

The Prayer of God's Pious People for Deliverance (Isaiah 64:1-9)

The idea of two or three Isaiahs is a construction of modern liberals. Because prophecies do not happen today, they argue, Isaiah could not have foretold the captivity in Babylon a hundred years before the event, and especially the name of Cyrus, who would carry out God's purpose, capturing Babylon and restoring the Jews to Jerusalem (Isa 44:24-28). So it is often assumed that Isaiah 40-66 was written by someone after the Babylonian captivity.

At the end of Isaiah 63 and at the beginning of Isaiah 64, Isaiah was preparing the pious people of God for their exile. There they would pray to God to remember them, as God had remembered the forced labour of their fathers in Egypt. They would long for another display of His power and grace. They would remind the LORD that the temple that would be destroyed in Jerusalem was His temple (Isa 63:17-18). Although they would confess that they had not been faithful to God, they would acknowledge that God was still their Father and Redeemer (Isa 64:8). Although God had chosen Israel as His special people, those people would confess that it had been a long time since they had been in a proper relationship to Him. They would ask God to take them back to Himself.

Pious Christians today have similar thoughts as they long for Jesus' return. They look back to Jesus' redemption at the cross and see a parallel to it in God's rescue of Israel from slavery and from the angel of death in Egypt. They confess that they must not merely berate rampant wickedness in their society, but also that they have themselves been unfaithful in many ways. They long for God to demonstrate His reconciliation to the world in His Son's death and resurrection by putting all things under Jesus' feet, banishing wickedness, and inaugurating the people of the age to come. They make the words of Isaiah their own as they complain that God seems to act too slowly, and plead with Him to use His power and show His grace: "If only You would tear the heavens apart and come down! If only the mountains might quake at Your presence, as when fire sets dry twigs ablaze, or when fire causes water to boil! Come down to make Your name known to Your enemies, that the nations may tremble in Your presence! When You did awesome things that we were not expecting, You came down, and the mountains quaked at Your presence" (Isa 64:1-3). They too think of the sky as a piece of cloth and asked God to tear it to display His glorious power. The references to fire and boiling water are pictures of God's judgment on prevailing wickedness. When God revealed His Law at Sinai, there were manifestations of fire, darkness, and earthquake, and the people for whom Isaiah wrote would long for such evidences of God's power to rescue them.

Over against strong pressure in modern society to equate the gods of other faiths with the one true God, Christians confess that all people should honour the Son just as they honour the Father (Jn 5:23). All other religions are religions that cannot recite the acts of the true God in the past on behalf of His people. "Since ancient times no one has heard or perceived with his ears, and no eye has seen any God except You. You act on behalf of the one who waits for You" (Isa 64:4). All other religions are religions of works. Their gods have not taken human sin on themselves. Those people do not describe faith as humble reception of undeserved divine grace, because of which they are patiently waiting for their god.

True piety acknowledges sin, and that God is justly angry with sin. Like the people in Isaiah's prophecy, pious people acknowledge, "Look! You have been angry; we have been sinning against Your ways for a long time." "All of us have become like something that is unclean, and all our righteous actions are like a filthy garment. All of us have withered like a leaf and our wrongdoings carry us away like the wind" (Isa 64:5-6). Truly pious people, in beginning with such a confession, do not see themselves as righteous and other people as wicked. They confess their solidarity in sin with all other descendants of Adam. It is not that they think of themselves as above reproach and simply deplore the contempt for God that other people show, with apparent impunity: "There is no one who calls on Your Name, or rouses himself to take hold of You." They admit their own spiritual uncleanness, and that they are as weak as shrivelled leaves. They include their own sluggishness in prayer when they complain that no one calls on the name of the LORD. What they dread most of all is God's turning away from them. "You have hidden Your face from us, and You have made us melt because of our wrongdoing" (Isa 64:7).

However, like a child whom a parent has smacked, and who runs back to the parent for comfort, pious Christians acknowledge that the only escape from God's just anger can come from the same God, who is gracious to them in the obedience of Jesus Christ, His Son. They acknowledge that their remedy has not come by awesome displays of God's naked, glorious power, but in the apparent weakness and foolishness of Christ's crucifixion, in shameful suffering, on their behalf. There is no salvation apart from Jesus' cross. He came to serve lost humanity by giving His life as a ransom for them, and often taught that God is His Father and His people's Father. The references to God as "Father" are comparatively rare in the Old Testament, probably because of wrong pictures of fertility in Baal worship. The Israelites about whom Isaiah wrote in prophecy acknowledge, "Nevertheless, LORD, You are our Father. We are the clay, and You are our Potter. All of us are the work of Your hand" (Isa 64:8). As in our Creeds, the concepts of "Father" and "Creator" are closely connected. God has made us as we are. Besides, the comparison to clay suggests that we are powerless to respond actively or creatively under His forming hands, and undeserving of any relationship of love from Him as the Potter. We cannot blame God for our miserable condition, when we admit that God's hand has shaped us under His corrective discipline. Nevertheless, pious people know that the word "Father" also evokes memories and hopes of His compassion, which goes far beyond a potter's calculating, objective attention to the clay that he is moulding. "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has had compassion on those who fear Him" (Ps 103:13).

Pious people know that they cannot rely on anything in themselves as the basis for an appeal to God. They appeal

to God's promises and to His nature as a God of compassion and love. They remember how God described Himself when He appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, "The LORD, the LORD, the merciful and compassionate God, slow to become angry, abounding in unfailing mercy and truth. He preserves mercy for thousands, and forgives wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin" (Ex 34:6-7). Pious people glory in love that God demonstrated in Christ's death for them, although they were sinful and continue to sin (Rm 5:8).

The central point of the covenants that God made at various times was that He would be their God and they would be His people. The plea of the people who would call to Him from exile, "Indeed, please look! We are all Your people" (Isa 64:9) is one that will be answered finally when God's redeemed see the new heaven and earth, and hear the loud voice from God's throne affirming that the destruction of the earthly temple at Jerusalem has not been God's final word: "Look! The tabernacle of God is among human beings. He will dwell with them, they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes; and there will be no more death. There will not be any more grief, crying, or pain, because the former things have passed away" (Rv 21:3-4).