

Prayers

Opening prayer

Almighty God and Lord of history, we ask You today to make Yourself known through all that is happening in the world all around us. Give us eyes to see Your hand at work in judgement, in mercy, in wondrous signs and in the kindness shown by one person to another. Grant us also the wisdom to be able to explain these things to people we meet who do not see You at work at all. May we therefore play our full part in guiding and influencing our world for good. We ask this in Your name, Lord Jesus, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: COMPASSION

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to give you a heart of compassion for those you find it hard to appreciate, so that you are not found wanting of the essential fruits of grace

2. For your friends and family

Pray that your meetings with friends and family will be filled with compassion and a desire for good, on the part of all

3. For the church and its work

Pray that all God's people grow in compassion and grace, and demonstrate this in their dealings with people outside of the church. This is not a request for unnecessary generosity, but an appeal for godliness to be shown to the world through His people

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

Listen to the news today and ask yourself what might have happened if people had acted with compassion and grace. Pray that such Godly qualities may be demonstrated in the resolution of these matters

Meditation

Some people like to pray generally;
No specifics, but in impressions, feelings,
In wants and pleadings of the heart:

But prayer reflects the nature of our faith;
And the one who prays in general
demonstrates a merely general faith
in a God of no specific interest

Can we really pray like this?

Our Lord is one who truly lives; He exists:
He is there for us to speak to one to one;
Our Saviour is our God, who speaks to us,
He gives Himself to us to hear our prayers;
Our God is indeed our Friend; He works
within His world for good, for You and me.

He is truly with us as we speak to Him;
He is with us in the things we do,
helping, sustaining, leading us on;
He is with us when we let Him down,
forgiving and changing us for good;
He is with us as our souls are transformed,
empowering, enriching us in His love.

In prayer, we speak to Him alone;
We breach the great divide with words,

We pour out our hearts as to our Lover;
And in faith we take the answers that He gives,
Happy evermore to know He cares ...
And trusting all our lives and all our needs
To Him in whom we find ourselves complete.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 13:1-22

- ¹ The oracle about Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw.
- ² On a bare hill raise a signal;
Shout out to them;
wave the hand for them to enter
the gates of the nobles.
- ³ I command those I have set aside,
I also call warriors dedicated to my wrath
Those who rejoice in my authority.
- ⁴ The sound of a tumult is in the mountains
Like a throng of people!
The sound of an uproar of kingdoms,
of nations gathering!
The LORD of hosts is mustering a host for battle.
- ⁵ They come from a distant land,
from the end of the heavens,
the LORD and the weapons of his wrath,
to destroy the whole land.
- ⁶ Weep, for the day of the LORD is near;
It will come like destruction from the Almighty!
- ⁷ Therefore all hands will be feeble,
and every human heart will melt.
- ⁸ They will be in terror:
pangs and anguish will seize them;
they will writhe like a woman in labour.
They will look aghast at one another;
their faces aflame.
- ⁹ Look, the day of the LORD comes,
cruel, with wrath and fierce anger,
to make the earth a desolation
and destroy its sinners from it.
- ¹⁰ For the stars of the heavens and their constellations
will not give their light;
the sun will be dark when it rises,
and the moon will not give its light.
- ¹¹ I will bring evil upon this world,
and guilt upon the wicked;
I will stop the arrogance of the proud,
and bring down the insolence of the tyrants.
- ¹² I will make a man rarer than fine gold,
and humanity than the gold of Ophir.
- ¹³ So I will make the heavens tremble,
and the earth will shake in its place,
at the wrath of the LORD of hosts
in the day of his fierce anger.
- ¹⁴ And like a hunted gazelle,
or a sheep which no-one tends,
each will turn to his own people,
and each will flee to his own land.

- ¹⁵Whoever is found will be stabbed,
and whoever is caught will fall by the sword.
- ¹⁶Their infants will be dashed in pieces
before their eyes;
their houses will be plundered
and their wives violated.
- ¹⁷Look, I am stirring up the Medes against them,
who are not bought by silver or enticed by gold.
- ¹⁸Their bows will strike down the young men;
and have no mercy on the fruit of the womb;
their eyes will not pity children.
- ¹⁹And Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms,
the glory of Chaldeans pride,
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah
when God overthrew them.
- ²⁰It will never be inhabited again
or lived in for all generations;
no Arab will pitch his tent there;
no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there.
- ²¹Wild animals will rest there,
and their houses will be full of howling creatures;
ostriches will dwell there,
and wild goats will dance there.
- ²²Hyenas will cry in her towers,
and jackals in the pleasant palaces;
its time is close at hand
and its days will not be prolonged.

Review

Chapter 13 of Isaiah is a strange chapter, and most of it describes war through which God acts against one of the nations. There are also some interesting passages such as 1:6-10 which refers to 'the day of the Lord', and the enigmatic phrase 'like sheep with no-one to gather them' (13:14) which remind us of the phrase 'sheep without a shepherd' (see Ez. 34 and Matt. 9:36). At first sight, the passage appears to have little spiritual depth. Later on, we will discover that it has some insight into what we might call 'spiritual warfare', but the complexity of the language and its vagueness make this difficult to spot.

We will therefore look at this passage differently in order to find its purpose, but as we do, we will lay some of the foundations for understanding the rest of Isaiah. Some have suggested that the original works of Isaiah consisted of one scroll covering Isaiah 1-12; and they would certainly be valuable like that. However, these early prophecies represent a snapshot in time giving us an enigmatic glimpse of the Messiah (see previous studies), and Isaiah lived much longer and he had much more to say (he prophesied from around 760BC to 710BC). He witnessed far more than the invasion of Israel and Judah by Assyria (721BC) which have dominated everything so far, and he had plenty of time to reflect on his prophecies.

Isaiah 13 begins a series of prophecies which continue to chapter 23. They are all called 'oracles' (13:1 – see notes below), and all of them tell us about the nations surrounding Israel and Judah. Put simply, Isaiah 1-12 is set against the story of God's judgement of Israel and Judah using surrounding nations and empires. Isaiah 13-23 focus on these nations and empires, and God's judgements on them for what they do to Israel and Judah.

In our passage today, the mystery is this; who is fighting against who, and when and why will this happen? God evidently musters an army (13:3), but it is not clear who he musters and who is to be fought. The opening verse says the prophecy is 'about Babylon'; so we naturally assume God was mustering a Babylonian army to act against evil in the world (13:11). However, later in the passage, we read 'look, I am stirring up the Medes ...' (13:17), and then, 'And Babylon ... will be like Sodom' (13:19)! This forces us to reconsider, and see that this is a prophecy of judgement against Babylon, with all its gory details of battle (13:4,5,8,9 etc) and its predictions of doom; 'the stars of the heavens ... will not give their light; the sun will be dark ... and the moon will not give its light.' (13:10).

Given the story of Isaiah so far, why should Isaiah now prophesy about the downfall Babylon? It is thought by some that this prophecy describes Babylon's downfall in 538BC when it was invaded by the Medes and Persians. On this basis, they say this prophecy cannot have been given by Isaiah because by then, he was dead!. They accept that it was influenced by him, but suggest it was written later and placed into his works in

his honour. For the same reasons, people hold that Isaiah 40 – 66 came from later times and was written by others. The word 'deutero-Isaiah' (meaning 'second Isaiah') has been used to refer to Isaiah 40-66.

There is, however, another way of explaining this. There is ample evidence that Isaiah was personally aware of Babylon's unhealthy and subversive interest in the affairs of Judah and Jerusalem (Isaiah 39, 2 Kings 20:12-19). Having seen what Assyria had done to Israel in 721BC and prophesied God's subsequent wrath against Assyria (10:12f.), and as one who saw nations and empires come and go throughout his long life, I suggest that Isaiah could easily see that Babylon was the next threat to Jerusalem. His prophecy against Babylon anticipates future events in a dramatic way, and we will discover more about this in the rest of the book; but it is important that we come to terms with these issues now.

Going Deeper

What we have discussed already is very important, and you may well find that what others say about this passage is quite different. Nevertheless, we will now look at some of the details of this text in the light of this general picture. This is a picture of war, but it speaks of the Lord's power in judgement and His authority over evil.

Notes on the text and translation

- V1 *The word 'oracle' means 'burden'. Strictly, it does not indicate a prophecy, but 'something carried', such as a concern. Over time, 'burden' came to mean a prophecy which came from the prophet's heart, something etched on their soul which had to be said – see Jeremiah 23:33f.*
- V1 *Some people have remarked on the closeness of the name of Isaiah's father, Amoz, to the other prophet Amos. But there is no good reason to think that Isaiah was Amos' son. In Hebrew, the names are quite distinct and different.*
- V2 *'Gates of the nobles' could be a specific place of entry to some place such as Babylon or Nineveh, or more likely, the entry to an army camp. Going through it was like swearing allegiance to the army and it's 'cause'.*
- V3 *the 'I' at the beginning of the verse is emphatic, making sure we understand that God Himself is summoning warriors. The rest of the verse is complicated. Each line denotes the calling of a warrior; firstly to make themselves holy for war, secondly to do God's will and thirdly to rejoice in God's authority and power.*
- V11 *My translation is different from that of others. The Hebrew reads literally 'I will visit on the world its evil and on the wicked their guilt.' The idea is that when the Lord 'visits', He brings something, so He brings evil upon the world and guilt to the wicked because of its sin. Other Bible versions read quite differently, but in my opinion incorrectly.*
- V12 *This verse compares two words for 'man' in Hebrew; one being the general word for a man 'ish', and the other being the generic word for people, 'adam'.*
- V16 *Unfortunately, Isaiah refers to the wives being 'violated', and it is most likely that this means 'raped'. It is not that Isaiah would take pleasure in a prophecy such as this; Isaiah was describing the undiluted horrors of war.*
- V17 *Notice the sarcasm in verse 17. In its day, Judah paid money to Assyria and Babylon to keep them at bay and try and buy safety and it did not work. Those who would carry out God's wrath against Babylon would not be influenced by money!*

War and battle in the Old Testament – the 'Day of the Lord'

There is no getting away from the fact that most of us dislike the war and battles of the Old Testament. However, we cannot escape the fact that this was what life was like in Isaiah's day. Nation states lived in a state of tension with each other, and when the balance was upset by the aggression of world powers, the ensuing battles could yield unpredictable results. But Isaiah was prepared to see God's hand in world affairs. The people of Jerusalem believed that God would protect them from the events which happened around them, but Isaiah saw this was false, because God could use even foreign powers to achieve His will, and did so when Assyria invaded the northern state of Israel in 721 BC.

Later on in our study we will read about what happened when the same Assyrians came to Jerusalem and after Isaiah had counselled King Hezekiah, the city was delivered from the threat of invasion (Is. 37,38). The fact that this is fully recorded in Scripture indicates that this event had a powerful influence upon Isaiah. God had 'saved' his people, but Isaiah knew that this was only for a time. He had been told by the Lord at the time of his calling (6:10-13) that the people of God would not heed the lessons of history, so he anticipated God's later judgement by invasion and seems to have concluded that it would come in the future at the hand

of the Babylonians. In addition, Isaiah saw that the Babylonians themselves would reap judgement from God; they were mere instruments in His hands.

In order to describe the acts of God's judgement which he prophesied, Isaiah used the expression 'the day of the Lord'; used in this passage twice (13:6,9). Each time, the coming of the Lord is likened to the most terrible destruction and anger, because God came to act against wickedness and sin. It is interesting to note that the first prophet who used this expression was Amos, a few years before Isaiah. He warned Israel that 'the day of the Lord' was 'darkness not light' (Amos 5:18,20), and seems to have attempted to correct the view of the people that a 'day of the Lord' was a source of joy and celebration like a religious festival. No, he said, God was just and would come with judgement.

'The day of the Lord' has been used by people in recent times to describe the second coming of Christ, and it is common to find people praying in earnest for the Lord to come again in glory. Now, that may be a proper thing for us to do as Christians, but we should not forget the warning of the prophets of old that God is utterly holy and just, and His coming will bring the final judgement when God's authority alone will rule (see Matt 25)

Some clues about God at war, from this passage

Most of this passage is written entirely generally, and it only mentions 'Babylonians' (13:1,19) or 'Medes' (13:17) in a few places. Much of the text is a description of God doing the necessary work fighting evil. With this in mind, it is significant that verse 3 (see notes above) gives three classifications of 'warriors' who will be used by God. Also, God is not ashamed to act publicly; verses 4 and 5 describe 'tumult' and 'uproar' amongst the nations as God goes about destroying evil. This is followed by a terrible description of the human panic which accompanies His wrath (13:6-9) and the perception of time standing still (13:10). By describing the 'day of the Lord' in this way, Isaiah used a story straight from the annals of the history of God's own people, for when Joshua was fighting the Amorites at Aijalon during the invasion of Canaan, God brought the people a miraculous victory which was indicated by an amazing sign; 'And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies.' (Josh 10:13). It is interesting to note that this sign indicated God's triumph over evil. Certainly, the darkening of the sky for three hours when Jesus died sounds ominous to us, but in view of the Old Testament, we should see it as a sign of heavenly victory!

God's victory over evil will ultimately be complete. This is the message of the second half of Isaiah 13, and it is a very important message. The details of the invasion of Babylon by the Medes (13:11f.) are terrible, but the complete annihilation of Babylon by the Medes and Persians was achieved in 538BC. This prophecy of Isaiah which followed the logic of all he saw happening during his own lifetime, yet anticipated these events long before their time, would have given God's people hope, and this is the reason why the prophecy is important. Imagine yourselves, generations after Isaiah, captured by Babylonians and dragged from Jerusalem to Babylon itself and facing an unknown future. Imagine that you found in the possessions of the scribes who had also been taken captive, a prophecy such as this from a revered prophet of previous generations. You would read this and have hope that one day, God would bring down His justice on the head of those who had just decimated the Temple and all you held dear in Jerusalem.

Discipleship

Application

As we shall see, this is only the beginning of the hope that Isaiah gave to the Judean people of later generations who were taken captive by the Babylonians. In this passage, we start to jump between the times of Isaiah (760–700BC) and the time of Judah's exile in Babylon (587–520 BC), and I have explained how Isaiah's prophecies did this, despite the many theories which deny him as the author of this passage and the book which bears his name.

The main challenge which comes to each of us from this text is to believe that God is a just God, and that our salvation in Jesus Christ is the only option open to us other than to face the absolute justice of God and His eventual and final destruction of all wickedness and evil. Some think that to say this puts unnecessary pressure on people to believe. Perhaps it should, because it is hard to find any different message in the Bible. We may practice evangelism with all the care and love at our disposal, as we should; but we cannot avoid the fact that we present people with a choice between life and death; life with Christ or death without Him. Today, we have become so cautious about what it means to be a Christian and 'choose life' with Christ, that we have reached the point where people will go to a pastor and say 'I think I've lost my faith' as if this was a pastoral issue requiring a little attention! I know full well that it is not easy to be a Christian today and that people have doubts, but if we avoid the truth that the alternative to life with Christ is death in sin, then we treat the Gospel of Grace too casually. Loss of faith is loss of everything! Sometimes something

like a war (here I mean spiritually) is required to make us sit up and take notice of what our salvation really means.

Questions for groups

1. Which parts of this text do you find most difficult, and how do you cope with it?
2. Do you have a hope that God will one day deal with all things and all people justly? How do you believe this will happen?
3. Do you prefer to believe that passages such as this were written by people other than Isaiah? In your group, discuss your reasons for and against this.

Discipleship challenges

- *Discuss what you have learned about Isaiah with your church leaders and ascertain their views about the authorship of Isaiah..*
- *Think about God's justice, and consider what He would wish to destroy in your life.*
- *Write down a list of the spiritual battles you have fought, and what you learned from each one.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, make us wise in our judgements and loving in our actions, ever conscious of the presence of Your guiding Holy Spirit and the judgement of Almighty God which rests upon us as well as all people. Save us through Jesus Christ, and bring us into His glory, we pray; AMEN
