

Isaiah 65

The LORD's answer

1. Introduction

Praying is not an easy thing to do, especially not if you get the feeling that you are not always going to receive an answer. Does the Lord actually hear your prayers? Does he do something with it? In Isaiah 63 and 64 we find a fervent prayer of someone who has the feeling that heaven is closed. We find the climax of this prayer in 64:1: *Oh, that you would rend the heavens.*

In Chapter 65 we read God's answer to that prayer.

He certainly hears the prayers of his people, but his answer is determined by the attitude of his people. It is possible that the attitude of the people forms an impediment to a positive answer. God's answer points this out too. His answer contains not only a promise, but also a threat. The answer "discriminates": the LORD distinguishes between the obedient and the disobedient among his people.

2. General remarks

1. *The answer of the LORD?*

Is Chapter 65 indeed an answer from the LORD to the previous prayer? There are different opinions about this.

J. Ridderbos, who expressed the opinion that the previous chapter could have been written by a disciple of Isaiah (see Outline 8 Section 2), poses that this chapter was written in Isaiah's time. Through the working of the Holy Spirit these chapters were blended into a beautiful unity when this book was put together at a later date. Ridderbos comes to this conclusion because the circumstances that are described do not really fit in the time after the exile (see next subsection).

C. Vonk is of the opinion that both the prayer and the answer apply to the time of Isaiah. The Spirit revealed to Isaiah the future circumstances of the people so that he wrote this prayer in such a way that Israel would later take this prayer on their lips. The answer of the LORD also was revealed at that time, in order to serve as admonition and comfort for the people who lived in the time after the exile (see Outline 8 Section 2). Over against Ridderbos, Vonk is of the opinion that the words of the LORD in Isaiah 65 are a direct answer to the previous prayer. The connection between the two cannot be denied. The answer of the LORD certainly corresponds well with the preceding prayer. The prayer makes it clear that years of sin have created a chasm between the LORD and his people. But there are also those among the people who still seek the LORD sincerely. In his answer the LORD emphasizes that he will punish the unrighteousness, and that his purified people may look forward to a glorious future.

2. *Which time frame?*

In Chapter 8 we said that it is likely that this prayer was uttered in the time after Isaiah. It probably

should be dated in the time of the exile. If this supposition is correct, we may conclude that the LORD's answer is dated around the same time.

Considering the thriving idol worship (see 65:3-5, 11) some would argue that the circumstances described in Chapter 65 do not fit the time of the exile and the time shortly after. However, little can be said for certain about the gods Gad and Meni, who are mentioned by name in verse 11. It is quite possible that the Israelites, who had stayed behind in Canaan, continued to serve these idols. It is also possible that the Israelites who had returned from exile had "imported" some foreign gods. Furthermore, we have to remember that God not only points to current sins, for the people have a complete history of sins behind them. This is clear in the previous chapter (64:5-7) as well as in 65:7, where the sins of the fathers are expressly mentioned.

The purpose of the exile was to purify the people. Perhaps we may picture it this way that this fervent prayer in Chapter 63 and 64 was offered up shortly after the deportation of the people and the destruction of the land. In his answer the LORD proclaims that he will continue with his people, but that first the judgement on the idol worship has to be executed. That would also explain the twofold answer that contains condemnation as well as a blessing.

3. Condemnation and blessing

It becomes clear from God's answer that he makes a separation between the people. He speaks of judgement as well as blessing. It is a proclamation of judgement in verse 6 and 11-12, while 9-10 and 17-25 speak of far-reaching blessings. God makes a definite distinction in judgement in verse 8 and 13-16. God's judgement is not arbitrary. He is a God who is faithful in curse and blessing. He acts according to the agreements made when he established the covenant with his people.

We actually find the same pattern in Isaiah 65 as in Deuteronomy 28 where God promises a blessing for obedience and a curse for disobedience. Those who are cursed are addressed directly by the LORD. It speaks about the blessed ones in the third person singular (except in verse 18). This could be explained by the fact that the LORD needed to rebuke the generation of that particular time. The punishment is in progress. But it is certain that the LORD will afterwards continue with the remnant of his people in the way of blessing.

We may note that in this chapter the blessing surpasses the curse.

4. A new heaven and a new earth

In the final two chapters of Isaiah the LORD promises that he will create a new heaven and a new earth (65:17 and 66:22). It also mentions a few things about life there.

What does the LORD mean to tell us here? Does he point to what will happen at the resurrection or does it just mean that the LORD will bring about a remarkable change in the situation of his people? New exegetes are of the latter opinion.

I believe it is incorrect to make a sharp contrast here. On the one hand it cannot be denied that the LORD speaks about recreating heaven and earth. The apostle Peter quotes these words when he says: "in keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13).

He alludes here to what God has promised in the past; so we may draw the conclusion that the words of Isaiah 65 indeed refer to that future event.

On the other hand, you may ask to what extent the people who heard these words, understood the far-reaching significance. The progress of God's revelation is like the rising of the sun. In that light it becomes progressively clearer what God is aiming at. Peter probably understood these words better than Israel in the time of exile. He himself says that the prophets searched diligently to find out the time and what God was pointing to in the words they were allowed to pass on. With longing they tried to see the things that have been announced to us (1 Peter 1:10-12).

We can be sure that the LORD meant to awaken great expectations among his people. He will give restoration by way of return from exile, and continued in the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. Also here we can think of a telescopic perspective (see Outline 2 Section 2 and Outline 7 Section 2).

3. Annotations to the text

Verse 1-2

The prayer in Chapter 63 and 64 tells us that the people do not experience God's presence: Where is he (63:11)? In his answer the LORD sheds a different light on the situation: He definitely could be *found* and he would have revealed himself to them. God has not withdrawn himself from his people. But the people themselves have as it were, drawn the curtains of heaven from underneath, by not seeking him diligently anymore. If they had sought advice, God would have given it. If they had asked for him, they would have found him and he would have intervened.

The words "all day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people" show how much the LORD cared for his people; in love he even continues to seek a rebellious people. But a nation that goes its own way bypasses the LORD.

These verses are quoted by Paul in Romans 10:20-21. It is remarkable that he applies verse 1 to the heathens who pay heed to the gospel and verse 2 to Israel that remains in unbelief. In Isaiah both verses apply to the people of Israel.

The LORD points out the sins of the people; they are "pursuing their own imaginations". They continue to do so and the following verses fill this in even further.

Verse 3-5a

A list of horrendous sins follows in verse 3-5a.

The people provoke the LORD. They defiantly continue to do the things God abhors.

We do not know for sure what kind of idol worship verse 3 is referring to. Perhaps it is the sacrificing to gods who provided fertility of the land, in order to implore them for a good harvest.

There are others, who want to make contact with the dead. By staying overnight among the graves (hewn out of the rocks) they hope to receive revelations in their dreams. The LORD had expressly

forbidden them to practice these things (cf. Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:11).

They eat pork (see the prohibition in Leviticus 11:7; Deuteronomy 14:8) and save unclean foods. Those who practise these things consider themselves holy: others may not even come near them.

Verse 5b-7

The LORD is not going to stand by silently. *Smoke* and *fire* are symbols of God's wrath. This anger is aroused by the sins of the people. The judgement is certain: God wrote it, as it were, in his book. The LORD will not keep silent. Compare Chapter 64:12 where the question is asked: Will God be silent, now that the intercessor has so fervently laid the needs of the people before him? The LORD answers that he will not be silent. But this reaction is not exactly what the intercessor had in mind. First the sentence they deserved fully will be meted out. The LORD will measure full payment into their lap. This expression refers to the custom of putting their money in a pouch that was carried between the folds of their robes, close to the girdle.

Sin is repeating itself. The forefathers had sacrificed on the high places (cf. 2 Kings 23:8), their descendants added idol worship to that. Now the measure is full and the LORD is ready to execute the sentence.

Verse 8-10

Yet the LORD will not completely destroy his people. He makes that clear with a parable. When a cluster of grapes still has some juice left in it, it is not thrown away of course. In the same way God will not destroy his people because of the good that he finds. But he makes a distinction: the pressed-out grapes are thrown out while the precious juice is saved. The LORD treasures the people, Jacob, whom he has chosen. But through judgement he will purify them. He continues with those who are faithful, his servants, and he fulfils his promises to them.

That promise implies that he gives them their land for a possession again. Sharon is a large plain along the coast to the south of mountain Carmel. These plains were well known for being fruitful and their excellent pastureland. King David let his herds graze there (1 Chronicles 27:29). The Valley of Achor was in the neighbourhood of Jericho and was more or less the gateway to Judah. The name means "the valley of misfortune." Achan was stoned there (see Joshua 7:24-25). Hosea 2:15 says that the LORD will make this valley "a door of hope", which confirms what Isaiah says here. The people who seek the LORD will live here in peace and quiet again.

Verse 11-12

But as for [those] who forsake the LORD and forget [his] holy mountain, they will suffer his judgement. They have exchanged the LORD for the idols Gad and Meni. We cannot say much with certainty about these gods. Gad probably was the god of good fortune, who was worshipped widely in and around Canaan. Meni was probably a god of fortune as well, a god of destiny. In that case there could be a play on words with regard to his name: the Hebrew word for destiny has the same consonants as the name Meni. The LORD will destine those who serve the gods of fortune for his judgement: they will be killed by the sword. In spite of the fact that God repeatedly called and warned them, they went their own way and chose the things he abhorred; therefore they will receive their just reward.

Verse 13-16

The misery which God will bring upon these idol worshippers, is expressed in the contrast made in these verses: God's servants will eat and drink, they will rejoice and sing out of the joy of their hearts. But the idol worshippers will be thirsty and hungry, they will be put to shame and cry out from anguish of heart and wail in brokenness of spirit. In light of what follows after verse 17, we can also take these words as a description of the agony of hell (cf. Matthew 22:13; Mark 9:47-48).

The chosen ones will use the name of the condemned as a curse. That means that the one who is cursed will be cursed with the same curse as the condemned person mentioned.

Over against that, the servants of God will receive "another name". Compare Revelation 2:17 and 3:12 as well as Isaiah 62:2. Receiving a new name expresses that God completely redeems them, gives them a new life: therefore a new name is fitting in order to manifest the redemptive work of God.

The blessings God bestows upon his servants confirm his faithfulness. Therefore his name shall be used to bless and for swearing an oath. They may bless themselves in the God who makes a definite end to all misery: the books are closed.

Verse 17-20

A new era begins. The rest of the chapter is devoted to the glorious future prepared by God for his people. The LORD is going to "create new heavens and a new earth" (see also 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). The promise of the LORD at the end of the book of Isaiah is rather unique in the Old Testament. It is true that new things are mentioned earlier in Isaiah (see Outline 6 Section 2). God will redeem his people. He brings them back to the promised land. But there is much more in store. Because of the work of the Servant of the LORD a new period of complete salvation will commence for God's people. It will culminate in the creation of the new heaven and the new earth. What the prophets in a few words foretell is often fulfilled in several stages (see Section 2).

Life in this new creation is characterized by joy. Jerusalem is created to be a delight; there will be no more sorrow and grief (see Revelation 21:1-8). God and his people are one in their joy.

Even death will be abolished. This is not said in so many words, but the mention of the absence of infant mortality and reaching a very old age definitely imply eternal life where death will be no more.

In the RSV, the final words of verse 20 sound a little strange in this context. Since God has already executed his judgement on them, will there still be sinners on the new earth? The word *sinner* in this verse would be better translated as in the NIV: *he who fails to reach a hundred (years)*. Linguistically this translation is possible and fits the original meaning of the word *sin* as *missing the mark*; therefore, he who does not become a hundred years old is considered *accursed*. Isaiah uses these somewhat cryptic-looking words to show that the curse of death has lost its power over the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem.

Verse 21-23

Here we read more about life on the new earth. Nothing will be built *in vain* and all work will have a purpose.

Building a house and not being allowed to live in it, and planting a vineyard without being allowed to eat its fruit, is considered a serious curse (see Deuteronomy 28:30; cf. Amos 5:11; 9:14). Either an enemy takes possession of all that you have built with your own hands, or you die before you have a chance to enjoy it.

But the LORD has taken care of the enemies and death will be no more. The days of the people will be like those of the trees and trees seem to have eternal life.

The LORD blesses those whom he has chosen, as well as their descendants, with prosperity and peace forever.

Verse 24

For the third time this chapter speaks about calling and answering. In verse 1 and 12 it appears that communication is cut off. Verse 24 speaks of a perfect relationship between the LORD and his people. The LORD attends to all the needs of his people by answering them even before they call.

Verse 25

The last verse describes the paradise-like setting of the new earth. Here and there we find literal references to Isaiah 11:6-9. The harmony in the animal world reflects the perfect relationships that will reign on the new earth between the LORD and his chosen servants. There will be no more evil on the “holy mountain” of the LORD.

Do the words “dust will be the serpent’s food” refer to Genesis 3:14? If they do, it would mean that the curse over the serpent is carried out forever. It could also simply mean that the serpents will be harmless. Isaiah 11:8 says that an infant will play near the hole of the cobra and that a young child will put his hand into the viper’s nest. Like the lion who will eat straw, so the serpent shall eat dust and not attack the children.

4. The meaning for today

The prayer of Isaiah 63 and 64 is a fervent plea for the LORD to intervene and change things for the better. The answer of the LORD makes clear that his salvation is not to be taken for granted. His answer speaks of judgement as well as promise. The LORD makes a clear distinction among his people. He judges those who have forsaken him and he continues with those who seek him, who are his servants. Through judgement he purifies his people so that a new generation appears. God wants to live with them in a new creation.

These words of the LORD show that we have no right to take him for granted. The LORD does not just hand out salvation to all his people, or to the whole church. Salvation is received in the way of faith and repentance. No one can hide behind his baptism or his church membership as if that would give automatic admission into heaven. A member of God’s people also has to show the marks of a true believer (cf. BC, Art. 29).

The preaching of the Word should never give the impression that salvation can be taken for granted.

There must be the call to faith and repentance. Also in the preaching of the New Testament there has to be room for a proclamation of judgement, not to frighten anyone but to call to self-examination and repentance. It has to stimulate us to seek the LORD sincerely. We enter through a narrow gate.

This does not mean that a sermon should be full of hell and damnation. The proclamation of judgement should serve the preaching of the glad tidings. Isaiah 65 emphasizes the promises of salvation. God wants to take his people to a glorious future. It is his heartfelt desire to rejoice together with his people on the new earth.

We also should make it our aim to live for that future. We may even pray for that future, but not as if God owes it to us. When we pray we should examine ourselves to see if God can answer our prayers, not because God would not have the power to do so, but because our actions can be an obstacle to his answer. Those who seek the LORD with their whole heart may with great expectation look forward to the fulfillment of God's glorious promises.

5. Suggestions for the introduction and preparatory study

1. Find the (geographical) names in this chapter in a concordance, a Bible dictionary or Bible atlas. Show that these places really exist.
2. Isaiah 65 speaks of curse and blessing. In connection with this compare Deuteronomy 28. Note the similarities between these chapters. What is an obvious difference?
3. Compare Isaiah 65 with 11:6-10. Also find out what Revelation 21 and 22 say about the new heaven and the new earth.

6. Ideas for the discussion

1. God continuously reaches down to his people (see verse 1-2). Are there other instances in Israel's history where God is indeed ready to listen to his people, but they do not seek him?
2. Can you make a comparison between the attitude of the LORD as it is portrayed to us in verse 1-2, and that of the father in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)? What does this tell us about the LORD? What conclusions we can draw from this for ourselves?
3. Isaiah 65 is an answer to prayer, in which the LORD distinguishes between his people. Should the sermons today show this distinction as well? (In other words, should the sermon be directed to different categories of listeners, such as, the doubters, the unbelievers, and the sincere believers?)
4. The Reformed Churches are sometimes accused of "covenant-automatism" (the idea that everyone who has been baptized and as such belongs to the covenant, will automatically be saved). Is this accusation justified? How could a covenant-automatism mindset be avoided?
5. What place must God's judgement have in the preaching today? How does it affect us when we hear the threat of judgement in a sermon?

6. Verse 18 tells us that the LORD creates Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. What conclusion can you draw from that for the singing of the church today?
7. How can you in your life here and now rightly express your expectation of the new earth?
8. How may we picture life on the new earth, based on what this chapter tells us?

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