



Highlights From the Book of Isaiah

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The LORD Rejects the Apostate Israelites (65:1-7)

- In the prayer of Isaiah which we looked at last week, we saw that he gave a passionate cry for help: *“If only you would tear apart the [heavens] and come down!”*
- The LORD seemed very far away – on the other side of a vast chasm.
- And so Isaiah ended his prayer with this mournful question: *“How can you still hold back, LORD? How can you be silent and continue to humiliate us?”*
- When we are in desperate need, the silence of God in response to our prayer is a terrifying thing.
- But the truth is that God is **not** far away, and never has been.

The LORD Rejects the Apostate Israelites (65:1-7)

- All through Israel's history, even when they were too far gone in apostasy, or just sheer hopelessness, to seek him, he had always been seeking them.
- When he did hold himself back, it was only to spare them the full venting of the wrath they so richly deserved.
- But he had never ceased to reveal himself to them.
- Generation after generation he had sent his prophets to speak to them in his name, saying "*Here I am! Here I am!*".

The LORD Rejects the Apostate Israelites (65:1-7)

- But they had obstinately chosen their own ways rather than his and had sunk deeper and deeper into pagan superstition and uncleanness.
- They foolishly regarded these things as superior to a wholesome, simple trust in the LORD – a trust which should have marked them as his children.
- This is the reason their history had been such a long, dark tunnel – *not* because God was *far away*, but because they would not listen to him.

The LORD Rejects the Apostate Israelites (65:1-7)

- As chapter 65 opens, the LORD speaks in the first person, listing the charges that he brings against his people (vv. 1–5).
- He makes it clear that he must punish the nation for their wickedness – a people who “*blatantly offend*” him to his very face (v. 3) – otherwise he would not be a just God.
- Thus verses 6–7 conclude with a warning of impending punishment.

The LORD Brings Charges Against His People (65:1-5)

65:1 *"[I allowed myself to be sought by those who did not ask; I allowed myself to be found by those who did not seek.] I said, 'Here I am! Here I am!' to a nation that [was not called by] my name. ² I spread out my hands all day long to my rebellious people, who lived in a way that is morally unacceptable and who did what they desired. ³ These people continually and blatantly offend me as they sacrifice in their sacred orchards and burn incense on brick altars. ⁴ They sit among the tombs and keep watch all night long. They eat pork and broth from unclean sacrificial meat is in their pans. ⁵ They say, 'Keep to yourself! Don't get near me, for I am holier than you!' These people are like smoke in my nostrils, like a fire that keeps burning all day long.*

65:1 “[I allowed myself to be sought by those who did not ask; I allowed myself to be found by those who did not seek.] I said, ‘Here I am! Here I am!’ to a nation that [was not called by] my name.

- The one speaking here is the LORD, and the fact that his speech is given *immediately after* a prayer addressed to him (by Isaiah) indicates that what he says here is to be understood as a *response* to the *complaints* brought against him in that prayer.
- But of *whom* does the LORD speak—the *nations* or *Israel*?
- Many modern translations follow the example of the Septuagint and other early versions by rendering the last line of the verse as “*to a nation that does not call on my name*”.
- Those who translate the last phrase in this way then go on to argue that the verbs “*I allowed myself to be sought*” and “*I allowed myself to be found*” should be understood in a *potential* (but not actual) sense.
- In other words: “I was *ready* to be sought / found”. (cf. ESV)

65:1 “[I allowed myself to be sought by those who did not ask; I allowed myself to be found by those who did not seek.] I said, ‘Here I am! Here I am!’ to a nation that [was not called by] my name.

- However, the Hebrew text does not apply this verse to Israel, nor does Paul in Romans 10:20–21, where he cites the first two lines of this verse along with 65:2, relating them respectively to the Gentiles and to the Jews.
- “*a nation that [was not called by] my name*” can **only** refer to non-Israelites.
- Furthermore, the first two lines strongly indicate that there was **not** just a **willingness** on the LORD’s part to be approached, but that those who sought to approach the LORD **actually succeeded** in doing so.

65:1 “[I allowed myself to be sought by those who did not ask; I allowed myself to be found by those who did not seek.] I said, ‘Here I am! Here I am!’ to a nation that [was not called by] my name.

- “*Those who did not ask [for me]*” and “*those who did not seek [me]*” – refer to a desire to seek the LORD in obedience and worship (cf. 31:1).
- Such behavior had not characterized the Gentile nations in Old Testament times, yet the LORD let himself be sought and found by them in large numbers after the coming of Christ.
- The LORD points to this acceptance of the Gentiles as a ***proof*** that he is willing to be approached.
- Indeed, he actively called for their attention by saying, “*Here I am!*” (literally, “Behold me”), just as he had once done to Israel (cf. 40:9; 52:6; 58:9).

65:1 “[I allowed myself to be sought by those who did not ask; I allowed myself to be found by those who did not seek.] I said, ‘Here I am! Here I am!’ to a nation that [was not called by] my name.

- Through the proclamation of the gospel the LORD drew to himself those (Gentiles) who had previously been unaware of him.
- How *much more* would his approachability, invitation and welcome have been extended to his covenant people if they had not persisted in their rebellion!
- Introducing the nations here also anticipates their inclusion in the final scene of 66:18–24.

65:2 *I spread out my hands all day long to my rebellious people, who lived in a way that is morally unacceptable and who did what they desired.*

- Here the LORD reviews his dealings with *Israel*.
- To “*spread out*” one’s “*hands*” was something that *people* did as a gesture of the prayer and supplication of to *God* (cf. 1:15; Exod 9:29; Ps 143:6; Ezra 9:5).
- But here, in a *startling reversal*, it describes the *LORD* spreading out his hands in supplication to his *people*!
- And he does this *continually* (“*all day long*”), as he entreats the people and invites them to listen to his message and respond (cf. Prov 1:24).
- However, it has been to no avail: no reaction is forthcoming from his rebellious people.

65:2 *I spread out my hands all day long to my rebellious people, who lived in a way that is morally unacceptable and who did what they desired.*

- The Israelites are defiantly “*rebellious*” in their disposition (cf. 1:23).
- They “*lived in a way*” that was “*morally unacceptable*” because what they were doing was *contrary* to the LORD’s commands, and would ultimately lead to their death.
- They were stubbornly determined to carry through on “*what they desired*” for *themselves* rather than what **God** desired of them (cf. 55:7; 59:7; Jer 18:12).

65:3 *These people continually and blatantly offend me as they sacrifice in their sacred orchards and burn incense on brick altars.*

- Here he gives a general description of the people's misconduct followed by a list of specific offences, all of which we know historically is an accurate description of the Israelites behavior prior to the Babylonian exile.
- *“These people continually and blatantly offend me”* describes acting in a deliberately infuriating manner – particularly by worshipping idols, which stirs up divine wrath (cf. Deut 4:25; 9:18; 31:29).
- They were ***brazenly*** engaging in worship that had been prohibited by the LORD.

65:3 *These people continually and blatantly offend me as they sacrifice in their sacred orchards and burn incense on brick altars.*

- Those who engaged in these idolatrous activities were not the *least bit hesitant* to acknowledge their involvement in these things, arguing that they were permissible.
- *“they sacrifice in their sacred orchards”* (cf. 1:29; 66:17) – the Israelites would go to certain “sacred” groves where there would be evergreen trees which, as symbols of life, played a major role in Canaanite pagan rituals (cf. 57:5).

65:3 *These people continually and blatantly offend me as they sacrifice in their sacred orchards and burn incense on brick altars.*

- Just as the “*orchards*” were an unauthorized place for sacrificing, so “*bricks*” were an unauthorized material for an “*altar*”:
 - *If you make me an altar of stone, you must not build it of stones shaped with tools, for if you use your tool on it you have defiled it.* (Exodus 20:25 see also Dt 27:5-6; Josh 8:31).
- Later on, Isaiah will make further condemnations, but he starts here with basic violations of religious practice, for disobedience often begins at a point where obedience would be easy but we don't think it's *important*, so we don't do it.

65:4 *They sit among the tombs and keep watch all night long. They eat pork and broth from unclean sacrificial meat is in their pans.*

- The catalogue of offences continues as he next condemns the practice of *necromancy*, where they attempted to obtain information about the future by contacting the dead.
- The practice was widespread in surrounding nations but forbidden in Deuteronomy 18:11.
- “*They sit among the tombs*” in an attempt to get close to the spirits of the dead who were buried there by sitting among their tombs.
- “*and keep watch all night long*” refers to the pagan practice of staying overnight at a shrine or some sacred spot in an effort to establish contact with the deity worshipped there.

65:4 *They sit among the tombs and keep watch all night long. They eat pork and broth from unclean sacrificial meat in their pans.*

- The consumption of “*pork*” was forbidden in the Law (cf. Lev 11:7–8; Deut 14:8).
- “*broth from unclean sacrificial meat*” refers to meat that did not meet the standard for ceremonial purity (cf. Ezek 4:14).
- Isaiah is describing what he saw around him as the Israelites adopted Canaanite pagan practices and abandoned the distinctive worship by which the LORD had marked them out as his special people.

65:5 *They say, 'Keep to yourself! Don't get near me, for I am holier than you!' These people are like smoke in my nostrils, like a fire that keeps burning all day long.*

- These words are spoken in sanctimonious fashion by the false worshippers, warning any who approached them: *"Keep to yourself! Don't get near me"*
- They are unashamed of their perversion of true worship because they consider their conduct to be a legitimate expression of their religious freedom.
- Furthermore, they believe that these distinct religious practices made them *superior* to those who didn't join them (*"I am holier than you!"*), and that physical contact with others would have led to the speakers becoming polluted!
- These false worshippers constitute a permanent irritant to the LORD: *"These people are like smoke in my nostrils, like a fire that keeps burning all day long."*

Impending Punishments for Those Who Engage in False Worship (65:6-7)

65:6 Look, [it is written before me]: I will not keep silent, but will pay them back; I will pay them back exactly what they deserve, ⁷ for your sins and your ancestors' sins," says the LORD.

"Because they burned incense on the mountains and offended me on the hills, I will punish them in full measure."

65:6 *Look, [it is written before me]: I will not keep silent, but will pay them back; I will pay them back exactly what they deserve...*

- The remaining two verses of the section develop the thought that God will not remain passive in the face of prevailing sins that stain his people.
- He has recorded their misdeeds (“*it is written before me*”) as something that calls for action.
- They are scheduled for attention.
- God will not remain inactive: “*I will not keep silent, but will pay them back; I will pay them back exactly what they deserve*” (cf. 62:1; 64:12).

65:7 for your sins and your ancestors' sins," says the LORD. "Because they burned incense on the mountains and offended me on the hills, I will punish them in full measure."

- Israel had not learned from their punishments.
- Their sins had *accumulated* over the years, their "*ancestors*" having demonstrated similar wickedness
- For example, Solomon was criticized for offering sacrifices on the high places:
 - *Solomon demonstrated his loyalty to the LORD by following the practices of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places. (1 Kgs 3:3).*
- God considers the worship of false gods (the burning of sacrifices on the mountains) a direct affront to him ("*[they have] offended me*").

The Apostle Paul's
Citation of
Isaiah 65:1-2
in Romans 10:20-21

Isaiah 65:1 *“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’”*² *All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations-- (NIV)*

Romans 10:19 *Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, “I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.”*²⁰ *And Isaiah boldly says, “I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.”*²¹ *But concerning Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.” (NIV).*

Paul's Citation of Isaiah 65:1-2 in Romans 10:20-21

- The Apostle Paul's citation of Isaiah 65:1-2 in Romans 10:20-21 occurs in a section of Romans where he is discussing the rejection of the Jews and inclusion of the Gentiles as God's People. (Romans 9-11)
- In his discussion of this issue, Paul points out that Israel should have understood from their (Old Testament) Scriptures that there would come a time in history when they would reject God and that God would reveal Himself to other nations instead.
- Paul then goes on to cite two OT scriptures that make this point – one of them being Isaiah 65:1-2.

Romans 10:18-21 - Jews Rejected, Gentiles Included - The Old Testament Predicted Both

Paul points out that Israel should have understood from their (Old Testament) Scriptures that there would come a time in history when they would reject God and that God would reveal Himself to other nations instead:

10:19

Again I ask: Did Israel not understand?

[That they would reject God and God would turn to the Gentiles]?

[They should have! Paul cites two (2) places in the Old Testament where such an event was predicted]:

[1] *First, Moses says, [In Deuteronomy 32:21]*

"I [God] will make you [Israel] envious

by those who are not a nation [The Gentiles];

I [God] will make you [Israel] angry

by a nation that has no understanding [The Gentiles]."

Romans 10:18-21 - Jews Rejected, Gentiles Included - The Old Testament Predicted Both

[Paul points out that Israel should have understood from their (Old Testament) Scriptures that there would come a time in history when they would reject God and that God would reveal Himself to other nations instead]:

10:20

[2] *And Isaiah boldly says [in Isaiah 65:1],
"I [God] was found by those who did not seek me;
I [God] revealed myself to those who did not ask for me."*

10:21

*But concerning Israel He says [in Isaiah 65:2],
"All day long I have held out my hands
to a disobedient and obstinate people."*

Next Time

- I plan to cover *The New Heavens and the New Earth* (65:17-25)

Class Discussion Time

- In my discussion of the “minor” violations (e.g., using an altar made of bricks rather than uncut stones) of the false worshippers addressed in our text today, I made the point that disobedience often begins at a point where obedience would be easy but we don’t think it’s important, so we don’t do it.
- Do you find this to be true?
- Can you think of any examples of where this is happening in modern churches – where people adopt a practice that goes against what God has commanded because it goes against our modern sensibilities and so to us it doesn’t seem like a big deal?

Class Discussion Time

- In our lesson today we saw that the false worshippers that the LORD condemned were unashamed of their perversion of true worship because they consider their conduct to be a legitimate expression of their religious freedom.
- The Second London Baptist Confession of 1689 states: *“The acceptable way of worshiping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.”*
- Are there limits to what we can do in our worship services?
- Can you think of any examples of things that churches in our day include in their worship services that they shouldn't?