

Isaiah 63:7- 64:12

Prayer for a nation gone astray

1. Introduction

The passage in this chapter is a prayer, a very fervent prayer.

It is often difficult to pray. We do not always know what to say, or what we may pray for.

In his Word the Lord teaches us to pray. There are many other prayers in the Bible besides the one that Jesus himself has taught us. We cannot always pray these prayers literally. But they do serve as examples to teach us how to pray. Examining these prayers can certainly enrich our own life of prayer.

This applies also to this prayer of Isaiah. It is a petition by an individual for the people of God. We can learn from this that we may not pray individualistically. We always have to bear in mind that we are a part of all God's people. God teaches us that we ought to pray for our brotherhood and that there can be an occasion to humble ourselves before God, together with that brotherhood.

2. General Remarks

1. An Intercessor for the people

The prayer that we find in this part of Isaiah is uttered by one person, and begins with "I". But this person is so closely associated with his people that "I" is soon replaced by "we". He prays for and on behalf of the people.

God's Word gives us more examples of people who prayed very fervently for the people, or acknowledged sin on behalf of the people, even if they had not personally committed that particular sin. Compare the prayer of Moses after the people sinned with the golden calf (Exodus 33:12-23; 34:8-9). See also the prayers of Ezra and Nehemiah in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 1 and 9.

2. The background of this prayer

This prayer strongly reflects the distress of God's people. Their distress is that the people no longer possess the Promised Land. The cities are destroyed and the temple has become a heap of ruins (see 63:18 and 64:10-11). The people have correctly concluded that God is no longer with them; he does not help them any more.

We can think of the time immediately after the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25; 2 Chronicles 36). We could also think of the first years after the return from exile (cf. the first chapters of Ezra; also Outline 1 Section 4.)

3. The cause of all the misery

The prayer shows that this person has a deep spiritual insight. There is no complaint about the enemies who have brought all this grief upon the people. It would be easy to point to them as the cause of all

that has happened. But the suffering has a deeper cause. The people's distress is a result of the sins they themselves have committed. That comes through loud and clear in Isaiah 64:5-7.

The depth of this prayer can only be the result of meditation, of a reflection on the problems, of prayers for insight, and of the preaching by the prophets.

4. Who is the praying servant?

If Isaiah himself has written the entire book of Isaiah, then he would have written this prayer, with the intent that the people themselves would take this prayer on their lips many years later. Is this most likely? J. Ridderbos [in the Dutch book *The prophet Isaiah*] thinks it possible that the book of Isaiah contains parts that stem from the time after Isaiah. This prayer would then certainly be regarded as one of those parts.

H. M. Ohmann assumes that this prayer is from the pupil of one of Isaiah's students who would then have continued in the line of his great predecessor. There is no need to rule out these ideas, when dealing with this section. Especially if we accept that in Isaiah 65 we find an answer from the LORD to this prayer. It is doubtful that this prayer as well as the answer would have been uttered so far in advance of the actual suffering, which serves as the background for this prayer (see also Outline1 Section 5).

5. Structure of the prayer

This prayer is structured beautifully.

It begins with a reference to the past (63:7-14) and mentions God's wondrous deeds. He requests the LORD's attention: Where is he who has revealed himself so much in the past (63:15-19)?

This is followed by asking when the LORD will act: Oh, that the LORD would come down and show his might (64:1-5a). In the following verses (64:5b-7), the intercessor confesses, on behalf of the people, the sins and acknowledges that they are the cause of all the misery.

He concludes with pointing out the distress in the land, and with an appeal to God as their Father, he once again asks the LORD to intervene (64:8-12).

3. Annotations to the text

Isaiah 63 Verse 7-9

This prayer begins with recalling God's great deeds in the past. It appears that much can be said about the love that God has shown to his people throughout the centuries. The prophet refers in particular to the exodus from Egypt. The grief that the people experience at the present forms a sharp contrast to the abundant goodness the LORD has shown to his people in days of old.

Verse 8 provides the reason for the LORD's abundant goodness: in love the LORD had chosen this nation for himself. He had expected much from his people. He expected them to respond in faithfulness to the LORD's own faithfulness.

In that expectation the LORD time and again exerted himself for his people: "he became their Saviour". He was all involved in their weal and woe. He was there. He was present with them and shared in all their troubles and anxieties. As a father he took them up in his arms and carried them.

“The angel of his presence” may refer to the Angel of the LORD, in whose appearance God, especially the Son of God, revealed himself as the Saviour and Redeemer of his people.

We need not necessarily think of the story in Exodus 32 and 33 (cf. especially Exodus 32:34 and 33:14-15). Moses does not exactly see it as a positive thing that God intends to send an angel to lead the people.

Verse 10-11a

God’s people reciprocated God’s love with rebellion. There are a host of examples to be found during the trek through the desert and the sojourn in Canaan (cf. Psalm 106). The people grieved his (God’s) Holy Spirit. (Only here and in Psalm 51:11 is the Holy Spirit mentioned fully by this name.) The sins of the people touched the heart of God. While he wanted to lead his people, they continually opposed him. Therefore he turned into their adversary. It must be terrifying when as an enemy the LORD fights against his own people. Yet, in a manner of speaking, the LORD could not keep that up very long. He remembered as it were the time of their first love, the time of Moses, the time of the exodus, the feast at Mount Sinai. God could not find it in his heart to destroy his people.

Verse 11b-14

Also these verses recall extensively the great deeds of God in the history of his people, in order to prepare the way for the petitions that will follow. This is apparent from the first words of verse 11b: “Where is he”? Where is he now who was so actively present in the past?

God brought “them through the sea, with the shepherd of his flock”.¹ God saved Moses out of the water (see Exodus 2:1-10). As shepherd of his people Moses was filled with the Holy Spirit (see Numbers 11:17). During the entire journey through the wilderness God was at Moses’ right hand. This was visible in the many miracles that God allowed Moses to perform. The water of the Red Sea was divided to let the people walk through. Especially by this miracle God made his name known in and outside of Israel (see Joshua 2:10; Psalm 77; Psalm 136). God made a highway through the desert for his people and gave them rest in the Promised Land. Here again mention is made of the Spirit by whom God leads his people.

God’s name is associated with the weal and woe of his people. This opens the way for a fervent plea: Where is he now?

Verse 15-16

The prayer, which so far speaks *about* God, now changes to a direct prayer *to* God. The intercessor cries out to God to attend to the misery of the people. God should save his people, as he has done in the past: where is he now? An appeal is made to God’s “tenderness and compassion”. Is this inaction not contrary to God’s love for his people?

Nothing is to be expected from the patriarchs Abraham and Israel. They do not know the people in their present situation. This may mean that they simply have no knowledge of their present circumstances. But it may also have a deeper meaning: Abraham and Jacob do not recognize themselves in their

¹ It is better to read *shepherd* instead of *shepherds*.

descendants any longer and want to have nothing to do with them. That means then that there is a severe crisis in the covenant that God has made with the patriarchs and their descendants. The sins of the people bring the fulfillment of the promises to a standstill.

Out of this misery they call upon the LORD, the Father of his people. They need God to redeem them. Let him live up to his reputation from of old (cf. v.8). This salvation would be the result of the pity God as their Father has for his children.

Verse 17-19

It is to be expected that a wise father would lead his children on the right path. Therefore it sounds like a reproach when they ask: "Why, O Lord, do you make us wander from your ways?" Even though the people are guilty of their sins, the LORD could have kept them from their evil ways, could he not? The consequence is that Israel lived in the Promised Land for only a short while, and afterwards was driven out by her enemies. It seems that Israel is no longer God's people: the covenant privileges have disappeared. Therefore they cry to the LORD to return to them.

Isaiah 64 Verse 1-5a

In Chapter 64 the prayer for God to intervene becomes more passionate. The prophet prays that God "would rend the heavens". He must have had a strong feeling that God was not in their midst, a feeling that the heavens are closed.

Therefore: let God come down now. The appearance of the LORD often is accompanied with great upheavals in nature: trembling mountains and blazing fire (Exodus 19:16-19; Psalm 18:7-15; Psalm 97:1-6).

They implore God for such an appearance. The terrible "side-effects" will terrorize their enemies. They will get to know the might of the LORD. God's intervention should be so great that it would surpass all God's previous deeds. Then also Israel's enemies will have to acknowledge that God is unique: there is no nation like Israel, with a god like the LORD.

The first sentence of verse 5 is not very transparent. It probably means that the people serve the LORD again with gladness, as a result of his mighty works. The people are learning again how to walk in the ways of the LORD. Therefore there can be a joyous reunion between God and his people.

Verse 5b-7

These verses clearly contain a confession of sins. The sins of the people are the cause of God's wrath and the reason for not saving them. These sins have been characteristic for the people for a long time. Why would the LORD help his people in this situation?

The seriousness of their sin is described vividly. The people have become "like one who is unclean". If you were unclean, you were not allowed to participate in the worship service. Sin has become an obstacle between God and his people. The "righteousness" of the people has become like "filthy rags". We have to think here of clothing which became unclean at a time of impurity (Leviticus 15:19-24).

Sin makes unclean but also causes mortality. That is made in clear by the imagery taken from the world of plants: God's people became as a falling leaf, sin was like a gust of wind which drives the nation

apart like autumn leaves.

The specific sin was that the people did not call upon the name of the LORD anymore. No one cared about the LORD and his service anymore. As a result the LORD withdrew himself also: he delivered the people into the power of sin, making return impossible (it is better to omit the word *for* at the beginning of the last sentence in verse 7).

Verse 8-12

At the end of his prayer the intercessor puts his destiny and that of the people in the hands of the LORD whom he knows as his Father. The people are like clay in the hand of God, who is able to form it as he wills. This means that the people are completely dependent on him. But they may expect that the LORD will form it into something beautiful. For he who *forms* them is their Father!

This confession of sin opens the way to God's grace; now wrath has come to an end. Confessed sin will not be held against them anymore, will it? In this way the intercessor shows the LORD how hopeless the situation has become in the land, and implores him to act once again. One motive is that it must be heartrending to the LORD as well, to see how the land lies in ruins. Are they not *his cities* as well? Is Zion not his holy city?

The temple is destroyed. Therefore it is impossible to worship God in the offering of sacrifices. The praise of the fathers that was heard there throughout the ages has been silenced. That should be reason enough for the LORD to take action. When he sees this, will he be able to restrain himself?

The petition for restoration is not only for the benefit of the people in order to bring an end to the oppression. It will also give the people the opportunity again to praise and worship the Lord. That is the desire of him who prays this prayer, and thus the prayer ends on an exultant note.

4. The meaning for today

Distress can lead to prayer. That becomes apparent in this part of the book of Isaiah. A life of sin has estranged the people from God. In reaction to this God has alienated himself from the people: he does not act as their Redeemer anymore, as the One who comes to the rescue of his people. We can actually say that God is hiding himself, which of course is the result of the secularization among the people, and this in turn causes more secularization. What becomes of a people when they have to live without the help of the LORD and the direction of the Holy Spirit? It can only go from bad to worse.

Yet God has not abandoned his people. He caused their distress in order to bring them to their knees. God punishes in order to banish superficiality and estrangement.

We learn to appreciate things when we have to do without them. Because they experience the "absence" of God, the people begin to long for his presence again. God wants the people to yearn for him again. God has evoked from his people the fervent prayer of Isaiah 63 and 64.

Of course that does not mean that all difficulties that come upon God's people are a direct punishment for their sins. God sometimes allows his faithful children to suffer in order to test their faith. Yet they

may trust that God will grant them perseverance (cf. 1 Peter 4:12 ff.).

This prayer in Isaiah 63 and 64 makes clear that the LORD does not just let go of his people. He has elected them in love and all of history tells of his faithfulness. God wants to proceed with his people. He makes this possible by way of judgement for the purpose of making them willing to continue with him.

This prayer is one of many that we find in God's Word that are used to teach people how pray. Of course we cannot just copy a prayer like this, because it is based on a particular historical situation. But the study of this prayer can prevent us from praying superficially.

When we pray, we should first of all realize that also our life is included in God's work throughout the ages. History testifies to God's faithfulness. It is a good thing to contemplate God's reputation, before you begin your prayer. It creates a sense of awe and trust: who is God to his people and what may we expect from him? A right prayer addresses God carefully.

We also have to take a look at ourselves. Our repeated unfaithfulness is in sharp contrast to God's continuous faithfulness. We should not think lightly of this. Our confession of sin should not become routine work. God takes our sins seriously. He will be pleased to hear that we hate our sins. When we confess our sins we should not be afraid to be thorough and specific.

This prayer in Isaiah also teaches us that we are totally dependent on God. If God would let go of us, even for one moment only, it would be the end of us. It is only because of his mercy and the guidance of his Spirit that we do not become entangled in our sins. It teaches us that in the struggle against sin and temptation, we should eliminate all confidence in ourselves. We can only persevere in the power of God's Spirit.

We have, after all, a sure basis for our prayer. We may passionately appeal to God who as our Father loves us. These are not just empty words. Christ has secured this for us with his own blood. Therefore the way is open for all who repeatedly fall into sin and yet seek God. Because of the Lord Jesus Christ, heaven is open.

5. Suggestions for the introduction and preparatory study

1. Find out, supported by, e.g. Psalm 78; 106; Nehemiah 9, how stubborn the people of Israel have been. Explain the role history played in the prayer of Isaiah.
2. In Isaiah 63:10 we read that the LORD turned to be their enemy. Find out if God can change and how.
3. Try to show how this prayer reveals how God operated in the old dispensation as the Triune God.
4. Find a connection between the words of this prayer (especially 63:17 and 64:7) and the sixth petition as we have it in Lord's Day 52 of the Heidelberg Catechism.
5. Find out how the Old Testament speaks about God as our Father.

6. Ideas for the discussion

1. Even though the person who prays this prayer may not even be guilty of the sins that are mentioned, still he, on behalf of the people, confesses guilt (see Section 2). Can we still do the same today? Should the whole congregation feel guilty if one member or a part of the congregation has sinned? (cf. the prayer in the *Form for Excommunication* in the *Book of Praise*.)
2. As the person who prays this prayer, so the minister prays in church on Sunday on behalf and for the whole congregation. What are the criteria for such a prayer?
3. God was distressed in his people's distress (63:9). Is there a connection to the work of Christ? (cf. Matthew 26:36-46; Hebrews 4:14-5:10; *Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper* in the *Book of Praise*.)
4. Sin causes God to be hidden from his people. Do we notice it in our own life that the Lord withdraws himself because of certain sins? How can you tell?
5. In Isaiah 63:10 we read that the people grieved the Holy Spirit. We read about grieving the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 4:30 also. What does this tell us about the Holy Spirit? How can we grieve the Holy Spirit?
6. May you blame God for sins that you are committing? Is this not actually what the intercessor in Isaiah 63:17 and 64:7 is doing?
7. Looking at this prayer, should we not put more emphasis on history in our prayer than we usually do? How should we do this? How could this enrich our prayers?
8. The one who prays recalls God's great deeds. May we regard various events in church history as an extension of these great deeds? Why?
9. Does this prayer meet the requirements for prayer as we read this in Question and Answer 117 of the Heidelberg Catechism?

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