

Prayers

Opening prayer

In the midst of this wonderful day, Lord Jesus, breathe new life into every part of my life; what I do, how I live, and what I feel and think. May Your presence inspire me, Your power enthral me, Your love amaze me, and Your vision excite me; and may Your peace at the end of this day encourage me that everything that happens to me is but a part of Your greater plan for me, for those I love and for all Creation. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: WATER

1. For yourself

Thank God for water, and for the many forms in which you use it.

2. For your friends and family

Thank God for the availability of water where you live, and the social benefits of being able to use water for washing and drinking, without hindrance

3. For the church and its work

God for the blessing of the Biblical picture of Jesus as the 'water of life', and everything this means for God's people

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

Pray for the management of water resources in your country and region. Pray that God will use the idea of water distribution for good, and more and more people will benefit from a clean supply of water throughout the world.

Meditation

You speak to us, Lord God, in graciousness and perfect love

You are firm when we need to be guided

You are gentle when we need to be loved

You are direct when we need instructions

You are challenging when we need to go forward

You are comforting when we need affirmation

You are encouraging when we need to press on

You are cautious when we need to take stock

You are critical when we need to know our mistakes

You are accepting when we need to know You care

And You are silent when we must think for ourselves

You speak to us, Lord God, and Your Words are our guide

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 37:21-29

²¹ Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent a message to Hezekiah which said, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: Because you have prayed to me about Sennacherib King of Assyria, ²² this is the word that the LORD has spoken about him:

*The virgin daughter of Zion,
she despises you, she mocks you,*

*the daughter of Jerusalem
 tosses her head behind you!*
²³ *Whom have you despised and blasphemed?
 Against whom have you raised your voice
 and lifted your eyes up high?
 Against the Holy One of Israel!*
²⁴ *By your servants
 you have insulted the Lord,
 When you said,
 'With my many chariots
 I climbed up the mountain height,
 to the heights of Lebanon,
 to cut down its highest cedars,
 and its best firs,
 to come to its farthest end,
 its finest forest.*
²⁵ *I dug wells
 and drank waters,
 I dried up with the sole of my foot
 all the streams built for siege!'*
²⁶ *Have you not heard?
 I prepared it long ago?
 I planned it from days of old
 and now I have brought it to pass;
 that you should crush fortified cities
 into heaps of stones.*
²⁷ *Their inhabitants have little strength,
 dismayed and put to shame;
 but they are like plants of the field
 like shoots of grass,
 like grass growing on housetops,
 scorched before it grows.*
²⁸ *I know your dwelling place,
 your going out and your coming in,
 as well as your raging against me.*
²⁹ *Because you have raged against me
 Your arrogance has come to my ears,
 I will put my ring in your nose
 and my bit in your mouth,
 and I will turn you back to the way
 by which you came.'*

Review

As soon as Hezekiah came to the Lord in prayer and laid out the perilous state of the people of Judah in the Temple (37:14f.), he received an answer from the prophet Isaiah; and what a powerful answer it was. God said He would send the king of Assyria packing, back whence he came (37:29)! Today, of course, we read this passage from the point of view of knowing that the King of Assyria did indeed fail to take Jerusalem, and as a consequence, Judah survived as a city state for another 120 years. So this prophecy of Isaiah is both an answer to Hezekiah's prayer, and also a triumphant confirmation of God's control of history and His ability to control even the great might of the Assyrian Empire! Hezekiah had laid the future of Jerusalem and the state of Judah before the Lord in prayer (37:14f.); he did not summon Isaiah for an answer, but Isaiah knew what was happening. Isaiah simply received this prophetic message from the Lord in response to the King's prayer, and gave it to him.

This is a powerful prophecy asserting God's absolute control over the affairs of nations and kings. The first part ridicules the grand assumptions of power paraded by the King of Assyria and his Commander in Chief. Their bragging was no more than bluster before Almighty God (37:22,23), and despite their arrogance and blasphemy, their exaggerated claims (37:24), and tactical manoeuvring (37:25), they were ultimately unable to capture Jerusalem (as we are formally told in tomorrow's passage, 37:30-38). In future years, Jerusalem was free to flaunt her independence and pour scorn on the one who sought to conquer her; the 'virgin daughter of Zion' tossed her head at Sennacherib, behind his back, and escaped his clutches! (37:22).

Remarkably, all this happens as an answer to prayer. Some have argued that it is unfair for God's people in general or Hezekiah in particular to attempt to manipulate history by 'pulling strings' with God by means of prayer. However, this would be to misunderstand the purpose and meaning of prayer. Prayer is communication between ourselves and God that brings us into line with His will, prayer does not pull God into line with our will, and there is a big difference between the two! In verses 26 and 27, God mocks the King of Assyria by declaring that he, the Lord God, has always been responsible for the affairs of the world. He was in control, and what was happening was according to His own plan (37:26). Sennacherib was only a great military commander because God allowed it (37:26,27), and the imagery of grass indicates that whatever destruction Assyria brought, the land and peoples they conquered would survive, just like grass that grows again after being scorched!

The last part of the prophecy describes God's control of Assyria; the Lord says '*I know your dwelling place, and your going out and your coming in*' (37:28). The phrase 'going out and coming in' comes from an ancient description of a king in warfare, leading an army out from his capital and back again, protecting his nation by securing its boundaries and fighting enemies. The words were used to describe David doing just this, '*marching out and coming in*' (1 Sam 18:13), and the words came to signify peace and security in Israel, as in this famous psalm; '*The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore*' (Psalm 121:8). However, the King of Assyria had not marched out and in to bring peace, but to '*rage against me (God)*' (37:28), so God said he would be punished, and Isaiah had already prophesied this (see 10:12f.).

The power of this prophecy lies not in what it says about Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, but in what it says about God's power to control all history. All these events happened in centuries past, but through Christ there is even more evidence now that God is in control, and there is no need for us to despair as Hezekiah did. Salvation is and always has been God's plan. Hezekiah caught a glimpse of it in ancient history, and we have it available to us through Christ.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- An exchange of insults!
- The Lord is in control!
- Consequences

Notes on the translation of the passage

- V22 *In the Hebrew, the lines are alternately the other way round; 'she despises you, she mocks you – the virgin daughter of Zion ...' However, the 'daughter of Zion' (meaning Jerusalem) is the subject of the sentence, so in normal English, this comes first. You may find some translations of the Bible preserve the original order, but this makes it very difficult to understand what is being said. Translated this way, everything is clear.*
- V23 *Some translations have 'reviled' where I have used the word 'blasphemed'. The Hebrew word means 'reviled' when describing what one person says about another, but it means more to revile God than other people, so 'blaspheme' is better.*
- V23 *'Lift your eyes up high' is universal body language for a dismissive attitude!*
- V24 *'the heights of Lebanon'. The Hebrew says 'to the limits of Lebanon', which in this context means the very tops of its mountains. Some translations suggest that this means to the far places of Lebanon rather than the heights. This is a matter of interpretation.*
- V24 *'its finest forest' - the Hebrew last line of the verse apparently reads; 'to the forest of your plantation' where the word for 'plantation' is 'CARMEL' meaning 'fruitful plain, plantation or garden land'. I have therefore tried to capture the sense of this which appears to be the finest of the forest lands being spoken of in the verse.*
- V25 *'all the streams built for siege' Many translations have 'all the rivers of Egypt' because they cannot make sense of what the Hebrew says quite literally, 'all the streams of siege' It was part of warfare to prevent water getting into a city being besieged, and this is what is being described here. All the translations which have 'Egypt' assume that some changes have been made to the text to make it mean 'Egypt' ('Mitzraim') instead of 'siege' (mitzor), which I believe to be wrong.*
- V27 *'scorched before it grows' I have translated the last line of this verse as closely to the Hebrew as I can, though the text is not at all clear in the Hebrew. It may well mean that grass has a tendency to grow again after even the most harsh treatment – and this would fit in with the theme at this point in the prophecy.*

The study will now examine the details of each of the three sections of Isaiah's prophecy with a focus on what it means as an answer to prayer. Strictly speaking, Isaiah spoke these words before the Assyrian army actually left Jerusalem (see 37:36f.), and so the ancient Jews would have regarded it as a prophecy which was fulfilled; another example of the veracity of Isaiah's prophecies!

An exchange of insults!

There could be no insult greater for a King of Assyria than to be dismissed by a woman! A man such as this would not tolerate this in his earthly kingdom, but Isaiah pointed out that by refusing to come and lead the fight against Jerusalem and eventually returning to his own country without pressing home the siege of Jerusalem, Sennacherib received a heavenly insult behind his back, from Jerusalem, the city he had threatened. 'Daughter Jerusalem' or 'Daughter of Zion' appear to be affectionate terms used by God for Jerusalem (see Psalm 9:14, Lamentations 2:10f. and Zephaniah 3:14 etc.). The whole prophecy speaks of Sennacherib's failure to take the Lord's 'daughter' for himself and pours scorn on a king who could make such claims for himself.

He claimed to be a greater god than the Lord God (37:11-13), but his insults were worthless. The list of Sennacherib's exploits (37:24) link his prowess with his ability to control the great forest regions of the Lebanon. There is not much left of these forests today, but they feature in many ancient accounts of the region and in many scriptural texts. It reminds us that the building of Empires was not done solely for military reasons, but to gain economic control of resources. The wood from Lebanon was a significant natural resource essential for the extensive building schemes of the Assyrians. In Isaiah's prophecy, the Lord mocks Sennacherib. Did the king imagine he was a god because he could control an essential raw material?

Verse 25 moves on, mocking the Assyrian's claim to control water. The text is not clear (see notes above), but it appears that this passage targets the Commander in Chief, who stood adjacent to the 'conduit of the upper pool' just outside Jerusalem (36:2) to threaten Hezekiah and Jerusalem. Control of the city's water supply would be an essential part of his tactics to bring the city to its knees, and verse 25 is sarcastic; the Assyrian claim to control water in order to bring people to submission had failed; it was an empty claim.

The Lord is in control!

Verse 26 is interesting, because the words 'have you not heard, I prepared it long ago' sound familiar. If you look them up you will find that Isaiah used the same words later in his prophecies, making the same point that the Lord God controls history; 'Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.' (Isaiah 40:21f. 28f.)

The main point of Isaiah's prophecy is that the King of Assyria had been used by God for his plans, and the king who arrogantly claimed to sweep aside all gods was in fact being used by the Lord God for His purposes. It was God who allowed Sennacherib to 'crush fortified cities' (37:26) but Isaiah had an important message for the king. The point of Isaiah's illustration of the grass in verse 27 was to say that however much he crushed, destroyed and decimated people, like grass, they would grow again. This little parable is partially lost in translation (see notes above), but it is very significant. One of Isaiah's key messages was that as far as Israel and Judah were concerned, a remnant would always survive catastrophe to start again, and this very fact meant that God's plans for His people and the world could never be overcome by an earthly king.

It is interesting that the illustration of the people as being like grass also occurs again in Isaiah 40, just like the saying in verse 26 (above); we all know the famous text 'the grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord will endure for ever' (40:8). We always assume that the grass in this illustration is shown to be fleeting and fragile in comparison to God's word, but when we come to study this passage, we will discover that it could easily mean that the property of grass to keep growing back despite being withered is in fact an illustration of the eternal value of God's Word. You may not have thought about this passage like this before, because we assume that once the grass has withered, it is dead, leaving the Word of the Lord to stand supreme! This actually sounds rather judgmental, but if we take the alternative interpretation as suggested, we can find within this small parable a message for the salvation of humanity, and not obliteration (as is normally implied).

Consequences

It is fascinating to see the scriptural connections within this prophecy which extend to the Lord's watchfulness of Sennacherib's 'going out and coming in' in verse 28 as we have already seen. Connections like this always indicate that a passage of scripture is highly significant, and the message of this last part of Isaiah's prophecy is indeed important. If the Lord chooses a king or nation to do His will and they rebel against Him, then the consequences are that the Lord will discipline that king or nation. In this, God is completely consistent. Israel was judged because of their rebellion, Judah was being judged for its rebellion, and Assyria would be judged for its 'raging' (37:28) against God, just as Isaiah prophesied earlier in chapter 10. In the case of Assyria, however, it would be led back to whence it came (37:29), a message which prophesies the dismantling of its great Empire, and one which was fulfilled in 610BC!

Discipleship

Application

When we come in prayer to the Lord in extreme circumstances as Hezekiah did (36:14f.), we ask for the Lord to answer our prayers, but we may not expect an answer in the form of a prophecy! Perhaps in our own day when people regard prophecy as a rare gift limited only to a few people and when Paul's desire that all might prophesy (1 Cor 14:5) is widely misunderstood, we have all but closed the door to one of the means whereby the Lord can answer our prayers. It is true that at the time Isaiah gave this prophecy, Sennacherib's army had not yet left Jerusalem and Hezekiah would have had to accept the prophecy in faith, but it was still an answer, and later generations were able to see this immediately.

Imagine what it would be like to come to the Lord with a difficult personal request, and then receive a prophetic answer as given to a close friend, a loved one or someone we know in church! What an encouragement! I also wonder whether our understanding of prophecy generally is too limited, because prophetic words are commonly given today about the Lord's love for His people combined with a challenge to action in His name. However, the Lord is longing for those who hear Him to be willing to receive His prophetic word in the encouragement of others, and sometimes an answer to their prayers! When many feel at a loss to know how the Lord will answer their prayers, perhaps we need to open our spirits to allow God to use us not in new ways, but in more fulfilling ways.

In our passage today, Isaiah exercises one of the greatest gifts of a prophet, to give God's word of encouragement to a king and a nation who desperately needed to hear it.

Questions for groups

1. How would you feel if you received a prophecy from someone in answer to one of your prayers?
2. In what ways do empires need to control the earth's resources in order to exist, today?
3. In what ways does this prophecy give hope to King Hezekiah?

Discipleship challenges

- *Read some of the texts particularly in chapters 10 and 40 of Isaiah which relate to this passage and check out how they connect with it.*
- *When you have spent some time in prayer for others, wait on the Lord to see if He says anything to you about your prayers. It may be that He has a prophetic word for you to give to someone else, to answer their prayers!*

Final Prayer

May we find our peace in You, Lord Jesus; carpenter of Nazareth, teacher of Israel, servant of all and healer of the sick. Bless our work, teach us the truth, lead us where we should go and help us in our need, we pray; Lord Jesus, Son of God, Saviour of the World: AMEN
