

Prayers

Opening prayer

We praise You Great Lord of all Creation
You are the One who makes all things perfect!
You are the One who knows what is right and wrong!
You are the One who graciously forgives our sin!
You are the One who liberates us for Glory!
Alleluia – AMEN!

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: WEALTH

1. For yourself

Reflect on your own attitudes towards the things you have and confess your sins, especially of greed and of covetousness

2. For your friends and family

Place before the Lord your feelings about the comparative wealth or otherwise of those you know and love. Seek the Lord's heart and mind about those things the devil can use to control or damage relationships

3. For the church and its work

Find out what your church has 'in the bank', and also what it plans to do with this. Confess the sins of you church and pray that its wealth will be always be used for the work of the Kingdom

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

Switch on the news and listen for the concerns of those who are poor. Pray for their needs, and ask the Lord to bless those who seek to distribute the wealth of nations with godly equity.

Meditation

I see the marks of faith in the lives of others
The saints of God who constantly witness to my spirit

A smile on the face of one who suffers
Which shows faith held high in the midst of hardship

A truthful word inspired by the Spirit
Which demonstrates integrity of faith and purpose

A hymn or psalm sung with spiritual beauty,
Which lifts the heart to the heights of God's throne

A helping hand offered timely and trustworthy
Which opens up the soul in love and generosity

A life lived through trials, but surely ascending
Which shouts freedom from Satan's spiral of despair

I see the marks of faith in the lives of others
And I thank my Saviour for all the saints of God

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 2:5-22

⁵ O house of Jacob,

come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

- ⁶ For You have abandoned Your people,
the house of Jacob,
because they are full of eastern practices
and they do divination like the Philistines,
and clasp hands with foreigners.
- ⁷ Their land is filled with silver and gold,
and their treasures are never ending;
their land is filled with horses,
and their chariots are without number.
- ⁸ Their land is filled with idols;
they worship the work of their hands,
to what their fingers have made.
- ⁹ And so people are humbled,
and each one is brought low;
do not raise them high!
- ¹⁰ Take cover in the rocks,
and hide in the dust
from the terror of the LORD,
and from the glory of his majesty.
- ¹¹ Those who look down on others will be humiliated,
and everyone's pride will be humbled;
but the LORD alone will be lifted up on that day!
- ¹² For the LORD of hosts will have His day
against all that is proud and arrogant,
against all that is exalted and it will fall;
- ¹³ against all the cedars of Lebanon,
which are high and lofty;
- ¹⁴ against all the oaks of Bashan;
- ¹⁵ against all the high mountains,
against all the lofty hills;
- ¹⁶ against every high tower,
against every fortified wall;
- ¹⁷ against all the ships of Tarshish,
against all the stately vessels.
- ¹⁸ Those who disdain others will be shamed,
and everyone's pride will be brought low;
and the LORD alone will be lifted up on that day.
- ¹⁹ The idols shall utterly pass away.
- ²⁰ They will take cover in rocks
and caves in the earth
from the terror of the LORD,
and from the glory of his majesty,
when he rises up to make the earth tremble!
- ²¹ On that day people will discard
to rodents and bats
the idols of silver and gold,
which they made for worship,
- ²² as they flee to the caverns of the rocks
and the crevices in the crags,
from the terror of the LORD,
and from the glory of his majesty,
when he rises up to make the earth tremble!
- ²³ Stop paying attention to people,
who only have breath in their nostrils,

for what is he worth?

Review

Isaiah calls for Israel to get to grips with her sin and face what it means to be God's people, and despairs of the way that the people of Israel of his day quickly run away from their spiritual obligations

In this astonishing prophecy, Isaiah moves on from describing God's eternal purposes (2:1-4) to address 'Jacob' (Israel, that is - 2:5,6) about what would happen to them because of their sins. Reading this is hard going, and although we gain some insight into what was happening in Israel in those days (2:6,7), Isaiah's words seem designed to scare those who hear or read them (2:19)! Isaiah prophesies against the extravagances of life (horses and chariots - 2:7), ignorant attitudes (pride and presumption - 2:11), the rich and affluent (represented by grand features of the countryside - 2:13-15), and trade (as in shipping - 2:16). What does this mean, however, coming after the magnificent prophecy that opened the chapter? Many people give up on the Old Testament when facing passages like this, even though they know that it is the 'Word of God'. People quickly say 'what has this to do with my faith in Jesus?' and move on.

I hope that after looking at this passage today you will refrain from doing this! Isaiah's prophetic poem is written with a structure which is not clear to us in English and I will explain it further in later study, but the clues to its meaning lie in the key phrases which hold the whole poem together. I have rearranged the essential phrases of the text below in a way that helps us understand what the prophecy says, and it can be seen quite easily that it has a message for today.

1. *Come let us walk in the light of the Lord. (2:5)*
2. *You, O God, have abandoned Your people because of their rebellion and sin; please do not let them become arrogant! (2:6-9)*
3. *People of Israel, take cover from the terror of God's judgement against all who are arrogant or have a high opinion of themselves, and against all the things in which we take pride (2:10-17). They are idols and they mean nothing. (2:18)*
4. *People of Israel, throw away all your home made idols and false gods as you take cover from the terror of God's judgement and stop listening to people. Their opinion about these matters is worthless! (2:19-22)*

In order to create this summary I have missed out many interesting details, but it is obvious that the whole prophecy in chapter 2 begins with a call to Israel to come back into line with God's vision of salvation for the whole world (2:1-4). This is summarised in the first verse of our passage today; '*come let us walk in the light of the Lord*' (2:5). The passage continues with a section that reads like the prophet interceding for the people because their sins mean that they are not ready to do God's will (2:5-11). He calls on God not to let His own people be 'lifted high' because they are not yet repentant and have not perceived that they are doing wrong in God's sight.

Then, in verses 12 to 19, the prophecy picks up the theme of people and things that are 'lifted up', because the people have elevated themselves rather than honoured their God. It is a most pertinent message, because even today, the church is often compromised by people who are convinced that their own opinion is right and show little regard for the Lord's revelation of truth to others. Frankly, this passage is designed to scare people who have such a haughty attitude, and also to encourage those who suffer under such domination that God is standing with them! God cannot abide such human arrogance, and He will always rise in judgement against it. Finally, the prophecy calls on people to throw away anything that is an offence to God's sovereignty, especially pride and arrogance, and it concludes with an appeal; why pay attention to people when you have God to guide you?

As with so many passages of the Old Testament prophets, once we have looked properly at the passage, it has considerable relevance and power for all people of whatever time or place in the history of the world!

Going Deeper

In our further study, we will look at each of the three main sections of the prophecy (2:6-9, 10-19, 20-22). In order to understand them, we will need to look at their structure, because as poems, they each express God's Word through a different poetic structure, and some of these are not poetry as we know it today! Nevertheless, we will find that each has some interesting things to say to us, as we should expect of the prophecy of Isaiah!

Will God abandon His people? (2:6-9)

It does not take too much observation to see that the first verse in our passage today is a link verse with what has gone before, but the prophetic message which follows in verses 6 to 9 is different from the rest of the passage. This is because it does not read like God speaking to His people, but a person (presumably Isaiah) speaking to God. In addition, if you take the whole of the section and read the first line and then the last, you will find that together they make what reads like a prayer; 'You have abandoned Your people ... do not raise them high!' This sounds a little strange, but remember that the previous vision in Isaiah 2:1-4 was about lifting up God (residing in Zion) higher than anything else in the world. Isaiah prays that God will not lift up with Him in Zion a sinful people, for Israel are not worthy of this!

In summary, the things which Isaiah prays about in verses 6 to 9 are firstly religious practices adopted from 'the east' and the temptation to join in 'divination', which means the prediction of the future (2:6), secondly the relative wealth of the land as measured in silver, gold, horses and chariots (2:7), thirdly the idolatry of people worshipping idols which people have made themselves (2:8). All of them are criticisms of God's people made frequently by Isaiah (as we will see), and all of them are issues which God's people today should be concerned about.

Criticisms of inappropriate use of wealth and of idolatry occur in many of the prophetic messages of the Old Testament and also figure in the teaching of Jesus. However, the issues which are raised freshly here in this passage are what Isaiah calls 'eastern practices' and 'divination'. Even in Isaiah's day, people were fascinated by a range of mystical eastern 'religious' practices, though we do not know much about what they were. Later on, at the time of the early church, eastern 'mystery cults' abounded which required people to be initiated by special rituals into the 'secrets' of heaven and earth; they were widely followed, but the church followed Isaiah's advice and banned them. Today, you do not have to look far to find various practices such as Yoga and some martial arts taking place on church premises. These may have a well known history in eastern countries, but where they are part of a religious belief system about the nature of people and who they are (as is Yoga), this scripture suggests they should be examined with caution and if necessary, cut off from the life of the church. There is much more to this for us to consider, but because Isaiah raises the issue, we must respond.

In the same verse as this, Isaiah warns against 'divination', which is classically defined as the prediction of the future by mystical or magical means. It is interesting that Isaiah says this because many people would say that prophecy is very similar, being all about 'predicting the future'. Isaiah insists that we must be clear about the difference between using human pseudo-religious means to predict the future, and reporting the words of God about the future which were guaranteed to be true because they came from God.

God deals with the arrogant (2:10-19)

According to Isaiah's prayer at the end of verse 9, the next and largest section of this reading is about how God resolves to 'bring low' all people and everything in Creation which attempts to raise itself higher than Himself, that is, higher than Zion. This is generally obvious from what is said in verses 10 to 19, but the verses themselves show a great deal of repetition; and in addition, some crucial sentences such as 'the idols shall utterly pass away' (2:18) seem lost in the barrage of information about things and people which have become 'lifted up' but God will 'bring low'. Here, however, there is a specific form of Hebrew poetry at work, and it is called a 'chiastic' poem, meaning one which is 'inverted' or goes back on itself; and it works like this.

- Verse 10: Fear the Lord (go to the rocks)
 - Verse 11: The arrogant will be humbled
 - Verses 12-16: The 'Lord will have His day against ...'
 - Verse 17: The arrogant will be humbled
- Verse 19: Fear the Lord (go to the rocks)

It is easy to see from this analysis that the themes of the poem are repeated; verse 10 is very similar to verse 19, verse 11 is similar to verse 17. But this repetition draws attention not just to these verses and what they say, but serves to emphasise the central section, which begins 'the Lord will have His day against ...'

By recognising this structure it becomes easier to explain what Isaiah says in this prophecy. Firstly (in verses 10 and 19) those who were aware of God's majestic authority in the history of the world should 'take cover', in other words, they should seek a 'low' place on earth because of what He was about to do. Secondly (in verses 11 and 17) Isaiah specifically identifies the haughty and arrogant people who needed to hear this message, because the Lord intended to 'humble' them whilst lifting Himself 'up high'. Thirdly (in verses 12-16) Isaiah declares with utter prophetic conviction that God will deal with all people and all things that might be considered to be 'high'. The Lord will not allow anything to compete with Him, and whilst Isaiah's list contains imposters recognisable in his day, we might add others, like the wonders of the world, technology or political leaders. All must be humbled by the Lord!

Throw away false gods (2:18, 20-22)

The chiastic poem is broken in only one place by verse 18, which consequently stands out from everything else said in the previous verses. However, by doing this it points forward to the last theme Isaiah presents in this part of his prophecy, which is all about idolatry.

With disdain, Isaiah draws a mental picture of people fleeing away from the wrath of God's judgement, throwing away their home made idols, 'to rodents and bats' (2:20). The previous poem began and ended with a terrifying picture of people taking cover as the 'terror of the Lord' arose (2:10,19) and reduced people to trembling (2:19), and this is repeated yet again to give it more force. God will be raised high in majesty, nothing will stand in His way, and people will be reduced to hiding and trembling in fear of the Lord when this happens.

This is a picture which we may find hard to read but it clearly expresses the heart of Isaiah's message here. The chapter began with a majestic picture of the Lord God being raised high in Zion, but this was a not a picture of victory as we might think of it, as if the Lord had defeated his enemies in battle, but a peaceful consequence of the Lord's work of salvation in the world (2:4). What Isaiah describes in our passage today is not the Lord's victory over His sinful human opponents by battle, but by the sheer force of His glory, presence and majesty. It is these that make people 'run for cover (2:10,19,21).

Discipleship

Application

Isaiah presents us with something new in Scripture. The Lord will do His work of salvation and will achieve His purposes because He is God, and not through war or battle or punishment or any such devastation. As we move further into Isaiah, we will see more of the importance of this revelation. It is the beginning of Isaiah's realisation that God's work is not done by force, but by obedience, service and doing His will, principles which will mature in later prophecies, principally the great prophecy of the suffering servant (53).

As a Christian and a church member, this prophecy reminds me that fighting my way through to try and get people to do this or that in the life of the church is not necessarily God's way. Largely because if I or anyone else acts like that, then we place ourselves in the very category of haughty and self opinionated people this prophecy says God dislikes and will humble! It is always necessary for us to work hard to achieve results in our work for the kingdom of God, but I am not sure that attacking things we think are wrong is a wise and helpful way of going about the Lord's work. He will do what is right, and our job is to stay with Him and be obedient, rather than be carried away by our concerns, however legitimate we may feel them to be.

Questions for groups

1. In this passage, what are the most significant criticisms of His people made by God, and why does He make them?
2. Discuss in your group the meaning of the different things featured in verses 12-16.
3. In the light of verse 22, what value should we place upon advice from other people, and how can we weigh what we hear from others with what we believe the Lord says to us?

Discipleship challenges

- *Look back upon the significant issues within the life of the church that you have been involved with in recent times, and assess whether you have had to 'fight' for victory or whether the Lord has given it to you.*
 - *Read over this passage and pray to the Lord. Seek His reassurance that you are not like those mentioned here, and if you are not certain, pray until you are sure!*
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Final Prayer

Remember us O Lord, and flood our lives with the joy of Your presence! Give us patience as we wait for Your timing of what will happen in our lives, and give us the comfort of knowing that we await Your works of power and might. We praise You for everything You do for us, O Lord; AMEN
