

# ***“Rend the heavens and come down”: The vulnerability of God***

Isaiah 64:1-9

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***“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!”*** That was Isaiah’s prayer (Is. 64:1). Historically, multiple cultures and legends have evidenced a similar **longing for God** to “show up on the scene” – it was fertile ground in the human heart for what God Himself really wanted to do: namely, become one of us for our sakes, incarnating Himself in our race and become part of our history. But humanity could never have “guessed” the incarnation, or as **C. S. Lewis** put it: *“Reality, in fact, is usually something you could not have guessed. That is one of the reasons I believe Christianity. It is a religion you could not have guessed. If it offered us just the kind of universe we had always expected, I should feel we were making it up. But, in fact, it is not the sort of thing anyone would have made up. It has just that unusual twist about it that real things have. So let us leave behind all these boys’ philosophies –these over-simple answers. The problem is not simple and the answer is not going to be simple either.”* Good advice! The Greeks, for all their poetry, drama, philosophy, and learning, never even imagined the possibility of the Incarnation. Zeus never took on human nature, but only the appearance, to disguise himself in order to seduce some maiden he found attractive. Yet does anyone defend the historicity of Greek mythology? So in Greek stories it was all about either anthropomorphosis or apotheosis [gods taking on human form, or humans being raised to god-like status], but never incarnation! On the other hand, the Gospels have often been held up as classic examples of Greco-Roman biographies; the authors *wanted* their readers to believe that the things they recorded really happened, because they had been eyewitnesses and firsthand investigators.

In several places in the Old Testament, we find the Scriptures reflecting this **ancient longing** (which in the Bible is basically like a promise on God’s part): the longing for God to show up in our earthly setting, in our personal situations. Remember **Job**? He was practically drowning in grief over his losses, sorrowful over the trials he was suffering; so all he could think about was **how urgent** it was for him to have a face-to-face encounter with God. He desperately needed God to explain some things to him that were beyond his understanding. Life can be full of those painful things that don’t seem to make sense, that need more light, more perspective and clarity that can only come from beyond this world, which has so many injustices that don’t seem to have a solution. So in Job’s story, it seemed like a **theology of retribution** was dominating everybody’s mind: everything was reduced to

pure mathematics, legalism, Pharisaic moralism. But Job couldn't believe in that; he was suffering unbearable pain and misery, and he couldn't come up with *anything* he'd done to actually deserve this. So he alone objected to that way of thinking and explaining life's dilemmas. He needed a real **theology of suffering** that could embrace all the tragedies and scars he carried in his soul and provide him some real comfort. But it's only when God actually "shows up on the scene" that we get anything like a resolution of all the book's tensions.

King **David** was next chronologically, as he dealt with all his enemies (especially King Saul), and other nations hostile toward Israel. David's longing was for God to show up **with power and vindication**: in Ps. 18, it was accompanied by hailstones, thunder, bolts of lightning; in Ps. 144, he imagined smoking mountains, lightning, and arrows, which would of course make for a mighty rescue, powerful deliverance. That's what we would often like to imagine in our personal situations as well: spectacular displays of God's favor! Later on, it would be **Isaiah's** turn, probably echoing David's feelings (Is. 64), longing for the same kind of divine intervention: heavens torn apart, God making a dramatic entry that would include trembling mountains, quaking nations, and awesome things on behalf of His people. And don't we identify with those fierce longings? "Oh, God, please show up in our mess! Please rescue us from this disaster (this exam I didn't have time to study for – please help me pass it anyway!)" Or "rescue me from these hurtful people, these tangled feelings, debts and disappointments, miserable living and working conditions, endless separations, this interminable waiting (for documents, people, a job, health issues, etc.)," How we would love for God's power to be available to us to accomplish the changes we need, when we want them!

It's why we need to take time out at Christmas to think about **how God actually chose to make His entrance** into our world: in such a small, humble form that no one could even recognize Him as the **Liberator!** The All-Powerful One was in fact showing His omnipotent hand, just not in the way David had asked for it: by making Himself weak and **vulnerable like us** so that He could bring about the revolutionary deliverance we most needed, but could never have imagined, because, of course, His aim was to rescue us from the power of sin (our real problem), of the evil one (our real enemy), and of death (our greatest fear). For that kind of rescue, He knew He would have to come Himself! Isaiah had predicted it more than once \*(Is. 35:4, 40:9-10). Yet God knew perfectly well what would happen when He came in such a vulnerable way (but He was longing to identify fully with you and me because He knew how desperately we needed rescue, a true **Deliverer!**). So He refused to come with shields and defenses raised, with barriers, armor, and weapons against us. No, He would come fully vulnerable, with the same flesh as we have, same blood, same inner make-up: the *imago Dei* stamped on a human soul, ready to do business with us on our turf, on our terms. And He knew it would be a **showdown** because the prince of this world would stir up sinful hearts **to do their worst** to the very One who had come to rescue us. **"This is the Heir"**: that was the whisper that echoed down the lines – **"let's get him, and then the vineyard will be ours!"** Remember the parable? So thought the rulers of that day, the same as the rulers of today!

So let us **contemplate the vulnerability of our God** – see how gently He parted those heavens for our sakes, reducing himself to a mere speck, a lowly fetus, an innocent baby: the Word made wordless, the Omnipotent One made helpless infant, the Omniscient One not even knowing His *aleph-beth-gimel* (the Hebrew alphabet), the Omnipresent One limited

to the tiny space of a feed trough. In fact, have you ever thought about **how vulnerable He made Himself to you**? To your preferences and will? That's also what He was doing in the incarnation. **John 3:16** is the classic statement of God's vulnerability: He so loved the world that He gave His Son, the very Son of Man who was delivered into the hands of sinners (Mk. 14:41). And what did sinners do to Him? We can't distance ourselves from those sinners of yesteryear, because in our hearts we too rejected His authority and rule. ("Just wanted to do it my way, do what everybody else is doing ... just thought I would try something different ... just got tired of always trying to be good ... didn't know I was going against God, certainly didn't mean to break His law...")

Scripture says He suffered all the same kinds of trials and testing we go through, yet without sin, a Teacher and Practitioner of grace and truth, an innocent Galilean Jew condemned by the political machinery of His day, the Jewish aristocracy in conspiracy with the big "Power House" of Rome. Though He could have called 12 legions of angels to defend Him – maybe they were the same ones who showed up on that Judean hillside announcing His birth to the shepherds – He chose not to call on them at this time, but to keep on representing perfectly the heart of His Father in human flesh: by loving God with all His heart and His fellowman as Himself. And the only way He could do that was by laying down His life in the face of our rebellion, submitting to our mutiny and humiliation and brutality, dying the death of slaves and criminals which we imposed on Him, identifying with the weak and oppressed of this world. In other words, He was **living out His vulnerability to the fullest consequences**. The durability of His reign had to be tested against the toughest possible earthly circumstances; the purity of His heart had to pass the fiercest test the enemy could throw at Him; the vulnerable love of God had to be proven against the worst humanity could do: there on that cross, culmination of Bethlehem.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus affirmed this vulnerability in terms of gentleness when He invited us to come and take His yoke upon us, to learn from Him: **"I am gentle and humble in heart"** (Mt. 11:29). Matthew also reminds us of the Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah being unusually gentle: **"He will not quarrel or shout, or raise His voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on the earth, and the nations will put their hope in his name"** (Is. 42:2-4, Mt. 12:20). What justice would He establish? "Right-relatedness" on both the vertical and horizontal planes. How? "Gently," by loving God and loving neighbor perfectly! Because that kind of justice can't be imposed; loving God and neighbor has to come from inside! So God knew all along that the **only true liberation for us would have to come from the inside out**, and He also knew that forcing His way in would not bring a true change of heart – our "insides" needed **a total reset**, a rebirth, a spiritual revolution, but it would only happen if **we** invited Him in, letting Him rule from inside our hearts as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, which meant, of course, **adopting His cross as our lifestyle**. So His vulnerability would in fact become our salvation and our model, because real liberation means not only "God with us" [Immanuel] and "God for us" [*Deus pro nobis*], but **"God in us"**, dwelling and ruling in us, teaching us His way step by step, teaching us His love language, guiding us gently from the inside!

Puritan pastor Jonathan Edwards said gentleness is "the true Christian spirit": **"All who are truly godly and real disciples of Christ have a gentle spirit in them."** We surely need to cultivate that, don't we? The apostles often reminded the early church of Jesus' gentleness.

In 2 Cor. 10:1, Paul says, ***“By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you ...”*** By that same meekness and gentleness, I appeal to you today to let Him in! Confess His name, open your heart and become vulnerable to His gentle rule; let Him be your Shepherd. This is what Christmas is about!