

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Holy Spirit of God, surround my day with Your peace, steer me through the day with Your power, touch my mind with Your wisdom, and comfort my heart with Your love. May I live to the Glory of God as long as I have breath to proclaim it and time to live it, and may I always witness to the truth about God found in Jesus Christ my Saviour. AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: TRANSPORT

**1. For yourself**

*Thank God for His love and mercy in giving you protection when you have travelled*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Praise God for His love and mercy in giving protection to those you love on their journeys*

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

*Praise God for the effective means of transport available today by which the Gospel can be taken throughout the world, according to God's plan*

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

*Give thanks to God for the amazing inventions of petrol and diesel engines and the other forms of power that are essential to travel by land sea or air. Pray that humanity will find ever more useful and effective means of power in years to come.*

### Meditation

Be comforted, you who have felt the power of sin,  
There is One who has the victory over Satan's evil sway.

Be strengthened, you who know cruel oppression,  
There is One who has the courage to win your freedom.

Be heartened, you who struggle with your burdens,  
There is One who takes the weight you suffer on Himself.

Be encouraged, you who need to hear Good News,  
There is One who broke through death to bring you love.

Be enlightened, you who have a heart to understand,  
There is One who taught the way of life, and lived it perfectly.

Be enthused, you who are willing to speak your faith,  
There is One who works through you in authority and power!

Be blessed, you who have walked in hope and joy,  
There is One who holds a personal place for you in heaven

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Isaiah 1:18-31

<sup>18</sup> Come now, let us set things straight,  
says the LORD:  
though your sins are like scarlet,  
they will be like snow;  
though they are red like crimson,

- they will be like wool.
- <sup>19</sup> If you consent and are obedient,  
you will eat the best of the land;
- <sup>20</sup> but if you refuse and rebel,  
you will be devoured by the sword;  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.
- <sup>21</sup> How has the faithful city  
come to be a prostitute!  
She was once full of justice,  
righteousness used to live in her;  
but now, murderers!
- <sup>22</sup> Your silver has become dross,  
your best wine is mixed with water.
- <sup>23</sup> Your rulers are rebels  
and comrades of thieves.  
Everyone loves a bribe  
and chases after gifts.  
They do not bring justice to orphans,  
and the widow's cause  
does not come before them.
- <sup>24</sup> Therefore the Lord declares,  
the LORD of hosts,  
the Mighty One of Israel:  
Now, I will get relief from my enemies,  
and take vengeance on my foes!
- <sup>25</sup> I will turn my hand against you;  
I will completely refine your dross  
and remove all your impurities.
- <sup>26</sup> I will restore your judges as at first,  
and your councillors as from the beginning.  
After this you will be called the city of righteousness,  
the faithful city.
- <sup>27</sup> Zion will be redeemed with justice,  
and her repentant ones by righteousness.
- <sup>28</sup> But rebels and sinners alike will be crushed,  
and those who forsake the LORD will perish.
- <sup>29</sup> You will be ashamed of the oaks you prized;  
and blush for the gardens you chose.
- <sup>30</sup> For you will be like an oak whose leaf withers,  
and like a garden without water.
- <sup>31</sup> The strong will be like tinder,  
and his work, a spark;  
they and their work will burn together,  
with no one to quench them.

## Review

There is no doubt that Isaiah was shocked at the state of the people of Judah and especially the people of Jerusalem (see 1:1). The opening prophecies in Isaiah speak of the separation between God and His people (1:2-4) due to sin, and the irrelevance of their worship (1:10-17); but they always remind us that God cared. God had His own plans for dealing with His people and these can be seen earlier in the chapter where we gain the impression that His intention was to heal (1:5,6), and where we learn that God wanted 'Zion' to survive (1:8,9) despite its problems. In our reading today, the tension between the sins of the people and God's desire to save becomes even more evident. On the one hand, the Lord challenges the people of Jerusalem because of their appalling unfaithfulness (1:21f.) and promises vengeance on his enemies (1:24,25), but on the other hand, the Lord's desire is to put things right, and towards the end of chapter 1 we read again about God's promise to redeem Zion (1:27).

The early prophecies of Isaiah are full of this tension between God's justice and His mercy, between His condemnations of what was wrong amongst His people and His desire to save them. In this, Isaiah is quite different from Hosea and Amos, for these earlier prophets saw little if any hope for the Israelites of the north who had rebelled against God, and they said so. Moreover, their gloomy prophecies of the destruction of Israel were indeed fulfilled (2 Kings 17). However, Isaiah was speaking to the southern Kingdom of Judah, and especially to Jerusalem itself (the 'faithful city' – 1:21, 26), which he refers as 'Zion' (1:8,27).

What do we mean by 'Zion'? When Solomon had built the Temple in Jerusalem, it became the focal point of all religious and state power within Israel. Since then, the people of Israel had split into two kingdoms, and in Isaiah's day, the people hoped that one day, God would re-unite His people and Jerusalem would exercise its authority over all God's people again. The word Zion refers to this prophetic hope of a united and redeemed Israel under God, as we can see clearly from both this passage, 'Zion will be redeemed with justice, and her repentant ones with righteousness.' (1:27), and also from Isaiah's later prophecies (chapters 59-66).

Despite the continued condemnation of wrongdoing in our reading today, Isaiah speaks of God's desire to bring about restoration and redemption, 'come now, let us set things straight ...' (1:18). This is followed by an amazing divine promise that is characteristic of all Isaiah's prophecies; he declares that if people will accept their sin (1:18) and be obedient (1:19), then God will set things right, remove their sins and restore His grace and favour ('you will eat the best of the land' 1:19). Isaiah continues by condemning sin (1:21-23) and bemoaning the religious and social sins of the people. Nevertheless, Isaiah does not let go of his vision of hope, and it is found again in verses 24 to 27, where Isaiah prophesies that God will act unilaterally to set things right. He will deal with His enemies (1:24) and establishing justice (1:26).

Isaiah's conviction is impressive. Despite his raging against sin, he prophesies that God has the answers to all human sin and rebellion, and He will not allow anything to prevent Him from accomplishing His work of redemption in the world. The more you read of the Old Testament and the awful manner in which God's people sinned in the eighth century BC, the more remarkable it is that Isaiah heard this distinct message from God, delivered it. He was the first prophet to speak of God's redemptive power and he worked throughout the whole life to put flesh on this conviction, leaving us with a unique prophetic heritage that points to Christ. His work is essential for our understanding of scripture.

## Going Deeper

In order to track this passage we will look firstly at the great promises of God which come at the beginning of the passage (1:18-20). After this we will review the 'sins' of humanity mentioned in the following stanza (1:21-23) which contain important biblical themes. Finally, we will look at God's declaration (1:24f.) and its consequences in terms of judgement and redemption.

### ***God's unilateral promises of redemption***

It is not at all surprising that we should read that if God's people rebel and refuse to listen to the Lord, then they will be 'devoured by the sword' (1:20). This reads just like the prophecies of Amos and Hosea, and is not far from what Paul says about those who teach falsely in the early church (Gal 1:8, 6:11f.)! As Isaiah spoke, he may well have been aware of what Amos and Hosea had said, and those who heard Isaiah also knew that the northern nation of Israel had indeed been conquered by the Assyrians progressively over several decades and finally in 721BC. These words were cemented in the reality of history; 'for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.' (1:20)

The passage starts however, with God ever ready to sort things out; 'come now, let us set things straight, says the Lord.' (1:18) but He will never compromise. Sin and God cannot exist together, and nothing we can do will change this. Even the work of Jesus on the Cross did not alter this; Jesus removed sin and its power, and we need to show faith in this rather than imagine that Jesus has somehow negotiated for sinful people to come into God's presence on the basis that we ought to confess it, for example. Through Jesus, sin must go, and then we may have 'peace with God (Romans 5:1). It is fascinating that if we read verses 18 and 19, God does promise that He will deal with the problem of sin; 'though your sins are like scarlet, they will be like snow.' (1:18). We do not yet know how, and Isaiah had not yet been given those revelations which would point to the life of Jesus by which God would do this, but the promise is there. It is an important promise, and it depends on nothing except God's own will to break the barrier. If His people will not be obedient to it, then, as Isaiah says, they 'will not eat the best of the land', but that comes after God's powerful, unilateral action.

To add interest to this theme, you will notice that most Bible versions have 'they shall be like snow' or 'they shall be like wool' but I have used the word 'will' instead of 'shall'. Before you accuse me of bad English ('shall' is the normal English 'future' tense used here), it is in fact good English to use the word 'will' where the passage indicates intent to do something, and I strongly believe that the whole theology of this passage

indicates God's specific intent to act for our redemption and salvation! For that reason, 'will' is the right word to use!

### ***The sins of humanity***

We have already read about the general sins of Judah and Jerusalem in the earlier verses of this chapter. The people have forgotten their God (1:2,3) and live in evil and corruption (1:4). In addition, the worship of God has been abused (1:10-16) and people do not show the discernment to do what is right socially, for the 'orphan and the widow' (1:17). Now, in verses 21 to 23, the Lord exposes more specific sins which have compromised God's people.

The most shocking accusation comes in verse 21 where Isaiah's prophecy describes 'the faithful city' as being like a 'prostitute'! Coming after the prophecies of Hosea, we may safely assume that Isaiah meant that Judah and Jerusalem acted towards God like an unfaithful wife towards a husband. In addition, the way they did this was by worshipping other gods as well as the Lord, even in Jerusalem; and as 2 Kings records, even in the Temple. A careful read of 2 Kings 17 and one or two of the preceding chapters will fill you in with the reality of Judean worship in the Temple of Jerusalem, which included sacrifices to gods placed in the Temple because of trade agreements with foreign countries, and because of the wives of various kings in Jerusalem! It is all very scandalous from the point of view of scripture; but clearly, back in those days, people thought little of it. That is, until Isaiah started to prophesy against it! There is some evidence that as an extreme, young children were sacrificed in the Temple to the Amorite god 'Molech' (Lev 18:21; 2 Kings 23:10) and this may be the reason why Isaiah bursts out 'murderers' in verse 21. This was no trivial matter.

The prophecy's general comment is that what was intended for good has become mixed up with evil; the 'silver' has become tainted by 'dross' (meaning impurities), and good wine has been watered down (1:22). A more serious comment is that people in high places or holding high office have become susceptible to bribes, and as such are regarded by God as little more than common thieves (1:23) more interested in their own pockets than the needs of real people.

### ***God's declaration***

In the light of everything, God pronounced what He intended to do. Verse 24 declares this emphatically using a multiplicity of God's names but predominantly the more 'war-like' ones such as 'Lord of Hosts' and 'Mighty One of Israel' indicating the absolute power and authority of God to defeat all spiritual evil and all enemies (1:24). The first action God chooses to take on earth is to deal with the impurities of His own people (1:25f.), so that their relationship with God will be restored; 'Zion will be redeemed with justice, and her repentant ones by righteousness.' (1:27)

It is tempting for us to think that God must surely have more important things to do to save the world rather than return again and again to His own people to deal with their on-going problems. However, the reason why God deals firstly with His own people is because they are supposed to be the means whereby He is known by the rest of the world, so their imperfections need to be dealt with and 'refined' (1:25). The first object of this work of refinement is to 'restore your judges ... and your counsellors' (1:26); and if you read this verse you will find that God's work is not to set up new schemes or appoint new people, but to deal with what is wrong so that true restoration takes place and God's original intentions for His people be re-established. The Lord is always faithful to what He has done in the past and those with whom He has worked in the past. He does not lightly reject any of His people.

The result of this action of God appears to be that some will follow the Lord and then be called 'the city of righteousness' (1:26), but that some 'rebels and sinners' (1:28) will continue to stand against the Lord and seek to prevent Him from doing His work. The word of the Lord against such people is damning; they will be 'crushed' (1:28). Such words appear too radical for us, surely God is more tolerant than that, we might say? But no, our God is constantly seeking to work with His people, but if they stand in His way, then they have no future. The last of our verses then describes the fate of those who claim to be God's people and yet stand in the way of all that He does. They will find themselves dispossessed and fruitless (1:29,30), and the strongest are likened to 'tinder' which easily burns (1:31).

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

The prophets in general present us with some very difficult dilemmas because they often speak about the judgement God brings upon His own people for going against His will, and there is plenty of this in our passage today. We like to think that if we call ourselves Christians then we have some protection from God against all the evils of the world, and if we find this to be not quite so, then we question God rather than our own

inadequate view of Him. The truth is that God has never changed, and He is a just and exclusive God. Jesus is the only means whereby we may have access to the Father, and then, only through our genuine repentance and acceptance of His authority to forgive our sins and make us 'clean'. All this sounds very 'old' and traditional, but we will not find that true faith will lead us in any other way.

God is not in the business of doing something new today which He has not done before, and it is profoundly helpful if God's people accept this fact today. Jesus Christ has died for us and we are privileged to know the means of restoration and salvation which Isaiah did not know. So, in the midst of our own problems, we are called to return to this truth in all justice and wisdom. It may not be fashionable, but it is what is right. God has never ceased to work consistently and in the same way for our redemption and restoration so that we may know how to find Him and not be confused by the way in which people like to create religious bandwagons and schemes instead of trusting the ancient truths of prophecy in God's Word.

## Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group whether sin and its consequences can ever be completely obliterated.
2. In the light of verse 23, is it inevitable that leaders of the world will succumb to the lures of wealth?
3. How does God act in judgement against His people today? Why might He need to do this? Can you give examples?

## Discipleship challenges

- *Read carefully and slowly through this passage. As you do so, ask the Lord to alert you to sins within your own life that He alone can deal with. When you become aware of these, offer them to the Lord and accept His redemption through Jesus Christ. Does this sound simple? You may well find it hard to do!*
- *Do the same exercise as above, but looking for the sins of God's people the church (which is you, not just 'other people'). Repent on behalf of God's people and be a minister of His grace to others.*

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## Final Prayer

Inspire us, O Lord, with the world around us. May we see within it a beauty that reflects Your nature, a purpose that points us to our destiny, and a love that reflects Your graciousness to all those who respond to Your call through Jesus Christ Your Son. Inspire us to live according to the truths we find both in the Word of God and also in the world You have made: AMEN

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