

Isaiah 63:7 – 64:12 The Prayer of God's Watchman

Alec Motyer, in his excellent commentary on Isaiah says this: *“Isaiah is characterized by a wonderful perception of the future, yet every time we are brought to the point where all seems to be fulfilled we meet a ‘not yet’”*. For example, in cp. 12 God's people sing a song of joy saying, **“Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the holy One of Israel.”** But then, in cp. 13-27 we are brought back to reality with the here and now as we read oracle after oracle of judgment. In cp. 55 we seek the great work of the Servant as completed. But then in cp. 56:1, again, we look to the future: **“Thus says the Lord: Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come and my righteousness be revealed.”** Two weeks ago we saw the great wrath of God's anointed Conqueror who has overthrown EVERY foe as God's redeeming is fully done. Then, we move to our passage today and find a sinful people still looking forward to the consummation of all things, praying and confessing and pleading with God as they wait for the new heavens and the new earth. This is us! We live between the already and not yet. In 62:6-7, we see that one of the tasks of the Anointed One was to post watchmen who would **“never be silent”** and take no rest until **“He establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth.”** Today, in Christ, we are his watchmen. Do you remember the Garden of Gethsemane? Jesus tells his disciples to “watch” and “pray.” As we “watch” we pray. And God uses our prayers as means to bring about his plan. Therefore, we need this passage today to guide us and teach us how we should pray! From this text I will share 5 truths.

1. As God's watchmen, we begin our prayers with praise. Look at vv. 7-9: **“I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, ‘Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely.’ And he became their Savior. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”**

Isaiah's listeners and readers would have immediately understood the context. He is remembering the Exodus as God miraculously brought them out of slavery from Egypt. In Exod. 2:23-25 we read: **“During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.”**

In this context he praises God for WHO HE is and ALL that HE has done. He begins with “steadfast love” (2x in v. 7). Our English translation only begins to capture its meaning. This word in Hebrew is also translated “loving kindness.” As I studied, I learned that the meaning of this word is not merely “love,” but love demonstrated in loyalty. This is why, when the watchman praises God, He remembers his acts; for in these acts, we know what love is. As creatures, we only know who God is by what he does. We know he is powerful because of creation. We know of his love because of how he works (in spite of our sins, in spite of our

ability to save ourselves) to save us and rescue us from slavery. At the end of the day, how does a wife know she is loved. Is it because her husband says so? Or, is it because of evidence?

Look at the “abundant” evidence in our text. We see his goodness, his compassion, his pity, his redemption, his salvation, his sovereign election to choose a people, his special presence. In all of these things, there is an emphasis on God’s special relationship with his people; a father meeting the needs of his children. And we know how these needs are met! **“For God so loved the world . . .”** (John 3:16). As Christians today, all the loving kindness of God, all that is “steadfast,” all that is “loyally demonstrated” is found in the giving of the Son. When we pray in Jesus’ name, we begin with praise for WHO God is and WHAT He has done for us!

Before moving on, I must say something about v. 9: **“In their affliction he was afflicted,”** and the **“angel of his presence saved them.”** First of all, the Hebrew translation is very difficult. For we know that God as Spirit cannot be afflicted as we are. He cannot suffer as we do. But, when we couple this phrase with the **“angel of God’s presence,”** we have a beautiful picture of the suffering servant of Isaiah. Though God was with them in their suffering in Egypt and in the Desert, we see the ultimate fulfillment in the cross of Christ, who is the **“angel of God’s presence.”**

2. The Watchman Confesses sin. Here, in the midst of praise and remembering the acts of God in his life and the life of God’s people, he sees his sin; he knows what he is like. In these verses we see a good definition of sin and the effects of sin on our lives. Look at 63:10: **“But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself sought against them.”** First, we see that sin is against the holiness of God. God is holy; His standard is holiness. And when we are not holy we become his enemy. And instead of favor, God Himself seeks us out in justice, righteousness, judgment, and wrath.

Look also at 64:5-7: **“Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?”** As the watchman consider his sin, he wonders how can he be saved. For in v. 6 he says, **“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”** This means that all we try to do to save ourselves will not work. And he continues, **“We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”** And then in v. 7 we see the truth of the fall and total depravity. He says, **“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.”** As sinners, we live and we die, and in the end, we are taken away from the “presence” he mentions in v. 9.

The application is that the one who prays ALWAYS feels the weight of his sin, knows his sin is against a holy God. BUT, He also knows the steadfast love of God. Throughout the prayer, he knows he has received undeserved, unmerited, mercy and grace motivated by the love God. (John 3:16). Is this your experience? If you are a Christian, it is! And you know what I am talking about. This is heart of repentance the Holy Spirit produces. And this is evident in our prayers.

(It is also interesting that in this passage, we see God the Father, God the Holy Spirit, and . . . God the Son, as seen in the Angel of God's Presence.)

3. The Watchman knows God will answer because of past faithfulness. Future grace is always based upon the past works of God. If he did it then . . . He will do it again. For He has promised to do so. Look at 63:11-14: **“Then he remembered the days of old, of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put in the midst of them his Holy Spirit, who caused his glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, who led them through the depths? Like a horse in the desert, they did not stumble. Like livestock that go down into the valley, the Spirit of the LORD gave them rest. So you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name.”**

Think about a job interview. When an employer brings a possible employee into an interview, what do they want to know? They want to know about your past experience, your previous job, etc. They want to know were you loyal, dependable, faithful, etc. Why? So they can decide whether to hire you or not. We don't give God an interview. But, in this life, as we watch and pray and wait for God to fulfill all his promises, we have great HOPE because of the faithfulness of God in the past. Is there a single promise God has failed to deliver on in his Word in his time? NO!

In Ps. 77 we see a troubled man, one who cannot sleep. In vv. 4-9 he says, **“You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.”** Then he says, **“I consider the days of old, the years long ago. I said, Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart. Then my spirit made a diligent search: Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?”** Then, as he contemplates these things he says in v. 10: **“Then I said, ‘I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.’”** And in 11 ff. **“I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all our work and meditate on your mighty deeds . . .”**

Brothers and sisters, God is faithful. And in our prayers, we must remember his ways, his great acts of faithfulness in the past! And as Israel remembered the Exodus from Egypt, what do we remember. Well, we also remember the great acts of God in the OT. However, we have been delivered from a greater foe, a more important Exodus: OUR DELIVERANCE FROM THE SLAVERY OF SIN! This is why we eventually remember the greatest demonstration of God's faithfulness in the Gospel of Christ, especially the cross, the place where God's faithfulness is displayed the greatest!

4. The Watchman remembers the discipline of God. It seems to me in vv. 15-19 that Isaiah is wondering how God's people can sin so much and yet, God still save them? He says, **“Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me.”** And then in v. 17 he says, **“O Lord, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts, so that we fear you not?”** And then in vv. 18-19 he says, **“You holy people held possession for a little while; our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. We**

have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name.” I believe these verses look forward to Babylonian captivity as we see God’s judgment upon physical Israel. But in the end, God does not utterly forsake them. This is also a time of discipline; for God will again bring them back to their land and bless them again. Look at v. 16. The watchman appeals to God as “Father:” **“For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.”**

V. 17 is striking: **“Why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not.”** This is a great mystery! Nonetheless it is true! Here we have a nation in which God is sovereignly hardening their hearts. Yet, we have a watchman in the midst of it all who has great faith. We see this with the Apostle Paul who seems to have Isaiah in mind. In Rom. 11:25, speaking of what is happening today, he says, **“Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”** I do not understand this great mystery! But it seems to me that the watchman, the one who is interceding knows the hearts of sinful men and women; understanding that our hearts naturally stray from God’s ways and become hardened in sin unless God intervenes with his sovereign grace (as we will see in 64). And if God fails to intervene, hardening is inevitable, though we are completely to blame for it.

I think for us today as New Covenant Christians, we must remember judgment for our sins has come at the cross of Christ. **“For there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Rom. 8:1). Yet, he still disciplines those he loves. Heb. 12:6 says, **“For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”** And He will keep us safe in this age and the age to come. HE is the sovereign God of this world. And, He is the Father of his people.

5. The Watchman prays for God to act. This truth simply follows the previous one. Our prayers are means to an end. God answers the prayers of his people. And the specific prayer in Is. 64 is for God to act. Look at vv. 1-5: **“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— 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! When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. 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. 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.”** Here again, the watchman remembers how God saved Israel in the past and appeals for him to do it again.

And then in vv. 8-12: **“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. Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our**

pleasant places have become ruins. Will you restrain yourself at these things, O LORD? Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?"

In this context, Isaiah looks forward to a time when Jerusalem will be completely destroyed and the people carried away to Babylon. And he knows they get what they deserve; the judgment of God will come. Yet, he prays, Lord, rend the heavens and work. Do not keep silent! And as we look back, we see a fulfillment of this request as he works mightily in the heart of King Cyrus to bring them back to Jerusalem to rebuild their walls and the temple. However, we know God answers the watchman's prayer most fully in the person and work of his Son. The word "to rend" (v. 1) means to literally "tear open the heavens." This is not the sky, but the place where God dwells (2 Cor. 12:2).

In Mark 10:1 we see the same word at the baptism of Jesus. **"And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."** Here, we see God's answer. But instead of thunder and lightning and mountains quaking, we see the Spirit descending upon him like a dove. Brothers and sisters, God has answered the watchman's prayer to act! The Son of God left heaven to come here . . . that we might be saved! And we see the word again in Matt. 27:51: **"And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split."** This is the cross of Christ. And God does not simply open up the holy of holies in the temple, He opens heaven! Jesus is God's answer. He is the door to the ark. He is the ladder of Jacob's dream. He is the lamb provided in the place of Isaac. He is the root of Jesse. He is Isaiah's stump, a root out of dry ground. Today, God has rent the heavens wide open. And, **"He does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance"** (2 Pet. 3:9).

And today, we wait for the final fulfillment of this prophecy, the 2nd coming of Christ, which everyone will witness. When He will come again, the earth will do more than quake. The first time he came as the savior of the world. The 2nd time, He will come in judgment. And God will fulfill ALL he has said. With this in mind, this is what we pray! Lord Jesus, come! And we wait for God to answer. Also, we continue to pray for God to act in our lives now. In fact, in some mysterious way I do not understand, prayer moves the heart of God to act. And when we pray, He acts.

Before we finish, I simply want to mention two essential truths about the watchman's prayer: 1) The watchman knows God is sovereign over all things. Look at v. 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."** 2) God does all things for his own glory. Look at 63:14: **"So you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name."**

Now, in closing, consider HOW Jesus tells us to pray. It could be right from Isaiah. He says, ***"My Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as forgive those who trespass against us. Let me not into temptation. But deliver me from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever."***