

*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. (Isaiah 64:1-9)*

### **Waiting with Prayer**

One of my most vivid memories of the time I spent in the army is waiting. The army has made an art form out of making people wait. I particularly remember this long hallway in an old World War II bunker in Germany that had been converted into a U.S. Army personnel section. It was lined with couches. Every time I had to go there, those couches were full of soldiers waiting. Have you ever had an experience like that? Do our experiences with waiting equip us to put ourselves into the shoes of Old Testament believers who waited for Christ to come? This year our midweek Advent series is entitled “Waiting with Old Testament Saints.” Each week, we’re going to look at a prophecy from Isaiah and try to learn something about our faith from their wait. Tonight, we want to look at what we Christians naturally do while we’re waiting. What is that? You could say live a Christian life and that would be true. But tonight, we want to focus especially on one crucial piece of the Christian life: **waiting with prayer.**

#### **I.**

It’s natural for God’s people to pray about the things that weigh on their hearts. Isaiah’s words are really a prayer. He said, **“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!”** He was praying that God would come. If you think about what it meant to spend your

life waiting for God to keep a promise to send a Savior, just like your father and your grandfather and your great-, great-, great-grandfather had done before you, you can understand why he would pray this. Those Old Testament saints were **waiting with prayer to see God work.**

This passage comes very close to the end of Isaiah's book and that probably means that it was also close to the end of his ministry. He may have felt what many a preacher feels as he looks back on his ministry and he thinks of all the people he couldn't reach – all the unbelievers that he failed to bring in and all the members that wandered away. Certainly, Isaiah was thinking about the unfaithfulness of the people God had called him to preach to and about all the enemies of the gospel that he had faced. He had seen kings and rulers mock God and pretend to be pious. He had seen unbelievers make life hard for believers. Through it all, God had used him to announce some of the most beautiful prophecies about Christ that we have: "A virgin will conceive and bear a son and call his name Immanuel." "To us a child is born, to us a son is given." "We all like sheep have gone astray and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." All those prophecies pointed to the coming of Christ. After a lifetime of preaching and opposition, Isaiah wanted to see them fulfilled, so he prayed for God to tear open the sky and come down.

In that prayer, Isaiah wanted something that feels very familiar to me. He said, **"For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you."** On the day God gave his covenant to Moses, he descended in fire and smoke onto Mt. Sinai. The earth shook and God spoke out loud so that the whole nation could hear his voice. When they got up that morning, they didn't expect any of that. But they saw it all. Isaiah wanted to see the same thing. He wanted God's enemies to see it. He wanted those unbelieving kings and those movers and shakers of society who were too smart to believe in God to have to eat their words. He wanted them to see who it was that we believers have put our trust in.

He goes on to point out how different the true God is from all the idols that these people were turning to. During Isaiah's lifetime, the people were tired of the traditional, boring Jewish faith. They wanted the exciting and fashionable gods that the king and the court were importing from the nations all around them. But Isaiah told them a hard truth: no one has ever seen any god actually answer the prayer of his people, except for the God of Israel. That's because all those idols are nothing. But the true God works every day for his people. Isaiah knew that and he longed for the day when everyone would see it.

He lived in a time when people were bored with the faith of their fathers. Doesn't that sound familiar? Isaiah lived in a time when people cared more about what other people thought and what was cool and fashionable and what would be the most fun, than they cared about whether God said those things were sin. Doesn't that sound familiar? Isaiah lived in a time when the enemies of the faith openly mocked believers and most intelligent people assumed that they knew better than God. My friends, could Isaiah have done a better job of describing our world today? So he wanted Jesus to come. He wanted the heavens to open and the whole world to see the one true God and know that his word really is the truth. He wanted God to put an end to this life of pain and sorrow and begin the new life of glory and joy with him. My friends, don't we want the same?

For 1500 years, God's Old Testament people waited for God to keep his promise to send a Savior who would pay for their sins and who would judge the world. God did not always clearly distinguish for them that those were two missions for Christ with two comings, first to save and later to judge. But they waited for him. They wrestled with life in a sinful world and prayed for their Savior to come. For 2000 years, God's New Testament people have been waiting for God to keep his promise and send that Savior back to put an end to sin and suffering and persecution. Like them, we wrestle with life in a sinful world and we, too, pray for that Savior to come. God kept his promise to Isaiah. Jesus came in Bethlehem. God will keep his promise to us, too. No matter how many generations of Christians have been waiting, even if our great-great-grandchildren are still waiting, Christ is coming. Wait for him with prayer.

## II.

Isaiah prayed while he waited because for him, this was all very real and personal. It wasn't just that he looked around and saw how evil the world was. He also understood how much he needed the Savior that God had promised. Isaiah loved to proclaim God's grace and forgiveness. He had had decades to reflect on that love and he prayed to see his Savior. **He waited with prayer to feel God's forgiveness.**

Isaiah said that God comes to the help of those who gladly do right and remember God's ways. But he confessed that he and his people had sinned continuously against God and he asked, **"How then can we be saved?"** That "we" is important. Isaiah could've said, "How can they be saved?" He could've looked out the

windows at all those unbelievers out there and shaken his head at them. He and the believers who heard these words could've been smug about the fact that they were going to escape God's judgment. But Isaiah said, "How can *we* be saved?" He didn't put himself above those unbelievers out there. He confessed that he was a sinner, too.

He goes on to say, "**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.**" Certainly, he was condemning the false righteousness of unbelievers all around him. But he never says "they" because he understood that even believers are still sinners. He understood just how hard it is to remember God's ways in a sinful society. He knew that he and his fellow believers all too often, followed that society instead God.

All that he says is still true in this sinful society. Even our best works here are still sinful. It is true that God rewards us when we live as he calls us to. And we rejoice in that blessing. But we need to understand that our hearts are still corrupted by sin. We don't deserve the rewards he gives us. If God actually weighed our best works in the balance of his holiness, they would not measure up. A book I read once described it like this: imagine a little boy looks out his window on a hot summer day and he sees his dad mowing the lawn. He sees how hot and sweaty his dad is and decides to get him a drink. So he pulls a chair up to the cabinet and gets a glass. Then he pushes the chair over to the sink and climbs up again and fills it with water. Now, he's a four-year-old, so his hands are dirty and they smudge the glass. There may even be fingerprints on the inside. And as he climbs back down again and opens the door to go outside, he splashes a fair amount of the water on the ground. When he gets to his dad, the drink he's brought him would get sent back at a restaurant and it might not take away his thirst. But dad sees the love in his son's eyes and he accepts the drink as if it were the coolest, most refreshing drink he will ever taste.

That's what God does when we strive to live for him. Compared to his holiness, all our righteous acts are filthy rags. And it would be an insult to God for us to claim that we deserve his reward because we try so hard, because we show up for midweek Advent services, because we give a generous offering and bring our kids to Lutheran schools. Our hearts are often in the wrong place when we do all those things and that's just sin that should be punished. But God sees the faith in Christ that strives to love him and he rewards those imperfect works with his grace. He treats them as if Jesus himself had done them perfectly.

Because we are still sinners here, there are too many times when our lives and our attitudes don't look like that little boy trying to show love to his father. They look like a child throwing a temper tantrum in the middle of Christmas shopping. They look like the selfish, me-first child that our society creates over and over again. So often, we care more for what the people around us like and think than we do what God likes and thinks. That's sin, too. Like the people of Isaiah's time, God's judgment should whither us like a leaf. His wind should sweep us away to hell.

But Isaiah took comfort in God's love. He says, "**Remember, O LORD, you are our Father.**" God loves us. Isaiah prays, "**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.**" You and I can offer the same prayer as we wait to see Jesus. The beauty of that prayer is that we already know how God answers it. He is our Father. He does love us and like a father, he is always ready to forgive us. Like a father, he may at times discipline us to teach us to live differently, but he forgives all the times that we live like we don't belong to him at all. He wipes them out of his memory and treats them like they never happened. 2,000 years before any of us was born, he sent Jesus to die and rise and erase all those sins. He gave us faith and made us his children and his people, who will live with him forever.

Isaiah was waiting for Jesus to come. We know that he has come. The cross and the empty tomb guarantee that when God looks on us, he does see his children, even though we still struggle with sin here. Yet, there is still a sense in which we are waiting just like the Old Testament believers were. We wait for our Savior to rip open the heavens and return and put an end to all sin and persecution and pain. While we wait, pray for faith and courage, for a new life and hope. And pray that Jesus would come quickly. Amen.