

Love that Moves the Sun and Stars

Isaiah 64:1-9 | Psalm 80:1-8 | 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 | Mark 13:24-37

ISAIAH 64:1-9

¹ O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— ² as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴ From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. ⁵ You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. ⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. ⁷ There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. ⁸ Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity for ever. Now consider, we are all your people.

INTRODUCTION

Beyond the sphere that makes the widest round,
 passes the sigh arisen from my heart;
 a new intelligence that Love in tears,
 endowed it with is urging it on high.
 Once arrived at the place of its desiring,
 it sees a lady held in reverence...¹

Don't worry, that was not more ridiculous 80s pop lyrics. It's a stanza from the final poem of *La Vita Nuova*, a prosimetrum by Dante Alighieri, written about 15 years before he began composing *The Divine Comedy*, his much more famous tour through the inferno, purgatory, and paradise. *La Vita Nuova*—which means *the new life*—tells of his meeting, falling for, and ultimately losing to death, his beloved Beatrice. It's a bittersweet work, capturing something of what it means to long for, to desire to be with, to have transcendent intimacy with, to be overwhelmed with the miraculous presence of a deeply cared for and desired person—a friend, lover, partner, counterpart, complement. And in this stanza, he articulates the sigh of his heart, a sigh leaving his heart and rising to heaven to see her radiance. Dante's longing for Beatrice goes well beyond romance, beyond virtue, into the deepest yearning for one who completes his soul and the melancholy of existing in a somehow-less-than-complete way without her.

This idea of longing, of course, is not uncommon in poetry—the medium of deeply felt emotion. And indeed, we find it at the centre of the poem we just heard from the prophet Isaiah. In those 30 or so lines of poetry, we find a prophet who longs for the presence of God. And through this exploration of that longing, and what stands in the way of satisfying it, he asks us a very simple question: Do we long for God? Let's take a look at how this idea unfolds.

¹ Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Vita Nuova, New Edition: A Translation and an Essay* (trans., Mark Musa; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973) 165-166).

1. LONGING FOR GOD

In the first five verses, Isaiah calls out to God, beckoning him to leave the confines of paradise and return to his people. *“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”*² Twice he notes that the mountains would quake, the earth would reverberate with the presence of God. If we keep reading, it would seem the reason is that the rival peoples might see that God operates on behalf of his people, *“to make [his] name known to [his] adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at [his] presence!”*³ This idea—that the nations would recognize that Judah has a powerful God, more powerful than any other—is noted at several points in these last chapters of the book.⁴ And it makes sense, as God has intervened directly on behalf of his people before—from delivering his people by parting the Red Sea to the shaking of Mount Sinai when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, God has acted on behalf of his people in perceptible, remarkable, awe-inspiring ways.⁵ But it is not just the public dimension of the greatness of God that would be made visible should he fulfil Isaiah’s longing and come down from heaven, there is also a personal dimension. In the chapter before ours, Isaiah prays for mercy. *“Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation.”* He goes on: *“Turn back for the sake of your servants...”* and *“We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name.”*⁶ The people of Judah feel so profoundly distant from God, so far from him, it is as though they never were his people. The longing here is sincere. The desire to be restored to a previous state of relationship, to return to the love they once shared, is deep.

2. REBELLING AGAINST GOD

And it begs the question: What has put this distance between God and his people? Isaiah answers with the following verses: *“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us...”*⁷ Isaiah is quite clear: The barrier is sin. God’s distance from his people was both caused by and resulted in the sinful rebellion of his people. The self-centred ways of the people, their evil and malicious acts, their dishonesty and idolatry, their love of power and wealth and pleasure that caused them to abandon the ways of God, their selfishness and arrogance—it could not be tolerated by a holy and righteous God. He was perfect, holy, set apart, and they were not. And in a hope of shaking them in to realising this, into returning to their God, he sent them into exile. He put distance between them so that they might long to be reunited. And they fell further for a time, rebelling even more, being delivered, as Isaiah put it the end there: *“into the hand of our iniquity.”*⁸ The problem, the obstacle, the cause of the distance was sin.

3. PLEADING BEFORE GOD

Having realised the depth of sin that separated God from his people, Isaiah did the only thing he could do. He begged once more for God’s mercy. *“Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity for ever. Now consider, we are all your people.”*⁹ That last phrase is especially

² Isa 64:1.

³ Isa 64:2.

⁴ See Isa 59:19, 60:9, 63:12, and 63:14.

⁵ See Exod 14:21-22, 19:18.

⁶ Isa 63:15, 17, 19.

⁷ Isa 64:6-7.

⁸ Isa 64:7.

⁹ Isa 64:9.

poignant, given that he had ended the previous chapter recognising that they had been so distant from God it was as though they had never been his: “*We have long been like those whom you do not rule, like those not called by your name.*”¹⁰ Isaiah reminds God that they are, in fact, his, begging him to look past their sin, to mercifully allow them into his presence once more.

4. RETURNING TO GOD

It is a beautiful, and yet tragic passage. And it is one that should pull at our hearts, one that should stir our blood. I think it is far too easy, sometimes, to expect very little from God. We’re not looking for him to shake mountains and overturn the earth. And we expect little because we want to give little. We grow comfortable in our sin, and so comfortable in our distance from God. We institutionalize our ways, surrendering, compromising, letting our hearts harden and our longing for God fade into distant memory. We may not even realize how cold we are or how much we have settled for a mediocre, mundane, uninspiring, utilitarian faith.

Perhaps today is the day that changes? Our hearts need to break and we need to rediscover our longing for the presence of God. I don’t know if you have ever sinned against someone you love deeply: a close friend, a parent, a spouse you betrayed. If you have, you know this feeling. It is a feeling of deep regret, repentance even, a need to have the relationship restored. You feel it in your stomach, deep down, this unease in your deepest soul, longing to go back to the way things were before you messed up. It is a need to put things right, to do anything just to not feel so distant from the one you love. This, my brothers and sisters, is the longing we must recover for God when our sinful ways make us cold and distant.

He’s already taken the first step. He did come down. He did tear open heaven and the mountains did quake and the fires burned. In sending his Son, Jesus Christ, he overcame our sin and restored the relationship. In fact, this same language is right there in the story of Jesus at the crucifixion. The temple curtain was torn open, the symbolic barrier between God and his people, was opened. The earth shook.¹¹ And why? Because God had come to his people, and in giving up his life, he undid all the sin that separates us from him. And then he overcame death, rising again, bringing us back into relationship, bringing us back to his profound love.

CONCLUSION

Our longing has been satisfied in the gospel. And yet, as we venture into this Advent season, may we continue to return to that longing, that desire to be reunited with God, that he may tear open heaven and come down to us once more. And indeed, this is what Dante learned—not in *La Vita Nuova*, his bittersweet poem of longing for Beatrice, but what he learned when she showed him the final circle of heaven in the *Paradiso*. He learned what God has for his people in the gospel is this: “*l’amor che move il sole e le altre stelle.*”¹² He learned of God’s “love that moves the sun and the stars.”

Let me pray. *Heavenly Father, thank you loving us more than we love you. May we grow in our longing to be with you in this Advent season, grateful that it has been made possible through the sacrifice of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁰ Isa 63:17, 19.

¹¹ Matt 27:51.

¹² Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, XXXIII, v. 145.