YAHWEH’S SILENCE ENDS WITH A PROMISE OF GRACE AND JUSTICE THROUGH A SEED IN ISAIAH 65:1-16

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ISAIAH

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Summary: Yahweh responds with love and grace to the question of his silence with a promise of a Seed, comfort to his servants, and horror to the rebellious.

Outline:

I. Yahweh’s amazing benevolence, mercy, and grace is seen in the fact that he permits people (a nation) to find him who are not seeking to know Yahweh (65:1-2a).

   A. Yahweh’s self-revelation is seen in the words, “Here am I, here am I” (65:1)
   B. Yahweh’s grace is fully seen all day long in his outstretched arms and open hands to a rebellious (or obstinate) people (65:2a).

II. Yahweh’s love does not keep him from seeing the sin of his covenant people whose lifestyle of sin is an open provocation to God righteous standard for his people’s lives (65:2b-7).

   A. There are at least four ways the rebellious people sin against Yahweh (65:2c).
      1. The rebels sin against Yahweh by violating the Mosaic Law in regard to where and how sacrifices are to be offered (65:3b).
      2. The rebels sin against Yahweh by communicating with the dead in graves and secrets places (65:4a).
      3. The rebels sin against Yahweh by ignoring the dietary restrictions found in the Torah (65:4b).
      4. The rebels sin against Yahweh with their self-righteous “holier than thou” attitude and words. (65:5a).

   B. The rebel’s sin cannot be ignored anymore than smoke in a person’s nostrils from a fire that burns all day (65:5b-7).
      1. Yahweh commits to repaying the rebels for their sin; he will not keep silent forever (65:6a).
      2. Yahweh’s punishment is a direct response to the rebel’s sin of insulting him with their abominable worship done according to their own standards (65:7).

III. Yahweh, the God of truth, communicates his love through a promise of not destroying his servants, cursing the rebels in various ways, and providing an offspring Who will ensure the people of God inherit the kingdom (65:8-16).

   A. An illustration of not destroying a cluster of grapes when a good grape can be found on the cluster is applied to the people of God (65:8).

   B. Yahweh will bring forth an offspring or offspring from Jacob and Judah (65:9). His chosen servants, people who have sought him, will possess and dwell in the land God has prepared for them (65:9, 10b).
      1. Sharon and Achor illustrate the place of green pasture and rest for God’s people is where their flocks will feed (65:10).
2. They will eat and drink well (65:13).
3. Their hearts will rejoice and they will sing for gladness (65:14).
4. Yahweh will give his servants another name (65:15).

C. Yahweh has destined the rebels to eternal separation from his unconditional love because of their failure to call upon the name of the Lord (65:11-15).
   1. Ironically, Yahweh will give them just what they deserve for worshipping the false gods of Destiny and Fortune (65:11b).
   2. Yahweh will control their destiny and a just consequence of their sinful behavior (65:12).
   3. They will be hungry and thirsty (65:13).
   4. They will be put to shame, cry out in pain and wail (65:14).
   5. They will be cursed and put to death (65:15).

D. Nothing will interfere with Yahweh, the God of Truth, keeping his word (65:16).
Introduction

Prior to Isaiah 65, seventeen verses are presented as a prayer to Yahweh. Beginning with “Look down from heaven and see” (63:15), Isaiah provides a model of how God’s people should be praying during this crisis. He states that although Yahweh is their Father, he is concerned that Abraham does not know them. They have drifted far from the ways of Israel. Isaiah asks, “Why the Lord has made them wander from him and harden our hearts, so that we fear you not?” (63:17). As evidence of their desperation, Isaiah prays that Yahweh would rip the heavens open and come down and give them a true display of his majesty; he wants the mountains to quake in the presence of the Lord (64:1). He rightfully acknowledges that Israel is the clay and he is the potter (64:8). Finally, he closes with two questions that sound more like desperate pleas: first, “will you restrain yourself at things, O Lord?” and second, “Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?” Yahweh responds to these questions beginning in Isaiah 65:1 with the words “I was ready,” (twice) “I said,” “I spread,” and “I will” (seven times). He responds with love and grace to the question of his silence and affliction with a promise of a Seed, comfort to his servants, and horror to the rebellious. The primary purposes of this paper are to provide an exposition of Isaiah 65:1-16, with a focus on the interpretive issues of the passage, identify the theological significance of the passage, and to draw application into the twenty-first century as a message just as relevant to believers and unbelievers as it was to the original recipients.

Paul reinforces the relevancy of passages like Isaiah 65 with his application to epistles like Romans. In chapter 10, Paul explains that his heart aches for Israel and that his greatest desire is to see Jews stop seeking after personal righteousness and pursue God’s righteousness by faith (v. 3). Then after a thorough explanation concerning how one is saved by believing in (v. 9)/ obeying (v. 16) the gospel in faith, Paul proceeds to quote from the Old Testament to prove
that this is not a new idea. First, he quotes from Isaiah 53:1 and then he quotes from Psalm 19:4.

Third, he quotes from Moses in Deuteronomy 32:21, and then in verses 20 and 21 he quotes from Isaiah 65:1-2. He writes, “Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, ‘I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.’ But of Israel he says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.’” Paul’s incorporation of Isaiah in his argument reveals its relevancy to the message of the gospel.

Exposition of the Text

God’s Love and Forbearance

In response to the accusation that God was neglecting his covenant people, Isaiah 65:1 answers the two questions presented in the previous chapter. These questions are: “Will you restrain yourself at these things, O LORD? [and] Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?” The initial response to the question reveals Yahweh’s amazing benevolence, mercy, and grace. This is seen in the fact that he permits people, more specifically a nation, to find him who are not seeking to know him (65:1-2a). Speaking for God, Isaiah declares that God has not been silent! He has continually been revealing himself to a nation that was not called by his name (65:1).

“Who is this nation” is the first interpretive issue in the text. Concerning the last clause “a nation that was not called by my name,” Carson writes: “The Hebrew [language] as it stands supports Rom. 10:20–21 in referring v 1 to the Gentiles and v 2 to Israel. In the NIV, the Hebrew phrase ‘a nation … not called by my name’, (i.e. the Gentiles) has been adjusted to read a nation that did not call on my name (which could still be Israel). While this reading can claim ancient support, the unaltered Hebrew (as in the AV and RV) points quite clearly to the Gentiles,

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answering Israel’s disdainful 63:19b, rather than merely echoing 64:7.Obviously then, the issue is not with God. Smith writes, “To this sinful Israelite “nation” (gōy), a derogatory term for foreign nations that is used instead of the covenant term “people” all of which seems to reinforce that Yahweh is not referring to Israel.

According to Ortlund, these verses look toward the narrative in the book of Acts and the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom to the Gentiles “as seen especially in Acts 28:17-28” where specific mention is made of the truth that the “salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; [who] will listen” (Acts 28:28). God was not silent. So much so that even a nation that was not seeking God found him. James Smith writes, “The day would come when Gentiles who have not even sought his grace would discover it (Rom 10:20f.). The irony here is obvious. Gentiles had not sought God, but would find him easily; God sought Israel, but had been constantly rejected.” In the first half of verse two, God’s actions are further communicated. Isaiah pictures God with outstretched arms “all the day to a rebellious people” (65:2). In just a few verses, Isaiah will compare God’s unconditional “all day” forbearance to Israel’s rebellion “which burns all day” (65:5). In less than two full verses, the reader senses the difficulty in the passage—God has an unconditional love for Israel but is unable to ignore Israel’s sin.

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5 The word “nation” is the Hebrew word gowy and normally refers to non-Hebrew people; it is often translated heathen (143) or Gentile (30); it should be translated in such a way as to distinguish between God’s covenant people Israel and people in pagan nations.
Describing Israel’s Sin in Detail

In spite of Yahweh’s covenant love for Israel, Israel’s sin is still an offense to him. Israel “walks in a way that is not good, following their own devices [or thoughts, AV]” (65:2b). Any religion after man’s thoughts or devices is a man-made religion. Collectively, the assessment is made that some, perhaps the majority, in the present generation of Israelites are a “people who provoke me to my face continually” (65:3). Throughout the passage, Isaiah gives God anthropomorphic features to graphically portray the struggle. In verse five, Israel’s sin is described as an irritating smoke in God’s nostrils which burns “all day” long.

Tremendous discussion and disagreement exists among scholars concerning the accuracy and authenticity of the articulation of Israel’s sin. This is the second major interpretive issue in the passage. There is no uniform consensus as to whether Isaiah is describing Israel’s actual behavior or simply using representative language that described pre-exilic idolatrous behavior. Smith writes, “Because of a general lack of information about various pagan religious practices throughout the history of Israel, there is a good deal of confusion on how to understand the pagan worship described in these verses.”\(^7\) It appears that the details of what it meant to “not walk in the way that was good” includes specific sins what were articulated in four ways. These Israelites were sinning where and how they worshipped Yahweh. In clear violation of the Mosaic Law, unlawful locations were selected to sacrifice. In chapter 64, there was a complaint about the state of the temple—the house where the fathers worshipped. Verse 11 describes that the temple is burned up in fire and lay in waste. Israel has the time and resources to keep gardens beautiful but does not see the priority of restoring the temple. Instead, Jews assembled in beautiful gardens and determined that these gardens were a better place to sacrifice. According to Motyer, Yahweh

\(^7\) Smith, G., 702.
was not worshipped in these gardens. The gardens symbolized places of fertility, and Baal was the object of worship there. Thus the wrong location led to idolatry. The fathers praised Yahweh in his house (64:11). This generation also ignored the prohibition concerning sacrificing on defiled stones. Exodus 20:25 clearly prohibits the modification of the stone when it is used as the foundation for the sacrifice. 8 This modifying of the stone—brick—defiles it and renders it not acceptable as the base for the sacrifice. Motyer explains, “What humans made or shaped became infected with their unclean sinfulness.” 9

     Next, God speaks to them about the time they are spending “sitting in tombs and the nights they are spending in secret places” (65:3). Some are very quick to say that Israel was practicing necromancy; while others reject that idea whole heartedly. 10 Determining whether the Jews were attempting to communicate with the dead is impossible—whatever they were doing at night in the graveyards was not what God wanted. Oswalt would agree with this premise; so much so, that he writes, “the prophet does not intend these verses to be taken literally.” 11 Instead, Oswalt thinks Isaiah is “throwing together a collection of the most horrendous images he can think of to try and convey how disgusting God finds ritualism of any sort.” 12 The struggle with rejecting the literal perspective is that it calls into question what else should not be taken literally in the passage. Regardless of whether the Jews were actually committing the sin of necromancy

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9 Ibid.
10 For the purpose of necromancy, they spend ... *their nights keeping secret vigil*, literally ‘in guarded places’, i.e. secure from interruption, the living finding spiritual guidance among the dead! (Cf. 8:19–20; Deut. 18:9ff.) Motyer, 446. On the other hand Gary Smith states, “There is no explicit reference to ancestor worship or necromancy.”
12 Ibid.
or not, the Biblical prohibition (cf. Deut 18:11) stands, regardless of the interpretation of this passage. This may appear simplistic, but essentially the point of the passage is that God’s people were sinning and deserved judgment. There is no question that the original audience would have clearly understood how they were sinning.

Next, these rebellious Jews violated the dietary laws. The Torah prescribed that pork was not to be consumed, and they were consuming it. This is a rather cut and dry issue that does not require much explanation. Finally, in an ironically amazing sense, the same group adopted a “holier than thou” attitude in an exceptionally self-righteous perspective. The Bible is replete with rebukes of self-righteousness, and God’s disgust with this sin is apparent. Motyer states that they developed their “own notions of holiness,” and he describes this as a type of “spiritual elitism” similar to what is present is some churches today. All this combined is then described as the irritant smoke in the nostrils of Yahweh who will not remain silent.

The sin of the people is compared to a fire which burns all day long producing smoke which bothers Yahweh as his hands are outstretched all day as well. The picture is very indicative of the Savior on the cross with arms outstretched while the crowd is mocking him. They asked if he would remain silent and the answer is “no.” He will not remain silent. Judgment is going to fall. It will be personal and directed at those who deserve it. The interpretive issue this raises is when this judgment fell or is it a prophecy of future judgment?

In verse six, the word “behold” assures the listener that what is pronounced is going to happen. Yahweh refers to something that is written, but Smith indicates that the reader cannot be

\[13\] According to Walvoord these were dabbling in necromancy. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 1119.

\[14\] Motyer, 446.
sure of where or how this is written.¹⁵ The fact is, Yahweh states very plainly that Israel’s sin will not be ignored. Neither the iniquities of the current generation nor the former generation will be ignored; instead, He will “repay into their bosom” which appears to be a very direct and personal manner (65:7).

Then in verse eight, Yahweh states that in the same way entire clusters of grapes are not destroyed if good grapes can be found on the cluster, Yahweh is going to preserve a remnant of people from Israel. In verse nine, some translations¹⁶ communicate a promise of a plurality of descendants will be from Jacob; whereas, the KJV, ESV, NASB renders zera’in a singular sense. This is the fourth interpretive issue in the passage. Is verse nine a prophetic reference to Christ or to a plurality of Jews that God will redeem? Commentators are just as divided as the translation committees who render the text in the plural sense eliminating a possible thought that Yahweh is speaking of his coming Son. In Isaiah 64:1, Israel prays that Yahweh would rip the heavens open and come down; then in verse twelve, there is the question as to how long he will remain silent. Certainly, Jesus is the answer to God’s silence; but that is not sufficient to answer how zera’in should be rendered. Perhaps the best answer to the question comes from the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:16. Paul states that the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. Cleary Paul is referring to Abraham and Genesis; however, it appears that Paul’s point is just as good for Jacob as it is for Abraham. George writes, “Now here is the hairsplitting point: the word ‘seed,’ he observed is singular not plural; therefore in its deepest and fullest meaning it refers to one person, not to many. And that one person, Paul contended,

¹⁵ Smith, G., 704.
¹⁶ NKJV, HCSB all render the Hebrew in a plural sense whereas ESV, AV, NASB translate seed in the singular sense.
Abraham’s true seed, is Christ himself.”\(^{17}\) Without Christ, there would not be an elect of God; therefore, understanding “seed” to be Christ makes the best sense (see Luke 24:44).

Two specific locations, Sharon and Achor\(^{18}\), are given to fully communicate the specificity of God’s promise to people who are characterized as being seekers of Him. In this way, God reassures Israel that he has not forgotten the promise he made to Abraham. One’s understanding of the eschatology will determine whether God fulfills this promise to Israel in the millennial reign of Christ on this earth or in a restored earth in eternity.

Then an interesting and ironic play of words occurs when God reaffirms his sovereignty in so much as he will determine the destiny of a people who have been offering sacrifices to the gods of Fortune (Gad) and Destiny (Meni). According to Smith, Fortune and Destiny are “often connected to the Syrian and Phoenician *Gad* and the Arabian *Meni*. These are gods who were responsible for a person’s fortune in the future.”\(^{19}\) This interpretation of the text is communicated in the clearest sense in the ESV, HCSB, NASB, and NIV; while the NKJV’s literal rendering of Gad and Meni does not communicate the play on words Isaiah may have intended. The issue is not with Yahweh; it is with the people. He is the one who controls destinies, but they are offering sacrifices to the wrong god. Once again Yahweh makes it clear that the issue is not with him.\(^{20}\) He has called and they did not answer; in fact, according to verse one he is the God who has revealed himself to a people that did not answer, chose to do evil and were not concerned with


\(^{18}\) The Sharon Plain in the western part of the country is a relatively flat, fertile pastureland (35:1–2; 1 Chr 5:16; 27:29) that runs north and south between the coastal plains along the sea and the mountainous hill country, extending south from the Carmel Ridge. The valley of Achor on the eastern side of the country is the narrow infertile valley that leads up from the Jordan River to the hill country of Israel. (Gary Smith, 712).

\(^{19}\) Smith, 711.

\(^{20}\) Oswalt, 682-684.
pleasing Yahweh (65:12). Those who did not answer will be cursed; whereas those who answered God will be blessed.

Through the prophet, God provides a stark contrast between what the rebels and people of God will experience. Yahweh’s servants will be blessed; they will eat, drink, rejoice, sing, receive a new name, and will not remember their former troubles (65:13-15). On the other hand, in stark contrast, the rebels will be cursed and their name will be cursed; they will be hungry, thirsty, be put to shame, cry, and “howl for vexation of spirit” (KJV). The servants of God receive a “new name” which Walvoord understands to be the same as saying they “will be given a new character.” Carson calls his reader to the “sharp contrasts” found in this passage to those spoken of by Christ in Mt. 25:31–46; Lk. 6:20–26; Jn. 3:36. All of which reinforces the understanding that Christ is the offspring promised in 65:9.

Finally, Isaiah ensures the people that Yahweh is a God who cannot lie; therefore, the people of God have a glorious future for which they can look forward to. They will be blessed, their former troubles will be forgotten, and Yahweh will remember their sin no more (65:16; Jer 31:34). Yahweh has spoken and will speak again through the seed of Jacob. He is both merciful and just. Those who seek him will be blessed and the others cursed. James Smith summarizes the end well with: “What a glorious future the faithful could anticipate! Former troubles would be forgotten. They would recognize Yahweh in that day as the God of Truth (lit., the God of Amen!). They would wish blessings upon themselves in his name (65:16).”

22 Carson, Is 65:1-16.
Theological Application

From Isaiah 65, several key points about God and man can be derived. First, with regard to God, it is obvious that the attributes of love, mercy, grace, and a consistent disposition to do good are a constant outpouring of the Person and Work of the first person of God—the Father. He has revealed himself to people who were not looking for him yet needed him more than they will ever be able to fully grasp. God’s grace can be seen in his actions. He has spread out “his hands all the day to a rebellious people” (65:2). Throughout the text, the point is made that it was not God that stopped communicating or moved. It was the people who changed or more accurately, failed to change. Although he was under no obligation to speak—he spoke!

Second, as one attempts to understand God’s love, it must be tempered with the truth that his objective love for all requires him to remain just, and this justice does not permit him to ignore those who are sinning against Him or others. He will not remain silent; he will recompense. According to Ortland, the historical accumulation of sin must be dealt with—he will repay (65:6-7). Yet his grace is seen in the promise that the remnant will not be destroyed (65:9).

Third, with regard to understanding how Israelites were saved, these verses show that being a descendent of Abraham was not sufficient to ensure that a person was destined to be saved. There must a circumcision of the heart (Rom 3:20-25). Each person is not born a follower of Yahweh; he or she must choose to be a servant of the God of truth. Yahweh responds in the affirmative that he is coming to punish, curse, and destroy Israelites. Legitimate descendents of Abraham are being addressed in this chapter, namely “you who forsook the Lord” (65:11). Given a choice of whether or not to serve God, they chose not to serve God; a choice which resulted in a forfeiture of an inheritance. The Pharisees should have understood that being a descendent of
Abraham did not ensure them of a place in the kingdom of God—Nicodemus had to be born again (Matt 3:9, John 3).

Although fourth in presentation, the reader learns from Isaiah that God is not distant. Concerning God’s relationship to his people, Boice writes, “If Jesus is God, then God is like Jesus. It means that God is not distant, arbitrary, or unreal. He is a God who loves us and Who came to earth to give himself as a ransom for our sins.”

The fact is Jesus is like the Father and the Father in this passage is not millions of miles away from his people. He is present with them. He knows who his servants are and who is not serving him. He knows them intimately. Yahweh is very much involved in the affairs of the world. Oswalt says it well: “The real facts are that God was not hidden in some dark faraway place where no one could find him, as some supposed.”

**Application**

The reader of this passage should leave the text examining himself (2 Cor 13:5). He should not assume that Yahweh sees him as a servant. Oswalt writes about birthright and behavior and makes it clear to his reader that one should take away from this passage the idea that it is behavior “that marks the servants of God” and not birthright. Being born into a Christian family, being baptized or confirmed, or saying a prayer of salvation are all modern equivalents of a birthright. Instead, there can be no question that some of the people being addressed saw themselves as servants of Yahweh—yet they were not. Likewise, at a future judgment many will say, “Lord, Lord,” but these people are not saved (Mt 7). Perhaps this group assumed that Yahweh was “ok” with their ritualistic religious ceremonies. Maybe they really

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25 Smith, G., 700.

26 Oswalt, 682.
thought they were “too holy” for others—perhaps even God. In chapter 64, they pray to him and should have been surprised with the answer they received. “No, I will not remain silent and yes, I will afflict you” must have been a shock to the crowd that is self-described as “holier than thou” (KJV).

Next, Oswalt sees application to today in the idea that God will not be manipulated by people whose primary reason in following God is to reap some kind of perceived benefit. He devotes much attention to the idea that Yahweh will judge religious people in this text unfavorably. It is as though Oswalt sees pure religion (Jam 1:27) and religion in this text where those practicing pure religion are in a relationship with Yahweh as his servants, and the religious are those who worship God because of what they perceive they will get out of God.27

Finally, passages like Isaiah 65 prove that men like Rob Bell are wrong when they call into question the perfect coexistence of love and justice in the Godhead. In numerous interviews and videos, Bell suggests that the orthodox understanding of the gospel posits a strange doctrine whereby Jesus rescues sinners from an angry God. Instead, Bell teaches that God’s love wins. Had Bell properly interpreted both the Old and the New Testament, the title of his new book should have been “God Wins” instead of Love Wins. Bell writes about a growing number of people who are “acutely aware that the Jesus’ story has been hijacked” because God so loved the World.28 Bell believes that Jesus is not rescuing people from the Father because the Father does not send people to eternal destruction. If Bell is correct, then nothing of the judgment in Isaiah 65 makes sense; moreover, the linkage between the blessing and cursing that can clearly be seen between Isaiah 65 and Matthew 25:31-46 also does not make sense. Bell is wrong, and the

27 Oswalt, 683-684.
orthodox understanding of evangelical gospel binds the love and justice of God together in perfect unity much like the Father and Jesus are One (John 10:30).
Bibliography


