

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Lord God Almighty, give us patience; we want to know the secrets of Your kingdom, but we cannot know everything. We therefore give You thanks for all You have revealed to us through Jesus Christ, for His teaching, for His life and death, and especially for the revelation that He will come again in glory to establish Your rule. Help us, each day, to be so devoted to You that we become content to do not our own will, but Yours; both now and always. AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: TRANSPORT

**1. For yourself**

*If you have a car or a bicycle or any other personal means of transport, offer this to God in prayer, and pray that God will bless you through its use.*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Pray that God will bless the various means of transport used by those you know and love. If any of these are on long journeys at this time, pray for them especially.*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Pray for God's blessing on any forms of church transport used by your church. Minibuses, cars or the like. Pray for the protection of God's servants when doing godly work in this world and especially when travelling.*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Ask the Lord in prayer what He thinks about the immense pollution of the world, which is a by-product of personal transportation. Pray that the oil industry and the car industry will be responsive to adjust concerns of many that unless there is change the future of the world is compromised.*

### Meditation

What is heaven?

What is your picture of this place where Jesus' lives?

Is it far above, untouchable, or it is there within your grasp, touched, like a feather at fingertips.

Think and pray,

and do not let imagination run too riot,

Jesus left a final Will and Testament,

words that have been written down to tell us all about His home.

It is the pasture wherein rest is found;

it is the place where love has conquered death;

it is the home of many mansions,

all prepared beforehand;

it is a place where even sparrows

do not fall unnoticed;

Yes, glimpsed by faith beforehand,

it is the place where Jesus holds a little child,

and smiles 'welcome';

it sparkles in its crystalline design,

and reaches farther than the eye can see;

it is the place where lamb and lion live together,

and where 'saint' and 'sinner' both rely upon God's grace.

Let these pictures from God's words inspire you,

let these visions of God's people speak to you,  
let the fire of God that burns within,  
encourage you to grasp the eternal truth,  
that heaven is home for you.

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## Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 1:10-17

- <sup>10</sup> Hear the word of the LORD,  
you rulers of Sodom!  
Pay attention to the Law of our God,  
you people of Gomorrah!
- <sup>11</sup> What do your many sacrifices mean to me?  
says the LORD;  
I have had my fill of the burnt offerings of rams  
and the fat of sacrificial animals;  
I take no delight in the blood of bulls,  
or of lambs, or of goats.
- <sup>12</sup> When you come to appear before me,  
who requires this from your hand?  
Trample through my courts no more;
- <sup>13</sup> Stop bringing any more futile offerings;  
incense is repugnant to me.  
'New Moon' and 'Sabbath'  
and the calling of special meetings -  
I cannot abide the iniquity  
of your sacred gatherings.
- <sup>14</sup> Your 'New Moon' and your festivals  
I hate them with all my being.  
They have become a burden to me,  
And I am tired of their weight.
- <sup>15</sup> When you spread out your hands,  
I will close my eyes to you;  
even though you make many prayers,  
I will not listen;  
your hands are full of blood.
- <sup>16</sup> Wash and make yourselves clean;  
Take your evil deeds away  
And out of my sight!
- <sup>17</sup> Stop doing evil,  
learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
challenge the ruthless,  
give the orphan justice,  
and fight on behalf of widows

### Review

In this passage, Isaiah struck at the heart of the problems of God's people in the eight century BC. Here at the beginning of his prophecies, in the very first chapter, we are left in no doubt that something had gone wrong with the sacrificial system of worship used by God's people and given in the Law. It is easy for Christians to be critical of Old Testament worship because we know that the sacrificial system of worship has ended with the death of Christ, and we might therefore consider our worship immune from the criticisms Isaiah levelled at the people of Israel and Judah. However, the basic point behind this passage is this; worship reflects the relationship between God and His people, and if God's people do not have a right

relationship with their God, then no form of worship will rectify it. If we understand this, then it becomes obvious that the passage has a great deal to say to us, even now.

Yesterday, we read about the collapse of the relationship between God and His people (1:1-9), and today, the point is emphasised. Isaiah's words would have shocked those who heard them; he described God's own people as 'rulers of Sodom' and 'people of Gomorrah', people who were regarded as the most depravity in history (see Gen 18 and 19:14f.). The point of this prophecy, however, is that God's people could not sit back and claim that everything was fine providing they continued to perform the rituals of worship God had given them. It is true that the sacrificial system could not deal with the heart of sin that had infused God's people, but God had commended Israel to worship Him with sacrifices and offerings. Their worship had become abhorrent to God because it did not reflect the true heart of the people; it was ritual and religion, and did not come from an obedience of the heart.

Centuries before, during the time of Moses, God had given His people a worship system of sacrifices and festivals. Over time, however, the system fell into abuse. For example, Leviticus says that only limited number of animals should be sacrificed as 'whole burnt offerings' and given over to God as something like a tithe (Leviticus 1f.); other sacrifices were offered for the forgiveness of sins (Leviticus 4f.), or for the purpose of sharing 'fellowship' meals (Leviticus 3f.). If you scan the Old Testament carefully, you will discover that eventually, individual kings and priests (e.g. 1 Kings 3:4, 2 Chron 1:6 etc) went 'over the top' offering vast numbers of sacrifices, as if to display their personal importance! This was worship in honour of God but in honour of kings! So in our reading God says that He has had enough of such unworthiness!

After this, Isaiah's prophecy describes the Lord asking why people came to His 'courts' (1:12) when they had forgotten what true worship meant. They were not so much interested in worshipping their God as enjoying 'New Moon' feasts, festivals and sacred gatherings (1:13,14), they even used the Sabbath for their own entertainment! 'New Moon' and related festivals were not even prescribed in the Law as part of worship, they were an import into Israel from the general religious life of people in that part of the world in the eighth century BC. Isaiah's prophecies tell us next of God's abhorrence even of ritual prayer, especially when offered with insincerity (1:15), and they call for His people to take action to restore their purity. This could not be done by sorting out the old sacrificial system, but only by the intent of the people to do good not evil, thus restoring their relationship with God (1:16,17).

The whole passage warns us about the dangers of living life as we please and assuming that our rituals of worship will please God. Even though we have no need of the sacrificial system today, we are still in danger of falling into the same trap. True worship can only come from the heart of the people, and God knows the difference between this and false religion, even if it is done properly and for all the right reasons.

## Going Deeper

Our passage today summons God's people to hear what He had to say about their sacrifices (1:11-13), then their religious festivals (1:13-14), then their personal life and worship (1:15-17). We will study each of these in turn before looking further at what these prophecies can tell us today.

### ***Sacrifices and Offerings (1:10-13)***

There is evidence all the way through the Old Testament of the misuse and misunderstanding of the great sacrificial system of worship instituted by Moses and recorded in the Law. It was intended to give the people of Israel a means of honouring God by tithing (the whole burnt offering), of offering all slaughtered meat to God before it was eaten (the fellowship offering) and a means of dealing with the sins of people who repented (the sin-offering). Above, we noted the example of Solomon who shows his grandiose authority by sacrificing 'thousands' of whole burnt offerings to God (1 Kings 3:4) in a manner completely contrary to the regulations of Leviticus. Others also abused the system, such as Eli's sons, who refused to allow the people to receive back the proper portions of meat from 'fellowship' offerings, and effectively stealing them for their own consumption (1 Samuel 2:12-17). These are examples of how something intended by God for good had been used sinfully and in a manner which was an affront to God.

Verses 10 to 13 are full of expressions which demonstrate God's displeasure. Verse 10 indicates God's anger at the sins of His people (see above), and verse 11 pronounces God's verdict on the large number of whole burnt offerings sacrificed in the Temple. There were too many ('what do your numerous sacrifices mean'), He had enough of them ('I have had had my fill') and He was no longer pleased with the sacrifices ('I take no delight in them'). How could God be pleased with a sacrifice of worship which said more about the people than about Him?

Isaiah was not the only prophet to whom it was revealed that the sacrificial system of worship was not fulfilling its purpose as a means of drawing people to God, to each other, and dealing with sin. Amos complained in the same way (Amos 4:4,5, 5:21-24, etc) as did others. Isaiah made this observation more than seven hundred years before

the time of Christ, and it is tragic that the people of Israel did not attempt to reform their religious practices in the course of that time even though they venerated people who exposed its weaknesses, in particular Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah and the other prophets.

The truth of the matter was observed by Moses, who was responsible for giving the law in the first place. He knew that unless a system of religious practice arose from a true relationship between God and His people and was imprinted upon people's hearts, then it meant nothing (Deut 30:2f.) Eventually, God had to demonstrate His own 'heart' by allowing His own Son to die on the Cross for us. In so doing, Jesus did for us everything that the sacrificial system could do and more, but unless our hearts are set on Him alone, then even in the church we quickly create religious systems according to our own desires and designs. God's wrath against these is as strong as that expressed in this passage against the misuse of the old sacrificial system.

### ***Festival events (1:13-15)***

Not only had the people manipulated the sacrificial system to their own advantage and preference, they had also taken on a variety of 'gatherings' and festive occasions which suited them. Many of them did not appear in the calendars of festive worship found in the books of the Law; for example, 'New Moon' festivals had no place in the seasonal round of festivities described in the Law (Exodus 23:14f.; Leviticus 23) but the worship of the 'moon' is mentioned in the list of idolatrous worship which King Josiah exposed during his great reforms (around 627BC). It also appears from this prophecy that some kind of 'sacred assemblies' (possibly for the privileged) were a regular feature of cultural life and that religious requirements were attached to the Sabbath (1:13). The Sabbath, of course, was instituted by God not as a day of worship but as a day of rest; indeed, it is described in the 10 commandments as a day in which God is honoured and worshipped precisely by not doing anything (Deut 5:12-15).

Just as before, the Lord's anger at all this is extraordinary. He says; 'I hate them with all my being' in verse 14, using a unique Hebrew expression in which God refers to everything about Himself (most translations have '... my soul hates'). These festive events have become a 'burden' to the Lord and He has become 'tired of their weight' (1:14).

What appears to have been happening here is that people were adding on to the essential requirements of Israelite faith a whole variety of assemblies, events and festivities. These did nothing to enable the people to worship God with all their 'heart and mind and strength (Deut 6:5) and Isaiah's words tell us that God saw no purpose in them. It was pointless, meaningless worship because it was not centred upon God but upon the social life of the people who enjoyed doing things as they wished. It was like hands 'spread in prayer' to which God would pay no attention because they were 'filled with blood' (1:15). These words are a damning indictment of all those who seek to mould and shape the worship of Almighty God according to human requirements, and they speak directly to us today. There are too many examples around us now of how people prefer to play with the structure of church life and worship rather than engage in the simple honesty of worshipping God for who He is.

### ***Personal responsibility in worship (1:16-17)***

The passage concludes with a call to God's own people to rid themselves of all evil and 'make yourselves clean' (1:16) by washing. We now know that such a thing cannot happen except through Jesus and that we are dependent upon Him for that cleanliness, but the call in Isaiah's prophecy is to the human heart. We need the work of God to make us clean, but we also need to show a personal intent to work with God to do what is right and live according to His ways. Then, after the emphatic phrase, 'Take your evil deeds away and out of my sight' (1:16), there are three pairs of short pieces of advice, as relevant to us now as they were to those who first heard them.

The first is 'stop doing evil, learn to do good'. This reminds us that for all our intent to put aside evil, goodness is not something we can take for granted. It is something which has to be worked at and learned, and this cannot happen in a vacuum. We all need guidance from others, from our Lord and from His Word, for example. Learning will not simply infuse us as life goes by. We need to put every effort into getting to know right from wrong. It is a challenge.

The second is 'seek justice, challenge the ruthless'. Now in many translations, the second half of this reads differently, as in 'seek justice, correct oppression'. The truth is that the Hebrew words are not altogether clear. However, justice is a straightforward but abstract idea, so the second half of the phrase asks us to do those things which demonstrate justice, such as standing against 'the ruthless', for example, or as it says in the New Revised Standard Version, 'rescue the oppressed'. There are plenty of ways in which we can put justice into action!

Lastly; 'give the orphan justice and fight on behalf of widows'. This pair of actions continues the same theme of just action. Orphans and widows were some of the poorest of people in early Israelite society because for complex social reasons they did not have the protection of the larger extended families within which most people lived; when the death of a father or husband left his family destitute, for example. The orphan and the

widow are constantly mentioned together in the Laws of Moses (in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy in particular) as people who should be cared for by the community despite their social problems. Isaiah's prophecy therefore reiterates what the law says. True faith must show itself in godly deeds.

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## Discipleship

### Application

Clearly, we can read this passage and be challenged in a variety of ways about how we worship our God. Isaiah's prophecy tells us at least that rituals can become human props to worship rather than worship itself, that trying to add all manner of social gatherings to the agenda of Christian worship will not help and that unless we do all in our power to learn to do what is right and stay close to the Lord our God, then our worship can become a sham. In common with most of the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah's words are neither kind nor tactful, but blunt. In this case, God speaks to us through these words like a person himself, chastising the sheer stupidity of any pretence at religion that is not completely focussed on God Himself. Certainly, Isaiah delivered this message aware that the Lord's judgement was coming which would deal with the problem he spoke about, and what he said was just the opening of a substantial body of work about God's work in the world.

These words speak simply to us even today about our relationship with God because they give a clear example of what happens when religion is practiced without the 'heart' of a relationship with God. When Christians worship God they do so in public, inviting anyone to join them. However, people do not worship God simply by attending and joining in. Those who form the heart of worship are those who have a relationship with God of which they are conscious, those who are focussed on God and Him alone, and who have a personal agenda to act justly in the world. This is not a council of perfection, but an impressive truth which we can observe in real people; and which, through Jesus Christ, should draw others to Almighty God through its honesty and integrity. May God's people avoid all bandwagons, rituals, social posturing and religious pomposity which stands in the way of demonstrating the love of God in Christ Jesus.

### Questions for groups

1. What church rituals act like the ancient 'sacrifices' in this text and can become a snare for us and our true relationship with God?
2. What gatherings of God's people are necessary, and what are not, given the criticism of Isaiah's prophecies (1:13,14)
3. Discuss how the church can show God's priorities for doing good and worshipping properly in the world today.

### Discipleship challenges

- *Today, consider how you can respond to the challenge of this passage by being positive and building up the worship and service of your Christian community, and not tear it down!*
- *In the course of the day, ensure that you worship God by doing what is right and good and giving Him the glory for everything. Try to make sure that others are aware that you give glory to God.*

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## Final Prayer

Lord God, You are powerful in deed and in word; may we never forget You or fail to recognise what You are doing amongst us. Speak to us so that we do not forget the sound of Your voice, and may we always understand what You would have us do in any situation. Lord God; reveal Yourself to us in power today:  
AMEN

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