

Filthy Rags

Book of Isaiah

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Bible Text: Isaiah 64:6, 7

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If you will, take your Bibles and look with me in Isaiah 64. My title is taken right from the text that we have here in verse 6 and it has to do with filthy rags. I know it's not a very pleasant title to think about and yet it is right here in the words we're going to read in a few moments. I'll begin reading in verse 1 even though my text is going to be in verses 6 and 7.

“Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence, as when the melting fire burneth, the fire causeth the waters to boil, to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence! When thou didst terrible things which we looked not for, thou camest down, the mountains flowed down at thy presence. For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him. Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved. But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand. Be not wroth very sore, O LORD, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people. Thy holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire: and all our pleasant things are laid waste. Wilt thou refrain thyself for these things, O LORD? wilt thou hold thy peace, and afflict us very sore?”

So, you can see here Isaiah, directed by the Spirit of God, writing some very sorrowful things pertaining to the people and pertaining to the state of their sin for which God brought Israel into judgment, took them away into a foreign land. I believe this is

prophetic historically looking forward to that time when Babylon would come and devastate the land and that the Temple would be destroyed of which he spoke there in verse 11. It's spoken as if it had already taken place, although Isaiah wrote this several hundred years before it was accomplished. But it's given here for one reason and this is the reason: to show any of us that are reading this our own desperate need before the Lord as sinners. We can read this just purely from an historic perspective and walk out of here just as dead as what we walked in.

I'm not here to give us a history lesson, although this is rooted in history but prayerfully for each of us here reading this portion together, to consider our own state before the Lord and to see that it is no better than even the best that men would consider the best. You can see here in verse 6, it doesn't say in all our sins are as filthy rags, does it? Take the best righteousnesses, plural, and put them all in a heap before the Lord. You hear people talking about standing before the Lord one day and presenting their good works to him and hopefully, as they think and say, the good will outweigh the bad. Well, you're already in trouble because the Scriptures declare that the best that men could consider before God is nothing but filthy rags.

But the ?? force in Romans 3, in the reading just before I came up here to speak, that "there is none righteous, no not one." Until the Lord is pleased to show us that in our lost depraved mind, we're going to continue to think that there is something in us that can commend us to God. And so, that is my prayer that if that is your thought, even now, that the Lord by his Spirit would cause you to see that there is nothing good in you, nothing good in me and that even my best righteousnesses are but filthy rags.

When I think of filthy rags, different pictures pop up in my mind and I don't want to in any way gross anybody out, but I've seen some pretty horrid situations throughout my travels throughout the world, whether it be a leper's sores that had been bound up in rags to keep the flies off and the putrid smell that there is that comes out of those sores. And those rags, the ones they are covered with, aren't even worth washing but just throwing out. I can remember traveling in the city of Port-au-Prince, Haiti a number of years ago and going downtown and it is what I would perceive as the biggest cesspool that I've ever seen in this world where people had nowhere to put their trash but in a flowing river. And the banks were overflowing with trash because there wasn't any kind of trash pick-up and the whole idea was that when it rained and the river overflowed, it would take the trash and flush it out into the ocean. And I can remember the putrid smell. This is right downtown, the putrid smell because of this trash that had been there for so long and looking down in it and finding old clothing and even old bandages from hospitals just cast out, old needles laying there in the open and people coming and just adding to it.

So, when I read here "filthy rags" the Lord has given us a very clear description of what he considers and how he, a holy and just God, looks upon who we are as sinners unless any of us should think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think and to be brought by his Spirit to think soberly and righteously and godly. To think soberly and righteously and godly is not to think better of ourselves. If people read the law of God and come away feeling better about themselves, I can tell you that they have not seen the law of

God because the law of God was designed to reveal his holiness. And as Paul said in the portion that Bob read in Romans 3:19 that, “every mouth may be stopped and the entire world found guilty before him.” Until we have been brought to see our desperate estate in that way, we’ve not seen God, we’ve not understood his law aright and we deceive ourselves.

You’ll notice in the reading, and this is why I like to read an entire chapter, it’s a little difficult in preaching to cover all of these verses because it’s such an in-depth revelation of the person of God, his character, the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s like standing in front of a beautiful painting and considering the strokes of the author and just being overwhelmed with all of the detail that is in that painting and being moved by what is describe. That’s what we have here in this chapter. It begins with a message of hope. Think about Isaiah prophesying in his day where there were few, if any, that the Lord was pleased to convert. In fact, if you’ll hold your hand here and go back to Isaiah 1 and we’ve been studying through this book of Isaiah for a long time, but the message is the same. You can see here is Isaiah 1 the indictment that was brought against Israel. This was the nation to whom Isaiah was sent to preach and you notice in verse 2,

“Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores.”

So, when you think in terms of filthy rags, think in terms of that which men’s minds be taken to, to wrapped putrefied sores. The rag itself, even though you might consider it a clean rag, becomes putrefied and becomes tainted, corrupted with the very sore that it is supposed to cover. And the picture I want you to see there is when men try to take their works and cover this sin which is not just what man does, but it is who he is. All it can do is make those works putrefied before the Lord.

“They have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers.”

So, this was the state of affairs when the Lord raised up Isaiah to go forth and to preach. But coming back here to Isaiah 64, whenever, as we’ve seen, there is a message of despair with regard to sin there is also a message of hope with regard to the salvation of that people that God has purposed to save. And that’s what I want you to see here in Isaiah 64.

It begins, as we saw in verse 1, “Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence.” You know what? The heavens were rent and God did come down in the person of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And the mountains flowed down at his presence. That was the message that was given to John the Baptist that the high places would be made low and that the way would be prepared for the Lord.

“As when the melting fire burneth, the fire causeth the waters to boil, to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence! When thou didst terrible things which we looked not for, thou camest down, the mountains flowed down at thy presence.” That’s a picture of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and to accomplish salvation for his people. It’s described in such a way there in verse 4,

“For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him.” Given a million years, men could never come up with a way of satisfying a holy and just God except the Spirit of God be pleased to reveal that way. And that’s really what verse 4 is describing. We saw that last time quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:9. What is it that the Spirit has revealed to, it says here, those that wait for him? I’m thinking of Simeon that went into the Temple drawn by the Spirit of God and it says, “he was waiting for the hope of Israel,” and he was caused to behold that little child in Mary’s arms and take that child and say, “Now, your servant can die because I have seen the salvation of the Lord.” He was given eyes to see. He was one of those that was caused to see in that coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in his living, doing and dying and rising again, ascending on high, how God had prepared that salvation for such that wait for him. So, against the back-drop of man’s sin and against the back-drop of the evil even of our own hearts, we find revealed here a message of hope.

And that’s what I want us to see. I could stand up here all day and talk to you about the problem but it takes the Spirit of God for you to see the remedy. And unless the Spirit reveals it in your heart to cause you to behold the glories of Christ’s coming and taking upon himself that sin that so corrupted our nature, but taking it upon himself without himself being corrupted, even that’s a mystery. That he should be the sin-bearer and yet never be a sinner. That he should walk among these that are sinners and yet he, himself, be holy and even unto his death where it’s declared that he died the just for the unjust that he might bring us to God. What a mystery. What a glorious salvation.

Lest we ever think that somehow he saved us because of any good in us, this is the message: perish the thought. God forbid. Even here in verse 5 that “Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness.” Remember we saw that last time? To work righteousness doesn’t mean to come up with that righteousness ourselves. To work righteousness is to be bowed to that one righteousness of God alone, to come to God the way that he has declared that sinners should come and that is through the one obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you were to ask me and I can remember back in the days of religion, this was something we went door-to-door and when someone allowed you to come in and sit down at the table, the first question you would ask them and we were taught to ask this was, "If you should stand before God, on what basis should he let you in?" And so you waited for the answer and most of the time, people answered, "Well, I guess it would be on the basis of me having at least tried to keep his Commandments or do good..." We heard all kinds of stuff but when I think of that question, first of all, just the whole idea of me standing before a holy God, I don't know about you, but it causes me even now to be bowed down and to melt in awe and fear in the sense that I would never want to ever have to address God except through a mediator. And so, "Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness," is talking about those that the Spirit of God has made to rejoice in and come to God through that one righteousness of God alone. We saw that written by Paul to the Galatians that if righteousness come by law, Christ has died in vain. If righteousness come by any duty or obligation that you or I can perform to commend us to God then we render the death of Christ of none effect. We, in essence, say he didn't have to die. What a blasphemy.

So, "Thou meetest him..." Meeting there in verse 5 is in the sense of welcoming, coming to such a one. It's not us coming to him but it's him coming to us and "those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth." And notice, "for we have sinned," and this is the part I want you to see, "in those is continuance." The whole notion that somehow I've come to Christ and now I'm no longer a sinner. I never stop being a sinner just as he never stops being the Savior. So, perish the thought of us even showing up for a time of worship and thinking that somehow by what I did, some ritual, some prayer, some devotion, somehow I got myself ready to present myself before God today, that I'm a little cleaner than I was yesterday or even a minute ago. Perish the thought.

I've been in those meetings where I've been invited to preach and these have been places where the Gospel isn't preached but there have been a few concerned individuals that have invited me to come and stand in those pulpits and declare the glories of Christ and the charade and the ceremony that goes on before you can even stand up to preach is a production. But how many times have I been in those situations that somebody has stood up and said to everybody, "Well, let's all bow our heads and get right with God. Let's have a moment of silence."

You know, when they say that, all my thoughts are toward the Lord Jesus Christ and him alone. There is nothing that I can do or can be said or done that's going to make me right with God if the Lord Jesus Christ, by his blood and righteousness alone, have not made me right with God.

And so, while there's hope in this chapter that we see heaven is being rent and Christ coming down and the fire melting. You think about this fire that's described in verse 2, "when the melting fire burneth." That was the fire of God's wrath that fell upon his Son. "The fire causeth the waters to boil." He was the water of life and you think about water boiling. That fire of God's wrath fell upon him. "To make thy name known to thine adversaries." To declare unto the world who lives in rebellion against the holy God that

this is the only way that God has ever been satisfied with any sinners and those for whom Christ has paid the debt and the debt he has paid and paid it in full.

But, lest we become arrogant in our thinking like so many I've heard that say, "Okay, how come you keep coming back to the cross? How come you keep coming back to the sacrifice? Can't we ever move on?" No. Because of this right here in verse 5, "in those is continuance," for we have sinned. "In those is continuance." I'll never stop being a sinner. I'll never stop needing that intercession of the Lord Jesus Christ and neither will you. And yet you see there it says, "and we shall be saved." We're not saved by our efforts, we're not saved by our performance, we're not saved by our duties, we're not saved by our supposed good manners or right living. No, because if that's our thought, look at verse 6, now you see the connection, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away." So, you can see here what I believe is the first thing with regard to God dealing mercifully in the heart of a sinner and that is that the sinner confesses what he is before God and we never stop confessing that.

Paul wrote to Timothy toward the end of his ministry and said, "This is a faithful saying worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners." And he didn't say "of whom I was chief," he said "of whom I am chief," continued to be the chief of sinners. If you look over in 1 John and I believe here as well, some who have never been made to see their sin and their deep need of Christ at all times, they misinterpret verses such as this but I'd have us to know what it's stating.

Here in 1 John 1, if we have some notion that somehow now that I've come to Christ I've stopped sinning or I've stopped being a sinner, well, look at what verse 8 says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." That's the clearest evidence that the person is still lost and in darkness when they can in any way minimize their sin or think that somehow they've gained victory over it. How many times have you heard men in religion say that, "Let me tell you, I've got victory over my sin." Well, unless the next word out of their mouth is "the Lord Jesus Christ," they're a liar and a deceiver. They have deceived themselves and they deceive everybody that listens to them in their testimony. That's what this verse 8 says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Now, here it is, verse 9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Here, again, is how men quickly misinterpret Scripture. In modern religion, to confess our sins is to get together in groups of accountability. How many of you ever heard about these accountability partners? I had an associate for a while, they're gone now, but wouldn't answer my phone call, we were supposed to be doing business and later she called back to apologize that she couldn't take my call because she said she was driving down the road and she was on the phone with her accountability partner. And I said, "Well, what is an accountability partner?" I was thinking of accounting in terms of business. She said, "No, no, no. In our church we have certain times of day that we call each other to make sure that we're thinking right and doing right and we kind of confess

our wrongdoing,” she didn’t use the word “sin” but “our weaknesses to one another and it kind of keeps us on track every day. We do that twice a day.”

There are a lot of people that think that that’s what this means here, “if we confess our sins.” But I will tell you, that’s far from the truth. Read it this way: it is when we confess our sins. The word “if” in the original can be used in that sense, in the word of “if” but “since” or “when” and it comes on the heels of verse 8, we are not of those who would say that we don’t have sin. So, when we confess our sins, and that word “confess” in the original is two parts in one word that means to say the same thing about our sin and the implication is, what God says, “Yes, Lord, I am that sinner.” So, when we declare our sinnerhood is what it’s saying.

That’s a work of the Spirit of God, to declare that I am, not that I was but I am, a sinner before a holy God “he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.” Now, this isn’t an open blanket forgiveness, amnesty that is being thrown out here but you go back in the context when he says “he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” he’s already declared in verse 7 that “the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” That word is in the present tense. In other words, when Christ paid the debt for the sin, the sin was put away and continues to cleanse that sin. And so it is here in verse 9, “he is faithful and just to continue to forgive us our sins.” It supposes a forgiveness already granted so that as we confess what we are before him, it doesn’t change his attitude towards us. So great and effectual was the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners that when he paid the debt it was paid in full and he is faithful to continue to forgive our sins. We don’t need to shirk back in any way in confessing unto God who we are. Do you know why? Because he already knows it. It’s not our saying it that declares anything to God but he brings out of us, out of our being, this declaration of who we are as sinners and “he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.” Not for anything in us, but for Christ’s sake. And that’s what we read there, “to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Again, you see in verse 10, “If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” That’s why when we come to worship, we leave all pretense at the door. We don’t come here to perform. We don’t come here to impress people around us. We come as needy sinners before a holy God knowing that apart from the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, his shed blood alone, that there is no forgiveness, there is no hope.

So, coming back here to Isaiah 64, this applies to that corruption which we are by nature. It says there in verse 6, “we are all as an unclean thing.” When it says “we are all *as* an unclean thing” it’s talking about a state of being, isn’t it? Most people judge themselves based on what they do or don’t do. But being a sinner, just saying that, *being* a sinner has to do with a state of corruption just like somebody that is overspread with leprosy, they’re a leper. And so it is with being a sinner. Just like the lepers of old were shut out of the camp, so would be our condition, so would be our state, shut out from God were it not for the cleansing that comes through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, when it describes sin here, it’s who we are but notice too, verse 6, “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.” It’s describing what men would typically take to try to

cover themselves. Remember the fig leaves back in the fall? That the Lord had to take off of Adam and Eve and then he slew an innocent animal and clothed them with the skins of those animals? Think of any other righteousness other than that which was imputed to the sinner's account upon completion of Christ's death whereby God has justified once for all those sinners. Think of any other covering as being nothing but filthy rags. That's what's described here.

And it says there, "we all do fade as a leaf." Think about how beautiful the leaves are in the springtime but as the year goes on, they begin to fade into fall. That's describing man's best performances, anything that you can think of that in your mind's eye, in your heart, would cause you to think would commend you to God. I would put in there even supposed graces that men look to. How many times have we fallen into that trap of thinking, "I really feel like I'm full of faith today." I'm going to tell you what, that's one of those leaves that does fade. Take the best fruit that there is and pick it and let it sit for a while. Just this weekend I was asking Mary, "Where are all these little flies coming from?" because every once in a while I was swatting and thinking "Did someone leave the door open?" And she takes me over and shows me half of a banana that I had cut and put back the other half to eat later and I'd forgotten about it and that thing turned sour. When it started it was good fruit but that's the picture that we have here of even our best performances or even graces that the Lord gives us. Fruit, dear friends, is passive. It depends on the branch, it depends on the root to bring it. Let's don't put confidence even in the best grace that the Lord would give us because when you look to it and not to Christ alone, you'll find that it, too, will fade. Whatever strength you felt you had this morning when you got up and felt like, "Man, of all days, I feel like I'm the Lord's today." Just give it a few hours, just give it a while. It will begin to fade and to stink and to become putrid.

But, you know, I believe the Lord does that. You say, "Why at one time can I open this Word and read it and it just seems to flow with Christ and I'm blessed and the next time I pick it up to read it and it just seems as cold and hard as steel?" Well, again, the Lord does it that we might cry unto him in our need and never presume that we can trust in anything but the Lord Jesus Christ and what he's accomplished on behalf of the sinner. It says, "like the wind." Our iniquities "like the wind have taken us away."

That's what it is to be a sheep, that's what it is to be a sinner. Prone to wander, "Lord, I feel it." ???? the one I love. These are reminders, even in this portion of Scripture, that apart from that blessed Word of the Lord Jesus Christ, apart from who he is and what he's accomplished for sinners such as we are, we have no hope.

And it says there in verse 7, "there is none that calleth upon thy name." Even there, how many times have we thought that we've prayed and I hear people talking about having had a good time in prayer when in reality it's nothing but fleshly exercise. You stop and think back over your lifetime how little you have truly called upon the Lord. It says there, "there is none that calls upon thy name." It's not in our nature to do it. Most times even what we call prayer and calling on him is just it's a cry of desperation to get out of a situation. That's about it, there's no reflecting upon our need truly in who God is and his

glory. So, many times his answer is to keep us in that situation, to cause us to continue to cry unto him that we be completely emptied of ourselves and be brought to a situation where we can do nothing. You see, as long as you think you can do something, I can pray, I can go back and read the Scriptures, these are fig leaves we run to. And so, the Lord many times purposely we run down those paths without any relief until he brings us just completely flat and just drains the stream dry. Have you ever been so thirsty you can just feel your tongue sticking to the roof of your mouth, your throat is parched and dry? And where nothing else matters but just getting a glass of water or I die? Give me Christ or I die.

I believe that's the sense here in which Isaiah is talking. That if the Lord would hide his face from us, that's the way he puts it in verse 7, "for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities." It's not the Lord's hand is short that he cannot save but anything that we ever put our confidence and trust in, even as his own, he's got to dry up, he's got to cause to wither and to be carried away that Christ alone be our all.

That's where the rest of the chapter turns to hope. You see that little word in verse 8 "but." But God. "But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand. Be not wroth very sore, O LORD, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people." You know, if the Lord Jesus Christ has paid the debt, therein is our hope that he does not remember our sin and iniquity anymore and that he looks upon us in that righteousness, God the Father looks upon us in that righteousness which his Son the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished for sinners such as we are.

We'll come back here, Lord willing, next time in verse 8-12 but may the Lord grant us his Spirit to know our destiny and to look to Christ alone.