

THINK|12: Is Revival Possible Today?

God Is There, and He Cares

Isaiah 64

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*Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your presence—
2^[a] 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!
3 When you did awesome things that we did not look for,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
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.
5 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?^{2[b]}
6 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.
7 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^{2[c]} the hand of our iniquities.*

*8 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.
9 Be not so terribly angry, O LORD,
and remember not iniquity forever.
Behold, please look, we are all your people.
10 Your holy cities have become a wilderness;
Zion has become a wilderness,
Jerusalem a desolation.
11 Our holy and beautiful^{2[d]} house,
where our fathers praised you,
has been burned by fire,
and all our pleasant places have become ruins.
12 Will you restrain yourself at these things, O LORD?
Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?*

Introduction

Pact with God? “God, if you’re out there, just give me a sign!”

We then wait for the thunder and lighting and hope for that rad tan Charlton Heston had when he saw God on Mount Sinai in *The Ten Commandments*.

Or maybe you bargain:

- “If you get me out of this traffic ticket, I’ll start tithing.”
- “If you get me through this illness, I’ll never miss church again.”
- “If you get my child on the straight and narrow, I’ll never ask for anything again.”

What do these prayers reveal about God? About us?

- Sometimes God seems distant, as if he’s forgotten about us and doesn’t care.
- Sometimes God seems angry, as if he’s punishing us.
- Sometimes God seems lazy, as if he doesn’t understand the urgency of our situation.

Distant. Angry. Lazy. Not a pretty picture of God.

In fact, what’s the difference between making a pact with God and a deal with the Devil? If you do this, then I’ll do that.

- Is this really how God acts?

Isaiah 64 tells a much different story about a God who is always there for us, who always cares, even when he feels distant, even when we sin and deserve his wrath.

Also reminds us we’re not center of the universe, that God does all things—what seems confusing, what seems slow, what seems unfair—for his own glory above all else.

- This is the best news at all, because we can trust this God to do the right thing in all circumstances.

This is, in fact, our only hope for help when all seems lost. We can plead with him on this basis—not to get us out of jams but to spread his fame among the nations.

When God seems distant, call him to account and wait. God is there, and he cares.

How do we know? He demonstrates his care through earth-shaking acts, fatherly discipline, and his sure promises.

Main Points

1. God demonstrates his care through earth-shaking acts.

Begin with Isaiah 63:19: "We have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name."

Felt distant, felt the wrath of God.

Isaiah turmoil: prophet served 740 to 700 B.C. Northern kingdom (Israel) fell to Assyria in 722, right in the middle. Much more powerfully historically than south. Probably even outdid the south in idolatry and other sin.

Earth-shaking acts? Using a pagan empire to slaughter and exile the people who bore God's name probably counts.

Isaiah did see the grace of God. Read in chapters 36-37.

All but Jerusalem (southern kingdom) fell to Assyrian army. Officers shouted at the Jewish men defending the walls of the City of David to intimidate them. "None of the other gods saved their people. The LORD can do nothing to stop us."

What followed has been commemorated as one of the greatest moments in the history of Jerusalem. King Hezekiah humbled himself and asked Isaiah to intercede with God.

How did the LORD respond? "Do not be afraid."

- Isn't that what you want to hear when God seems distant?

Earth-shaking acts? Forget those false gods.

- This is the creator and sustainer of the universe!
- The God who is sovereign over the nations!
- The God who makes kingdoms rise and fall!
- He speaks and the mountains tremble!

Here is how you call God to account when he feels distant (Isaiah 37:16-20). Hezekiah prayed:

16 O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. 17 Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. 18 Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, 19 and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. 20 So now, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord.

So how did God respond? He sent an angel of the LORD to kill 185,000 Assyrians, forcing the king Sennacherib to withdraw. While he worshiped one of his false gods, his sons slaughtered him.

That is an earth-shaking act!

Do your prayers reflect the possibility that God can act in this way? That he cares enough to deliver you from your enemies?

When you know God cares for you, and when you know God jealously guards his glory, you can call him to account as Hezekiah did.

- Do you hear, God, what they're saying about me on account of you?
 - For preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, for following your ways rather than the ways of the world.
- Do you hear, God, what they're saying about you?
 - That you're impotent to act, that you don't even exist.
- Do you see, God, these idols they worship?
 - World ruled by money, sex, power.

This is what Isaiah means when he asks God to tear open the heavens. Like Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer: "Let it be on earth, God, as it is in heaven," where you rule with all power, mercy, goodness, and justice.

2. God demonstrates his care through fatherly discipline.

So why doesn't our father act? Why do we feel like orphans, sometimes? Why does it feel like he abandoned us?

Sometimes his timing is not our timing. Memorize Isaiah 64:4:

- 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.

Three of the hardest words in the English language: *wait for him*.

But where else will you turn for deliverance? Isaiah relentlessly attacks idols. We make them with our two hands, then we bow down and worship them.

- It's not the idol that's dumb. It's us.
- We trust in our children to fulfill us, and we rage at them when they disobey.
- We trust in our job to give us purpose, and we kill ourselves working unsustainable hours.
- We trust in our money to secure us, and we shed tears of helplessness as our home values decline, our jobs disappear, and our retirement savings vanish.

Truth is, failure to wait for him will incur nothing but fatherly discipline, because God's loves us.

Where you turn for help when God seems distant and you're tired of waiting, that's where the Lord wants to help you grow.

- Where does your patience give out?
- When do your frustrations arise?
- When is it hardest to trust God?

Examining their collective sin in 64:6-7 led Isaiah, speaking on behalf of Israel, to confess God as Father in 64:8.

Futile to try and work their way back into God's favor. Look at the language:

- v. 6—righteous deeds like a polluted garment (sanitized version); our best isn't good enough; it's soiled, unclean because of sin; mixed motives
- v. 7—no one pursues God; but God pursues us as the prodigal's father!

Prodigal doesn't earn his way back into his father's favor. You can try to bribe man-made idols, the false gods, but you can't coerce the living God. We don't appease him with good behavior. He wants our hearts. And like a good Father, he won't stop until he's captured them.

3. God demonstrates his care through sure promises.

Promise only as good as the one who promises.

Scholars believe Isaiah is recalling God delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt.

- Fire (64:2) = burning bush out of which God spoke to Moses (Ex. 3)
- Tremble at presence = Mount Sinai, which quaked as God made his covenant with Israel (Ex. 19).

How different was their own day!

- Once they had been enslaved by the Egyptians, but now they were enslaved by their sin.

They had seen the cities of Judah destroyed, their neighbors murdered and deported. The prophet Isaiah foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem, including the temple, the place where the LORD himself dwelled (64:10-11).

So how do we know God is there, and he cares? Sure didn't look that way in Isaiah's day.

Restoring our relationship with God requires (a) us to remember one thing, and (b) God to forget another.

Isaiah 64:5 says, "You meet him who joyfully works righteousness," explained in the next part of the verse as "those who remember God in his ways."

- First, we must remember God's ways. Isaiah promises in chapters 52 and 53 a servant who would suffer on our behalf. Though he had done nothing wrong, he would accept the punishment we deserve. More than 700 years after Isaiah's death that servant endured death on a Jerusalem cross. We remember his death until he comes again every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper by sharing bread and the cup.
- Second, we read in Isaiah 64:9 that a relationship with God requires him to forget something: our iniquity, our guilt. Why does he choose not to remember? Isaiah 53:5 says, "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed."

When God seems distant, remember what Jesus has done for you. Remember the price of your peace. This is why you can trust his beautiful promises. This is why you no matter what you suffer, you can trust that God will never abandon you, because if you're a Christian and you've remembered his ways, he will remember to care for you. Along with Jesus' triumphant resurrection, this is God's definitive display of his glory to the nations.

Promises of Isaiah 65 belong to you: new heavens and new earth with no weeping, no distress, where the wolf and the lamb graze together.

Conclusion

Holding God to account may seem strange. Isn't it presumptuous?

Yes, if do what everyone else does: hold him to our standards and treat him like a divine butler to serve our every whim.

Jesus modeled prayer when he said in Gethsemene, "Not my will, Father, but yours be done."

God seems distant from us for at least three reasons:

- ***Our sin.*** Remember the "polluted garment" of Isaiah 64:6. God may be disciplining us, warning us against further disobedience.
- ***Our rebellion.*** We serve ourselves, our idols, rather than the one true God. We want it to be in heaven as our paradise on earth. Instead, pray:
 - 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 (Isaiah 64:8).
 - Mold me as you want, for the glory of your name!
- ***Our unforeseen good.*** Great theologian Garth Brooks once thanked God for unanswered prayers. Can you imagine how horrible your life would be if God answered every prayer you offered?

He does not promise to save us from hardship in this life. To save us from pain. To save us from ever having to say we're sorry.

He promises us something beyond our imagination: that he will conform us to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29). To see God face to face. To know God in such a way that he never feels distant again. To never doubt that he is there for us, and he cares.

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