

**God's Sovereignty & Prayer**  
**Isaiah 63: 1 – 15 – 64:12**

Our sermon text this morning will be Isaiah 63, verse 15, through to the end of Isaiah chapter 64, which is at verse 12. Isaiah 53:15, through to Isaiah 64:12. Before the reading, we'll pray. Please join me in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we pray that you would bless your word to us. We pray that we would be given ears that hear, eyes that see, and hearts that understand and obey. Please help me as I speak. Please help us all as we listen. May we indeed hear from the living God. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Isaiah 63, verse 15: "Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me. <sup>16</sup> For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. <sup>17</sup> O LORD, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. <sup>18</sup> Your holy people held possession for a little while; our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. <sup>19</sup> We have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name."

Chapter 64: "<sup>1</sup> Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence—<sup>2</sup> as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! <sup>3</sup> When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. <sup>4</sup> From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him. <sup>5</sup> You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways. Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.

"<sup>8</sup> But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. <sup>9</sup> Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people. <sup>10</sup> Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. <sup>11</sup> Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. <sup>12</sup> Will you restrain yourself at these things, O LORD? Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?" Amen. May God bless His word.

Our passage before us this morning takes the form of a lament and a plea for mercy. It's a prayer, basically, for revival—looking at verse 1 of chapter 64: "Oh that you would rend the

heavens and come down.” Oh, that you would come down once again to your people. And Isaiah goes on to speak of the things that God has done in the past, and the things that he hopes that God would do in the future.

But our passage does go more deeply into the theology of true faith, more deeply than just simply a prayer of lament and a prayer of seeking for God to revive His people and to revive His church. There’s theology built into this. This is a difficult passage in some ways. It’s difficult to understand the timeframe that it’s set into, because what it sounds like and what it appears to be is a prayer that is prayed *after* the people have been captured and been taken off into captivity.

If you look, for example, at verses 18 and 19 of chapter 63, Isaiah says, “<sup>18</sup>Your holy people held possession for a little while; our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. <sup>19</sup>We have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name.” Or if you look at verses 10 and 11 of chapter 64: “<sup>10</sup>Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. <sup>11</sup>Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.”

So from within the text itself, the timeframe seems to be speaking of after the people had been taken off into the Babylonian captivity. It seems to be a prayer for restoration in the mouths of those people who are now slaves in Babylon. And so the question is often asked, How could that be Isaiah? Isaiah didn’t live to be taken off into captivity in Babylon. Isaiah himself was not taken into captivity. Jeremiah was the prophet, or the leading prophet in Israel at the time that the people were taken to Babylon. Isaiah had already died.

But Isaiah is a prophet. God’s word is timeless. It’s not unusual for a prophet to speak of things to come as though they’ve already happened. We’ve seen that through the whole book. We’ve seen that in many, many instances. It’s not unusual for a prophet, in predicting the future, to speak as though the future was indeed an already-established fact, and was actually past history.

The passage is kind of timeless, and furthermore, the Apostle Paul himself makes a couple of different references to the passage that’s before us today. In First Corinthians chapter 2, verse 9, Paul speaks of Isaiah chapter 64, verse 4: “From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.”

Then, of course, in Romans chapter 9, where Paul speaks of the work of the potter and the clay, and how the potter is free to work with the clay however he so desires—well, surely, you’ve picked up that reference which is to be found in Isaiah chapter 64, verse 8: “But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”

So though Isaiah speaks as though he himself were in captivity, I don’t think it presents a real problem. Isaiah is simply preaching to us as he is carried along by the Holy Spirit. He’s speaking to the people of God as he is carried along by the Holy Spirit. He is one with the people of God.

And so this prayer that Isaiah prays fits perfectly in the mouths of those who were in captivity in Babylon. It also fits perfectly in the mouths of the church today. It fits perfectly in our time. We feel that we are stuck in an evil nation. We feel that we live in a world that's in rebellion against God. We feel that we are under the discipline of God. We feel that we need the presence of God. We need God to come down and revive and strengthen the church here, today.

It should be that way. God's word speaks to God's people, and God's people have been in the world throughout history—from creation, right through to the very last day. If God's word can't speak to God's people wherever they are, well then God's word is more like man's word. And it's not man's word—it's God's word.

The second thing that is a feature of our passage today is that Isaiah speaks to a God who is sovereign, a God who rules over all. Everything that Isaiah speaks of, he speaks of as having come from the hand of God. Look at Isaiah chapter 63, verse 17. Isaiah says, "O LORD, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not?" This is a request being made to a sovereign God.

One of the objections people often make against reformed theology, and against those of us who say all things happen exactly according to the will of God, and exactly according to the purposes of God—one of the objections that often comes our way is, Well, why would you pray? What's the point of praying? If everything's going to happen according to the will of God, why pray? Well, my answer to that is really simple. If God is not sovereign and can do as He pleases, why would you pray to a God who is not sovereign? The very fact that we're asking God to do something is actually indicative of the fact that we're saying God has the power to do it.

You know, it's sort of amused me from the very day it was first ever pointed out to me, and I hear it and see it all the time still, theology which is called "Arminian Theology," theology which is semi-Pelagian, which says that a person is saved through their own choices; a person must make their own choice; someone must choose God so that God can choose them.

When those people pray, when they pray for someone, here's how they don't pray. They don't say, "God, my brother Bill is not a Christian. I know that you must respect his freedom of choice, and I know that you must allow him to express his own will—so please, Father, give him chance after chance after chance after chance. Let someone come to him with the gospel, day by day by day by day. Wear him down, Father, until he makes the right choice."

Have you ever heard anyone pray like that? No one prays like that. When we're praying for the salvation of anybody, be it someone who is close to us, with whom we have a personal loving relationship, or someone who is far distant—how do we pray? "Father in heaven, we pray for the salvation of Harold. Father in heaven, we pray that you would do a mighty work of grace, that he would be made one of your own."

You see, that first prayer, giving chance after chance after chance after chance, is basically saying to God, “Do the best that you can. Please, God, try your hardest. Just do the best that you can.” The second prayer is saying, “God, you are sovereign. Therefore, I ask you to work salvation in the life of a person that I love.”

Another reason that we ought to pray is that we’re commanded to pray. Once again, you know, people think about prayer, and the question runs through your mind, and it ran through my mind not long after I was converted: “Hang on. God knows everything, God is ever-present, God does all that He wishes. God knows what I’m going to say before I say it. What’s the point of saying it? What’s the point of saying it? I’m not telling Him anything He doesn’t know. I’m not asking for anything that He doesn’t know I already want. Why pray?” Answer? God commands us to pray.

In our earlier reading from First Kings chapter 18, notice something. The prophet Elijah prayed. He prayed. Before the fire fell from heaven, Elijah prayed. God was always going to answer. God was always going to accept that offering. God was always going to send down the fire. But Elijah praying does what? It makes it obvious to the unbelieving world that here, this man who claims to be a prophet, he prays, and God who is in heaven hears his prayer, and answers.

God graciously proves Himself, both to Elijah and to the world around Elijah by answering the prayer of His people. So Elijah prays, and in the next paragraph, if we had read a little further, we see Elijah says to King Ahab, “It’s about to start raining. It’s going to start raining. Go home, have something to eat. It’s going to rain.” And then he goes back to the mountaintop and bows his head and prays seven times. He knew it was going to rain and then he prayed for the rain.

All right, we are God’s people. The church is God’s church. The church is the body of Christ. God has made many, many promises concerning the church.

God has promised He will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Therefore, my friends, pray accordingly. Pray that He will build His church.

God has promised that those who are His people will be made to persevere through to the very end, that He will not lose one who is His. Therefore, pray for perseverance. Pray that God would build you up in faith.

God has promised that His church will be fruitful, that His gospel will be effective, that none will be lost. Therefore, pray for the preaching of the gospel. Pray for the salvation of souls as they hear the gospel.

Jesus spoke about having the faith of a little child. Now, I don’t think He meant that we’re supposed to be as sinful in our thoughts as a little child for the rest of our life. I think He’s saying, just simply, Trust God. Trust God. You teach a child about God, and I can tell you that

that child will immediately start to pray. It's a fact. It's a simple thing: There is a God; He hears my prayers; I will pray. So we ought always to be a people of prayer.

Now as we look at our passage this morning and some particulars therein, I've divided it into three sections. Section number one is chapter 63, verses 15 to 19. I've simply called it, "For you are our Father." Section number two is in chapter 64, verses 1 to 7: "Come down to us, though our righteousness is as filthy rags." And the final section is chapter 64, verses 8 to 12: "You are the potter; we are the clay."

Let's have a look at that first section, chapter 63, verses 15 to 19. Remember, this is a continuation of chapter 63, verse 7. Isaiah started to pray back there. "I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion." And that's where Isaiah started to pray. He continues to pray, looking at verse 15: "Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me."

"Look down from heaven and see." He's not saying God doesn't see. He's not saying God doesn't know and God hasn't seen. It's a bit like the line in the book of Genesis, where it says, "And God remembered Noah." It doesn't mean God had ever forgotten about Noah. It means God watched over Noah. God cared for Noah. God preserved Noah in the ark. Well, this is a similar sort of thing. Isaiah is not saying, "I know you haven't seen this, God," but he's saying, "Come on, God. Get close. Come close. Get involved here. Look at the way that things are."

Verse 16: "For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name." Now this is not—don't read too much into it—this is not as we have been taught by Jesus. This is not a proclamation of the Fatherhood of God. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven," and the apostles went on and reasoned that we who are in Christ can pray to God as our Father, for being in the eternally begotten Son of God, we are ourselves adopted sons of God. This is not that kind of thinking here in Isaiah. This is more thinking back to the past.

Note the context: "though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us." In the book of Exodus, when God sent Moses to His people—just turn there to Exodus chapter 4 and verse 22—when God sent Moses to Pharaoh, looking at verse 22: "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son,<sup>23</sup> and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'"

"Israel is my firstborn son. The nation is my nation. The nation are my children. As a people, I count them as one, and the one that they are, I count them as being my son." How would that work? Well, you're invited to think further back. What comes further back? Well, who's the father of the faithful nation? Abraham. And remember, he has a son by promise and a son who was not by promise. And Isaac is the son by promise. "Israel is my firstborn son." Everything that Isaiah prays has a scriptural background and a scriptural context.

In Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 6, Moses also speaks to the people of the fact that God is the Father of this nation. Now if God is the Father of this nation, that actually tells us something. It's a nation of supernatural birth. God is not the father of an unbelieving nation, He's the father of a faithful nation. Remember Isaac was a miraculous child. His parents were old, way past the age of childbearing. "You are our Father."

Notice he says, "though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us." It appears that he's saying, "We know we do not share in the faith of Abraham. We do not share in the faith of Jacob." Israel, remember is the name given to Jacob. "We're not faithful. They wouldn't recognize our nation. They wouldn't claim us as their own. We're not faithful." He's confessing sins. But you, "O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name."

Looking at verse 17, he says, "O LORD, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not?" Once again, notice in this prayer that he's praying, the sovereignty of God. Why? Why are the people not obedient? Why are the people not faithful? "O LORD, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not?" What does that mean? Does that mean God Himself is actually making them wicked, that God Himself is placing wicked thoughts within their hearts and minds? I don't think that's what it means at all.

I want you to turn to a passage in Second Chronicles chapter 32. I just want to look at one verse there, but I'd like you to have it before your eyes. Second Chronicles chapter 32, and have a look at verse 31. Now this is speaking of Hezekiah, one of the faithful kings of Israel. Second Chronicles 32, verse 31: "And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart." God left him to himself.

Now Hezekiah, if you don't know, had acted very foolishly. He had shown these people from far off Babylon all his wealth. He'd shown them the treasury, he'd shown them the temple, he'd shown them all the things that a rapacious and greedy people would want to take for themselves. Why was he so foolish? Why did he do such wickedness? "God left him to himself, in order to test him."

Turning back to Isaiah, what does God have to do for people to have their hearts hardened? What does God have to do for people to be left to wander in their own ways, to wander apart from the way of God? He simply has to let them follow their own hearts and do as they desire. God Himself does not have to place a wicked thought in our hearts. We're wicked apart from God. We don't need God to make us wicked, we're wicked in and of our being. All God has to do concerning the nation of Judah, if He wishes to bring it under discipline, is to turn away, to withdraw the restraining hand of His grace from that nation, to let them follow their own heart.

Now why would God do this? Well, we know one reason already, don't we? To test, to make obvious that which is hidden. That's the point of God testing—to show Hezekiah, for example,

his own foolishness, that Hezekiah himself is not a savior. Though he was a king, and a good king in the line of David, Hezekiah himself was not a savior.

Another reason is to discipline—to discipline. Turn to Hebrews chapter 12, and we'll start reading at verse 3. Hebrews chapter 12, verses 3: "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." Now he's speaking there of Christ. Verse 4: "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. <sup>5</sup> And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. <sup>6</sup> For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.' <sup>7</sup> It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. <sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

Discipline. Why is it that sometimes in your Christian life things don't seem good, things don't seem easy, the hand of God doesn't seem to be supporting you in all that you do? Why is that sometimes you feel like you're beating your head into a brick wall? One of the reasons is that God disciplines His children.

Why is it that at times you can go sometimes—and all of us, each and every one of us, has some particular sin which seems to stumble us at any given point of time. There's something that we return back to, that we fall down over at any given point in time. Why is it that you can go for weeks, even months, not falling, not stumbling, not tempted, and then suddenly, Bam!—back it comes again? And you, without thinking, me without thinking, you do what you ought not do. You look at that which you ought not to look at. You fantasize, or think those thoughts which you ought not to think. What you thought you had walked away from—"I had the victory! I'd defeated that! It no longer rules over me! Hallelujah, amen, brother!" And the next day you stumble. You kick your toe on it all over again. It's called the discipline of God.

God does want you to have victory over your sins. He does want you to cast off the wicked works of this world. But He does not want you to become proud; He does not want you to become boastful; He does not want you to become casual in your Christian walk. He wants you to remember that you are utterly reliant upon Him, every single day of your life.

So sometimes, God lets you fall off the bike. Sometimes He lets you have a crash so that you repent, so that you remember your sins, so that you remember how reliant upon Him you are, so that you don't become a judgmental hypocrite. And that's so easy for us as Christians. It's so easy to look at the world and to see a drunken fool and think, "Well, there's no salvation in there

for him or her.” To see people with their messed-up and destroyed lives, and to think, “They are so far from God. Could they ever be saved?”

But Isaiah asks that question here in our text this morning, doesn't he? We'll get to it shortly. Isaiah asks that same question. He says, “You've left us in our sins. And can we be saved?” In chapter 64, verse 5: “In our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?”

You see, it's not good for the people of God to be proud. It's not good for the people of God to be boastful. It's not good for us to forget that every day of our Christian lives, we're completely reliant upon the grace of God, that our strength is God. Yeah, we exercise our own will, and we exercise our own effort in this thing that we call sanctification. We most definitely do. Yet, even the power to will and to work comes to us through and by the work of the Spirit of God.

The very fact that we have the right desires is the evidence of the work of God in us. And so God as a father will discipline us with our sins. He'll make you have a good hard look at yourself. Sometimes it's good to wonder, “Am I even really a Christian? Can I possibly be saved?” I remember the saying that's been attributed to Martin Luther: “When I look at myself, I wonder if I can be saved. When I look at the Lord Jesus, I wonder if I can be lost.” That's a good one. It's true. And so Isaiah, in his prayer, acknowledges the providential discipline of God, who is sovereign over His own people.

I ask you the question again: Why would you pray to anyone other than a God who is sovereign? When you've got a problem, you don't make requests of people who can't help you. You make your requests to someone who has the ability to come to you, to come to you with strength and to help you through your troubles. You pray to the Sovereign God because He's the God who has power over all things.

Let's move on to the second section. Chapter 64, verses 1 to 7. “Come down to us, even though our righteousness is as filthy rags.” Looking there at verse 1: “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence.”

As I considered that verse, I thought of something. Let's turn to the book of Matthew, chapter 3. In the Hebrew language, Isaiah 64, verse 1, it's a good translation there to say “rend.” But in the Septuagint, instead of the word “rend,” it's the word “open”—exactly the same word that gets used here in Matthew chapter 3. Look at Matthew chapter 3, and we'll read verses 13 to 17.

“<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; <sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”



Now turn back to Isaiah. “Oh that you would open the heavens and come down.” Ultimately, Isaiah’s praying for the coming of the Savior. He’s praying for God to show forth His power in saving His people. And ultimately, the answer to Isaiah’s prayer is indeed that God Himself took upon Himself flesh, in the person of His eternally begotten Son, and came to the earth. And He preached the gospel. And He lived that perfect and righteous and holy life in the sight of God. And He died for the sins of all who would believe. And He was raised from the dead. And he reigns at the right hand of God on high.

Ultimately, the gospel is the answer to Isaiah’s prayer. “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down.” And isn’t that the longing of God’s people, even today, even now? Don’t you wish the church was powerful? I mean, in a manner of speaking we certainly are. But don’t you just wish that the gospel was going forth with power, with a gospel harvest like that which has been seen in days gone by? Don’t you wish there were baptisms every other week, as new believers are called into the kingdom of God?

Don’t you wish that you felt like it was easy? I know I sure do. I certainly do wish I felt like it was easy, because at the moment it feels like the going is hard. But these things are in the hand of our God. We’re to be faithful. We’re to be preachers of the gospel, pray-ers of the gospel, an obedient, faithful church, seeking to grow in sanctification. That’s God’s instruction. He’ll make it work as much as He wants it to work. Not one will be lost. And He will use us according to His will.

Look at verse 6. It’s the famous passage. It’s often quoted. Isaiah 64, verse 6: “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.” The word “unclean” is the same word used to describe the uncleanness of leprosy, back in the book of Leviticus. And what is translated politely here in the ESV as the polluted garment, it’s speaking of the ritual uncleanness also described back in the book of Leviticus, the ritual uncleanness of a woman in her monthly cycle. All our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.

People imagine that their works are in some way good, that in some way, if I could just do what is right, God would love me. And you know someone hasn’t gotten the gospel when you’re speaking to them and they say, “You know, I’m going to clean my life up and then I’m going to get myself back into church.” Really? “I’m going to straighten myself out and get myself back into church and make peace with Jesus.” So you think that your cleaning yourself up before you come into church is what is necessary? What is necessary is repentance. You don’t clean yourself up apart from repentance. You don’t clean yourself up apart from faith.

This idea that somehow or other, we do works that are pleasing in the sight of God is nonsense. Notice Isaiah says, “We have *all* become like one who is unclean.” He counts himself amongst this sinful people. He doesn’t separate himself from the people of God. 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.

We have no righteousness of our own. Our righteousness is completely and utterly reliant upon the gift of God, through faith in Christ. Isaiah's righteousness was completely and utterly reliant upon the gift of God. Remember when he was confronted with his vision of YAHWEH, high and lifted up, he said, "I am a man of sinful lips. I dwell in the midst of a people of sinful lips." This was Isaiah the preacher, and he says, "Even my lips are filthy. Even my lips are sinful." And an angel took a coal from the altar before God and touched his lips with it, and said, "Fear not. Your lips have been cleansed." You see, the gift of cleansing, where did it come from? It came from God. Even Isaiah, with his faith in the coming Savior, was completely reliant upon that Savior for his righteousness. In and of himself, all his deeds were like a polluted garment.

When the Lord separates the sheep from the goats in the passage near the end of the book of Matthew, I always love the fact that no one really realizes what they've been doing. The Lord says to the righteous, "When I was in prison, you visited me. When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was naked, you clothed me. You've done all these wonderful things for me. Enter into your eternal rest." And the people who receive that blessing say, "When? We weren't aware that we were doing these righteous deeds in your sight. When did we do these things?" And the Lord explains, "In that you did it to the least of one of my people, you did it to me."

You see, faithful people acting in obedience to the gospel do good works. Faith that saves is never apart from works that confirm that salvation. The faith that saves doesn't come apart from the works of righteousness, but no one's works save them. They weren't even aware that they were doing works of righteousness. They were just being the people that God had made them to be. They weren't turning up saying, "Well, here's the scorecard. I helped twenty-four old ladies across the street. I visited the prison sixteen times—didn't even know the prisoners, but hey, I visited. Here's the scorecard. Let me in, I'm righteous." They weren't even aware of the fact that God considered their works to be righteous. They looked upon themselves as sinners. Yet in Christ, our deeds, our works, are accepted.

Looking at verse 7 of chapter 64 of Isaiah: "There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you." Now once again, we're confronted with the sovereignty of God. Why is this? Why is no one calling upon the name of God? "For you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities." For you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.

Why are they not calling upon the name of God? Well, it's exactly the same thing that Isaiah was speaking of back in chapter 63 and verse 17: "Why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not?" It's amazing. Our God, He is omnipresent. He is in all places. We're never apart from Him. We're never hidden from Him. Everything that we do, the very thoughts of our heart are open to Him. Every thought that runs through our mind is open to Him. Every sin is known by Him. And yet, even though He is with us, He Himself can hide Himself so that nobody knows He's there. He can hide Himself from us. He can hide His face from us.

In Isaiah chapter 45—just turn back there for a moment. Isaiah speaks of the fact that God hides Himself from the idolatrous nations. We'll start reading at verse 14: "Thus says the LORD: 'The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours; they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will plead with you, saying: "Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him.'" <sup>15</sup> Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior. <sup>16</sup> All of them are put to shame and confounded; the makers of idols go in confusion together."

God can hide Himself. He can hide Himself from the nations so that they do not see Him or know Him. Well now, in Isaiah chapter 64, God has hidden His face from His own people. Once again, this is a disciplinary hardening of the heart that God does, according to His will and according to His providence.

My friends, if you know God, it's because God has made Himself known to you. If you know God, it's because God first knew you. God, as it says in the Scriptures, foreknew you from the beginning of time. And that "foreknew" is not speaking simply of technical knowledge, like I know the times tables, and I know the gear ratios of a Volvo truck, and I know the gear ratios of Kenworth truck. I have knowledge. That's not what "foreknow" means.

Here, "known" is the idea that God has a loving relationship with someone. It's the same idea where it says, "Adam knew Eve, and she conceived and had children." God knew us from before the beginning of time. He knew us in a loving way. Remember, to Him all time is now—past, present, future. God's outside of time. God is not under time like you and I are. God can intervene in time at any time, according to His will.

If we know God, it's because He made Himself known to us. If God has been revealed to you, it's because He chose to reveal Himself to you. And yet Isaiah complains, "You've hidden your face from us and made us melt in the hand of our iniquities."

I point back to Isaiah chapter 64, verse 5: "Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?" It's almost as though he's saying, "Can we be saved?" I think he knows the answer is Yes. He knows the answer is Yes, we can be saved; but he also knows that they are sinners who cannot save themselves. He's totally reliant upon the sovereign God.

Let's look at the third part, Isaiah chapter 64, verses 8 to 12: "We are the clay, you are the potter." Once again, this concept of sovereignty. In all three sections, Isaiah highlights God's sovereignty over His people—their complete and utter reliance upon God's graciousness.

You know, in a bit of a discussion with a member of the family in recent weeks, that person objected to the fact that I said that God rules over all and saves whom He wants. And the objection was, "I don't like saying that God saves one and not another." And I said to the person, "Is not God good? Is not God good? If you're going to trust someone with sovereignty, who do you want to have sovereignty? A man, or God?"

The thought of a sovereign person, man or woman, is terrifying. If each, or if any one of us was given true sovereignty, could you imagine? Could you imagine if you had true sovereignty? We'd be tyrants. We'd be bullies. I'm sorry, but we'd be wicked. Whoever the best person here is, that person is a sinner. Whoever the most sanctified saint in this room is, that person is a sinner! I don't want any mortal person to have sovereignty.

If someone has to have sovereignty, let it be God, because God is good, and we can trust God. And we can trust in the goodness of God. I'm happy to give to God the choice of sovereignty over all of humanity. Where else would I want it to be but in the hands of one who is perfectly good, holy and righteous? Where else would you want it to be? We ascribe sovereignty to our God because He is good.

What does that mean for us, then, as Christians? It means, therefore, that everything that happens actually has some meaning. All the wicked things that happen actually have some meaning. There is some answer. The Twin Towers fall because evil men fly aircraft loaded with, in terms of that crime, innocent people into those towers—thousands die.

You can either say, God had nothing to do with it, in which case, we live in a random world, we live in a world where God does not have power over the things that happen, we live in a world where God does not have sovereignty. And, my friends, in that kind of world, you better fear the demons. You'd better fear the demons, because they're doing as they please. They're doing what they want.

Or, it has some kind of meaning, because the sovereign God permitted it to happen, according to His will. I know that's scary. I realize that. And I know that that's hard to understand. I realize that, too. You say, "What good could possibly come from something like the disaster on 9/11, or the disastrous bush fires that we see in this nation, or the disastrous cyclones that destroy cities? What good can come from these things?" Well, trust God. Trust God to bring good from these things. He does bring good from these things, though we do not understand it.

And remember something else, my friend—each and every person in this earth is a rebellious, wicked sinner whom God has the right to judge, howsoever He desires, when He chooses to judge them. God has the right to end any life He chooses to end, He has the right to preserve any life He chooses to preserve, He has the right to save any He's willing to save, and He has the right not to save whom He does not wish to save. We're sinners! What claim does a sinner have on the holy, righteous, living God? None whatsoever. God calls on His people to trust Him, to trust in His graciousness, to trust in His rightness, to trust in His goodness.

Those young men who were cast into the fiery pit, what was their statement to that anti-Christ king about to throw them in there? "Our God can preserve us from the fire. But even if not, we will not worship your gods." You see, they had no guarantee of preservation before they were cast into the pit. They simply said, "Our God can save us, if He so wills. Even if not, we're not worshipping your gods!"

My friends, God has the right to do with humanity as He pleases. He is sovereign, He is good, He is transcendently good. Even the things that happen that we don't understand and that appear to us to be works of unrestrained evil, He has ordained that those things happen, and He will use them for His glory. He will use them for His glory. That's a test of faith, my friends, for us as Christians. God simply says, "Trust me. Trust me. Accept this. Accept that I do as I will. Accept that I have power over all life. Accept that my sovereignty is good."

Otherwise, as I said, you've ceased to be worshipers of the living God, and you become superstitious people who fear the demons—who fear the bad things in the world—and you become fools, superstitious fools, doing this and doing that. You don't step on the cracks in the concrete, you don't walk out the door on Friday the thirteenth—whatever your little superstition might be. You know, there's a million of them.

Why do people have them? Because they fear the darkness, they fear the demons, and they don't fear the living God. They don't acknowledge the sovereignty of God. And so their attitude is not, "We will not worship your gods. Whether we live or die, we will worship the living God." Their attitude is, "How can I keep this little god happy? How can I keep that little god happy? What must I do to avert bad luck here? What must I do to bring good luck there?"

Astrology, palm-reading, you name it—all the other nonsense. It's fearing the gods of this world, or fearing the demons of this world. It's not fearing the living God, who is sovereign over all things—life, death, destruction, salvation, damnation, you name it.

Isaiah complains. "We are the clay. You are our potter. We are all the work of your hand." Verse 9: "Be not so terribly angry, O LORD, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people. <sup>10</sup> Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. <sup>11</sup> Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. <sup>12</sup> Will you restrain yourself at these things, O LORD? Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?"

One of the ways you can have peace in your life my Christian friends—now I don't mean "peace" the way the world speaks of peace, but peace in terms of the inner peace that comes to a Christian through the work of God's Holy Spirit—one of the ways you can have peace in your life is to understand that everything comes to you from God. Everything—the hard times, the easy times, the blessings and the troubles—everything comes from God. We live in His hand. We have to ascribe glory to God. We must trust God. In the darkest night, we still must trust God. That's what God requires of us. That's actually the victory of the Christian over the world.

Let's finish by turning to First John chapter 5, reading from verse 1: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. <sup>2</sup> By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. <sup>3</sup> For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. <sup>4</sup> For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the

world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”

Verse 4: “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” The world is our enemy, okay? The world is our enemy. I’m not speaking about the physical world, the atoms that God has gathered together into this planet. I’m speaking of the world in terms of the world as a political, social thing—the mass of humanity. The world is our enemy.

And what’s this victory that overcomes the world? Our faith. Now who was John speaking to at that time? Well, he was speaking to Christians in a time of Roman persecution and domination; Christians who lived under what we could call, in a way, one of the most wicked empires the world has ever seen. Yeah, I know, eventually along comes Constantine, and eventually Christianity actually conquers Rome. But that wasn’t when John wrote this.

When John wrote this, it was a time of persecution. There’d been an emperor whose name was Nero. He was evil, just plain outright evil. He was thought of as possibly the anti-Christ. He’s at least a model for the anti-Christ that were to come. He burned people to death to light up his gardens for nighttime barbecues. You get the Christians, you dip them in pitch, you tie them to a fence, and you set them on fire. And then you stand around laughing and eating food that your cooks bring out to you, as these people are burned to death. That’s the kind of man he was. That’s the kind of time that those Christians lived in.

And what does John say? “Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” Our faith. You hear what he’s saying. That Christian who was burned to death hanging off a fence in Nero’s back yard while he had a barbecue, that Christian overcame the world. That Christian overcame the world! That Christian who was persecuted to death, a painful death, overcame the world by faith.

Victorious Christian living is not a matter of big houses, nice cars, the best furniture, a fat bank account, never suffering sickness or illness, and having everything go your way. The truth is, if that’s your life, you actually might be a child of the devil, not a child of God. And we all want good things, and you know that I’m paying off our house and Lesa and I have a rather nice car parked out there in the carpark, which we bought only last year. We all want the good things.

I’m not saying that enjoying the things that God gives us is evil. But what I’m saying is, if you live a life that is never, ever brought to the test, if your faith is never, ever put on trial, you just might not actually be a Christian. If you don’t have to overcome the world, the truth is, you’re probably part of the world. And we don’t want to be part of the world. We want our part in Christ. The world is our enemy.

As times get harder, if God does not do something amazing, if this is to be turned around, if our nations where they are today are to be turned around, it will be an amazing work of the Spirit of God in reviving His churches and empowering the gospel. That’s the only hope that we have. If

that's not the case, well, judgment is going to fall heavier and heavier upon our nations, and the world is going to turn against us, and they're going to come after our property, and after our jobs, and after our cars. They're going to want to silence us. And if we keep speaking the truth, they're going to make us pay for that speaking the only way they can make us pay—Caesar owns the money, Caesar takes the money. Depending on how far God allows this to go, we could end up in a very persecuted place.

There are Christians in the world today, my friends, who die for the name of Jesus—who die for the name of Jesus. Now they are overcoming the world, and that is their victory—the things of the world, they were prepared to let go of in order to cling to the life that is in Christ. We hope that we don't get called to do those things. I don't want to be a martyr. I've got no great desire to face the firing squad or the gas chamber, or whatever. But it's a possibility. In the providence of God, it's most certainly a possibility. It's not unusual in Christian history for these things to happen, and the victory that overcomes the world is our faith. Do what they can, do what they will, they can't destroy our faith. They can't destroy our place in Christ Jesus.

All things come from the hand of God. My friends, if you've had bad times, if you've had testing times, they're coming from the hand of God. Cling to God in hope. As Isaiah has prayed, pray. Pray that He would come down. Pray that He would pour out His Spirit. Pray He would strengthen you. And understand something: He loves His church. He also blesses His church.

Not only hard times come from the hand of the Lord, but good times come from the hand of the Lord. I've spoken of things that may or may not be in our future. I don't know. These things are in the hand of God. He can turn nations around. He has done it in the past, He could do it now if He chooses to. I don't claim to have any idea where we are, in terms of God's planned history of this earth—no idea. I simply say, Jesus could return tonight and He could return in a thousand years, and it could be ten thousand years. These things are in the hand of our God.

The church is to do what it can, and what it can do is faithfully pray for God to pour out His blessings upon His people, that God may be glorified through all the earth. He's our sovereign God. He has the power to answer our prayers and to make us overcome this world. Let's close in prayer.

Father in heaven, all things come from you. We know that you are good. We know that you are holy. We know that nothing happens apart from your will. Father, help us. Give us the faith to trust you. Father, give us the faith which overcomes the world, even in times of darkness. Uphold us in this struggle with sin. Father, let our hearts not be hardened, but let our hearts be softened and meek, that we may receive your word for that which it is, the very word of God. May we tremble in your presence. May we worship you with fear and with love. Help us, Father, to love you as we should and to love our neighbour as ourselves. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.