



## Sermon Transcript

### November 4, 2018

# Hospitable God, Hospitable People

## Rend the Heavens and Come Down!

Isaiah 63:7-64:12

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on November 4, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**Isaiah 63:7-64:12**

**63:7** I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. <sup>8</sup> For he said, “Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely.” And he became their Savior. <sup>9</sup> In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. <sup>10</sup> But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them. <sup>11</sup> Then he remembered the days of old, of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put in the midst of them his Holy Spirit, <sup>12</sup> who caused his glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, <sup>13</sup> who led them through the depths? Like a horse in the desert, they did not stumble. <sup>14</sup> Like livestock that go down into the valley, the Spirit of the Lord gave them rest. So you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name.

<sup>15</sup> Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful habitation. Where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me. <sup>16</sup> For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. <sup>17</sup> O Lord, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. <sup>18</sup> Your holy people held possession for a little while; our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary. <sup>19</sup> We have become like those over whom you have never ruled, like those who are not called by your name.

**64:1** Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— <sup>2</sup> as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence! <sup>3</sup> When you did awesome things that we did not look for, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. <sup>4</sup> From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him. <sup>5</sup> You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways. Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? <sup>6</sup> We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our

righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. <sup>7</sup> There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.

<sup>8</sup> But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. <sup>9</sup> Be not so terribly angry, O Lord, and remember not iniquity forever. Behold, please look, we are all your people. <sup>10</sup> Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. <sup>11</sup> Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. <sup>12</sup> Will you restrain yourself at these things, O Lord? Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?

## Introduction

Our passage this morning is a prayer. D. A. Carson suggests that this prayer is one of the great intercessory prayers of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> The central cry of this prayer is found in Isaiah 64:1-2. Here Isaiah prays, *“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!”*

Here is the great thing about this prayer. It is a prayer that confesses that unless God shows up, we can’t do anything. We can’t save ourselves. We can’t change ourselves. On our own, we can’t accomplish the mission of bringing Christ to the nations through our strategies and through our missionary efforts. But this thing we can do. This thing we must do. We must pray. *“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down!”*

This is true for the persecuted church. It is their earnest prayer. Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Today, all over the world, the church is pausing to remember and to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who suffer simply because of their faith in Christ. I was reading this week about how in China, the government is once again stepping up its efforts to suppress the church in China. Under the current administration of President Xi, some prominent churches have been torn down. One of those churches was the 50,000 member church called “The Golden Lampstand” in the Shanxi Province. In many churches, crosses are being replaced on the top of steeples with the national flag and inside the crosses are being

replaced with pictures of President Xi. Reflecting on the increased repression of the church in China, Mark Galli said, “God has given us one clear unparalleled action to take when persecution occurs: Pray.”<sup>2</sup>

Scottish theologian, T. F. Torrance put it this way in his commentary on the book of Revelation. “The prayers of the saints and the fire of God move the whole course of the world. They are the most potent, most disturbing, most revolutionary, most terrifying power that the world knows . . . All history moves at the impulse of prayer.”<sup>3</sup> Do you believe that about prayer? Is it your conviction that “all history moves at the impulse of prayer?” The persecuted church depends on that. Part of what gives birth to this prayer in Isaiah is the suffering that God’s people face from the external forces in this world. They are a people in exile. In Isaiah 63:18 they cry out, *“our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary.”* And at the end of the prayer in Isaiah 64:10-11 they lament, *“Your holy cities have become a wilderness; Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.”* In the midst of their exile they cry out, *“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down.”*

The challenge for the church in the West is different. Compared to our persecuted brothers and sisters in the church, we really don’t know what it means to suffer for the cause of Christ. Our problem is more internal. We depend more on our programs and our activity than we do on prayer. Consequently, Eugene Peterson suggests that our “attention is subverted from what God is doing to what we are doing.” Peterson goes on to say, “God’s repeated assurance is this: Nothing that we do has more effect in heaven and earth”<sup>4</sup> This internal spiritual lethargy and self dependency seems to also mark the people Isaiah is writing to. In Isaiah 64:7 he says of them, *“There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you.”* Who are we kidding? We can have the outer form of religion, but without prayer, we lack the power.

Leonard Ravenhill was a 20<sup>th</sup> century English evangelist who wrote a lot about prayer and revival. He had this message for the church in the West. He said, “No man is greater than his prayer life. The pastor who is not praying is playing; the people who are not praying are straying. We have many organizers, but few agonizers; many players and payers, few pray-ers; many singers, few clingers; lots of pastors, few wrestlers; many fears, few tears; much fashion, little passion; many interferers, few intercessors; many writers, but few fighters. Failing here, we fail everywhere.”<sup>5</sup> For the church in the West, for Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church, who wants to see God move in this region with an increased gospel presence, we must remember where the power lies. *“Oh that*

*you would rend the heavens and come down.”*

With this in mind, I want us to consider the role this prayer plays as we wait for God to fulfill his promises and his purposes. I like the way Motyer describes these final chapters of the book of Isaiah. He titles them, “steps to the new heaven and new earth.” In these final chapters he sees “a praying church” and “a promising God.”<sup>6</sup> If anything, he is reminding us that as we walk towards the new heaven and the new earth, we do so on our knees. So as we walk this journey, this prayer tells us why we should pray and what we should pray.

### **Why we should pray**

So let's begin with the question, “Why?” Why should we pray? Why should we join Isaiah here and pray that God “*would rend the heavens and come down.*” To answer this question, we need to pull back and look at how this passage fits in the broader context of Isaiah. In doing so, we discover that the reason why we need to pray is because of who we are: we are watchmen, waiting for God to make his name and his glory known to the ends of the earth. This is why we pray “*Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*”

We are watchmen: A couple of weeks ago, in Isaiah 62, we heard how God was making a way for all people to be able to come to him. It was a wonderful picture of a highway that was being built and how God's salvation was reaching the ends of the earth. Access was now being open for anyone—anywhere to come to God. Interestingly, in order to accomplish his purposes for this world, God established watchmen on the walls of the city. For what purpose? It is their role to pray. In fact, the consistency of their prayer is to be without ceasing. They are to give God no rest. It says in Isaiah 62:6-7, “*On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen; all the day and all the night they shall never be silent. You who put the Lord in remembrance, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth.*”

We were reminded a couple of weeks ago that when God invites us to “not give him any rest” in our prayers it was not because God is prone to forget to do what he has promised to do. But it is because “our prayers are, by his will, in some way a vital ingredient in the implementing of his promise.”<sup>7</sup> As James tells us in James 5:16, “*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*” In fact that is what Isaiah says in our prayer in Isaiah 64:4-5, God “*acts for those who wait for him. You meet him who joyfully works righteousness, those who remember you in your ways.*” So we pray

that God would “*rend the heavens and come down*” because God has chosen to use our prayers to accomplish his will. Do you want to be used of God in this world? Pray.

In the early church there were fixed hours for prayer. Some still observe what is called “the daily office.” These three prescribed hours for prayer were inherited from the practice of Jewish worshipers who were under Roman authority. Three times a day they prayed: 6:00 am, noon and 3:00 pm. In Acts, we see Peter observing these patterns for prayer and over time in the early church fixed hours and fixed prayers were observed by Christians. By the third century, the monks devised a strategy of having one group of monks pass the praying of these prayers to another group of monks waiting to begin their prayers. The result was the introduction into Christian thinking of the concept of a continuous cascade of prayer before the throne of God. (We have held 24 hour prayer vigils here, where for 24 hours continuous prayer cascades before God. Imagine 24 hours a day—365 days a year—year after year.) “Christians today wherever they practice the discipline of fixed hour prayer, frequently find themselves filled with a conscious awareness that they are handing their worship, at its final “Amen,” on to other Christians in the next time zone. Like relay runners passing a lighted torch, those who do the work of fixed hour prayer create a continuous cascade of praise before the throne of God.”<sup>8</sup> God is establishing his watchmen on the walls. Have you found your place along the wall? Are you part of the continuous cascade of prayer coming from God’s people all over the world? It is a wonderful picture. Pick any time. Pick any place. But by all means—get a place on the wall and pray.

We are waiting: We join these watchmen in prayer because we are a waiting people. In fact the context of this prayer comes from a people who are not home. They are in exile. In this prayer the temple is destroyed and the land is desolate. That is us. We are sojourners longing to go home. In fact, Isaiah repeats a pattern throughout his book that reminds us that we are living in the “not yet.” He often gives us a glimpse of the glory that is to come, and then he will quickly bring us back down to earth to remind us we are not there yet. It is coming. But we are living in the “not yet.” We are living in exile. Last week, we got a glimpse of that day when the Divine Warrior—Jesus— comes and brings the final judgment of God. But here we are this morning, in the very next chapter being reminded that we are not there yet. But even though we are not there yet, it is very clear that God is rending the heavens and he is making his glory known among the peoples. As sojourners who are waiting for God to fulfill his purpose we are to pray with our eyes on the promises of God.

We are witnesses: This really gets to the heart of why we need to pray. As watchmen

who are waiting for the Divine Warrior—who will someday “rend the heavens and come down in glory and bring the promises of God to completion—but we also know that today is the day of God’s favor and people all over the world are turning in faith to Christ. In fact, when Isaiah prays *“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down”* he states the reason why he makes this prayer at the end of verse 2. He says, *“to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!”* I wonder if when Isaiah prays this prayer if he is not thinking back to Isaiah 6 when he actually saw the glory of the Lord. Do you remember what the angels sang as they worshiped God? *“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Host; the whole earth is full of his glory.”* And so when this God asked, *“Whom shall I send?”* Isaiah said, *“Here am I! Send me!”* Send me where? Into this world, into the “not yet” - that we might make known to this world the glory and the fame of Jesus. Remember, that is how Isaiah 56-66 both begins and ends. It begins and ends with the righteous foreigners—that is us!!! - around the throne of God worshipping the living God.

That is why we are to pray! We want the fame and the glory of God—the salvation of God that is freely offered in Jesus—to spread throughout the nations. That is our calling until Jesus takes us home. That is why we occupy space at 511 Maple Street. We are to shine the light of Jesus to this community. That is why we want to see an increased gospel presence in this region through church planting. That is why we participate in missions. But none of this can be done apart from prayer. *“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down”* Grab your spot on the wall and pray!

### **What we should pray**

One of my convictions about prayer is that God is not just interested that we pray. In other words, God is not just interested that we find a place along the wall as a watchman. But is also interested in what we pray. When the disciples come and ask Jesus to teach them to pray, I am intrigued by how Jesus responds to their request. He turns to them and says, *“When you pray, say . . .”* And then he gives them the words to say—the Lord’s Prayer. The *Didache* is an ancient document of the church written in the first century of the church. The full title of this book was “The Teaching of the Apostles.” It was the primer for discipleship in the first four centuries of the church. Here they disciple was instructed to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times a day. Why? Because God is concerned with what we pray. You never go wrong praying for God’s name to be hallowed, God kingdom to come, God’s will to be done. You never go wrong lifting the needs of others, confessing your sin and asking for God’s grace to resist temptation. The Bible is full of prayers to help us as we take our place along the wall as watchmen.

Since our passage this morning is a prayer, I don't want to just talk about prayer. I want us to pray this morning. At the end of the service, I will be asking for four volunteers to come forward to lead us in prayer. We will be using this prayer in Isaiah as our template to guide us in what we pray. So listen closely as I share with you the four aspects of prayer found in Isaiah's prayer. I will ask each volunteer to take one of these aspects of prayer and to lead us as we seek God to *rend the heavens and come down*.

Recount what God has done: The first thing we encounter in Isaiah's prayer is a prayer of praise. He recounts what God has done. He begins by saying in Isaiah 63:7, "*I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love.*"

Whenever you see the phrase in the Old Testament *the steadfast love of the Lord* he is referring to a special Hebrew word that means covenant love. In the New Testament it is a love that we celebrate because nothing can separate us from it. Not even death can separate us from God because God has made promise. "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*" And so Isaiah celebrates the fact that God's love never fails. God is always good. God is compassionate towards us. And so Isaiah recounts the story of God's love and God's goodness and God's compassion by recounting what God did for Israel. He redeemed them from bondage in Egypt through the blood of the lamb applied to the doorposts. When God brought them to Mount Sinai he *rend the heavens and came down* and the mountain quaked. Here he made them his people.

Can't you see our story in their story? In some sense, God has already answered the prayer of Isaiah 64:1. Jesus has come down from heaven. As we read in Isaiah 53, out of love and compassion for us, "*he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.*" The Holy Spirit has also come and has done a work in us that we might believe. And so when you go to pray, whether in good times or in hard times, begin by recounting what God has already done for you. Praise him. Thank him. Recount his steadfast love, his goodness and his compassion. Rehearse your own story of how God has delivered you from your sin.

Repent of what you have done: One of the predominant themes of prayer is the prayer of confession. Why do we need to pray prayers of repentance and confession? Because we have sins to confess. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray and he told them to say,



*“forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”* Isaiah is no different. Here he prays in Isaiah 64:5-6, *“Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”*

Whether it be personal sins or corporate sins, we have plenty to confess. It is in this posture of repentance of sin that we remain humble and we find the grace to forgive those who have sinned against us. That is the glue that holds the body of Christ together. It is our love for each other that is born out of God’s grace extended to us. And this is how the world comes to know that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. It is through our love for one another that is shared in the common grace of God’s forgiveness and is experienced when we are able to forgive one another.

Motyer says this about repentance. “The people are now right with God. The wonder of repentance is that it works. Will not the Lord now leap into action to deal with his remaining foes and to create a new situation transcending the ruins of the past.”<sup>9</sup>

When you pray, recount what God has done and repent of what you have done.

Request what needs to be done: When Isaiah prays *“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down”* he is ultimately praying that God’s fame and God’s glory would be known. He is praying that God’s promised salvation would come in full. That is the point of Isaiah 56-66. Isaiah is reminding us that while we live in this time of waiting—the time of the “not yet” - we are called to take the of the salvation of God to the nations so that others can join us in worshiping the living God. And so this is what still needs to be done. We have been sent by God on mission. We are to proclaim the hope of Jesus to the world. We are to pray, *“Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* This is a prayer for fresh revival. We are praying for a fresh pouring out of the Spirit of God and the effectual work of the gospel. We need watchmen who are praying for God to rend the heavens and to bring about the effectual work of the gospel.

Pray for people to come to faith through the work of WEFC.

Pray for increased gospel presence in this region through church planting.

Pray for people in your life who need Jesus.

Pray for the faithful witness of our brothers and sisters in the persecuted church.

Pray for our missionaries and the effectual work of the gospel around the world.

Pray that God would rend the heavens and come down!

When you pray: Recount what God has done. Repent of what you have done. Request what needs to be done.

Rouse yourself to become undone: I am intrigued by what Isaiah prays in Isaiah 64:7. I think it is a prayer that is appropriate for the church in the West. I know it is appropriate for me. *“There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.”* It is basically a prayer that acknowledges our lack of prayer. No doubt, this can be a prayer of confession. But I would like to make it a prayer request.

Would that God would *rend the heavens and come down* and stir his people to pray. Would you pray that God’s people would be roused to pray. Pray that we would be personally undone, that is overcome with the wonder and the glory of God. Pray that we would have a passion for God and for God’s glory and for God’s salvation to come to the nations. Pray that we would be captivated by the beauty of God.

When you pray: Recount what God has done. Repent of what you have done. Request what needs to be done. Rouse yourself to become undone before God.

## Conclusion

The conclusion is simple this morning. Let us pray!

May this week find you taking your place along the wall of the city as a watchmen. And may your voice be part of the never ending cascade of voices calling on God to bring his salvation to the ends of the earth—to New England—across the street. All for the glory of God.

*“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence— as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!”*

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- <sup>1</sup>D. A. Carson *For the Love of God Volume 2* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999) July 2 reading
- <sup>2</sup>Mark Galli “China Cracks Down Again” in *Christianity Today* November 2019, 22
- <sup>3</sup>T. F. Torrance quoted in Galli
- <sup>4</sup>Eugene Peterson quoted in Galli
- <sup>5</sup>Leonard Ravenhill [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/159020.Leonard\\_Ravenhill](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/159020.Leonard_Ravenhill)
- <sup>6</sup>J. Alec Motyer *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 466
- <sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 507
- <sup>8</sup>Phyllis Tickle *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) Kindle Reader, Location 65
- <sup>9</sup>Motyer, 522

**Sermon Title:** Rend the Heavens and Come Down!

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS



### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share either something you are celebrating or something that is a challenge you are facing.
2. Talk about prayer. What has been your experience with prayer? What do you find most difficult about prayer? Have you experienced a recent answer to prayer?
3. What did you take from the sermon on Sunday?



### Diving Into The Word

*Because the passage this week is a prayer, consider taking each section of the passage and spend some time praying instead of talking about it.*

4. Read Isaiah 63:7-14. Recount what God has done! Spend some time thanking God for what God has done.
5. Read Isaiah 63:17-19 and 64:5-7. Repent of what you have done. Spend some time in personal and corporate repentance.
6. Read Isaiah 63:15-16 and 64:1-5. Request what needs to be done. Pray for the spread of the gospel: through you, WEFC, New England, missions, the world.
7. Read Isaiah 64:7-12. Rouse yourself to become undone. Pray for a fresh stirring of the Spirit that God's people would be moved to pray.



### Taking It Home

8. What did God lay on your heart while you were praying?
9. What do you want to do this week to spend time in prayer?