

# God Comes Down to Us

by Ray Ortlund Jr.

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*The sermon encourages believers to pray for a fresh visitation from God, trusting in His power and sovereignty to bring about spiritual renewal and revival.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 62:7, Isaiah 63:7, Isaiah 63:15, Isaiah 64:1, Isaiah 64:10, Matthew 6:7

**Topics:** "Church Revival", "Effective Prayer"

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## Description

Ray Ortlund Jr. preaches about the significance of the church being the salt of the earth and light of the world, emphasizing the importance of the church's condition for the world. He delves into Isaiah 63:7-64:12, teaching how to pray when living in the shadows, urging believers to seek a fresh visitation from God. Ortlund highlights the need for intelligent argument in prayer, grounding requests in God's nature and promises. He explores Isaiah's prayer, encouraging believers to pray with confidence for a renewed experience of God's love and to seek God's revival in the church.

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## Transcript

It was a gorgeous September day in the northeast of Scotland, 1984. I was standing atop a hill overlooking the valley where my family and I lived while I was doing my doctoral work at the University of Aberdeen. As I rested at the summit, my eyes were exulting in the lovely view.

At that moment I noticed that puffy cumulus clouds were casting shadows randomly on the valley floor. In one place all was green and bright. In another place it was shadowy, gray, and subdued. Suddenly, a thought came to me. The church is like this. In some quarters the light of God is streaming down in unclouded brilliance, flooding the church with life and joy. In other places a chill has set in. The color has faded. God's people are living in the shadows.

How is this fact significant? It is significant in that the church, and the church only, is the salt of the earth and light of the world. By God's own appointment, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is the agent of divine redemption in human society. There is no other--not the Boy Scouts, not the Rotary Club, not any political party. That being so, what could be more important for the world than the condition of the church?

Isaiah 63:7-64:12 teaches us how to pray when we find ourselves living in the shadows. This biblical prayer challenges us to get rid of our routinized expectations of God and seek Him boldly for a fresh visitation from on high. He is able to come down to His people.

The people of God to whom Isaiah's prayer was originally given urgently needed to rediscover God in this way. Judah had been conquered by the Babylonian Empire, and the forces of evil stood triumphant over God's people, savoring their victory with sadistic glee. To the Jewish survivors, it must have seemed as if the whole moral order of the universe had been overthrown. The temple had been violated and its ministries halted. The holy city had been plundered and its people deported. The stragglers left behind had to ask, "Where is God now? Has He abandoned us?" The people of God were living in the shadows. Yet in the midst of these circumstances the prophet Isaiah calls them to pray that God would come down to them again with reviving mercies.

Isaiah's prayer divides into two main sections. In 63:7-14 the people raise their eyes from the misery of the present to view their glorious history with God. Emboldened by that thrilling reminder, they lift their plea to Him for revival in 63:15-64:12. They know that their past, present, and future all have one fixed constant--God Himself--and so they cling passionately to His past mercies in a spirit of courageous faith for the present.

Keep on Reminding God!

A secret to prayer that our generation seems largely to have forgotten is the use of argument with God. We should reason with Him, grounding our requests solidly in His own nature and His promises to us. God does not need to be convinced or impressed, but intelligent argument based on God's Word guides, purifies, intensifies, and directs our prayers toward those things that please Him and that He will readily grant. If we blather on with our own impulsive notions -"babbling like pagans" Jesus called it in Matthew 6:7--we waste our effort, but let a thoughtful use of God's own declared commitments to us be woven into our prayers, and heaven will listen.

Isaiah does this very thing. He launches into an extended argument with God. He reminds God of His own kindnesses. His is a watchman's prayer, giving God no rest. This is how we intercessors are to keep on praying until God's people are "the praise of the earth" (Isa. 62:7). But where should our praying begin? God's persistent kindness, His great goodness, His tender compassion--all mentioned in Isaiah 63:7--stand in contrast to His people's miserable performance in response. God alone stands true despite our repeated betrayals of His love. God has indeed done great things for us.

Where Are You, Father?

"Look down from heaven and see from your lofty throne, holy and glorious. Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us" (Isa. 63:15, NIV).

I remember hearing Francis Schaeffer pray in public many years ago. His opening words struck me: "O God, we thank You that You exist." It had never occurred to me to thank God for His existence, but what a meaningful prayer that was. Our only hope is that God is there. He may withdraw from us, but He is still there.

It is a great comfort to know that our present experience is not the full measure of God. His glory is not diminished when it lies beyond the range of our vision. As long as God is there, unchanged and unchanging, He can renew our experience of Him here. The prophet encourages us to pray with that confidence in mind.

This way of praying expresses true faith struggling to find God afresh. We cannot pray this way unless we believe that, no matter how barren our experience has become, our Father is still there for us. Isaiah calls us to defy despair and pray for renewed enjoyment of God's love. Our Father rules all things from His glorious throne in heaven, in full possession of His attributes and powers. Therefore, our present experience does not determine our future. God our Father and Redeemer is the true measure of our future prospects, and we may seek Him with that confidence.

However, our attempts to seek the Lord can be neutralized by our own sinfulness, counteracting our higher aspirations. The prophet now subjects our spiritual malaise to a profoundly searching analysis.

Why Do You Harden Us, Lord?

"Why, O Lord, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you?" (Isa. 63:17, NIV).

When we wander from God, we have only ourselves to blame (James 1:13-15). However, this verse proclaims the utter necessity of the mercy of God on us, for our best efforts will crumble under the power of our sin. If God withholds Himself, sin takes over within our souls.

Choice is one of our favorite words today, but we must never forget that God's choices underlie our own. We can fall before Him and plead His mercies in Christ our Savior, but we will never outsmart Him.

Solemn as this warning is, it inspires an equally thrilling hope. If it is His to harden us, then it is also His to make us tender once more. Our sinful condition is not within our easy control, but it is entirely within God's sovereign control. This hope is the great message of Isaiah 63:17. We can cry out to God from the prison we've created by our sins, and He will hear us even from there. After we have gone beyond the point of no return, God is able to return to us, softening His sin-coarsened people.

Oh, That You Would Come Down!

"Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! . . . For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you" (Isa. 64:1, 3, NIV).

Isaiah portrays the descent of God as something to be longed for. "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down" is a vivid way of praying, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." God, who seems so far away up there, so removed from the cruel push-and-shove dominating our world, so careless about the fortunes of His own cause, suddenly rips through the sky to break in with His presence and power. The thought is enough to make every believer tremble with joy!

The "mountains" symbolize long-established, well-positioned, difficult-to-remove resistance to God. That is the world we live in, and that is what the church cannot change by her own efforts, programs, and good intentions. But the Lord's presence changes everything. The evil that we cannot budge has no power to resist God. He is able to come down in new, unanticipated ways here in this world so that people actually change their minds about Him. He is able to make His name known to His enemies. He is able to cause the nations to quake before Him. He does it by His own power and in His own surprising ways.

Isaiah is teaching us how to pray for the church in our generation. One senses the intensity of his plea. He draws us up with him into fervency with God. This kind of praying does not drone on in sleepy requests for

what will likely happen anyway but rather looks back to God's unexpected breakthroughs in the past for inspiration to pray for new breakthroughs today.

Doesn't this vision of God put our brainstorming and programs into a true perspective? At bottom, we do not need formulas for successful Christian living or techniques for successful church growth. Granted, there is a proper place for the wise use of the best means, but Isaiah's vision lifts us beyond praying for God's blessing on our own ideas. He is proposing something more profound. He sets before us the glorious prospect of a surprising visitation from Almighty God Himself.

Will You Hold Yourself Back?

"Your sacred cities have become a desert; even Zion is a desert, Jerusalem is a desolation. . . . After all this, O Lord, will you hold yourself back? Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?" (Isa. 64:10, 12, NIV).

The way Isaiah asks these questions shows that it is inconceivable for God to completely abandon His people. He has too much invested in us. "How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another" (Isa. 48:11). Isaiah wants us to ground our deepest convictions in the bedrock of that strong confidence.

Isaiah's prayer is intended to search our hearts, shape our aspirations, enlarge our faith, and draw us nearer to God. When God rends the heavens and comes down on His people, a divine power achieves what human effort at its best fails to do. God's people thirst for the ministry of the Word and receive it with tender meltings of soul. The grip of enslaving sin is broken. Reconciliation between believers is sought and granted. Spiritual things, rather than material things, capture people's hearts.

In times of revival a defensive, timid church is transformed into a confident army. Believers joyfully suffer for their Lord. They treasure usefulness to God over career advancement. Communion with God is avidly enjoyed. Churches and Christian organizations reform their policies and procedures. People who had always been indifferent to the gospel now inquire anxiously. A wave of divine grace washes over the church and spills out onto the world. That is what happens when God comes down, and that is how we should pray for the church today.

We are grateful for God's reviving mercies in the past, but we cannot afford to be content with past blessings. Isn't it time to pray for God to again rend the heavens and come down? Isaiah's prayer is calculated to give us the courage to pray boldly for a new revival sent from God in our day.

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