

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?

Teaching Aim

To help class participants confess their need for God

Lesson One

Confessing Our Need for God

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

A sensitive reader of the Book of Isaiah observes two distinct settings in the book. Chapters 1—39 relate to the latter part of the eighth century BC, a time when God’s people faced divine judgment because they had forsaken their covenant obligations. Chapters 40—66 address the nation’s situation about 150 years later. The situation then was that Babylon had conquered Judah, destroyed the temple, and deported many of Jerusalem’s leading citizens to Babylon. Circumstances had not been kind to the Israelites during this period of exile. This latter section can be further subdivided. Chapters 40—55 record messages directed to exiles in Babylon. Chapters 56–66 include prophecies following the exiles’ return in 538 BC but before the completion of the rebuilding of the temple in 515 BC.

Isaiah 40—66 records messages of hope and comfort to the oppressed and disheartened exiles. The exile would not last forever. God would restore the people to Jerusalem. Although God promised they would return, the trip back home did not occur immediately. The people languished in exile for approximately fifty to seventy years. Even the most optimistic spirits sagged during this extended sojourn.

UNIT ONE



Isaiah’s Christmas Story

Judah lost more than its independence, and the people lost more than their freedom when Babylon forced their surrender. They lost confidence in God. While they had faithfully carried out the ritual requirements of worship at the temple, they failed to realize that God desired obedience to the covenant and not merely acts of worship. They believed that God's presence in the temple provided them with strong national defense. They thought that the Lord would never allow foreign armies to overthrow God's people, God's city, and God's temple. God, though, had (at least in the minds of the people) been bested by the Babylonian gods. That God seemed to have been defeated undermined the people's conviction that God could protect them or that God cared for them. A lengthy exile added to their doubt.

Finally the day of return arrived. Many, but not all, of the people returned to Jerusalem. Nothing could have prepared them for what they saw. The city was still a pile of rubble. Living conditions were worse than in Babylon. When God did not alter the circumstances as quickly as they hoped, the struggle to make some sense of the situation arose again. On the one hand, God's promise to restore them generated hope. On the other hand, their situation remained bleak. The people wondered, *Can we trust God's word?* They failed to see that the problem might be within them, that they might be at fault for their condition. They sought to blame someone else—in this case, God.

God sent a prophet to speak to these people who refused to accept personal responsibility for their plight. After a lengthy struggle in their minds, the Israelites acknowledged their sinfulness, confessed their sin, and accepted the possibility that God could now reverse their fortunes.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Longing for Divine Intervention (64:1–4)

64:1–2. Israel—referring specifically to the Southern Kingdom of Judah at this point—could not understand why God seemed so distant and remote. Israel felt like those who had never had a relationship with Yahweh (63:19). Where was the Lord? Why had God failed to respond to their requests for redemption and deliverance? Would Yahweh ever restore the fortunes of the covenant people? Verse 1 in our English translations is actually the final verse of chapter 63 in the Hebrew text. This

shows the close connection between Israel's call for God's action and Israel's feeling that God had abandoned it. The people longed for a sign that God continued to be affected by their plight. Finally, they blurted out their longing for God to intervene in clear, drastic, and unmistakable ways.

One key theme of the Book of Isaiah is that God is the Holy One or the Holy One of Israel. The basic meaning of holiness is *set apart*. A holy God was separated from the people and thus unique. The problem from Judah's perspective in 64:1–2 is that God was *too* separated and thus not involved at all in the nation's affairs.

The prophet had asked God to look down from heaven and behold the plight of the Israelites (63:15). He was seeking a sign of God's presence that would deliver the people from their discouragement and sense of hopelessness. In 64:1, the prophet asked that God would not only look down but come down and intervene. What the prophet desired was a theophany, literally an appearing of God.

Such appearances by God, while not common, certainly have a prominent place in the Old Testament. The most obvious example, and the one that seems to be reflected in these verses, occurred on Mount Sinai when God appeared to the Hebrews (Exodus 19:16–18). Another example of a theophany was God's announcement to Manoah and his wife that they would become parents of Samson (Judges 13:20). Gideon encountered God in similar fashion (Judg. 6:19–24). Isaiah's call in the temple was yet another instance where God appeared in a dramatic manner (Isa. 6:1–13). Israel sought nothing less than a spectacular intrusion of God to reverse its fortunes. *If only* (“O that”) God would act in such a manner, Israel would be encouraged (64:1).

God's place of dwelling is described as in “the heavens” (64:1). The verse pictures some kind of wall separating earth from God's immediate presence. No small act of God would suffice to bring down the partition. The Hebrew verb suggests a violent tearing of the barrier. If God would remove the barrier, the people would know that God cared for them.

Earthquakes are associated also with theophanies. Here the shaking ground would suggest a powerful and majestic God. A mighty God who could cause the earth to shake could certainly deliver the Israelites from their enemies.

Isaiah then mentioned fire as a feature of God's appearance (64:2). Fire would remind the people of God's power and the ability to change things quickly. Farmers use fire to clear land; cooks use it to boil water to prepare

meals. Ancient peoples never took the power and value of fire for granted. Israel was learning not to take the power and presence of God lightly.

God's stunning appearance would certainly impact Israel's enemies as well as other nations. God's overpowering presence would certainly bring the Israelites release from their dire circumstances. In the ancient world, the loss of a nation in war signified that the victor's god was more powerful than the conquered nation's god. A theophany by God would demonstrate that Israel's God was most powerful, and thus the enemies of the nation and of God would fear and tremble. Relief would soon be forthcoming.

64:3–4. Israel longed for God to respond because the people remembered earlier times when God had responded to their need by acting in new and unexpected ways. No other nation had ever witnessed such a God.

Israel remembered that God had always taken the initiative in dealing with them. The people could not forecast when God would intervene. When God acted, God acted in an “awesome” manner, however (64:3). Moses used the same word to describe God's mighty works as he delivered Hebrew slaves from Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:21). David spoke in like manner when he extolled God for promising an eternal dynasty to the king (2 Samuel 7:23).

When reading 64:4, one almost hears the Israelites singing praises to God. No other deity could rival their God. God had revealed himself to the Hebrews. Their enemies had neither heard nor seen Yahweh.

A change in the mood of the people begins to emerge in the last phrase in verse 4, “Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him.” The Israelites had exhibited impatience while demanding that God intercede in their behalf. They demanded quick action from the Lord. When God failed to respond at their insistence, they questioned God's concern for them. But here, one glimpses that the attitude of the people was changing. No longer would they demand that God act now in their behalf. They were beginning to understand that God acts “in behalf of the one who waits for Him.” God might not be to blame for their plight. They might be responsible. We may also see a hint that God acts when God is ready to act and that no outside entity controls God's actions.

Recognizing Personal Responsibility (64:5–7)

64:5. Israel finally admitted its sinfulness and wondered whether God was willing to redeem it because of its sin. Israel's transition from blaming

God for its plight to accepting personal responsibility for its sins was complete. The people recognize that God meets “him who rejoices in doing righteousness.” They began to understand that those who remember God are those who experience God’s presence. To remember denotes more than a mental act. To remember God’s ways is to order one’s life according to God’s covenant with Israel.

Israel remembered that God was angry with them. The phrase, “Behold, You were angry, for we sinned,” has several possible interpretations. One rendering is, “Behold, thou wast angry, and we sinned” (Revised Standard Version). This rendering suggests that God was angry with the people and turned them over to their sin in judgment. (The American Standard Version of 1901 has a similar translation.) The meaning of this rendering is that current sin is the punishment for the earlier sins. Sin itself is destructive. This interpretation resembles Paul’s understanding of God’s judgment on sin and sinners in Romans 1:24, “Therefore, God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.”

Another possible translation is, “thou wast angry and yet we sinned.” In this case the meaning is that the people sinned despite God’s warning against sin. They ignored God’s warning and persisted in their rebellion.

The thrust of the verse is that the people at last recognized they had brought judgment and punishment upon themselves. They had sinned and had persisted in their sin despite repeated warnings. Many of these warnings can be found in the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah. Now the people wondered whether they could be saved (“shall we be saved?”). They asked whether there was still hope for them.

64:6–7. The people acknowledged that their actions were self-destructive. They deserved their punishment. The people, not God, had built the barrier that blocked their access to God. They described themselves as “unclean.” The word usually suggests ceremonial impurity that makes a person or thing totally unfit for association with God or for use in worship. The word highlights the extent of Israel’s sinfulness and its admission of guilt.

Israel admitted that its righteous deeds were “like a filthy garment.” Some objects can never become clean after being defiled and are fit only for destruction. The people described themselves as being so dried up that they withered quickly and were like leaves falling from trees. Such leaves are so flimsy and weightless that the wind carries them away. They

have no substance. The people compared themselves to these insubstantial leaves that are effortlessly carried away.

The people's confession continued. That "no one called on Your name" helps us understand the extent to which the nation had ignored God. People neglected worship and failed to grasp ("take hold of") God. They searched elsewhere for deliverance. What they needed to do was humbly petition God for forgiveness.

God had hidden his face from the people because of their rebellion. God's "face" suggests God's presence. The people had faced alone the struggles caused by their sinfulness. Their plight may have helped break down their resistance to God and influenced them to respond to and accept God on the Lord's terms. Continued adversity may have softened their stubbornness.

Desiring God's Forgiveness (64:8–9)

64:8. The people finally realized that their only hope for salvation resided in God. "But now" introduces the climax of this chapter, the critical point in the prayer. Despite all its sins and rebellion, Judah recognized now that its welfare and salvation depended on the God who had created and birthed it as a nation.

The people affirmed God as Creator by using the image of potter and clay (see also Jeremiah 18:1–12; Isa. 29:16; 30:14; 41:25). The Israelites acknowledged that God could deal with them as God chose. Their only hope rested on their relationship to God as Father and Creator. They comprehended that they must remain open and pliable toward God. They recognized that divine grace alone could end their suffering and affliction.

64:9. The people at last asked for God's forgiveness. They asked God to look beyond his anger and remember that they were his people. They asked God to forget forever their sin. They reminded God that they were God's people and urged God to restore them and renew their relationship with him.

Focusing on the Meaning

I look forward to the Christmas season. For me, it's the most wonderful time of the year. If this Christmas is like previous Christmases, my calendar is already full. My family and I are making travel arrangements to

visit our larger family. Some of us are attending last-minute choir rehearsals, and I am outlining sermons for Advent. Plans are progressing for celebrating Christmas.

We can easily get caught up in the hustle and bustle of the season. God can get pushed out of the season if we are not careful. Isaiah 64 reminds us God can act in unexpected ways. He did so on the first Christmas, sending a baby boy to a couple of modest means who found shelter in a stable. That boy who was born in humble circumstances has had an impact on our world more than any other one person. Let us look now for God to intrude in our lives this Christmas.

We may also discover at Christmas that we are influenced more by a secular approach to Christmas than a sacred one. Isaiah's words to a skeptical people remind us of the importance of our relationship with God. We might discover this Christmas that we need to pay more attention to that relationship than we have been giving it. We may realize that the relationship is cool and distant, not warm and intimate. One way we can prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior is to accept our responsibility for our sinfulness and confess our sins to God.

You may have already completed your wish list for Christmas. You may already know that your stocking will be full of presents and gifts galore. Take another look at that list. It may not be complete. The greatest need we have and the greatest gift that God offers is the promise of a personal relationship with those who seek him. Don't forget that our need for that personal relationship should top our list this Christmas.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Bring a flashlight (without batteries) and batteries (for later use). Pass the flashlight around and allow class members time to turn it on and examine it. Ask, *What does the flashlight need in order to function the way it was intended?* Set the flashlight on a table or in a prominent location for later use.

2. Inquire, *What do we really need to exist?* Allow time for responses. You may want to enlist in advance a class member to survey people in the church hallway, grocery store, or neighborhood to get responses. (Answers may include air, food, water, purpose, relationships, etc.)
3. Comment that today's study focuses on our need for God. All of us need God, but not all of us know that we need God. Further, as the *Study Guide* points out, "None of us recognize our need for God all of the time." Without God, we lack power and usefulness and face a grim future.

Guide Bible Study

4. Enlist a class member to read Isaiah 64:1–5b aloud from the New International Version, the translation printed in the *Study Guide*. Encourage the class to count how many times the words *you* or *your* are used (eleven times). Ask, *What did the prophet ask God to do?* ("come down," 64:1)
5. Prepare and display a poster of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:9. Call attention to Paul's words, noting that Paul used these words when thinking about how good God is. Direct members to examine the last part of Isaiah 64:4. Ask, *How difficult is it to wait on God?* Allow time for discussion, and then ask a participant to read Isaiah 40:31 aloud.
6. Inquire, *What do we do while we wait for God?* After a few responses ask class members to read 64:5c–7 in unison. Comment that these verses help us understand why we need God. Point out that we are sinful and separated from God and that God did not create us to be distant from him, but close.
7. Comment that God reveals himself to his people in various ways, but the real story of God's revelation of himself is the story of Christmas. Read Galatians 4:4 aloud, and note that when things were just right ("the fullness of the time") God answered Isaiah's petition.
8. Before reading Isaiah 64:8–9 aloud, form two listening groups. Ask one group to listen for what the verses suggest about the relationship between God and God's people. Ask the second group to listen

for the things God's people request. Compile responses from each group in a chart similar to the following:

Relationship Between God and God's People	What God's People Ask
God is our Father.	Do not be angry with us beyond measure.
God is the potter; we are the clay.	Do not remember our iniquity.
We are the work of God's hand.	
We are God's people.	

9. Give each class member an unwrapped stick of modeling clay. Ask the class to notice that the clay really serves no useful purpose until it is molded into something. Allow members a few minutes to open the clay and mold it. Point out that as we confess our need for God and ask God to come to us, God will mold our lives as a potter molds clay. Ask class members to ponder this question silently: *What do you need to do about confessing your need for God and allowing God to shape your life?*

Encourage Application

10. Call attention once again to the flashlight. Insert batteries and turn the flashlight on. Comment that the flashlight needs batteries to work. All of us need God's presence to be the people created us to be.
11. Challenge members to realize that we live in a dark world that needs light, and Jesus instructed that his followers are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). Comment that our need for God is not simply for our own feeling of well-being and self-fulfillment. Rather, we need God so we can carry out our task of reaching a world with the good news of Christmas.
12. Close with a prayer of confession (that we need God) and petition (that God will make his presence known).

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Point out that two of the dates in American history that are well-known and will be remembered for all time are the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Both of these days brought tragedy of unknown proportions to a people who previously felt safe and secure against major attack. Ask class members to recall and briefly discuss the events of these two days. Use the following questions to guide further discussion:
 - What do we seem to lose when a national crisis occurs (such as December 7 and September 11)? (sense of security, for one thing)
 - How do we attempt to replace what we lose?
2. Point out that the theme of today's lesson is our need for God. Remind participants that often when tragedy strikes we are reminded that we can find security only in God. State that God's people, Israel, always needed God. National crises accompanied by the ministry of God's prophets sensitized the community from time to time to their need of God.

Guide Bible Study

3. Use the information in the “Historical Background” section in the *Study Guide* to present a brief overview of the circumstances and conditions God's people faced during the time of this Scripture passage.
4. Write the word *Advent* on the board. Read Isaiah 64:1–5b aloud. Refer especially to 64:1, and comment that advent means *coming*. State that God's people needed God's mercy and help. They needed God's presence.
5. Encourage class members to notice the vivid descriptions found in 64:1–5b. List some of these descriptions on the board under the word *Advent*. Such descriptions could include these:

- Mountains quake at God's presence
- Fire kindles the brushwood
- Fire causes water to boil
- Nations tremble at God's presence
- God did awesome things
- God acts in behalf of the one who waits for him

Emphasize the awesome and mighty power that accompanies God's presence.

6. Read Isaiah 64:5c–7 aloud while the class listens for the people's problem. Inquire, *Why was God angry?* Comment that while we are waiting for God to come we should use that time to confess and repent. Compare these verses to Isaiah's worship encounter in Isaiah 6:1–8 and ask, *What did God do after Isaiah repented?* (took away his sin)
7. Invite members to read Isaiah 64:8–9 silently. Enlist a class member to read the passage about the potter and the clay found in Jeremiah 18:1–6. Note that the same image is used in each passage. Describe what Isaiah 64:8–9 teaches about these two themes: (a) The people's relationship to God; (b) What the people God asked God to do. Use information on these two themes in the chart in step 8 of "Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities."

Encourage Application

8. Invite class members to respond to this statement: *Without God we are helpless.* Comment that sometimes we seek to meet our own needs, without regard for God. Ask, *What are some substitutes we allow to take the place of God?* (Responses may include family, friends, possessions/material things, money, and many others.)
9. Note that all of us at some time are guilty of thinking that if we just had more money our lives would be okay. Remind class members that our real need is not money. Share with class members the following things someone has suggested that money can and cannot buy:
 - A bed but not sleep,
 - Books but not brains,
 - Food but not an appetite,

A house but not a home,
Medicine but not health,
Luxuries but not culture,
Amusements but not happiness,
Flattery but not respect.

10. Challenge participants to be aware of their need for God this week. Point out that at Christmas we celebrate the goodness of God's gift of himself to us. He gave us his Son, and we need him desperately! Encourage members to reflect on and confess their need for God as you lead them in prayer.