

The Goodness and Severity of God – Isaiah 65:1-7

Introduction – We now begin the answer to the prayer of the previous two chapters: “Look down from heaven...Where are...Your mercies towards me” (63:15), “Oh, that You would rend the heavens! That You would come down!” (64:1), “Will You restrain Yourself...” (64:12). We learned from Isaiah how and what to Whom we should pray. But there is much to learn from God’s answers as well, for to call on God to rend the heavens and come down is to invite His judgment as well as his salvation. This is a revival-prayer that invites the separation of the sheep from the goats, among God’s own people as well as in the world at large.

The Eager Goodness of God (v1) – On the one hand, God has not been silent at all, nor has He been distant or difficult to appease. In fact, He is so eager to be found (even to those self-important people who snub their noses at Him) that He speaks in undignified tones, “Here I am, Here I am.” John 3:16 says that “God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son...” This was a humiliating work as Jesus took the form of a servant (Phil 2:3-8). During His ministry, He was found to dine with prostitutes and tax-collectors (Matt 9:10-13, 21:31-32). Jesus loves His ministry of forgiving sinners like you and me (Psalm 103:1-5). And God glories in going after those who were not even showing any interest in Him. He makes the first move (Rom 5:8).

Outstretched Hands (v2a) – Far from hiding His face, God actively offers Himself to the people. Stretched out hands is a gesture of supplication associated with prayer; God was pleading for His people to come to Him.

To a Rebellious People (v2b) – The problem was not that God would not come; the problem was that the people would not come. And of course, this too was brought to fruition in Jesus’ day; “He came to His own and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). The leaders and false-teachers would not bring the people to Jesus (Luke 13:34, Acts 7:51-52) and they actively persecuted those who tried to get their people or even the Gentiles to come to Christ (1 Thess 2:15-16). Isaiah said they were a people who walked “according to their own thoughts.” Rebellion is not always outright on the face of it – it can look very religious. Nadab and Abihu sought to worship the LORD but on their own terms (Lev 10:1-3). Similarly, our individualistic and rebellious culture may say it is “Christian” but defines that term and what it requires according to its own devices.

Provoking the Severity of God (vv3-5) – This redefining of Who God is, what holiness is, what He requires, these provoke the Lord’s anger. From sacrifices in gardens (v3), such disobedience trends downwards all the way to the occult practices and an obsession with darkness, abominations and death (v4). It is not that we become non-religious, we become very religious and our “holiness” requires that God be kept far, far away (i.e. secular humanistic Darwinism). When a people have become like this, God warns, “Watch out! My nose burns with anger” (v5). There is no neutral ground. Jesus said, “He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with me scatters abroad” (Matt 12:30).

Another Explicit Warning to Israel (vv6-7) – For their rebellion, God promises to repay them according to their iniquities, especially those who had blasphemed. And Jesus warned that those who blasphemed against Him could be forgiven but those who blasphemed against the Holy Spirit (and the work after Pentecost of taking the Gospel to the Gentiles) would not be forgiven (Matt 12:31-32, 23:31-36).

This is What the Preaching of the Gospel Does – It is fragrant. It is the fragrance of life to those being saved and it is the fragrance of death to those who are under judgment (2 Cor 2:15-16). And Paul says that Isaiah 65:1-2 was fulfilled in his generation as he watched the Jews reject Christ while the Gentiles came pouring in (Rom 10:20-21). Look back now to Rom 10:14 and see the context is of the preaching of the Gospel and the gift of faith by hearing, for when the gospel is preached, men and women come to faith because they hear and see Christ Himself. God’s plan for the world is its transformation by sending, preaching, hearing, believing and calling – the very work of evangelists, missionaries and church planters – to people who aren’t even looking for Him. But Israel refused to believe and was cut out like branches from an olive tree, while the wild branches of the Gentiles were being grafted in (Rom 11:16-24). Paul is warning the church that finds its home in Rome not to be haughty, like the Israelites, in believing that it is the one true covenant people of God, regardless of what they believe or do. Jerusalem fell in 70AD and the Temple with it. What is the Roman church today to understand? And what of all covenant people of God? Do not be haughty, “He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness.”

We are those Gentiles, those people God was reaching out for who were not even reaching for Him (Isaiah 65:1). Let us never be those stubborn, rebellious ones upon whom will fall a severe judgment. But rejoice in the new mercies of God for those who fear Him – every day. He is made jealous by idolatries but these only cause Him even more to pour out His blessing where no one expects. History is full of great apostasies and greater reformations and revivals. Everything is thrown into turmoil, all the religious fussers fuss, and the kingdom of God advances to the nations in glory. (More on this in the verses ahead...).