

Introduction

People say that “hindsight is ‘twenty twenty’”. In the moment it can be hard to know what to do. But, after things have taken place, it’s much easier to see what worked or what didn’t. This is why people who never actually do anything, can be so ready to criticize the actions of others. In the sports world this is known as being a “Monday morning quarterback”. It’s easy for guys standing in the break room to explain what the quarterback should have done. Of course they don’t have 300 pound defensive linemen chasing them!

The opening verses of our passage this morning are an exercise in hindsight. Even though Isaiah lived many years before the Babylonians came and conquered Jerusalem and took the people of Judah off to exile, God revealed to Him what was going to happen. As a prophet Isaiah knew not only what was going to happen but he also knew what could’ve happened instead so that disaster would have been avoided.

In [Isaiah 64](#) it is as though Isaiah has been transported to the future, Jerusalem has fallen and the Temple has been destroyed. God’s people are in Babylonian exile. Isaiah sees all this and writes a prayer of longing about what has taken place. In this prayer God provides His people a framework for how they should respond to God’s own judgement after they have been taken into Babylon.

This should encourage us, because it teaches us that God provides for His people in every situation they find themselves in.

I want to draw three main things out of these verses this morning:

1. Only God can make things right (vv. 1-3).
2. God’s holiness is a problem for a sinful people (vv. 4-7)
3. God’s grace is the solution for a sinful people (vv. 8-9)

Only God Can Make Things Right (vv. 1-3)

Verse 1 begins by stating, “Oh that you *would* rend the heavens and come down,” but it is in the past tense. It would be better to read the first line as “Oh that you had rent the heavens and come down,”

Isaiah laments the fact that God *did not* rend the heavens and come down and stop the Babylonians from destroying Jerusalem and the Temple.

The prophet's words bring to mind the account of God descending on Mount Sinai in [Exodus 19](#) when there were *"thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast...[and] Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire...and the whole mountain trembled greatly."*

Had God visited His people *again* like He did at Sinai, He would have defeated their enemies. They would have caught fire like brushwood before God's presence and ***"the nations [would have] trembled at [God's] presence."***

And Isaiah has reason to wish that something like this would have happened. In [Isaiah 31:4](#) the prophet speaks about the threat of Assyria. Assyria was like a lion, not afraid of any man, *"so the Lord of hosts will come down to fight on Mount Zion."*

God did *rend the heavens* against the Assyrians. But why didn't God save His people from the Babylonians?

Isaiah's words concern events that happened to over 2,500 years ago, but they should resonate with you. Each one of you can look back on your lives and do the same thing that Isaiah does here. You could probably look back over the last week and do this.

"God, had only you stepped in, everything would have turned out alright! Had only you intervened! Had only you 'rent the heavens and come down' then I would have been delivered through the trial."

It was true in Isaiah's day and it is true in our day. What every individual, family, church, and nation needs is for God to show up and make things right.

Yes, we can all look to our own lives and think of various practical measures we could do to improve them. Better parenting techniques, approaches to finances, and the *"Seven Habits of Highly Effective People"* can all be taken. But at the end of the day, your problems and the world's problems need God. We need His power to intervene.

But there's a catch...which leads us into our next section...

God's Holiness is a Problem for Us (vv.4-7)

If the opening verses ask the question, "God why didn't you intervene?", these verses ask a very different question, "God, why would you intervene for a people like this?"

Isaiah knows that God's holy presence is like an all consuming fire. It burns up brushwood and brings lukewarm waters to a boil. The Babylonians would certainly be no match for

God's presence and power. But God's presence is a threat to all unholiness, including that of God's people.

Isaiah begins this section by proclaiming the power and uniqueness of God. "**No one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you.**" The gods of the nations are mere imitations of YHWH. He alone is God Almighty.

Isaiah states that it is the fact that God "**acts for those who wait for him.**" that sets YHWH apart. It is the fact that God brings salvation for His people that He is the only true God.

And while this would seem to be encouraging news, Isaiah begins to lay out the conditions under which God will act. Who is it that God brings salvation to? Isaiah tells us. "**You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways.**" ([Isaiah 64:5](#)).

God brings salvation, but He does so to those who joyfully work righteousness and remember God in their ways. For Isaiah, this is not good news. This does *not* describe his own generation or the one that would live after the exile in Babylon. When Isaiah himself was confronted with holiness of God in [Isaiah 6](#) he was driven to confession saying, "*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*" ([Is. 6:5](#))

This is why verse 5 of [Isaiah 64](#) continues by stating, "**Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?**" Rather than God's righteous anger leading His people to repentance, they responded with sin. And they have been in their sin a long time. The question of these verses is an honest question: "**shall we be saved?**"

Isaiah doubles down at this point. He doesn't let up but he drills down deeper. Isaiah offers a bleak and penetrating diagnosis of the sin of the people. Isaiah says, "**We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.**"

Isaiah echoes Leviticus and the laws clean and unclean. If a person was diagnosed with leprosy they were to go outside the camp and if anyone were to come near them they were to shout out "Unclean! Unclean!" lest they spread their uncleanness to others ([Lev. 13:45](#)). The man or woman would touch a garment that was contaminated by a bodily discharge would also become unclean. Being unclean meant that you were *unfit to be in God's presence* until He made you clean again.

For Isaiah, "sin is not a matter of behavioral dysfunction, but an offence that contaminates and destroys the human spirit." (Oswalt)

Isaiah continues in verse 6 by stating, “**We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.**” The soul ensnared in sin is like a dead leaf, unable to choose its course, pushed to and fro by the slightest breeze of folly.

Verse 7 concludes the diagnosis, “**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 the hand of our iniquities.**”

The only hope for man in his sinfulness is to “**call upon God’s name**”. But men who are ensnared in their sin hate God and refuse His help. The sinner is like a man sleepwalking through life, unable to **rouse himself that he might take hold of God**. As [Romans 1](#) shows, the truest sign of God’s judgement is when He gives sinners over to their sin. God hides His face and lets the sinner “**melt in the hand of his iniquities.**”

Isaiah’s words are stark. But you need to be reminded of them. You don’t sin because you’re tired. You don’t sin because you had a bad week. You don’t sin because of the way your parents raised you. You sin because you think it’s okay to offend God’s holiness. If God is gracious to you, He will reveal His holiness to you and you will respond like Isaiah by saying, “Woe is me!”

God’s Grace is the Solution(vv. 8-9)

Isaiah makes it clear, God’s holiness is a problem for everyone, not just the Babylonians. God’s people have fallen under God’s judgement. But judgement never has the last word in Isaiah’s prophecy or in the Bible as a whole.

In verses 8-9, Isaiah offers the solution, **the grace and mercy of God**.

After the bleak words of verses 4-7, Isaiah moves on to hope, “**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. Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people.**”

Isaiah appeals to the covenant relationship that the people have God.

Isaiah reminds God that He is Father to His people. He created His people and He loves with a divine love.

Isaiah reminds God that He is the potter and His people are the clay. God is sovereign. He can reshape and remold the clay once again into something beautiful.

Isaiah reminds God that He is the craftsman. His people are the “work of His hand”. The Divine Workman works on His people with care and attention.

Isaiah asks God not bring the full force of His judgement on the people and to not remember their iniquity forever. Isaiah recalls what Asaph writes in [Psalm 79:8](#) *“Do not remember against us our former iniquities; let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low.”* Isaiah also recalls the words of David in [Psalm 103:12](#) *“as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.”* and also the words of the psalmist in [Psalm 130:3–4](#) *“If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.”*

The true mark of being abandoned by God is an unwillingness to call out for God’s mercy. Isaiah’s words stand as a memorial to all God’s people. No matter where you are and how low your sin has brought you. You can cry out to God. Because with Him there is mercy. As Peter says, *“Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”* ([1 Pet. 2:24](#))

God is merciful and He comes to His people with salvation. Meditate on these things this Advent season.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!