

Focal Text

Isaiah 64:1–9

Background

Isaiah 63:7—64:12

Main Idea

A genuine celebration of Christmas begins with confessing our need for God.

Question to Explore

With all that we have, do we really need God?

Study Aim

To confess my need for God

Study and Action Emphases

- Affirm the Bible as our authoritative guide for life and ministry
- Share the gospel with all people
- Developing a growing, vibrant faith
- Equip people for servant leadership

LESSON ONE

Confessing Our Need for God

Quick Read

In all of the history of Israel, the people needed God. They did not, however, always recognize their need. Our text relates to a time when the people realized they needed God.



ISAIAH: Proclaiming God's Salvation

Buster Davis was one of our church's custodians. He was a deacon in his church and several years my senior. On an occasion when we were driving around our church campus so that I could show him where I wanted him to place the signs advertising our revival, he said to me: "You know, Reverend, people are a lot meaner today than they were when I was a young man."

I decided to glean some wisdom from my Baptist deacon friend and replied: "Deacon, why do you think that is true?"

I have come to appreciate his response as unusually insightful: "It's because people don't think they need God. They think God needs them. They need God, but God can get along nicely without them."

All of us need God, but all of us do not know that we need God. I would venture to say further, none of us recognize our need for God *all of the time*.

On Sunday, September 9, 2001, the church I was attending had plenty of vacant seats. We as a people felt pretty secure. Our economy was struggling some, but most felt it would turn around by the end of the year. Moreover, unlike the cold-war days when we feared intercontinental ballistic missiles from the Soviets, we now felt safe from our enemies, having two oceans to buffer us from foreign attack.

Then on Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, the attacks on the World Trade Center by terrorists brought these huge buildings to the ground, killing thousands of people. In addition, an attack on the Pentagon killed several hundred more. Moreover, to bring the horrible events right to our local doorsteps, two suspected terrorists were apprehended a couple of days later near the small town where I live.

The stock market plummeted in the following days, threatening our standard of living. Too, suddenly I was aware that our enemies could strike almost anywhere, even in the places where we felt safest.

All at once from everywhere, people appealed for God to bless America. We saw the message on signs, on billboards, and on the rear windows of automobiles. Over the radio and television we heard, around the clock, the words to Irving Berlin's song, "God Bless America."

Sunday, September 16, 2001, appeared to be "High Attendance Day" in many of our churches. People in increased numbers felt the need to get in touch with God. They realized they needed God.

Knowing that we need God is like hunger. Being hungry does not assure that the body's need for nourishment will be met, but it does start a person looking for food.

God's people always needed God. They, however, did not always recognize that need. National crises accompanied by the ministry of God's spokespeople, the prophets, sensitized the community from time to time to their need of God.

Isaiah 64:1–9

- 1 Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
- 2 As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!
- 3 For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
- 4 Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
- 5 You come to the help of those who gladly do right,
who remember your ways.
But when we continued to sin against them,
you were angry.
How then can we be saved?
- 6 All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
- 7 No one calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and made us waste away because of our sins.
- 8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
- 9 Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD;
do not remember our sins forever.
Oh, look upon us, we pray,
for we are all your people.

Historical Background

The historical background for Isaiah 56—66 is Israel in the last half of the sixth century BC. The Babylonian captivity was ended about 538 BC with the decree of Cyrus: “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “The LORD,

God's most powerful coming to date is when God became flesh and lived among us.

the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is

in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:2–3). (See the chart, “Events Related to the Books of Isaiah and Jeremiah,” on page 7 for a summary of events in Judah during this time.)

The people who had gone into captivity in 598 BC and 587 BC returned to Palestine to find that the temple was in shambles. “Our holy and glorious temple, where our fathers praised you, has been burned with fire, and all that we treasured lies in ruins” (Isaiah 64:11).

All of the people of Judah living in Babylon at the time of Cyrus's decree did not return to Jerusalem. People fifty years old and younger had never known any home but Babylon. Those who returned began to rebuild the temple. (See article, “The Temple.”) What they could afford was far

Waiting is not something we moderns do well.

inferior to Solomon's temple, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed in 587 BC. The folk who had been born in Babylon were overjoyed when the foundation was laid and sacrifices could once again be made. But

the “old people,” the ones who could remember Solomon's temple in its splendor, wept (Ezra 3:10–13). To the people who could remember seeing Solomon's temple, this temple of Zerubbabel must have looked like a tool shed, certainly no appropriate house for God.

The people became discouraged and stopped building the temple, contenting themselves with making sacrifices on the foundation. Work was not continued on the temple until the ministry of two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, in 520 BC—two decades since the return. The temple was finished four years later, in 516 BC (Ezra 6:1–15).

The glorious anticipation of the people who returned from Babylon had been shattered on the rocks of the reality of a Jerusalem and Palestine in

ruins. In despair, the Book of Isaiah voices the lament of the remnant community: “Look down from heaven and see from your lofty throne, holy and glorious. Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us. But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name” (Isaiah 63:15–16).

A Sermon/Prayer for Advent (64:1–5b)

Note that in Isaiah 63:15, in our background text, the call is for God to *look down* on the plight of his people in Palestine. Then note that in 64:1 in our focal text, the prophet pleaded for God to *come down*: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!” The prophet was calling for God’s “advent.” The word “advent” means “coming.”

“It’s because people don’t think they need God. They think God needs them.”

Isaiah had in mind a theophany like the ten plagues visited on Egypt or the parting of the waters at the Red Sea. His prayer was for God to come down and overwhelm the foes of God’s people.

Little did Isaiah realize that God’s most powerful *coming down* would be several centuries later. Then God would, without fanfare, *come down* in an obscure place and in a non-threatening presence—a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

Read Isaiah 64:1–5b and think of Isaiah’s prayer and plea for God to *come down*. Then think of how much more glorious and world-changing God’s ultimate answer to the prophet’s prayer was. God’s most powerful *coming* to date is when God became flesh and lived among us. The power of the Second Coming is yet to be revealed.

Our Father

The term “our Father” rolled off our Savior’s tongue as Jesus taught his disciples to pray (Matthew 6:9). It flowed from the Apostle Paul’s pen as he wrote the churches (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Colossians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 2:16; Philemon 3). However, the expression as applied to God is found only three times in all of the Old Testament—twice in Isaiah 63:16 and once in Isaiah 64:8.

ISAIAH: Proclaiming God's Salvation

When the Apostle Paul was thinking about how good God is, he quoted Isaiah 64:4: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). Paul probably quoted it from memory or from the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament.

Waiting seems to be a part of each of God's *coming down* in history: Israel waited more than 200 years for deliverance from Egyptian slavery. They waited 70 years to return from Babylonian captivity. The world

waited 500 years for the ultimate answer to the prayer in Isaiah 64.

Now is the time to realign ourselves with Christ.

Waiting is not something we moderns do well. Isaiah said, “God acts on behalf of those who wait for him” (Isaiah 64:4c).

Waiting on God is an act of submission. To do otherwise than be submissive to God is to demand that God act on our timetable. To demand that God act on our timetable is to be insubordinate.

Preparing for God's Advent (64:5c-7)

What do we do while we are waiting for the advent of God? The answer is, we prepare!

How should we prepare? In Isaiah 64:5c-7, Isaiah tells us that the way to prepare for God's coming is to confess our sin and repent.

When God appeared to Isaiah in the temple in the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah confessed his sin. He said, “Woe to me! I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty’” (6:5).

Confession of sin and repentance is the appropriate way to prepare for any advent of God. This truth is seen in the colors of the candles in an Advent wreath. Three of the candles are purple. Purple is the color of repentance and royalty, both appropriate during Advent.

The words in 64:6 echo an earlier word in the Book of Isaiah: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way . . .” (53:6). They are a forerunner of Paul's words, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Note in Isaiah 64:5: “But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry.” This is the sequence that one would expect. People sin, and

that kindles the righteous anger of God. The New International Version, however, has altered the text to express our expectation. The American Standard Version of 1901 preserves the sequence of the Hebrew: “behold, thou wast wroth, and we sinned” (64:5). When we read the statement in the sequence of the original text, it seems to confuse cause with effect. But upon looking more closely, our text expresses a vital truth: God’s wrath shows itself sometimes through the sinner’s being turned over to greater sinfulness. Paul spoke of God’s wrath in this way in Romans 1:18–32. Sin carries its own punishment, polluting all that it touches and in the end sweeping the sinner away like dead leaves driven by the wind (Isaiah 64:6). There is, therefore, nothing more frightening than to be turned over to our sins: “And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee; for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us by means of our iniquities” (Isaiah 64:7, American Standard Version).

*. . . Suddenly I was aware
that our enemies could
strike almost anywhere,
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At Christmas we celebrate God’s coming as Immanuel—“God with us.” The Almighty One did not come to be with us because he needed to know something about us, but because we needed to know about him and needed to be able to believe he really understood us and what our plight in life was.

*Immanuel, sent from
heaven to be born in a
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wants to come into our lives
and empower us for living.*

In the movie *Lawrence of Arabia*, Peter O’Toole, the actor playing Lawrence, said something to the effect that “No man could lead Arabs except he ate their food, wore their clothes, lived level with them, yet appeared better in himself.” When God became a human being in Jesus Christ, God became like us that we might become like him, as the early Christian leader Irenaeus put it.¹

It is not enough to allow this celebration of God’s coming in Christ to remain encased in the history of the first century. We must make room for the Christ child in our lives. Immanuel, sent from heaven to be born in a stable 2000 years ago, wants to come into our lives and empower us for living. Sin defiles, destroys, and creates a barrier that prevents the advent of God in our lives. Confession of and repentance from sin removes the barrier and makes the Savior’s entrance possible.

The Temple

There were three temples in Israel's history. The first and most magnificent was the temple constructed by Solomon (1 Kings 6:1–38). It took seven years to build. Nebuchadnezzar destroyed this temple in 587 BC after about 375 years of use.

The second temple was the Zerubbabel temple. It was built on the return from Babylonian captivity, which began to occur about 538. Cyrus's appointee for governor, Zerubbabel, oversaw the construction of the temple known by his name. This temple was completed in 516 BC, after four years of actual work. It was in use 500 years—longer than either of the other two temples.

The Zerubbabel temple was superseded by the temple Herod the Great built for the Jews. Herod's temple was begun fifteen years before Jesus was born and was not completely finished until thirty years after Jesus' death. This temple was in use during Jesus' life and ministry. The Romans destroyed it in 70 AD, just a few years after its completion. Today, the Islamic Dome of the Rock stands on the site where each of the three temples stood.

A Final Plea and Surrender (64:8–9)

“Yet, O LORD, you are our Father” (Isaiah 64:8a). The Book of Isaiah refers to God as the Father of his people in a plea for God to remember their relationship and not their sins (see small article, “Our Father”). In addition to confession of and repentance from sin, Isaiah called for submission to God like a lump of clay waits in the potter's hand to become what the potter wills.

Two others in Scripture speak of the relationship of God to his people being analogous to the potter and his clay—Jeremiah in Jeremiah 18:1–6 and Paul in Romans 9:19–21. Both of these Scriptures are in a similar context. The context is that God is seen as sovereign in the area of judgment of sin.

In Isaiah 64:8–9, the people cast themselves on the mercy of God. They called on God to remember not their sins, but their standing as God's people. “Do not be angry

beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people” (64:9).

Any genuine finding of the “Christmas spirit” begins with a desire for God.
