

Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel...for Lost Causes

Isaiah 64:1-9 (NIV)

¹ Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! ² As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! ³ For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. ⁴ Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. ⁵ You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? ⁶ All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. ⁷ No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins. ⁸ Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. ⁹ Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.

The prophecies of Isaiah are amazing not only for their message but moreso when you consider the timing of his writing. Isaiah's ministry begins around 740 BC, 20 years before the Assyrian army invaded and destroyed the 10 northern tribes of Israel. He prophesied that event and saw it happen. But Isaiah didn't stop there. He also prophesied that the Babylonian army will come later and siege and destroy Jerusalem in Judea and exile many of the people to Babylon.

This second conquest and exile would be worse than the first. The Jews would lose their hometown. King David would no longer have someone sitting on the throne in Jerusalem, and his offspring was supposed to rule over the nations forever. They would lose their temple, their whole worship life, all the sacrifices that foreshadowed that promised Messiah. They would essentially lose their entire identity. This wouldn't take place for about another 150 years, but it all happened the way the Lord had foretold through Isaiah.

It is in the prophesied aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews to Babylon that Isaiah records our words for today. "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you." (verses 1-3) C'mon, God. Where is that good ol' smiting of the past when you rained fire and brimstone down on Sodom and Gomorrah, when you brought the 10 plagues on the Egyptians, when you parted the Red Sea and closed it over Pharaoh's army? "You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways." (verse 5a) Come, Lord! Be with us and fight for us!

Don't we want this too? Do we pray a prayer like that? C'mon, Lord! Don't you see the enemies of the cross all around us? These false religions are gaining adherents, teaching people to reject who you are and what you have done for them. They're making our lives harder. Non-Christian worldviews are permeating society and changing the laws to suit their desires, their agenda. The world is eating away its moral fiber. If you don't intervene now, I'm afraid that we will lose it all. Come, Lord! Be with us and fight for us!

God is a God of justice. He will bring judgment upon his wicked enemies. But who are the wicked? "You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins." (verses 5-7)

Israel admits that they have continued to sin against God's ways. They know his commands, but they keep doing what is wrong. They are not the ones who gladly do right. Even the prophet himself, Isaiah, a man who God cleansed earlier in this book of prophecy, puts himself in the same crowd of Israelites. He's not standing to the side pointing fingers at all the rest of the nation of Israel; he is pointing a finger at himself. I continued to sin against the Lord's ways. I have become like one who is unclean. All my righteous acts are like filthy rags. If you come and judge me, then you'd sweep me away like a shriveled up, dead leaf. They are lost causes.

It is always easy to point to others as the problem, as if evil and sin are all their fault, that God should come and judge them, not us. Are we better than the Israelites? Are we better than Isaiah the prophet?

Not a few times I've been asked, "Can we do anything perfectly?" What do you think? Consider the best deeds you've done. Was the deed done perfectly, that there was absolutely no room for improvement? And I'm not talking about whether or not it was the best you could do. I'm talking about whether anyone could have done better than what you had done. Consider also, though, the motivation. Was there any ounce of you doing this deed for yourself, any hint of a self-serving motive behind it? Did you have only pure thoughts the entire time you went about doing it or did you, even if just for a microsecond flash, begrudge the task, not enjoy it, desire to not do it?

Isaiah reflects on his life as a prophet, and he confesses that all his righteous acts are like filthy rags. All the man of God's works are tarnished. He considers them something to be thrown away in a trash heap – and this is the best he has to offer, the closest to perfection he can muster. That is not just Isaiah's reality, but our reality when we realize just how thoroughly we are infected by sin. We come from imperfect, sinful parents. We are, therefore, incapable of producing anything of perfection on our own power and desire. We have an idea of what's perfect, that it's attainable, but the absolute best of us still can't achieve it. I am a lost cause of perfection.

So, on second thought, Lord, can you cancel that request to rend the heavens and come down? Because if you come in judgment based on the best I can do, I have to own my sins and my imperfections. As a lost cause whose most righteous acts, my best personal efforts, are filthy rags, I will be cast aside from you.

Are we lost causes before God? Was Israel? Was Isaiah? No. They had hope, a hope that would be realized in God rending the heavens and coming down to be with them, being Emmanuel, God with us.

"Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." (verse 8) Lord, you made us perfect, and we messed it up. You gave us life even though we are completely and thoroughly infected by sin. And you did so much more than that. You promised that would take care of our sin. You promised that one would be born of King David's royal line who would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. You showed us through all those blood sacrifices the payment you would make to take away our sin, to drench our sins in the payment of your blood, atoning for every single one of them. You did this to bring us into your family, that you are our Father – not by virtue of having created us, but by virtue of having reconciled us to you and clothing us with your perfection given through the Messiah, the Christ.

Our hope is the same as Israel's and Isaiah's: "Do not be angry beyond measure, LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people." (verse 9) A father does not just disown his delinquent and disobedient children immediately when they show imperfection and sin. No, he continues to love us, continues to serve us. We ask, we petition, that God would remember that he has wiped out our debt of sin with his life and his blood and thus remembers our sins no more. Even though we are thoroughly sinful lost causes, we look for the sign of our deliverance: the Emmanuel, the God with us, the one who was perfect for us, who reconciled us to you by his perfect life and the shedding of his precious blood. Therefore, do not remember our sins because he has dealt with them, paid for them. He is the one who came for lost causes so that the Israelites would not be lost, that Isaiah would not be lost, that we would not be lost.

Brothers and sisters, your life is not a lost cause of sin and imperfection because you have been washed clean of all of your sins by the blood of the Lamb. You have also been covered in the perfection of the Emmanuel, the God with us. This makes us totally different. Instead of being lost causes you can do nothing but things tainted with sin, now everything we do is covered in Jesus' perfection. We actually do perfect works because we live and move and have our being in what Emmanuel has done for us. This means that even the things that you've done which you know you could have done better on, the things that you did having moments when you didn't want to do them, the things you did with just a hint of self-serving interest to them, God rejoices over them, not as your best try but as perfect deeds covered with the perfection of Emmanuel.

We are not lost causes to the Lord because we put our hope in the Emmanuel. He has already come once and paid for our sins and covered us with his perfection. This makes us ready for when Emmanuel comes the second time when he will rend the heavens and make his name known to his enemies and judge them. We will be found perfect because Emmanuel has come to put his perfection on lost causes like us, Isaiah, and the Israelites. Amen.