

Prayers

Opening prayer

You have stored up for us great and wonderful things, Lord Jesus. Bring us into Your presence and show us the wonders of Your creative power, the glory of Your eternal plan, the abundance of Your love, and Your immense compassion for all. May we always rejoice in the extent of Your provision, and remain confident in Your gift of our salvation, for You are our faithful friend and Saviour, and we praise You: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: COMPASSION

1. For yourself

In saying our prayers, we sometimes speak to God at times when we do not feel particularly enthusiastic about our task. Pray, and ask the Lord to help you relax and feel free in the Lord's presence, so that you can show your true feelings for yourself and for others.

2. For your friends and family

There will be some members of your family who you find difficult; this is natural within any family. Ask the Lord to help you let go of your negative reactions to such individuals so that you are able to show true love and compassion for them.

3. For the church and its work

Pray that God's people will as a whole be seen as a compassionate people willing to help those in need and willing to 'go the extra mile' for justice and for love.

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

Pray for those involved in the international money markets at this time, as well as political leaders and national banks. The pressures felt by those in this system are acute, as mistrust surrounds the entire system. Pray that stability and trust will be restored.

Meditation

Am I ready for the call of God,
To respond to the touch of His hand on my life?

Am I ready to submit to Him,
So that He can use me in whatever way He will?

Am I ready to accept His challenge,
To live firstly for others and not for myself?

Am I ready to put a stop to my sins,
And testify to the saving grace of our God?

Am I ready to deal with evil,
By the power of the Spirit and the truth of the Word?

Am I ready to help a stranger,
Because this is how I must show God's love?

Am I ready to declare the Gospel,
By word and deed, and in everything I do?

Prepare me, Father, to do Your will,
So I may live by faith throughout all my life.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 14:12-24

¹²How you have fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
You have been cut down to the ground,
You weakened the nations!

¹³You had said in your heart,
'I will ascend to heaven;
Above the divine stars
I will raise my throne;
I will sit on the Mount of Assembly
in the far reaches of the north;

¹⁴I will rise high over high places and clouds,
I will be like the Most High.'

¹⁵But you have been brought down to Sheol,
to the deepest Pit!

¹⁶Onlookers stare at you,
and they ponder over you:

'Is this the man who terrorised the earth?
The one who shook kingdoms,

¹⁷who made the world like a desert
and destroyed its cities,
who gave his prisoners no release?'

¹⁸All the kings of the nations – all of them!
They lie in glory,
each in his own mausoleum;

¹⁹but you, you are thrown out from your tomb,
like a loathed shoot,
like the clothes of the dead, slain by the sword,
like those who fall into a pit of stones,
like a corpse trampled underfoot.

²⁰You cannot be united with them in burial,
because you have destroyed your land,
and have killed your own people.

This race of evildoers
will never again pass people's lips.

²¹Prepare the slaughter of his sons
because of the guilt of their father.
So that they may never rise to possess the earth
or fill the surface of the world with cities!

²² I will rise up against them, says the LORD of hosts, and cut off from Babylon her name and survivors, her children and her future, says the LORD. ²³ And I will turn it into a place for hedgehogs with pools of water, and I will sweep it with the broom of destruction, says the LORD of hosts.

²⁴ The LORD of hosts has sworn: As I have planned, so will it be; and as I have intended, so will it come to pass.

Review

Before we move on in Isaiah, it is important that we read this passage and consider the controversies which surround it concerning the description of the King of Babylon in verse 12f. It has become considered as correct to limit its interpretation to that of a prophecy about the King of Babylon with yet another damning indictment of his destruction of Jerusalem with some rather horrific descriptions of loathing (14:18-20).

However, as soon as you begin to read this prophecy closely in Hebrew or in English, such a general approach seems less than adequate. The passage is steeped in quite unusual language for the Old Testament referring to divinity rather than mere kingly qualities, particularly in verses 12 and 13, and some of the words used are simply not found anywhere else in the Old Testament. We must therefore consider looking at the text more closely.

This, of course, has been done before, and earlier Christian scholars came to the conclusion that these verses were prophetic not merely of what would happen to the King of Babylon as part of his punishment for invading the holy city of Jerusalem. They regarded the prophecy as identifying Babylon as the epitome of evil, the supreme example of wickedness and sin. By the time that the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible was made in the 5th century AD, the ceremonial name of the King of Babylon cited in our text in verse 12; 'Day-Star' was translated as the Latin 'Lucifer', and characterised as an 'Angel of Light'. In other words, this passage came to be regarded as a description of the Prince of Evil, Satan Himself under the name of Lucifer.

In addition to this however, people saw the connection between the throwing down of 'Day-Star' (Lucifer) and the famous occasion when Jesus talked about Satan with these words; 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning!' (Luke 10:18), and also the words from the Revelation of John which describe the ultimate defeat of Satan and all evil, where an angel cries out 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! ...' (Rev 14:8 and elsewhere). Because of this the traditional view of the church has therefore been that Isaiah 14:12f. does indeed say more about God and Satan than appears on the surface; though some feel that the texts can be explained in other ways.

If we take the imagery we have discovered and look at the passage again, we can see that it describes the Dar Star's (Lucifer's) attempts to rise higher than God and usurp the authority of the Almighty. For that reason, God acted to dismiss him from the heavenly council and throw him out, down to the 'deepest pit' (14:15 – a phrase which has resonance with the fiery pit of Revelation 19:20f. and 20:14 into which the Beast and then death are to be thrown at the end of time). It is a short step from there to suggest that this passage describes something like a 'heavenly fall' in which sin has been thrown out of heaven, and reflects Lucifer's 'eviction' from heaven; the heavenly fall from grace of God's enemy which parallels the earthly fall from grace of humanity described in Genesis 3!

You may agree or disagree with how this passage has become a key prophetic description of evil in the Bible, but we must surely look at how and why this passage has come to mean so much. I once came across a College tutor who did not believe that Isaiah 14 had anything to do with Satan and asked his students to read Isaiah 14 and tell him what they could find out about Satan in it. They came back and told him they could find nothing. They could not find the connections because no-one told them what the Hebrew meant or what the early Christians thought of this passage, or how the ancient Septuagint translation or the Latin Vulgate treats this passage, or pointed them to the other scriptural texts traditionally associated with it. I have told you all this so that you know why this passage has long been regarded as a very important Biblical text. It deserves our fullest attention.

Going Deeper

Whilst we have started by looking at the general importance of this passage, much has not yet been explained! The passage describes the rise and fall of the 'Dar-Star' (the King of Babylon: 14:12-17) and his gruesome fate (14:18f.). The text concludes with a statement of God's intent to destroy evil. The power of the final verse is significant. It is God's ultimate plan to destroy everything that stands in the way of His ultimate plan of restoration and redemption.

Notes on the text and translation

- V12 *The 'Day-Star' (Hebrew 'helel') is a title of the King of Babylon, and is literally translated as 'the Shining One'. It is important to note that a close Arabic word means 'New Moon' ('hilalun'). Also, because of the equation of the King of Babylon with evil, the Latin Vulgate translation used for centuries used the name 'Lucifer' here, which is a fair Latin translation of the original Hebrew, meaning 'shining light'.*
- V13 *The descriptions in this verse are all about divinity. The 'Mount of Assembly' is in ancient mythology the place where the gods assemble, and 'the far reaches of the north' is sometimes translated (literally) as 'Zaphon', a mystical and mythological place in the mountain regions beyond and north of the Euphrates where the 'gods' were believed to dwell.*
- V14 *The first sentence is awkward because two words are placed together, 'bamah', meaning 'high-places' (the places where the ba'als were worshipped) and 'yav' meaning 'thick cloud'. Both words are important words which relate to the 'gods'. See discussion in text.*

- V17 *The last part of this verse reads literally 'he would not let his prisoners go to their homes!' But the whole expression is too long to fit into the rhythm of the poetry in English (it does in Hebrew of course), so we are forced to find a shorter way of saying the same thing!*
- V18 *There is an emphatic 'all of them' in the first line which is missed out by some translations. Secondly, the last line refers to the kings sleeping in their own homes, however, this is a colloquial way of talking about a king being buried in a 'mausoleum', hence my translation.*
- V19 *The words 'like a loathed shoot' are controversial and you will find few translations agree. The Hebrew words are unclear and appear to refer to a shoot of young growth which is rejected in disgust. Some have surmised that the words described the disposal of a still born child or aborted foetus, but I have left in the traditional interpretation 'shoot' (possibly 'branch') which has other connections with Isaiah.*
- V20 *The last stanza is often translated 'may the descendants of evildoers nevermore be named!' However, what Isaiah is trying to say is that the people of the Kingdom of Babylon will never be talked about by people again.*

The rise of Babylon / Day Star / Lucifer

I have explained the connections between the different titles used for the King of Babylon in this passage in the notes above. The complete title here is 'Day Star, son of the Dawn' (14:12). The Hebrew words for this are closely linked to a wide variety of ancient mythologies, and scholars can find an extensive array of myths and legends attached to these names in Sumerian and Acadian sources contemporary to or pre-dating Isaiah, which reflect popular beliefs held at the time. All of these myths speak of gods who attempted to become too big for themselves and ended up paying the price. If you want to explore these myths and legends, most scholarly commentaries on Isaiah will give you further information about them and where they came from. What Isaiah seems to have done is to take a popular myth of his day and use it as the basis for a prophetic announcement of God's intention to judge and finally deal with His enemies; and Babylon (as explained in yesterday's study) represented the final enemy. All this makes us reflect on the principles at stake in the whole passage.

What this passage appears to say is that as in the example of the King of Babylon (who we assume to be Nebuchadnezzar), the nature of evil is to rise and attempt to climb higher than God Himself. The 'Mount of Assembly' mentioned in verse 13 and the 'far reaches of the north' both refer to ancient pagan beliefs occasionally reflected in scripture but not generally supported by it, that the 'north' was where all the 'god's' came from (see also Psalm 48:2). We learn next that the Day-Star sought to usurp God's authority by mimicking Him, for in verse 14, it describes him attempting to rise 'high over ... clouds'. Remember, the cloud was a classic description going back to the time of Moses of the dwelling place of Almighty God (Ex 40:34f.). In summary, verse 15 concludes that Day Star intended to 'be like the Most High'.

This passage therefore describes the classic feature of evil at its worst, which is its attempt to stand in the place of God. It is easily possible to see how Satan attempts this even in our own day. He will use almost any means to displace God from people's lives and plant himself in some other guise in His place. Satan will use other religions, alternative medical therapies and all manner of things, some of which may themselves be neither good or evil (such as music or love), but he will use these to separate people from their true God and make them 'commit' to something else.

The 'Fall'

However, God will not have this and will act against Day Star (Lucifer, or the King of Babylon). Isaiah prophesied that he would be 'brought down' (12:15) and thrown into the deepest pit. Even in the context of Isaiah talking about a military defeat of Babylon, such words describe awful death, and by using the people's own popular mythology, Isaiah appears to have been addressing them in terms they would understand, to say that God would ultimately defeat the worst prince of evil imaginable; Babylon, called Day Star. Nothing could get past God Almighty! The time would come, said Isaiah, when God would throw down Day Star in public and desecrate and destroy him. Not even death was good enough for this paragon of evil, and the list of loathed consequences in verse 19 is supposed to make us cringe. It describes 'a loathed shoot' which may be a colloquialism for a still born child (see above), the 'unclean' and despicable clothes of dead soldiers, and the graves of those fallen in war who are not properly buried. It may be that the text does reveal exactly how loathsome all these things were to the people of the day, but there is no doubt that Isaiah was describing to the people of his day 'something worse than death'.

More than this, the race (14:20) of those who had heralded this King (meaning the Babylonians, or even the demonic hordes of Lucifer) were denounced by Isaiah with the same horror as the 'Day Star' (14:20-23) and even the land where the Babylonian empire was would become desolate. It was God's plan to utterly destroy all evil in order to establish His Kingdom and give His people their peace (14:24), according to this extraordinary prophecy of Isaiah.

The unique craft and skill of this prophecy and its use of popular mythology enabled Isaiah to state a powerful truth about God's ultimate objective, which was to bring an end to all evil. However the Day Star had risen and whatever he had done, all of his work would one day be utterly destroyed. That is the unique message of Isaiah 14.

Discipleship

Application

Some people have asked me whether I believe that this passage tells us anything about the 'heavenly fall of Satan' which Jesus talks about in Luke 10:18. Yes, I do think that Isaiah was prophesying about the heavenly reality of evil satanic powers using language which meant a great deal to people in his own day but is partly clouded for us now; and it is quite possible that it does describe the principle of the 'fall of evil'. However, the driving energy behind this prophecy is not backwards but forwards. Isaiah's conviction that 'Day Star' would be overcome (14:24) and cast down points us more towards the conclusion that we must encourage Christians today to take hold of the Biblical truth that God will have the victory over all evil when He comes in His Kingdom. Together with Isaiah we can anticipate Satan's final downfall, firstly in Jesus' work on the Cross (through which we now stand against all evil), and eventually when Jesus comes again in glory and Creation is 'remade' (Rev 20,21). However, trying to look backwards to work out if and when there was a heavenly fall of Satan (Lucifer etc.) at some point relating to the fall of man (Gen 3) is just not something we can tie down in this text as firmly as we would like; though it certainly appears to make sense, given Jesus' words in Luke (above).

In the meantime, it is helpful if we make firm efforts to identify the way in which Satan works in our midst, and in this passage of scripture we have been given a big clue. Verses 13 and 14 warn us that anything which takes the place of God in a person's life may well be the work of Satan. For example, domination happens when one person or a group of people take authority over others in an ungodly way, or make themselves 'like God' over others; some men dominate women in this way, and some people habitually seek such domination over others through all forms of child and adult bullying. Also, nations place themselves over others and even control their ability to survive as if by right. All these are examples of ungodly domination and evil activity which needs to be identified and fought against. God's people have a calling to do the work of God and stand against all the works of Satan, expose them and work to destroy them, confident in God's final victory.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss the interpretation of this passage more fully in your group.
2. Does Isaiah prophesy only about the defeat of the Babylonians by the Persians in 538BC? Why might he wish to say more?
3. Does this passage of scripture help your understanding of the nature of evil, or does it make things more confusing? Discuss in your group.

Discipleship challenges

- *Spend time with this passage of scripture and read it several times, until you feel that you have a firmer hold on what you believe it all means.*
- *If you have the opportunity to do so, find out what other preachers or teachers in your church think about this passage.*
- *Write down a list of anything you believe dominates your own life. Pray against the enemy, Satan, and tell him in Jesus' name to leave this part of your life alone.*

Final Prayer

Help us learn from this day, Lord God. In your wisdom, teach us how to make the best of every situation in which we find ourselves, and in Your mercy, protect us from all the works of the evil one. All praise to You, our Lord and God, our friend and Saviour: AMEN

