

Isaiah Part 40: Prayer for the LORD's mercy

Isaiah 63 v 7 to 64 v 12

The LORD's mercy remembered (Isaiah 63 v 7 to 14)

“I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD, the praises of the LORD...” (v 7) – this prayer seems to be prophetically uttered one of Judah’s Babylonian exiles. Despite the agony expressed later in the prayer, the praying one first recalls God’s ‘steadfast love’. This is a wonderful example of how, even in the lowest place, we can praise the Lord and remember his “great goodness”.

- These verses form a prelude to the prayer. What have the people of Israel learned of God’s love and mercy in times past? Consider how Paul began some of his prayers – see Ephesians 1 v 16; Philippians 1 v 3, 4; Philippians 4 v 6; Colossians 1 v 3. What does this teach us about how to pray?

This is an amazing passage, and there appear to be six ‘themes’:

1. The LORD’s ‘steadfast love’, ‘great goodness’, ‘compassion’, ‘love’ and ‘pity’ (v 7, 9);
2. God’s saving actions, in that he “became their Saviour” (v 8); “he was afflicted” (v 9, with echoes of Isaiah 53); he “saved them” and “redeemed them” (v 9);
3. A negative note in verse 10: “But they rebelled and grieved... therefore... he fought against them”;
4. Amazing references to “the angel of his presence” (v 9, Jesus?) and “his Holy Spirit” (v 10, 11, 14);
5. God’s further loving actions, in that “he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old” (v9); “he remembered the days of old” (v 11); he “brought them up out of the sea” (v 11); he “divided the waters before them” and “led them through the depths” (v 13);
6. These actions of salvation and deliverance displayed the LORD’s “glorious arm” and his “everlasting name” (v 12), and his “glorious name” (v 14).

“The angel of his presence” (v 9) – literally, ‘the angel of his face’: this may be a synonym for the phrase ‘the angel of the Lord’, occurring in many places in the Old Testament, and often taken as referring to the pre-incarnate Jesus. See Genesis 16 v 7; Genesis 21 v 17; Genesis 22 v 11, 15; Exodus 3 v 2; Exodus 14 v 19, Exodus 23 v 20 to 23; Psalm 34 v 7).

“But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit” (v 10) – despite the outpouring of love and mercy from God, his people responded with cold, rebellious, unresponsive hearts. God had to deal with this in his people, so he “fought against them”. “Then he remembered the days of old” (v 11) – in the midst of the LORD’s discipline, in this case, prophetically speaking, the Babylonian exile, the praying one remembered the “glorious arm” of God in days past and knew that mighty arm could be raised again for his people. Specifically, in this case, he remembered what the LORD did in the days of Moses and the Exodus.

“Like a horse in the desert... Like livestock that go down into the valley (v 13, 14) – here Isaiah seems to be alluding to the progress that Israel made during the Exodus, and how God will bless Israel again in their regathering and restoration, with the result that the “Spirit of the LORD [would give them] rest.” A “horse in the desert” can be understood as a horse in open country, with the idea of rapid and unhindered progress.

Prayer for mercy (Isaiah 63 v 15 to Isaiah 64 v 12)

- What does the praying one ask for in Isaiah 63 v 15 to 19? In Isaiah 64 v 4 and 5 he begins to pray for something else – what is it, and why is he unable to continue his plea (v 6 and 7)? How do these verses teach us how to plead with God?

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“Where are your zeal and your might? (v 15) – these are honest words of prayer. Sometimes it feels that the zeal and the strength of the LORD are far away, but we should do just what the praying one did: cry out to God. “We have become like those over whom you have never ruled” (v 19) – the praying one cries out in agony. Why has God allowed this? The praying one may not be correct in his theology, as God rules over everyone and everything, but he is an expert in expressing the pain of the human heart.

“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down...” (v 1) – here the plea is for God to intervene from heaven. “That the mountains might quake at your presence” – in Isaiah 63 v 11 to 13 the praying one remembered God’s great work for Israel in the Exodus. Here he also remembers how the LORD shook Mount Sinai when Israel camped there on their way to the Promised Land (Exodus 19 v 17, 18).

“No eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him” (v 4) – the praying one now trusts that since he is one who waits for the LORD, he also will see God act on his behalf. “You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways” (v 5) – the praying one asks the question, ‘What kind of person does the LORD answer in prayer?’ In verse 4, he declared that it was the one who waits for God; now he expands the idea, and says that God will meet the one who rejoices and practises righteousness, and the one who remembers the LORD in his ways.

“Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?” – the NIV (New International Version) translates this last phrase as, “How then can we be saved?” This explains the problem. The praying remnant knows that God answers the prayers of the righteous, yet it ‘unrighteous’ Israel needs to be saved from the disaster she has brought on herself. The praying one then eloquently describes our state of sin. “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” – our sinful, unclean condition has made us weak and unstable, with no lasting power before God. We have no power to stand against temptation: our sins carry us along like a hurricane. “There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you” (v 7) – even in our unclean, unstable condition, we were lazy and complacent, and we did not seek the LORD as we should. “You have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities” (v 7) – this is God’s reaction to man’s sinful condition: fellowship is broken, and our sinful condition has invited the righteous judgment of God.

“But now, O LORD, you are our Father” (v 8) – the praying one is in a desperate place; he needs God’s mercy, because God’s justice condemns him. In his appeal for mercy, he reminds God to have mercy as a loving Father. “We are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” – now the praying one appeals to God’s mercy because of his sovereign power over each life. A father is always a father: he can never truly disown his children. A potter cannot disown the pot: it is only there because he made it.

“Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever” (v 9) – the praying one asks for mercy on account of ‘time served’, as if he is saying, ‘You had a right to be angry with us for a while, but please do not remember our iniquity forever.’ “Behold, please look, we are all your people” – the praying one makes his final appeal for mercy on the simple grounds that ‘We are sinners and deserve your judgment, but we are still your people’... “Will you restrain yourself at these things, O LORD? Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?” (v 12) – the praying one concludes his prayer questions. ‘These things’ are not the desperate condition of Jerusalem and the temple (v 10, 11), but are the descriptions of our sinful condition (v 5 to 7). The sense of the questions is, ‘Lord, please show mercy! Will you always give us what we deserve?’

In this prayer, the praying one deals with an impossible problem. Because of our sin, we are in a desperate state and need God’s salvation. But God only answers the prayers of a righteous man – and a righteous man would not be in such a desperate state! Ultimately, the answer is found in the New Covenant, where a Righteous Man stands in our place and prays for us. This is why Jesus invites us to pray in his name (John 14 v 13, 14). When we pray in Jesus’ name, he is the righteous one who intercedes to God on our behalf...