

CHAPTER 64

This chapter goes on with that pathetic pleading prayer which the church offered up to God in the latter part of the foregoing chapter. They had argued from their covenant-relation to God and his interest and concern in them; now here,

I. They pray that God would appear in some remarkable and surprising manner for them against his and their enemies (v. 1, 2).

II. They plead what God had formerly done, and was always ready to do, for his people (v. 3-5).

III. They confess themselves to be sinful and unworthy of God's favour, and that they had deserved the judgments they were now under (v. 6, 7).

IV. They refer themselves to the mercy of God as a Father, and submit themselves to his sovereignty (v. 8).

V. They represent the very deplorable condition they were in, and earnestly pray for the pardon of sin and the turning away of God's anger (v. 9-12). And this was not only intended for the use of the captive Jews, but may serve for direction to the church in other times of distress, what to ask of God and how to plead with him. Are God's people at any time in affliction, in great affliction? Let them pray, let them thus pray.

<264>ISAIAH 64:1-5

PRAYER FOR THE DIVINE PRESENCE

Here,

I. The petition is that God would appear wonderfully for them now, v. 1, 2. Their case was represented in the close of the foregoing chapter as very sad and very hard, and in this case it was time to cry, "Help, Lord; O that God would manifest his zeal and his strength!" They had prayed (<265>Isaiah 63:15) that God would *look down from heaven*; here they pray that he would come down to deliver them, as he had said, <118>Exodus 3:8.

1. They desire that God would in his providence manifest himself both to them and for them. When God works some extraordinary deliverance for his people he is said to *shine forth*, to show himself strong; so, here, they pray that he would *rend the heavens and come down*, as when he delivered David he is said to *bow the heavens, and come down* (~~EXB~~ Psalm 18:9), to display his power, and justice, and goodness, in an extraordinary manner, so that all may take notice of them and acknowledge them. This God's people desire and pray for, that they themselves having the satisfaction of seeing him though his way be in the sea, others may be made to see him when his way is in the clouds. This is applicable to the second coming of Christ, when *the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout. Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.*

2. They desire that he would vanquish all opposition and that it might be made to give way before him: *That the mountains might flow down at thy presence*, that the fire of thy wrath may burn so fiercely against thy enemies as even to dissolve the rockiest mountains and melt them down before it, as metal in the furnace, which is made liquid and cast into what shape the operator pleases; so *the melting fire burns*, v. 2. Let things be put into a ferment, in order to a glorious revolution in favour of the church: *As the fire causes the waters to boil*. There is an allusion here, some think, to the *volcanoes*, or burning mountains, which sometimes send forth such sulphureous streams as make the adjacent rivers and seas to boil, which, perhaps, are left as sensible intimations of the power of God's wrath and warning-pieces of the final conflagration.

3. They desire that this may tend very much to the glory and honour of God, *may make his name known*, not only to his friends (they knew it before, and trusted in his power), but to his adversaries likewise, that they may know it and *tremble at his presence*, and may say, with the men of Bethshemesh, *Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God? Who knows the power of his anger?* Note, Sooner or later God will make his name known to his adversaries and force those to *tremble at his presence* that would not come and worship in his presence. God's name, if it be not a stronghold for us, into which we may run and be safe, will be a stronghold against us, out of the reach of which we cannot run and be safe. The day will come when nations shall be made to tremble at the presence of God, though they be ever so numerous and strong.

II. The plea is that God had appeared wonderfully for his people formerly; and *thou hast*, therefore *thou wilt*, is good arguing at the throne of grace, ^{<3017>}Psalm 10:17.

1. They plead what he had done for his people Israel in particular when he brought them out of Egypt, v. 3. He then *did terrible things* in the plagues of Egypt, *which they looked not for*; they despaired of deliverance, so far were they from any thought of being delivered with such a high hand and outstretched arm. Then he came down upon Mount Sinai in such terror as made that and the adjacent mountains to *flow down at his presence*, to *skip like rams* (^{<1104>}Psalm 114:4), to tremble, so that they were scattered and the perpetual hills were made to bow, ^{<3016>}Habakkuk 3:6. In the many great salvations God wrought for that people he did *terrible things which they looked not for*, made great men, that seemed as stately and strong as mountains, to fall before him, and great opposition to give way. See ^{<1014>}Judges 5:4, 5; ^{<1017>}Psalm 68:7, 8. Some refer this to the defeat of Sennacherib's powerful army, which was as surprising an instance of the divine power as the melting down of rocks and mountains would be.

2. They plead what God had been used to do, and had declared his gracious purpose to do, for his people in general. The provision he has made for the safety and happiness of his people, even of all those that seek him, and serve him, and trust in him, is very rich and very ready, so that they need not fear being either disappointed of it, for it is sure, or disappointed in it, for it is sufficient.

(1.) It is very rich, v. 4. Men have not heard nor seen what God has *prepared for those that wait for him*. Observe the character of God's people; they are such as wait for him in the way of duty, wait for the salvation he has promised and designed for them. Observe where the happiness of this people is bound up; it is *what God has prepared for them*, what he has designed for them in his counsel and is in his providence and grace preparing for them and preparing them for, what he has *done* or *will* do, so it may be read. Some of the Jewish doctors have understood this of the blessings reserved for the days of the Messiah, and to them the apostle applies these words; and others extend them to the glories of the world to come. It is all that goodness which God has *laid up for those that fear him, and wrought for those that trust in him*, ^{<1019>}Psalm 31:19. Of this it is here said that *since the beginning of the world*, in the most prying and inquisitive ages of it, men have not, either by hearing or

seeing, the two learning senses, come to the full knowledge of it. None have seen, nor heard, nor can understand, but God himself, what the provision is that is made for the present and future felicity of holy souls. For,

[1.] Much of it was concealed in former ages; they knew it not, because the *unsearchable riches of Christ were hidden in God, were hidden from the wise and prudent*; but in latter ages they were revealed by the gospel; so the apostle applies this (⁴⁰⁹1 Corinthians 2:9), for it follows (v. 10), *But God has revealed them unto us by his Spirit*; compare ⁵¹⁰⁵Romans 16:25, 26, with ⁴⁰⁰Ephesians 3:9. That which men had not heard *since the beginning of the world* they should hear before the end of it, and at the end of it should see, when the veil shall be rent to introduce the glory that is yet to be revealed. God himself knew what he had in store for believers, but none knew besides him.

[2.] It cannot be fully comprehended by the human understanding, no, not when it is revealed; it is spiritual, and refined from those ideas which our minds are most apt to receive in this world of sense; it is very great, and will far outdo the utmost of our expectations. Even the present peace of believers, much more their future bliss, is such as surpasses all conception and expression, ⁵⁰⁰⁷Philippians 4:7. None can comprehend it but God himself, whose understanding is infinite. Some give another reading of these words, referring the transcendency, not so much to the work itself as to the author of it: *Neither has the eye seen a god besides thee, who doth so (or has done or can do so) for him that waits for him*. We must infer from God's works of wonderous grace, as well as from his works of wondrous power, from the kind things, as well as from the great things, he does, that there is *no god like him*, nor any among the sons of the mighty to be compared with him.

(2.) It is very ready (v. 5): *“Thou meetest him that rejoices and works righteousness, meetest him with that good which thou hast prepared for him (v. 4), and dost not forget those that remember thee in thy ways.”* See here what communion there is between a gracious God and a gracious soul.

[1.] What God expects from us, in order to our having communion with him. *First*, We must make conscience of doing our duty in every thing, we must *work righteousness*, must do that which is good and which the Lord our God requires of us, and must do it well. *Secondly*, We must be

cheerful in doing our duty, we must *rejoice and work righteousness*, must delight ourselves in God and in his law, must be cheerful in his service and sing at our work. God loves a cheerful giver, a cheerful worshipper. We must *serve the Lord with gladness*. *Thirdly*, We must conform ourselves to all the methods of his providence concerning us and be suitably affected with them, must *remember him in his ways*, in all the ways wherein he walks, whether he walks towards us or walks contrary to us. We must mind him and make mention of him with thanksgiving when his ways are ways of mercy (*in a day of prosperity be joyful*), with patience and submission when he contends with us. *In the way of thy judgments we have waited for thee; for in a day of adversity we must consider*.

[2.] We are here told what we may expect from God if we thus attend him in the way of duty: *Thou meetest him*. This intimates the friendship, fellowship, and familiarity to which God admits his people; he meets them, to converse with them, to manifest himself to them, and to receive their addresses, ^{<1714>}Exodus 20:24; 29:43. It likewise intimates his freeness and forwardness in doing them good; he will *anticipate them with the blessings of his goodness*, will *rejoice to do good* to those that *rejoice in working righteousness*, and wait to be gracious to those that *wait for him*. He meets his penitent people with a pardon, as the father of the prodigal met his returning son, ^{<1750>}Luke 15:20. He meets his praying people with an answer of peace, while they are yet speaking, ^{<2162>}Isaiah 65:24.

3. They plead the unchangeableness of God's favour and the stability of his promise, notwithstanding the sins of his people and his displeasure against them for their sins: "*Behold, thou hast many a time been wroth with us because we have sinned, and we have been under the tokens of thy wrath; but in those, those ways of thine, the ways of mercy in which we have remembered thee, in those is continuance,*" or "*in those thou art ever*" (his mercy endures for ever), "*and therefore we shall at last be saved, though thou art wroth, and we have sinned.*" This agrees with the tenour of God's covenant, that, if we *forsake the law*, he will *visit our transgression with a rod*, but *his lovingkindness he will not utterly take away, his covenant he will not break* (^{<3883>}Psalm 89:30, etc.), and by this his people have been many a time saved from ruin when they were just upon the brink of it; see ^{<1783>}Psalm 78:38. And by this continuance of the covenant we hope to be saved, for its being an everlasting covenant is all our salvation. Though God has been angry with us for our sins, and justly, yet

his anger has endured but for a moment and has been soon over; but *in his favour is life*, because *in it is continuance*; in the ways of his favour he proceeds and perseveres, and on that we depend for our salvation, see ²⁵⁰Isaiah 54:7, 8. It is well for us that our hopes of salvation are built not upon any merit or sufficiency of our own (for in that there is no certainty, even Adam in innocency did not abide), but upon God's mercies and promises, for *in those*, we are sure, *is continuance*.

²⁵⁰ISAIAH 64:6-12

HUMBLE CONFESSION

As we have the Lamentations of Jeremiah, so here we have the Lamentations of Isaiah; the subject of both is the same — the destruction of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans and the sin of Israel that brought that destruction — only with this difference, Isaiah sees it at a distance and laments it by the Spirit of prophecy, Jeremiah saw it accomplished. In these verses,

I. The people of God in their affliction confess and bewail their sins, thereby justifying God in their afflictions, owning themselves unworthy of his mercy, and thereby both improving their troubles and preparing for deliverance. Now that they were under divine rebukes for sin they had nothing to trust to but the mere mercy of God and the continuance of that; for among themselves there is none to help, none to uphold, none to stand in the gap and make intercession, for they are all polluted with sin and therefore unworthy to intercede, all careless and remiss in duty and therefore unable and unfit to intercede.

1. There was a general corruption of manners among them (v. 6): *We are all as an unclean thing*, or as an unclean *person*, as one overspread with a leprosy, who was to be shut out of the camp. The body of the people were like one under a ceremonial pollution, who was not admitted into the courts of the tabernacle, or like one labouring under some loathsome disease, from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot *nothing but wounds and bruises*, ²⁰⁰Isaiah 1:6. We have all by sin become not only obnoxious to God's justice, but odious to his holiness; for sin is that *abominable thing which the Lord hates*, and cannot endure to look upon. *Even all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags*.

(1.) “The best of our persons are so; we are all so corrupt and polluted that even those among us who pass for righteous men, in comparison with what our fathers were who *rejoiced and wrought righteousness* (v. 5), are but as filthy rags, fit to be cast to the dunghill. *The best of them is as a brier.*”

(2.) “The best of our performances are so. There is not only a general corruption of manners, but a general defection in the exercises of devotion too; those which pass for the *sacrifices of righteousness*, when they come to be enquired into, are *the torn, and the lame, and the sick*, and therefore are provoking to God, as nauseous as filthy rags.” Our performances, though they be ever so plausible, if we depend upon them as our righteousness and think to merit by them at God's hand, are as filthy rags — rags, and will not cover us — filthy rags, and will but defile us. True penitents cast away their idols as filthy rags (²³¹²Isaiah 30:22), odious in their sight; here they acknowledge even their righteousness to be so in God's sight if he should deal with them in strict justice. Our best duties are so defective, and so far short of the rule, that they are as rags, and so full of sin and corruption cleaving to them that they are as filthy rags. When we would do good evil is present with us; and the iniquity of our holy things would be our ruin if we were under the law.

2. There was a general coldness of devotion among them, v. 7. The measure was filled by the abounding iniquity of the people, and nothing was done to empty it.

(1.) Prayer was in a manner neglected: “*There is none that calls on thy name*, none that seeks to thee for grace to reform us and take away sin, or for mercy to relieve us and take away the judgments which our sins have brought upon us.” *Therefore* people are so bad, because they do not pray; compare ³⁴⁴³Psalms 14:3, 4, *They have altogether become filthy, for they call not upon the Lord*. It bodes ill to a people when prayer is restrained among them.

(2.) It was very negligently performed. If there was here and there one that called on God's name, it was with a great deal of indifferency: *There is none that stirs up himself to take hold of God*. Note,

[1.] To pray is to *take hold of God*, by faith to take hold of the promises and the declarations God has made of his good-will to us and to plead them with him, — to take hold of him as of one who is about to depart

from us, earnestly begging of him not to leave us, or of one that has departed, soliciting his return, — to take hold of him as he that wrestles takes hold of him he wrestles with; for the seed of Jacob wrestle with him and so prevail. But when we *take hold of God* it is as the boatman with his hook takes hold on the shore, as if he would pull the shore to him, but really it is to pull himself to the shore; so we pray, not to bring God to our mind, but to bring ourselves to him.

[2.] Those that would take hold of God in prayer so as to prevail with him must stir up themselves to do it; all that is within us must be employed in the duty (and all little enough), our thoughts fixed and our affections flaming. In order hereunto all that is within us must be engaged and summoned into the service; we must *stir up the gift that is in us* by an actual consideration of the importance of the work that is before us and a close application of mind to it; but how can we expect that God should come to us in ways of mercy when there are none that do this, when those that profess to be intercessors are mere triflers?

II. They acknowledge their afflictions to be the fruit and product of their own sins and God's wrath.

1. They brought their troubles upon themselves by their own folly: “*We are all as an unclean thing, and therefore we do all fade away as a leaf* (v. 6), we not only wither and lose our beauty, but we fall and drop off” (so the word signifies) “as leaves in autumn; our profession of religion withers, and we grow dry and sapless; our prosperity withers and comes to nothing; we fall to the ground, as despicable and contemptible; and then *our iniquities like the wind have taken us away* and hurried us into captivity, as the winds in autumn blow off, and then blow away, the faded withered leaves,” ^{<300>}Psalm 1:3, 4. Sinners are blasted, and then carried away, by the malignant and violent wind of their own iniquity; it withers them and then ruins them.

2. God brought their troubles upon them by his wrath (v. 7): *Thou hast hidden thy face from us*; hast been displeased with us and refused to afford us any succour. When they made themselves *as an unclean thing* no wonder that God turned his face away from them, as loathing them. Yet this was not all: *Thou hast consumed us because of our iniquities*. This is the same complaint with that (^{<300>}Psalm 90:7, 8), *We are consumed by thy anger*; thou hast *melted us*, so the word is. God had put them in the

furnace, not to consume them as dross, but to melt them as gold, that they might be refined and new-cast.

III. They claim relation to God as their God, and humbly plead it with him, and in consideration of it cheerfully refer themselves to him (v. 8): “*But now, O Lord! thou art our Father*: though we have conducted ourselves very undutifully and ungratefully towards thee, yet still we have owned thee as our Father; and, though thou hast corrected us, yet thou hast not cast us off. Foolish and careless as we are, poor and despised and trampled upon as we are by our enemies, yet still *thou art our Father*; to thee therefore we return in our repentance, as the prodigal arose and came to his father; to thee we address ourselves by prayer; from whom should we expect relief and succour but from our Father? It is the wrath of a Father that we are under, who will be reconciled and not *keep his anger for ever*.” God is their Father,

1. By creation; he gave them their being, formed them into a people, shaped them as he pleased: “*We are the clay and thou our potter*, therefore we will not quarrel with thee, however thou art pleased to deal with us, ^{<2486>}Jeremiah 18:6. Nay, therefore we will hope that thou wilt deal well with us, that thou who madest us wilt new-make us, new-form us, though we have unmade and deformed ourselves: *We are all as an unclean thing*, but *we are all the work of thy hands*, therefore do away our uncleanness, that we may be fit for thy use, the use we were made for. We are the *work of thy hands*, therefore *forsake us not*,” ^{<1438>}Psalm 138:8.

2. By covenant; this is pleaded (v. 9): “*Behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people*, all the people thou hast in the world, that make open profession of thy name. We are called *thy people*, our neighbours look upon us as such, and therefore what we suffer reflects upon thee, and the relief that our case requires is expected from thee. *We are thy people*; and *should not a people seek unto their God?*” ^{<2489>}Isaiah 8:19. *We are thine; save us*,” ^{<1594>}Psalm 119:94. Note, When we are under providential rebukes from God it is good to keep fast hold of our covenant-relation to him.

IV. They are importunate with God for the turning away of his anger and the pardoning of their sins (v. 9): “*Be not wroth very sore, O Lord!* though we have deserved that thou shouldst, *neither remember iniquity for ever against us*.” They do not expressly pray for the removal of the judgment they were under; as to that, they refer themselves to God. But,

1. They pray that God would be reconciled to them, and then they can be easy whether the affliction be continued or removed: “*Be not wroth to extremity, but let thy anger be mitigated by the clemency and compassion of a father.*” They do not say, *Lord, rebuke us not*, for that may be necessary, but *Not in thy anger, not in thy hot displeasure*. It is but *in a little wrath that God hides his face*.

2. They pray that they may not be dealt with according to the desert of their sin: *Neither remember iniquity for ever*. Such is the evil of sin that it deserves to be remembered for ever; and this is that which they deprecate, that consequence of sin, which is for ever. Those make it to appear that they are truly humbled under the hand of God who are more afraid of the terror of God's wrath, and the fatal consequences of their own sin, than of any judgment whatsoever, looking upon these as the sting of death.

V. They lodge in the court of heaven a very melancholy representation, or memorial, of the lamentable condition they were in and the ruins they were groaning under.

1. Their own houses were in ruins, v. 10. The cities of Judah were destroyed by the Chaldeans and the inhabitants of them were carried away, so that there was none to repair them or take any notice of them, which would in a few years make them look like perfect deserts: *Thy holy cities are a wilderness*. The cities of Judah are called *holy cities*, for the people were unto God a kingdom of priests. The cities had synagogues in them, in which God was served; and therefore they lamented the ruins of them, and insisted upon this in pleading with God for them, not so much that they were stately cities, rich or ancient ones, but that they were holy cities, cities in which God's name was known, professed, and called upon. “These cities are a wilderness; the beauty of them is sullied; they are neither inhabited nor visited, as formerly. *They have burnt up all the synagogues of God in the land,*” ^{
}Psalm 74:8. Nor was it only the smaller cities that were thus left as a wilderness unfrequented, but even “*Zion is a wilderness; the city of David itself lies in ruins; Jerusalem, that was beautiful for situation and the joy of the whole earth, is now deformed, and has become the scorn and scandal of the whole earth; that noble city is a desolation, a heap of rubbish.*” See what devastations sin brings upon a people; and an external profession of sanctity will be no fence against them; *holy cities*, if they become wicked cities, will be soonest of all turned into a wilderness, ^{
}Amos 3:2.

2. God's house was in ruins, v. 11. This they lament most of all, that *the temple was burnt with fire*; but, as soon as it was built, they were told what their sin would bring it to. ⁴¹²2 Chronicles 7:21, *This house, which is high, shall be an astonishment*. Observe how pathetically they bewail the ruins of the temple.

(1.) It was *their holy and beautiful house*; it was a most sumptuous building, but the holiness of it was in their eye the greatest beauty of it, and consequently the profanation of it was the saddest part of its desolation and that which grieved them most, that the sacred services which used to be performed there were discontinued.

(2.) It was the place *where their fathers praised God* with their sacrifices and songs; what a pity is it that that should lie in ashes which had been for so many ages the glory of their nation! It aggravated their present disuse of the songs of Zion that their fathers had so often praised God with them. They interest God in the cause when they plead that it was the house where *he had been praised*, and put him in mind too of his covenant with their fathers by taking notice of their fathers' praising him.

(3.) With it *all their pleasant things were laid waste*, all their desires and delights, all those things which were employed by them in the service of God, which they had a great delight in; not only the furniture of the temple, the altars and table, but especially the sabbaths and new moons, and all their religious feasts, which they used to keep with gladness, their ministers and solemn assemblies, these were all a desolation. Note, God's people reckon their sacred things their most delectable things; rob them of holy ordinances and the means of grace, and you *lay waste all their pleasant things*. What have they more? Observe here how God and his people have their interest twisted and interchanged; when they speak of the cities for their own habitation they call them *thy holy cities*, for to God they were dedicated; when they speak of the temple wherein God dwelt they call it *our beautiful house* and its furniture *our pleasant things*, for they had heartily espoused it and all the interests of it. If thus we interest God in all our concerns by devoting them to his service, and interest ourselves in all his concerns by laying them near our hearts, we may with satisfaction leave both with him, for he will perfect both.

VI. They conclude with an affectionate expostulation, humbly arguing with God concerning their present desolations (v. 12): "*Wilt thou refrain*

thyself for these things? Or, Canst thou contain thyself at these things? Canst thou see thy temple ruined and not resent it, not revenge it? Has the jealous God forgotten to be jealous? <B7D>Psalm 74:22, Arise, O God! plead thy own cause. Lord, thou art insulted, thou art blasphemed; and wilt thou hold thy peace and take no notice of it? Shall the highest affronts that can be done to Heaven pass unrebuked?" When we are abused we hold our peace, because vengeance does not belong to us, and because we have a God to refer our cause to. When God is injured in his honour it may justly be expected that he should speak in the vindication of it; his people prescribe not to him what he shall say, but their prayer is (as here) <B8D>Psalm 83:1, *Keep not thou silence, O God!* and <B9D>Psalm 109:1, "*Hold not thy peace, O God of my praise! Speak for the conviction of thy enemies, speak for the comfort and relief of thy people; for wilt thou afflict us very grievously, or afflict us for ever?"* It is a sore affliction to good people to see God's sanctuary laid waste and nothing done towards the raising of it out of its ruins. But God has said that he *will not contend for ever*, and therefore his people may depend upon it that their afflictions shall be neither to extremity nor to eternity, but *light and for a moment*.