

Prayers

Opening prayer

Almighty God, may we always be ready for You to work in our lives by the power of Your Holy Spirit. Place in our hearts a longing to see You at work in our midst, and an expectation that great things will be done! Give us a desire to join with You in the work of salvation and deliverance by which Your Kingdom comes on earth, and may be content in our relationship with You. Thank You, Almighty God; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: WEALTH

1. For yourself

Give thanks to God for all that you, your accumulated 'wealth'. Ask the Lord to help you use it all for His glory and praise

2. For your friends and family

Pray for any of your family who may be going through hard, especially financially. It is not something some people will talk about but it is important, and by the grace of God, we have a duty to help each other in the family

3. For the church and its work

Pray that the church of which you are a part will have the courage to be generous to those who are in need

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

Pray for those in your country who have an abundance of wealth and have a duty before God to use it wisely. Pray that political leaders will have the courage to distribute the wealth of the nation with care and insight

Meditation

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with what is good,
And keep the enemy away from my thoughts and feelings.

When life is routine, Lord, give me the concentration I need
To attend to the detail of what I do, and honour You in my work.

When life becomes difficult, Lord, save me from panic;
Help me to focus on You, and trust Your spiritual guidance.

When life is horrendous, Lord, draw me ever closer to You,
To gain the spiritual energy I need to find my way through trouble.

When life is easier, Lord, may I not forget You or Your love,
But remember Your faithfulness through good times and bad.

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with all that is good;
Keep me alert, and prepare me for all that is yet to come.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 3: 1-12

- ¹ For now the Lord, the LORD of hosts,
will remove from Jerusalem and Judah
provisions and stores;

- all supplies of bread and water
- 2 warrior and soldier,
judge and prophet,
diviner and elder,
- 3 captain of fifty and nobleman,
counsellor and skilful magician
and expert enchanter.
- 4 I will make youths as their rulers
and babies will have authority over them.
- 5 People will oppress each other,
each one against his friend;
the youth will be arrogant to the elder,
and the rogue to the one who is honourable.
- 6 For a man will even seize a brother,
One of his father's house, and say,
'You have clothes;
you will be our leader,
and this heap of ruins
will be under your authority.'
- 7 But he will answer on the same day,
'I cannot sort this out
If there is no food or clothing in my house;
do not make me the people's leader.'
- 8 For Jerusalem is stumbling
and Judah is falling
because what they say and do is against the LORD,
a provocation in the sight of His glory.
- 9 The look on their faces is evidence against them;
they parade their sin like Sodom,
they do not hide it.
Woe to them!
For they have brought evil on themselves.
- 10 Tell the righteous things will be all right for them,
and they will eat the fruit of their labours.
- 11 Woe to the wicked!
Things will not go well for them,
for what their hands have done
will be done to them.
- 12 This is my people - their taskmasters are infants,
and women rule over them.
O my people, your leaders have mislead you,
And confused the paths you should follow

Review

When we read a passage of prophecy such as this, we can see that it speaks about what happens when people ignore God. We may be tempted to think we have heard it all before, and settle back, mentally, knowing that the prophet is speaking of something that was relevant to the people of Israel, but not to us. However, God has given us His Word to help us learn, and the story of God's people and their covenant relationship with the Lord speaks to us in every verse. If we are willing to follow the general story of the Old Testament, then passages like this will indeed make sense. The nature of people today is not far different from those of ancient times, and it does not take much to spot the connections. Here, they tell us about what can happen when the Lord is ignored by His own people, and we can hardly say that this is not an important matter today.

Isaiah has already bemoaned the sins of God's people (1:1-31), specifically unfaithfulness and idolatry. However, the Lord revealed to Isaiah in a vision that He would eventually save His people in peace, not through war (2:1-4). For Biblical times, this was an astonishing new revelation. Other prophets spoke about the coming destruction of Israel because of her sins, and God had indeed destroyed those peoples and nations in the past who had disobeyed him (e.g. the story of Noah – Gen 6-9). Consequently, most of the

rest of Isaiah holds us in tension, at one moment prophesying the gloom of those who ignore their God (e.g. Isaiah 1,5 etc.) and then revealing God's desire to overcome evil with peace (see Isaiah 9,11,35). So although this passage sounds gloomy, we must accept the wider picture of prophecy of which it is a part.

Since the opening of chapter 2 when Isaiah revealed the loving heart of God, the sins of God's people stand in ever more stark contrast not so much to His justice, but His love. Where yesterday's passage contrasts the generosity of God with the haughty arrogance of humanity (2:5-22), our passage today details the tragic human consequences of those who have abandoned God, specifically, those who have claimed to have a relationship with Him. The more we read the more we should feel real horror and concern at the plight of those described. They thought they knew better than God but they were wrong.

From verse 1 it becomes obvious that our passage describes what happens when God's blessing is withdrawn from His people, and they become weak. In ancient times, a weak nation was 'easy prey' for surrounding peoples seeking to extend their own empires, and it was only a matter of time before they would be attacked. This weakness is graphically described in the first five verses of our passage. Those who would have held society together were not to be found (3:2,3), and social anarchy reigned (3:4,5). Moreover, people were reluctant to take positions of authority because the prospects were not good (3:6,7). The verse at the heart of our passage is in the middle; *'Jerusalem is stumbling and Judah is falling because what they say and do is against the Lord; a provocation in the sight of His glory'* (3:8). Lastly, Isaiah tells of God's horror at the trouble His own people have brought on themselves (3:9-12). Despite this, God does not curse them, He appears heartbroken; *'things will not go well for them; for what their hands have done will be done to them. This is my people ... your leaders have misled you'* (3:11).

It does not take much to see connections between all this and the life of God's people today, and these words act as a warning to us. When the leadership of God's people is ineffective and ungodly, as in this passage, the people are lost. No wonder that Isaiah's prophecies soon begin to focus on the quest for a new leader of God's people; one who will be a new 'king' and 'servant' of God, His 'Anointed One', the Messiah!

Going Deeper

If we travel carefully through this passage with this background in mind, all manner of things pop up for our consideration. We are told about the nature of weak leadership so that we can spot it, and the reluctance of people to accept leadership reminds us of the excuses people make today to prevent holding office in the church! But Isaiah is insistent, the root problem is a reluctance to follow the Lord and submit to Him (3:8); this is what will ruin God's people.

The collapse of a community (3:1-5)

If you read from 2 Kings 16 you will discover what happened in Judah and Jerusalem after Uzziah died and his son Jotham also passed away (2 Kings 15:38). Below are some extracts from this chapter which will help us understand why Isaiah was so concerned about what was happening in his own country.

'King Ahaz began to reign ... he did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord his God. ... he made his son pass through fire after the practice of the nations ... King Rezin of Aram waged war on Jerusalem and besieged him. ... At that time the king of Edom recovered Elath for Edom ... Ahaz sent messengers to the king ... of Assyria saying 'I am your servant and your son, come up and rescue me ... he found the gold and silver in the Temple ... and gave them as a present to the king of Assyria.' (from 2 Kings 16:1-9)

This background seems to fit this prophecy of Isaiah perfectly. Ahaz was a king of Judah during the middle of Isaiah's life (1:1f.) and during his reign, Jerusalem was besieged, which explains Isaiah's talk of the lack of food and provisions (3:1), his talk of Judah as falling and Jerusalem as stumbling (3:8). It also explains the social breakdown in verse 5 which was a common feature of a city under siege. Clearly, the military were in a state of decay or decline because they seemed to be quite unable to fight off either the neighbouring city-state of Aram, or to defend local towns from Edomite raiders (see above), hence the towns described as 'heaps of ruin' (3:6). Also, under such circumstances, it is not hard to imagine that those with real wealth had long since escaped a land which they saw as without prospects. They had the means to go and had left (3:3). In such anarchy, authority hardly had a chance to establish itself and was severely stretched (3:4,5).

The social collapse occurred because king Ahaz was weak and sought to buy protection from the king of Assyria (a large empire North East of Judah). Imagine the horror of a godly man such as Isaiah who may have been a priest in the Temple, at the stripping of gold and silver from the Temple to pay an emperor for protection instead of trusting in God! You will probably have noticed that there are a number of comments in our passage which are quite derogatory about leaders; Isaiah says 'youths [are] their rulers' and calls them 'babies' (3:4), and later on he speaks dismissively to say 'women rule over them' (3:12). None of these comments are insults against youths, babies or women, neither are they comments about who should be

leaders and who should not. In the light of our understanding of this text, they are Isaiah's insulting way of talking about king Ahaz! He is disgusted at his behaviour!

Reluctant leaders (3:6-8)

If you are uncertain about whether it is right to connect King Ahaz's rule to this passage of scripture, then bear in mind the great passage of Isaiah we all remember 'the year that King Uzziah died ...' (Isaiah 6:1), a passage which describes the great call of Isaiah (Isaiah 6). Immediately after Isaiah's call in chapter 6, you can read a confrontation between Isaiah and King Ahaz (Isaiah 7); the story is very tense! Ahaz was clearly not interested in the Lord and Isaiah was clearly completely disillusioned with him. It certainly seems that Isaiah began prophesying around the time that Uzziah (and his son Jotham) died and Ahaz seized the throne, and this is the time frame for the quote from 2 Kings 16 above.

Now, if you imagine yourself as a group of people who live in a town outside Jerusalem at this time. You have heard all about this awful king who has lost control of the country, is only interested in saving his own skin by buying protection from the nearest emperor, and has made everyone so disillusioned that the military leaders as senior social classes have all left the country. Defenceless, you find yourselves at the mercy of marauding tribesmen from neighbouring states, and your own town has been raided just like Elath (2 Kings 16:6). On returning to your own home after the terror of the raid, you have to try and re-establish some kind of order, so someone has to take authority. But no-one is prepared to do it because the responsibility is too great! The town has been raised, and there is no prospect of help from Jerusalem, because it too is 'stumbling'!

With this background, read again verses 6 to 8; and you will find it all seems very real. Isaiah was not writing poetry for the sake of it, or to bore us more than two and a half thousand years later. He was describing the collapse of a society which once believed in God, so that we could recognise the signs and hopefully learn from the lessons of what happened to Judah and Jerusalem!

God's sadness (3:9-12)

When reading verses 9 to 12, it is difficult not to hear the voice of Isaiah himself within the prophecy. Sometimes a true prophet will speak and does not have to say 'this is the word of the Lord', and it is clear that what is said is prophetic. These verses sound like a heartfelt cry from a preacher. The leader of the nation has acted abominably; 'my people ... your leaders have misled you' (3:12) and the prophet calls out to warn the people of the consequences. It may well have been that other people did not see the trouble coming, and Isaiah spoke these words by way of warning about Ahaz, and because what he preached proved to be right, they were recorded and eventually recognised as prophecy, according to the standards set in Deuteronomy (Deut 18:15:2f.)

Isaiah warned that failing leadership brought trouble down on the people (3:9). The main result would be a division between those who remained righteous and those who followed wickedness like the king. He sought to warn those who remained righteous not to be taken in by the tyrant. They would 'be all right ... [and] eat the fruit of their labours.' (3:10). On the other hand, the wicked would bear a different fruit; 'what their hands have done will be done to them.' (3:11). This is a rather extraordinary prophecy because it uses the famous principle of justice; 'an eye for an eye ...' (Ex 21:24) which advocates equality in retribution. Isaiah turns the full weight of this principle against those who have acted in an ungodly way; the insults they have brought upon God and His people should be turned back on them!

Isaiah bemoaned the fact that the people had lost their way, and as a priest and spiritual leader of God's people, he probably felt a deep sense of personal responsibility to respond to the challenge of this ungodliness. We will certainly find out more in the chapters to come!

Discipleship

Application

I have read a number of commentaries on this scripture which speak of its analysis of the problems of God's people, pointing out, for example, that it appears to say that leadership has gone wrong if 'youths' or 'women' become leaders, or the difficulties which arise when people will not take personal responsibility for leadership (3:6-8). However, by keeping close to the story of the Old Testament and following the evidence, I have arrived at a different set of conclusions.

The most important conclusion is that at the head of each human structure there is a leader, and the whole of that organisation will in some way reflect the one who is its head. Isaiah saw Judah collapse as its own leader King Ahaz failed in his duties and rejected the God who had placed him on the throne of Israel. How

important it is, therefore, for those 'at the top' of the life of the church to be good and godly people. It is unfortunately true that many a church takes its character from its minister or leader, in worship styles, ministry emphases and many other things. To a certain extent this is always true, but where Jesus is not honoured with complete integrity, and church leaders act in a dictatorial manner in taking authority to themselves, the results can be disastrous. There is a need for accountability in leadership within the church so that bad leaders are rooted out, but few churches are willing to confront the need or deal with this issue. It is my opinion that Isaiah would be one who advocated the highest standards of godly leadership and the most exacting standards of accountability. So should we.

Questions for groups

1. What do you believe are the most significant issues raised in this passage, and how do they affect the life of God's people today?
2. What signs of the collapse of society mentioned by Isaiah are observable today?
3. Are the churches of God stumbling and falling today (3:8), or is the picture more complex than this? What can we learn from this passage today?

Discipleship challenges

- *Jot down any features of this passage which remind you of the life of the church or society today, and make an attempt to discuss what you think about this with others, wherever you are.*
- *Think and pray about why there are leadership failures amongst God's people today and what can be done to overcome this.*

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord; You clothe us, You feed us, You give us energy, and You nurture us. You do this for us so that we might grow into the full stature of those who live in righteousness; trusting in You, victorious in this world, and giving You the praise and the glory which is Your due. Glorious Lord, we praise You: AMEN
