

Prayers

Opening prayer

Dear Jesus, bless us with the spiritual fruit of kindness, we pray. We know that we need to show kindness to others, which might mean doing good deeds, but it may also mean laughing with them, or getting close to them in the midst of their pain. May we be willing to be vulnerable in making ourselves available to others, and show the same kindness to others that You have shown to us. We praise You for all You have done for us, and we seek to copy Your example of mature faith in action: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: COMPASSION

1. For yourself

Pray in silence, and offer yourself to the Lord to hear His Word, do His will, and live in faith and charity; so wait on Him for His Word

2. For your friends and family

Pray for any of your family who are having a hard time because of illness or bereavement and do not know who to trust. Pray for those around them who have to help them in the midst of their infirmity

3. For the church and its work

Pray that God's people will have the courage to remain kind in the midst of difficulties. As soon as difficulties arise within a church fellowship, the essential peace and kindness of the community can easily be lost. Pray that this will not be so with your fellowship

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

Pray for peace in the financial markets of the world, where trading is done largely on the basis of trust. At the moment, few people trust each other, and few are willing to be generous in their attitudes. Pray that the current turmoil will not make people as a whole less trusting and caring

Meditation

Sing a song of praise to God!

Sing it over and over again and let it fill your heart
Let your feelings and emotions soar away in wonder
Let them rise in praise of Him who lives within you!

Sing a hymn of praise to God!

Sing each verse, and wonder at the mysteries of faith
Revealed through every line, through every glorious word;
Proclaim the blessing of our God and His salvation.

Sing a psalm of praise to God!

Sing with all God's faithful people through the ages
Who've been inspired by the eternal Word of God,
And challenged by the personal witness of His people

Sing a song, a hymn, a psalm,

To glorify your God, in love and praise!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 14: 1-11

¹ But the LORD will have compassion on Jacob and will choose Israel once again, and will give them rest in their own land; and other peoples will join them and attach themselves to the house of Jacob. ² The peoples will take them and bring them to their own place, and the house of Israel will have both male and female servants in the LORD's land; they will take captive those who had captured them, and rule over those who oppressed them.

³ On the day that the LORD gives you rest from the suffering, turmoil and cruel bondage by which you have been enslaved, ⁴ you will take up this proverbial song against the king of Babylon:

Look how oppressions have ceased!
Arrogance has ceased!

⁵ The LORD has broken the staff of the wicked,
the sceptre of rulers,

⁶ In anger it had struck down peoples
with ceaseless blows,
In wrath it subdued the nations
with relentless persecution.

⁷ The whole earth rests and is quiet,
And songs break out.

⁸ Even the cypress trees rejoice over you,
And the cedars of Lebanon;
'Now you have been laid low,
no one will come to cut us down.'

⁹ Beneath us, Sheol has prepared
to meet you when you come;
it rouses the spirits of the dead to greet you,
all those who were leaders of the earth;
It rouses from their thrones
all the kings of the nations.

¹⁰ All of them will answer and say to you:
'You have become weak, as we are!
You have been made like us!'

¹¹ Your pomp is lowered to Sheol,
and the noise of your disgrace;
The bed underneath you is maggots,
and your covering is worms!

Review

Yesterday we looked at the way in which Isaiah was led to anticipate a time when Babylon would invade the Promised Land and Jerusalem in particular. Such a cataclysmic event was foreseen by Isaiah as a logical consequence of all he had seen, more than a hundred years before it happened (587BC). Isaiah had also been told by God that His people would not understand their salvation until virtually all of them were destroyed and there remained only a 'Holy Seed' (6:13). By God's help, therefore, Isaiah did what few others could do, which was to see beyond the troubles and destruction to a time when God's people would have rest from their oppression and servitude (14:1-3), and be free to rejoice in the judgement of God against those who had enslaved them and the evils they represented. The Babylonians had been used by God, but they were incredibly brutal, and Isaiah said they would reap God's righteous judgements in 'Sheol', the place of the dead.

The people of Israel believed that when people died, they were buried in the earth and lived a shadowy existence in the 'underworld', called 'Sheol'. Some significant verses in today's text speak of Sheol, and describe it as rising up to meet those who would go there (14:9), in this case the leaders of the nations who had desecrated God's land. They would be met by the spirits of kings and leaders who had gone before (14:9), taunting them by saying that in death they were no stronger than anyone else; for this had been their proud boast when they were alive! Even the trees rejoiced at this (14:8), and the song reaches its climax in the ghoulish description of corpses in a tomb lying on maggots and covered in worms (14:11)!

The remarkable thing about this song is that God is the One who is in control of these events; even death, as is clear from verse 5 onwards. We read this song today and fail to see this poem as remarkable just because God is described as the One taking vengeful wrath against His enemies (and we tend not to like such notions of God). If anything, we may feel ourselves to be observers of this judgement, and living thousands of years after the events it describes. However, it was not at all clear to most people of Isaiah's day that Sheol was a place where God could have any control; indeed, traditional Hebrew belief was that

Sheol was beyond the authority of God. However, Isaiah was prepared to say with visionary insight that there was nowhere that God did not have ultimate authority. To use a phrase from elsewhere in scripture, God is God of 'the living as well as the dead' (Luke 20:38, Romans 14:9).

This passage, however, is basically a prophecy of rejoicing and victory, a description of God's ability to command world events and bring both vindication to His people and the complete destruction of His enemies. It is often the case that whilst we are under oppression of some kind, we cannot see our way through the problems we face. Indeed, some would say that this gives us a definition of what 'oppression' really is; something we cannot see through, overcome or get beyond. The oppression of God's people by Babylon is used in the Bible as a parable of the general oppression of evil and sin which afflict all humanity, and 'Babylon' is one of the words in the Bible directly associated with evil (see Revelations 14:8, 16:19, 18:2f. etc.).

It is possible to say therefore that although this passage sounds relatively uninteresting to us, it represents another picture in Isaiah of God's ultimate victory and control over all things; it is a picture of salvation! I often come across people in church who have no conviction whatsoever that God will 'bring them through' whatever problems they have; and they need the 'assurance of their salvation'. One of the benefits of reading the Bible is to come across the many stories of how God brings such salvation to His people; it is something which Isaiah spoke about long before the time of Christ!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the text and translation
- The saved land and Israel's rest
- Sheol and the subduing of the nations

Notes on the text and translation

- V1 *Jacob and Israel will be given 'rest' according to my translation, but in others, you will find it says 'I will settle them'. The Hebrew verb here is one used of shepherds settling down a flock of sheep for the night. However, the promise of God is that His people will enjoy rest from the turmoil of war and destruction through which they have been judged.*
- V1 *The 'other peoples' who will join Jacob and Israel are the 'sojourners' or 'resident aliens'; people who elect to live with God's people but who come from a different heritage.*
- V4 *The Hebrew word for '... a proverbial song against ...' is translated by most authors as a '... a taunt against ...'. The word means a parable or proverb, but here it is meant in a negative sense, and we have no word in English which mean 'a negative parable told against ...' I have used a phrase which seems best to me.*
- V4 *The last line 'arrogance has ceased'. I have taken the traditional line here in interpreting a word which is in the text but is almost unknown in Hebrew. Some think the term refers to Babylon as the 'golden city', but the confusion is not helped by the fact that the Dead Sea scrolls do not shed light on this word either.*
- V6 *You may find the words of this verse to be quite different in various translations, but the gist of what Isaiah says is very clear. All the Hebrew words have multiple meanings; ceaseless blows, relentless persecutions etc.*
- V9 *Sheol is 'stirred up' according to the Hebrew, but this means that the underworld has been prepared by God for the coming of sin and wickedness in the form of Babylon.*
- V11 *Most translations talk about 'the sound of your harps' in the second line, but the word which might mean 'harps' could well be 'disgrace', and this fits with the meaning of the song far better.*

We will now go on to look at some of the interesting details of the text which we have not as yet covered; the issues of land (1:1-4) and the nature of Israel's rest; the subduing of the nations and how 'Sheol' equates to our understanding of 'Hell'.

The saved land and Israel's rest

This passage of scripture highlights the contrast between Isaiah's own day and the day when God would bring His people safely back again to their own land after the defeat of Babylon (described in chapter 13). In Isaiah's day, Israel and Judah were at war with each other (see 7:1-6), but now, in God's time of restoration, they are unified. This is indicated by the way that they are called 'Jacob' and 'Israel' (14:1,2), the two names of the man whose children originally constituted all the tribes of Israel (Gen 29,30,32:22f.). The land would have rest not simply from invasion but from the warring and fighting between God's people. Using the

language of Joshua, Isaiah talked about a re-occupation of the Promised Land, with each returning to their own place (14:2); land they occupied not by right but because as God's people, they had a share in His inheritance.

Some may say that this prophecy was fulfilled when God's people came back from Babylon in phases after 538BC (under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah), but that is to limit the power of the vision. God's work here is a genuine work of restoration, leading His people back to where they should be, and it can be interpreted in a number of different ways. Jewish people today would say that the creation of the state of Israel fulfils this prophesy; Christians might agree, but add that spiritually, this prophecy tells us that God often works in restoration power. Today, people will talk about the church 'going forward' because we live in a world in which things are constantly changing, and people argue that the Gospel has to be made relevant to the people of today so that they can hear it and respond to it. This may be so, but we can never go forward on the basis of the world's agenda. We can only build on the solid foundations of what God has already done for us; and for that, we sometimes need to be 'restored' by God to the spiritual place He would have us be. Our starting place is always Christ, and Christ alone.

In general, the Old Testament often uses the word 'salvation', but the word is often related to the idea of 'rest' or 'free open places', as with a flock of sheep free to 'rest besides still waters' (Psalm 23) or wander and feed at peace. Verse 3 suggests to those who endure suffering, turmoil and hardship that if they trust Him, God will give them true 'rest'; a place of nourishment, growing and building up.

Sheol and the subduing of the nations

The terrible fate of the Babylonians becomes something for the saved people of God to praise God for (14:4-11). The original prophecy was Isaiah's typically blunt descriptions of the consequences of war. He treats Babylon as an individual, as a king who has wielded a stick in anger (14:6), striking repeatedly and brutal in its persecution. This brutality and anger is the reason for God's wrath. The Bible often talks about the 'cedars of Lebanon' as one of the natural wonders of the Middle Eastern world, presumably beautiful forests of the north eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea which existed in those days. The wood from these forests were one of the staple trades of the people of Tyre (1 Kings 17:1f. and 19:1f.), but the real damage done to them was by armies who cut great swathes through them in their quest for power. In the ancient world, their peace was an indicator of world peace (14:8).

Isaiah prophesied against the Assyrians at first (see 10:20f.) because of their invasion of Israel. The Assyrian Empire was eventually toppled by the Babylonian empire around 626BC, and the Babylonians were greatly feared because they had defeated the great Assyrian Empire. It is with some sarcasm that Isaiah describes the kings of the past (Assyria and others) rising to meet the greatest King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, and reminding him that in death, he was no greater than anyone else (14:10,11)!

Can we make an equation between the Old Testament's description of Sheol, and an understanding of hell which comes from the New Testament and Jesus' description of a place 'where there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth!' (Matt 8:12, 13:42, 22:13, 24:30 etc.). It is best to think of the one gradually becoming the other, for the understanding of death and Sheol in the Old Testament developed over the years between the Testaments. In Jesus' day, the equivalent of 'Sheol' was 'Hades', the Greek word for the 'place of the dead', but as in this text in Isaiah, although it was a place which stood for separation from God, Christ had authority over death by means of His resurrection. There is no 'resurrection' in this passage of Scripture, but there is an understanding that God has some kind of authority over death and Sheol, because they perform God's ultimate act of judgement against those who have been agents of evil in this life, and Babylon, or the King of Babylon, was certainly one of those.

Discipleship

Application

It may seem difficult to study passages such as these, but they are important. We must carefully note how the prophets throughout scripture talk about 'Sheol', the place of the dead, because although we do not find it here, we will sometimes find in them hints about God's resurrecting power. Also, judgement is an essential feature of the whole Bible, Old Testament and New, and we would be foolish to ignore what God's Word says about the final judgement of God which people face after death. If we were to remove from our minds all the Biblical references to God's judgements against evil, then we would 'skew' the moral world in which we live, and lose sight of the importance of making godly moral decisions which identify what is wrong and evil in our world; for what is evil should be assigned to 'Sheol'.

In comparison to a discussion of 'Sheol', it is easier for us to appreciate the idea of 'restoration' with which this passage clearly begins. People will often talk about 'revival', or 'renewal', and sometimes 'restoration' or 'reawakening', as ways of describing what God does to bring special blessing and growth to His people. We do need to be clear that each of these has a role to play in any genuine work of the Spirit. In this case, as represented by the re-taking of the land in verses 1 and 2, 'restoration' is the re-establishment of godly principles upon which the church of God has been built. People often talk about the Wesleyan revival in Great Britain in the 18th century as something of a 'new' phenomenon. Wesley himself would have been mortified to think that anyone thought he was preaching anything other than the classical Christian doctrines of the Christian church. His technique (outdoor preaching) was new, but he called people back (restoration) to basic Biblical truths of salvation and an understanding of God as One whose essential character was love. Restoration has always been a feature of God's call to His people; it is not the only part of what He calls us to do, but it has an important role to play in any move of God's Spirit.

Questions for groups

1. Is it possible to have 'revival' without 'restoration'?
2. How important is 'land' to the church today, and is our 'Promised Land' only in heaven?
3. Discuss in your group how God's people identify what is evil, and how they may be able to come to a common mind about issues of morality.

Discipleship challenges

- Find a friend who is not a Christian and discuss with them whether they think the churches of your country will grow. Learn what you can from this!
- Pray about the sin which is in our world and is a direct affront to God. Pray against its roots wherever you perceive them to be.
- Write to your political representatives or leaders about some of the evils present in your own country and ask them to take action against them.

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Friend, give us peace in the midst of strife, joy in the midst of unhappiness, and grace in the midst of trouble. By this we know your love and affection, and may we never take it for granted. Thank You Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN.
