

When I use the phrase, “the good old days,” what do you think of first? Our Old Testament reading today catches the prophet Isaiah doing a little reminiscing. Back in the good old days, God used to rescue His people from their enemies in dramatic ways. In the good old days, God would divide the sea so that His people could walk right through it and close it up on their pursuers. Back in the good old days, God would sponsor contests with other gods, sending fire down from the sky. Things were better back then—or, at least, more obvious.

Isaiah felt that the time was ripe for God to do His thing again. ‘Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence, as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil, to make your name known among your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!’

Can you relate to the spirit of this prayer? After all, things are terribly wrong. The world is filled with incredible problems. The forces opposed to God’s Word and God’s people are powerful and persistent and they’re wearing us down. ‘Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down’ the way you used to come down in the good old days. Set a fire, shake the mountains. Establish your justice. Crush the evildoer.

Sounds good doesn’t it? Wouldn’t that be satisfying? And yet, there is an old saying, ‘Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it.’ And that applies to prayers, as well. You see, what’s wrong with the world is not just ‘out there,’ it’s also ‘in here.’ The selfishness and greed, the envy and lust, the thirst for power and the willingness to take advantage of your position to get what you want; it’s all *as alive in us* as it is in the world. We may dress it up and camouflage it, disguise it, even to ourselves. To be candid, I can justify my own behavior with the best of them. But God sees it, and it’s all the same to Him. Sin is sin. Evil is evil. Wrong is wrong. Guilty is guilty.

So, it’s almost as if Isaiah catches himself in the middle of his prayer and begins to realize the implications of what he’s praying for. If God *were* to tear open the heavens and come down, and execute His perfect justice on the evildoer, it would mean that *no one would survive*. It is striking how drastically the tone of Isaiah’s prayer changes about halfway through. You could say he comes to his senses. He goes from begging God to execute dramatic justice, to a humble, heartfelt confession of the sin of Israel. No longer is he speaking to God about ‘THEM’ at all, but ‘WE,’ ‘OUR,’ ‘US.’

‘Behold, you were angry, and WE sinned.’ When God disciplined Israel, as a loving father disciplines his children, rather than turning from their sin, ‘they sinned’ all the more. ‘Behold, you were angry, and we sinned.’ The more God disciplined them, the more they turned against God. And over time, their hearts became harder and harder. And Isaiah says, ‘In our sins we have been a long time.’

And so, I need to ask, is there a sin that you've been in a long time—so long, you have a hard time seeing it as sin? Or, different perspective, is there something you know God wants you to begin, but you've been resisting, denying, putting it off for a long time? We're being warned by Isaiah that our hearts can harden when we leave things unaddressed.

What is the way forward? It is repentance. Confession. Isaiah says, 'There is no one who calls on your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.' The language is so vivid, it makes me wonder if we could import it into our worship: 'Behold, you were angry and we sinned and in our sins we have been a long time. We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.' Now, there's a confession of sins.

Appealing to God's faithfulness and mercy, Isaiah then prays, 'But now, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please, we are all your people.' Isaiah's prayer proceeds from faith, and it's a beautiful faith, that is hopeful of God's fatherly, tender love for his wayward kids.

God answered Isaiah's prayer with a bold 'YES.' When the time was exactly right, He ripped open heaven and came down and healed the sick and cured the diseased, gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and legs to the lame simply by sound of His voice and the touch of His hand. He cast out demons by the power of His name. He walked on the water and calmed the storm and commanded the fish to fill the nets. Now that's what we're talking about. He even called the dead out of their graves, and they walked out, alive and well. But all of that was simply a sneak preview. The most dramatic demonstration of His power was when He, the Creator of the world, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, humbled Himself, became a servant and gave Himself over to be mocked and crucified. God was asked to come down with perfect justice against the evildoer, so that's what He did. Justice demanded the punishment of the evildoer, but in an amazing twist, Jesus stepped into the evildoer's place. All of God's anger against sin was exhausted on His Son, and Jesus' actions have the effect of stripping off our polluted garments and clothing us in His righteousness. God answered Isaiah's prayer with a bold 'YES,' so Jesus rode into Jerusalem as the gentle King, to be crowned with thorns. He comes to us today, riding on bread and wine, delivering the forgiveness for our sins with His body and blood. And at the Last Day, He will 'rend the heavens and come down' in the fullness of His glory, riding on the clouds with all His angels, to render His final judgment and make all things new. The good old days have nothing on what is to come.

*Stir up Your power O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance. We thank you for answering this prayer in Jesus Christ, your Son, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*