyed ("crimsoned") and He is "glorious in His apparel, marching in the greatness of strength" (v.1). All of these words convey the attributes of dignity, confidence, power, and majesty. The prophet asks, "Who is this?" and the answer given ("I that speak in righteousness...") really leaves no doubt that it is none other than Jehovah (cf. 45:19).

Isaiah probes further in verse two, asking, "Wherefore art thou red in thine apparel...?" This question indicates that the warrior's clothing was not meant to be red, but had been stained

as if from grapes trampled in a wine vat. God's reply, which appears in the next three verses, makes it very plain that the redness of His garments is the blood of His enemies. Figuratively speaking, God has trampled the Edomites and crushed them as though they were grapes in a winepress. In the process He has inevitably been splattered with their blood, so that all His raiment has been stained. It is emphasized in verse three and particularly in verse five that God has acted alone in executing this judgment. Though it was certainly not needed, God would have liked to think (and had every right to expect) that someone would stand with Him in His battle against evil. He looked intently for some sign of help, and wondered that there was none to be found (cf. 59:15-16). Therefore God had to tread the winepress alone. It was His own arm that brought victory and salvation, spurred on by divine wrath against sin.

Though this passage clearly involves anger on the part of God, it would be a grave error to construe His actions as being motivated by spite or uncontrolled rage. What is described in these verses is nothing more or less than an infinite example of "righteous indignation". It was in God's heart (i.e., a part of His nature) to wreak vengeance against His enemies because they were the enemies of righteousness. Therefore the Edomites would be trodden down in God's anger and trampled in His wrath. Isaiah's use of the phrase "made them drunk in my wrath" (v.6) indicates a state of complete helplessness, so that the people's lifeblood (literally their strength) is poured out on the ground. This vision provides a graphic, sobering picture of the consequences of impenitent sin.

God's History of Bountiful Care for His People Recalled (63:7–14)

In preceding chapters the inspired prophet has dealt with the Suffering Servant (52-53) and the promised growth and glory of Zion (54, 60-62). The certainty of God's judgment against His enemies has been reinforced in the passage just discussed. It seems fitting, then, that the next section of this passage contains a catalog of God's blessings and reciprocal outpouring of praise.

The phrase in verse 7, "I will make mention..." seems to indicate that Isaiah is speaking for himself alone. It is also possible, however, that the faithful remnant of the people is included in the thoughts which follow. The focus of these verses is on God's "lovingkindnesses" and His "great goodness" toward Israel. These characteristics are recognized as motivated by God's tender love and mercy, and are worthy of the highest praise His people can offer/express.

Verse 8 indicates that, in light of God's treatment of/care for Israel, He expected/required (and rightfully so) that they, His children, would respond appropriately and would remain true to Him. As long as the condition of their faithfulness and obedience to God was being met, He was, in every respect, their Savior. God has emphasized this repeatedly via His messengers,

from the beginning of Israel's history (cf. Lev. 26:12; Deut. 6:3; 29:13; Jer. 7:23; Ezek. 11:20; et al.).

Verse 9 has been the source of considerable discussion and dispute because of two possible translations of the opening statement, "In all their affliction he was afflicted...". The most natural understanding of this rendering (ASV and KJV) would be that God empathized with His people in all of their suffering and trials. This thought seems born out well enough by such statements as are recorded in Judges 10:16 and Hebrews 4:15. The God of the bible has always been personally and deeply concerned about the condition/well-being of His people, so much so that it is not unreasonable to state, in effect, that He hurts when they hurt.

An alternate reading of this phrase, however, (ASV margin) indicates that in all the adversity which the people faced, God was no adversary. In other words, though Israel often acted as an enemy toward God, He was never an enemy to them. The afflictions which God brought about were for the purpose of chastisement and discipline, meant only for Israel's benefit.

The remainder of the verse seems to correspond more closely to the idea of divine empathy. So great were God's love and pity for His people that He sent "the angel of his presence" to care for them. Haley points out that

...The word translated *angel* may also be rendered "messenger" or "representative"; the word translated *presence* literally means "face." Jehovah promised Moses, "My presence [face] shall go with thee" (Exod. 33:14). Thus the *angel* is the representative of Jehovah's face or presence that went with Israel. Inasmuch as Christ accompanied Israel in the wilderness (I Cor. 10:4), and is the "image of God" (II Cor. 4:4, 6; Col. 1:15) and "the effulgence of his glory" (Heb. 1:3), this representative of Jehovah's presence probably is the Word of God that became flesh (John 1:14)....²

By means of this "representative presence" God saw to the needs of His people throughout their history. He was their savior and redeemer, the one who picked them up and carried them along "all the days of old."

In spite of God's wonderful and comprehensive care for the nation of Israel, its history was marked by rebellion against Him from almost the beginning (cf. Deut. 9:7). By responding to God's love in this way, the people are said to have "grieved his holy Spirit" and made Him their enemy (v. 10). Though God willed and worked nothing but good for His people, they chose a course which forced Him to fight against them. The phrase "holy Spirit" in this verse seems to be much more than a mere reference to God's disposition at a given point/time. Isaiah appears to be talking about a distinct person who is able to feel pain and experience grief.³ That being the case, it is probable that this passage (vv. 8-10) contains references to each person of the Godhead, all working for Israel's benefit, and all being rejected in return.

As in verse 9, alternate readings on verse 11 have raised some interesting questions. Some commentators have gone so far as to say that this verse "bristles with difficulties."⁴ The key issue revolves around just who is doing the remembering in the first clause, whether an indefinite "he" (KJV and ASV) or "his people" (margin), which would seem to be an obvious reference to the Israelite nation. A series of questions follows (vv. 11–13), the tenor of which appears to fit best with the marginal reading of this verse. In other words, it seems only natural and fitting for the people as a whole (rather than some individual) to be remembering God's historical care for them and then asking, "Where is he...?"

The questions in this section all relate to various aspects of Israel's early history and God's role in it. The phrase "...up out of the sea" is an obvious reference to the crossing of the Red Sea during Israel's flight from Egypt (cf. Exod., Ps. 106:9), and Moses and Aaron (or Moses alone, if the marginal reading is correct) are readily understood as "the shepherds of his flock". The question about God's putting "his holy Spirit in the midst of them" appears to be another clear reference to the third person of the Godhead and is easy to relate to such passages as Numbers 11:17ff. And Haggai 2:5.

In the next two verses (12–13) the questioning continues, and the theme is unchanged. "Where is the God?", Israel wants to know, whose "glorious arm" was at the right hand of Moses? This, of course, has reference to God's majesty, to His sustaining strength and miraculous power with which Moses was endued throughout Israel's deliverance from Egypt and her journey toward Canaan. This same power "divided the waters [of the Red Sea] before them" and "led them through the depths" as though the nation was a sure-footed horse traveling through the wilderness (i.e., a flat desert plain).⁵ It should come as no surprise that the events referenced in these questions served to make God "an everlasting name " (v. 12), but the people of Israel are asking (through Isaiah), "Where is God now?"

Verse 14 provides one more figurative illustration of God's care in times past, which is remarkable for its beauty and comfort. Just as cattle are led down into a valley to find refreshment, comfort, safety, and rest, God's spirit led the Israelites to their ultimate rest in the Promised Land. Once again the prophet emphasizes that God's activities (both providential and miraculous) in the care and leadership of His people have served to enhance God's reputation. They have had the design and the effect of making His name "glorious". It has been observed, however, that the point of this section (vv. 11-14), from Israel's perspective, has been "Why then and not now?" Why was God with them so closely and so tangibly at the beginning of their history, but not at the present?⁶

Israel's Fervent Prayer for God's Help (63:15–64:12)

The prayer that begins in verse 15 recounts God's wondrous works on their behalf (the manifestations of His infinite love and mercy) from the beginning of their history. A comparison of their former state to the present prompts a touching plea for mercy and help. The prayer begins with the request that God "look down" from His perfect home, from the seat/source of all that is holy and glorious, and "behold" the sad condition of His people. Again Israel (through the prophet) questions God's inactivity and His apparent absence from their lives: "Where are thy zeal and thy mighty acts?" (cf. Isa. 26:11; 42:13; 59; 17). God seems so far removed at this point that the people ask, in effect, "Why have the feelings of your heart and your compassion toward us ceased?"

In verse 16 we see the foundation of Israel's prayer, namely that God is their father, both nationally and spiritually. He brought the nation into being by making the people His chosen and by means of His covenant with them. This prayer freely acknowledges that it will do no good to call on their ancestors Abraham and Jacob for aid at this point. There is no comfort nor any hope for deliverance in being the physical descendants of Abraham and Jacob. The nation's only hope lies in appealing directly to Jehovah, who is their only spiritual father and their eternal redeemer.

On the surface, the question posed in verse 17 ("Why dost thou make us to err...?") is difficult to understand/presents some difficulty. At first glance, this appears to be an extremely irreverent/disrespectful reproach against God. Surely Isaiah is wise enough not to fault the almighty with the sinful rebellion of the people. Surely he doesn't dare to blame God for what man has chosen to do. In interpreting this verse it is helpful to bear in mind the prophetic charge which was given to Isaiah when he was called (cf. Isa. 6:8-10; Matt. 13:14-15). The people have dulled their senses to God's truth. They have shut their eyes and their ears and the longer they have remained in this condition, the easier it has become to remain in this condition. As a result, the only message which could have produced a healthy fear of God and could have turned them back from their sins has hardened them further.⁷ The sad fact is that, because of man's free will, the word of God will often have the effect of driving away those who need to hear it most. Perhaps that is the thought being expressed here.

The heartfelt plea of this verse is that God will "return" and that He will once again be the God described in verses 7–14 of this chapter. This plea is made on behalf of ("for the sake of") those who might yet be considered God's servants. In Leupold's words:

God is to "return" or turn back, or, become as he once was. As basis for this attitude the prophet in this lament adduces the fact that there are still some within the "tribes of [God's] inheritance" who are "servants" of the Lord. He is urged to take these into consideration.⁸

The final two verses of this chapter (18–19) are apparently meant to provide further motivation for God to hear and act upon the prayer for help. There is some exegetical difficulty in verse eighteen due to the fact that the object of the verb "possessed" is unspecified. The word *it* (v.18) has been supplied by translators to help the reading make better sense. In light of this fact, it is somewhat difficult to determine what it was that the people possessed "but a little while." Isaiah could be speaking of the land, the temple, or something else. It seems best/most reasonable to interpret this passage in terms of God's words to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 4:25-26. Here God warned that the people would "**soon** [emph. AJM] utterly perish from off the land" they had been promised. This fate would be a direct result of their persistent, widespread corruption and idolatry. Sure enough, after decades of widespread wickedness (cf. 2 Kings 21:1–18, et al.), Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were taken captive by the Babylonian empire. It is quite plausible to suggest that this is what is meant by the phrase "but a little while" (i.e., only for a relatively brief period).⁹ In this case the object of the verb "possessed" would be the Promised Land itself. In any event, whatever this verse has reference to was something of great significance, something very dear and full of meaning to the people.

The declaration regarding the "adversaries [who] have trodden down thy sanctuary" seems to be an obvious reference to the Babylonians during the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. 64:11). On the other hand, the "adversaries" in this instance may be that segment of the Israelites which was bent/intent on perverting the worship of the one true God and grossly profaning His temple. In either case, the sad result is that the people now understand and lament the fact that they are no different than those who have never submitted to God's rule, nor ever been known as His people.

The concepts of God as the King of Israel and of Israel as His property appear often (cf. 33:22; 41:21; 44:6). It is not denied that God's providential rule extends over all peoples, but simply that the kingship that was manifested in the theocracy has been bestowed upon no other nation but Israel...No other nation but Israel has thus known God so as to be able to call upon His name, nor has it been known by His name (cf. 48:1). The complaint, however, shows that these blessings do not seem now to exist.¹⁰

In chapter 64:1–3 the prayer of the people continues, and the request which was begun in 63:15 ("Look down...and behold") is strengthened/intensified. Now the people ask for action. They ask for God to tear the heavens open, come down to the earth, and make the mountains quake by His presence. In verse two Isaiah provides a vivid picture of the intense power of this

presence. It ignites the brushwood, it causes water to boil, it forces even God's enemies to acknowledge Him, and the nations tremble because of it (cf. Nah. 1:5).

All of these phrases are reminiscent of a time when God **did** come down, when He did terrible (i.e., awe inspiring) things which the people had neither asked for nor expected (v.3). Haley observes that this is essentially the same set of circumstances as when the Israelites were encamped at Mount Sinai and the law was first delivered.¹¹ At that time the people were terrified by God's presence. They "stood afar off" and made Moses intercede for them (cf. Exod. 20:18-21; Deut. 5:25-27). The emphasis of this passage and this plea is clearly revealed in the last two words of each verse. The people are praying for "thy [God's] presence", though they know it will be a very frightening thing to behold.

In verse 4 we see one of the key reasons God's presence has the effect that it does. In all of human history (since the beginning of time), no one has ever seen or heard of a god like the God of Israel. Man has never known, never experienced any idol or false god who works on behalf of its faithful people as does the God Isaiah has under consideration. This special care, however, is reserved for "him that waiteth for him", the one who maintains an attitude of earnest expectation and confident hope regarding God's ability and disposition to render aid. Without a doubt, God and His wonderful works are incomparable in all of human experience.

He alone has been known to appear unto the help of his people. Go back as far as the annals of history or the memory of man can carry you, there is nothing on record like deeds which the Lord has done. There are involved here not idle appearances to no effect of purpose. The Lord has "[done] deeds for those who wait for him." That is the uniqueness of Israel's tradition that their God has manifested himself in visible and audible fashion.¹²

In verse 5 another source of some confusion and controversy appears. It is perfectly clear that God "meets" those who rejoice in working righteousness and who remember God in His ways. In other words, God assists and intercedes for those who are happy to obey His commands (Psa. 119:172) and who remember to make God's ways their ways (Prov. 3:5-8). It is also plain that the people have sinned. They have disobeyed God on a continual basis and provoked His wrath.

The question arises over how the last phrase of this verse is rendered. In light of their perpetual iniquity, are the people, perhaps, wondering if they **can** be saved ("...shall we be saved?", ASV)? The alternate reading (ASV margin) seems to express confidence that "we shall be saved", while the New King James Version acknowledges: "we need to be saved." Admittedly it is difficult to come to a firm conclusion, due to the ambiguity of the Hebrew text. However, in light of the immediate context of this verse and the pervading tone of this section of Isaiah (i.e., chapters 40-66), it seems necessary to construe the thought here as hopeful. Since

it is the case that God meets those who are happy in doing righteousness and who remember His ways (cf. 55:6-7; 64:5a), it must follow that the people can be saved if they will only turn back to God in penitent obedience.

Isaiah proceeds in verse 6 to elaborate on the sad condition, which has just been noted. The wickedness in Israel is so widespread and horrible that the people must confess: “We are all...unclean.” They were unclean both morally and ceremonially to such a degree that even what they would offer to God in the name of righteousness was as repulsive as a “polluted garment.” The language employed here is meant to convey, in graphic terms, the way sin separates man from all that is pure and holy (cf. Lev. 15:19–30). In this state the people are, spiritually speaking, as frail as a fading leaf which is easily blown away by the “wind” of the iniquities.

The nation described in verse 7 appears totally bereft of spiritual thought, expression, or motivation. Prayer is simply non-existent. Isaiah may be describing a vicious cycle of inactivity promoting inactivity. It seems likely that the peoples’ recognition of their own uncleanness and unworthiness is being viewed as a reason not to approach God in prayer. This, of course, only compounds the problem, because the people have been failing to take advantage of the opportunity and privilege to “take hold” of Jehovah through prayer. As a result, God’s face is, in effect, hidden from Israel. The people see God as inaccessible and they are “consumed” (ASV margin, “melted”) by means of their sins. In other words, the nation as a whole is weak and wilted because it has chosen a course which cuts it off from God and His infinite power.

Isaiah, in verse 8, now presents another argument for Israel’s case, another motive for God to answer the prayer and intervene on behalf of His people. The claim of 63:16 (“Thou are our Father”) is repeated, but a different aspect is stressed. The emphasis now is on God as the creator of Israel, the One Who fashioned the nation just as a potter would make vessel of clay. Thought this is a fairly common analogy, the meaning in this verse is rather special. Certainly God had created all people, but He can only be thought of as “Father” by those who belong to Him spiritually. It is worth noting that this reference to God as the potter implies that the people will yield in His hands, as clay. By and large, however, they have not been at all “pliable” (i.e., cooperative or submissive), so the result is not what God intended (cf. Jer. 18:1–6).

The plea for God’s consideration is continued in verse 9, and the motive in this verse is that “we are all they people.” On the basis of this special relationship, Isaiah prays, not for acquittal or pardon, but that God’s judgment upon them will not be to the maximum extent, demanded by His justice. Young has well summarized the thought of this verse as Israel’s prayer to God...

...that His anger be abated, that it not extend to an extremity or to the fullest measure (lit.,...until it has reached its full strength).... To remember iniquity is to visit it with the punishment that it is due. The prayer is that this remembrance will not be eternal (cf. 54:7–8). the people are not rebuking God for punishing them nor are they praying wholly to be delivered from judgment; well do they recognize that the judgment is just, and they ask for an alleviation therefrom.¹³

In verse 10 perhaps another reason is being offered for God not to remain angry forever. Since His holy cities have become “wilderness” and “desolation,” surely God will not fail to reclaim and restore them. The cities referred to in this verse are most likely those of Judah in general, since it was not uncommon for Judah to be called “the holy land” (Zec. 2:12). Zion and Jerusalem are probably singled out for emphasis.

The seriousness of the desolation just noted is in verse 11 declared in more specific terms. The prayer moves from the “holy cities” to “Jerusalem” to “our holy and our beautiful house” (i.e., the temple). Since there is no valid reason for supposing that the book of Isaiah is anything other than the work of a single author, this verse appears to be predictive in nature, foretelling the eventual destruction of the temple (cf. Jer. 52:12–13). As with many of the Bible’s prophetic passages, knowledge of the event in question is so certain to occur that it is spoken of as though already accomplished (e.g., Psa. 22; Isa 53, et al.). Given such promises (warnings) (cf. Lev. 26:31) and the subsequent behavior of the children of Israel, one could argue that it should not have been too difficult to anticipate the future in this instance.

The language employed by the prophet to describe the temple demonstrates its importance. It was, at least for a time, one of the focal points (if not **the** focal point) in the lives of the Israelites. It was a symbol of holiness. It was a beautiful and pleasant place, not only in the physical sense, but especially from a spiritual perspective. Now, as a consequence of sin, it is recognized that all of this will be “laid waste.”

Verse 12, the last verse of this chapter and of this prayer, contains two questions for God. These questions are probably best viewed as a final attempt to elicit God’s mercy and His assistance. Given the pitiful state of affairs just presented in verses 10 and 11 (“these things”), will God refrain himself; will He hold back and refuse to come to their aid? Furthermore, the people wonder, will God continue to afflict them indefinitely? The sense of the questions expresses a strong desire and confident hope that God will **not** withhold His mercy from them and that He will not punish them forever. In other words, a negative answer to the questions is expected, though it is not given in this passage.

Conclusion

As noted in the introduction, the messages of the inspired writers are characterized by a timeless relevance for all of mankind. This being the case, our careful consideration of these truths is still necessary and beneficial today, centuries after the prophet Isaiah recorded them. In light of Paul's teaching in Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:11, it is clear that God has preserved the words of the Old Testament "for our admonition" and "for our learning."

The destruction of Edom described at the beginning of chapter 63 is an emphatic reminder that God does remember willful, impenitent sin and that, sooner or later, the consequences will be as severe, decisive, and thorough as an infinite God can make them. This passage also clearly implies that, while God has no need of man's assistance in any endeavor, He is pleased when His servants take a strong stand against sin and error, and He is disappointed when they do not. Furthermore, it bears repeating that an outpouring of God's anger against sin in no way detracts from His perfect love. Rather, it is precisely because of that love that He cannot tolerate sin or its horrible effects.

In addition, these chapters serve as a reminder that God is able and willing to do truly wonderful things for the benefit of His people. The events mentioned in this passage demonstrate God's infinite love, goodness, and power and have secured for Him a reputation which is unique, to say the least. Consistent with the totality of the Scriptures, though, Isaiah makes it clear that our access to all of the blessings which God wills toward us is and always has been conditional. God's people today are every bit as capable of the type and degree of rebellion which characterized the Israelites. To the extent that this occurs, we are polluting ourselves, making God our enemy, causing His Spirit to anguish, and allowing His holy place (the church) to be desecrated.

Finally, we must never forget that while our sins may have inescapable consequences in this life, it need not be so in the life to come. Regardless of how low we sink spiritually, God is still willing to meet us if we will remember His ways, find happiness in obeying His will, and take hold of Him through prayer.

Endnotes

¹ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the American Standard Version.

² Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 504.

³ H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1968), p. 343.

⁴ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1972), 3:483.

⁵ Ibid., p. 485.

⁶ Leupold, p. 345.

⁷ Hailey, p. 507.

⁸ Leupold, p. 347.

⁹ Hailey, p. 507.

¹⁰ Young, p. 490.

¹¹ Hailey, p. 509.

¹² Leupold, p. 352.

¹³ Young, p. 498.

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