

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God, You have made the day that is before us. Alert us to its potential, and in those moments when we think that nothing is happening, surprise us by the inherent possibilities of the life You have given us. Send us Your Holy Spirit, inspire us by greater things, and fill our souls with the light of Your grace, which cries out within us that all things are possible through Him who has made us. May everything we do give glory to You, Lord God, almighty Lord and Saviour. ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: WEALTH

1. For yourself

Are you content with what you have? This is a challenging question, but place this question and your response before the Lord in prayer, and see what He says to you

2. For your friends and family

Pray for any friends you have who are lacking the financial and material means to cope with life. Pray also for any friends you have who have far more than they need, and pray for them that they make their resources available to others in a godly manner

3. For the church and its work

Pray that the church will use its resources well and 'feed the poor' (and all this implies), as Christ required of His disciples

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

Pray for those in your neighbourhood who are lacking financial means, and pray for those who have the finances to help them. Pray for justice and equity in your neighbourhood, and pray that the government of your country will pass laws that are equitable and just for all people.

Meditation

There are roads that are waiting for footsteps
On the route that is narrow and less trod
There are pathways yet to be followed
Leading souls to the foot of the Cross

There are heights that are ready to be climbed
By pioneers of God's Kingdom on earth
There are mountains yet to be conquered
To show everyone that God cares for His world

There are valleys that have to be entered
By all in this tense and tough world
There are vales of darkness and tears ahead
But in Christ, these troubles yield peace

There are trials to face and problems for all
But the Gospel means no one need fear
Christ has trod each pathway ahead of His own
He has conquered, and given true hope

Alleluia, our Jesus has died and been raised
Amen, He has gone to the Father
Alleluia, He has poured out His Spirit on us
Amen, so be it, praise God!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 4:2-6

² On that day the branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel. ³ Those who are left in Zion and remain in Jerusalem, all who are recorded as among the living in Jerusalem, will be called holy.

⁴ When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains from the midst of Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning, ⁵ then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and those who gather there a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory there will be a covering, ⁶ and it will serve as a shelter for shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and cover from storm and rain.

Review

These words come upon us suddenly and unexpectedly after a chapter in Isaiah in which we are told that the Lord was standing to pronounce judgement (3:13) on His people because of their sins! Given that the previous verses are a damning indictment of slavery to fashion and a description of how war is a consequence of sinful behaviour on the part of God's people (3:13-26), the wonderful visionary nature of these words is a complete surprise! But what is going on? Are God's people to be blessed or cursed for their sins? It is easy to read a passage such as this by itself and glory in its rich description of the blessings of God's presence amongst His people 'on that day' (4:2), but in order to understand what is happening, we must work out why these wonderful promises are placed here within Isaiah's prophecies.

Some scholars believe this prophecy to be so different in style and language from those around it that it must have been written and inserted at a later date. However, suggestions like these are totally improvable however convincingly they are explained; and there are good reasons for believing that the passage fits exactly where it is. This is because for the second time in Isaiah, we have found a passage that rises above the surrounding prophecies to speak forcefully of God's gracious and greater intention to be with His people 'in Zion'. Everything we have learned about Isaiah leads us to believe that he did not believe that God would simply punish His people's sins by means of war and destruction. Isaiah knew that God did not want to destroy His people, He wanted to redeem them so that they could take part in His plan and be a testimony to the world of His saving love and mercy (see 2:1-4). In this, Isaiah's prophecies are completely different from those of other prophets (such as Amos), who said that Israel would be destroyed by war, and was right. Isaiah saw that God had greater things for Judah and Jerusalem, and although sin would always have its consequences, the Lord intended to be far more than a God of justice and retribution. He wanted to show love for His people, and through them, to the whole world.

The passage speaks of a 'branch of the Lord' that would become fruitful; language that soon came to refer to the Messiah (see Isaiah 11:1, Jer 23:5, Zech 3:8 etc), even if it did not mean this when Isaiah first said it! The prophecy speaks not about wars so much as survivors (4:2) who are a chosen people ('recorded amongst the living' – 4:3), blessed and restore to holiness in Jerusalem and Zion. The prophetic message then speaks of God's cleansing judgement and burning (4:4), which would make the whole of Zion worthy of His presence, symbolised by the cloud, smoke and fire (as in the days of the wilderness, Exodus 13:19, 40:38). The remarkable thing is that these signs of God's presence are not confined within Zion or Jerusalem, they are extend over it. In other words, the presence of the Lord is bigger and broader than one place, and the area covered by God's love and protection is far greater than just Jerusalem and Zion.

On the one hand, the theme of this prophecy is consistent with the development of the prophecies so far in the book of Isaiah, but it also projects them far into the future. It is perhaps understandable that some people think this must have been written later, but the words of the Lord spoken to His prophets have always projected forward, explaining consequences and revealing mysteries about His will for the present and the future. This is how the Lord blesses His people and prepares them for all that is to come.

Going Deeper

There is much we do not know about the writings in the Bible, but what we do have is invaluable as it stands, and that is how it is best studied. As we look further at this passage, we will look at how the great blessings described in this passage link up with the promises of God in Israel's past and also point forward to His self

revelation in Jesus Christ. Isaiah had glimpses of what was to come which he may not have fully understood himself, but by faithfully recording them, he has passed down to us an invaluable record of God's revelation.

The 'branch of the Lord'

Before this passage there have been seven references in Isaiah to a 'day' on which the Lord would do something (2:2, 11, 12, 20, 3:7, 18, 4:1). On each occasion, the prophecies look forward to a time when the Lord would act in some way. Here, after this complete round of seven anticipatory texts, the prophet speaks about God's purpose and aim for His people, and the first of these aims is that His people become fruitful. But where did the idea of a 'branch' come from?

In Numbers 13 we are told an important story about the taking of the Promised Land. The spies sent out by Moses came back with a large single cluster of grapes 'on a branch' which was so big it had to be carried by two men (Numb 13:23). Unfortunately, this sample of God's good provision for His people in the Promised Land was rejected, because the people were too afraid of the enemies they believed existed in Canaan. As a consequence, the people of Israel were condemned to wander in the wilderness for 40 more years. The story was a sorry reminder to God's people of their lack of faith in God. Here, however, Isaiah foresees a branch bearing 'beautiful and glorious' fruit which will be the 'pride and glory of the survivors of Israel'. The prophecy appears to be a reversal of this terrible event in Israel's past, and the language of the passage therefore implies that those who survive in Jerusalem are about to enter a new 'Promised Land'!

Scholars often say that this passage is about the return of the people from Babylon to Jerusalem about 200 years after Isaiah lived. However, it is also possible that those who returned to Jerusalem at that time were able to find encouragement from this earlier prophecy of Isaiah which spoke to them powerfully of their history.

Holiness restored

Only yesterday we read about the terrible state of wanton behaviour and injustice in which the people of Israel lived, and learned that the logical consequence of such things would be the destruction of the country by war. In ancient times, nation states were unforgiving in their pursuit of land and they had no hesitation in exploiting states which had become as weak as the Judah described by Isaiah. There would indeed be war because of the sins of Judah and Jerusalem (3:25,26); but our passage declares forthrightly that God's holy purposes lay beyond such war.

It was God's intention to record a chosen people ('recorded amongst the living' – 4:3) who were left out of those who would survive war and 'remain in Jerusalem' (4:3). The Lord would cleanse Jerusalem from its filth not by means of war, but by a 'spirit of judgement and by a spirit of burning' (4:4). Some say that this is an allusion to war, but Isaiah had plenty of ways of describing war, and his prophetic vision led him to describe the cleansing in this more 'spiritual' way. No explanation is given about how God would go about this work, and we are left only to be amazed that God does the work of cleansing from sin not physically, but spiritually! This reminds us of what Jesus said to Nicodemus; 'no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the spirit is spirit.' (John 3:5,6). Sin needed a spiritual solution, not a physical one!

The daughters of Jerusalem who had paraded their wealth and their jewellery were acting like prostitutes within the walls of Jerusalem, and their actions represented the way their men folk had prostituted themselves by worshipping the 'ba'al' gods of Canaan, even in Jerusalem. The Lord had to cleanse the city but He did this Himself.

The presence of the Lord

The last two verses of our passage describe the presence of the Lord which comes in renewed protection over the land. God's presence was manifest (meaning 'made evident') in 'a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flame by night.' (4:5). This famous reminder of the presence of God during the wilderness years is further proof to us that Isaiah saw a connection between what had happened during the first quest for the Promised Land and what would happen in the future when God saved His people (the same was true with the 'branch' – above).

The great feature of this passage is that the cloud and the fire which represent the Lord are described as providing a 'refuge and a cover' which is not located in Mount Zion, but 'over' it. In Isaiah's day, the people believed that the Lord was present in His Temple in a special way, and for this reason, Zion had special meaning to the people of Judah. However, what this vision speaks about is a time when God's presence was 'above' not 'in' any physical place, offering a far more extensive cover than before, because it was no longer tied to one place. We should remember that in the church, the name Zion is a description of any place where God shows Himself to be present by his Spirit, it is no longer a particular place. The Temple Mount today is covered by a Mosque, and that is difficult for many people, Jews and Christians alike.

However, God's promise here is that His covering protection will be over 'those who gather', in other words, His people; for that is now where 'Zion' is.

Isaiah may not have understood the prophetic visions he had, and many people today testify that they do not necessarily see the meaning of the pictures or vision they have. This great prophetic vision speaks of a future which was quite unlike anything anyone had ever heard of at that time, but it confirmed that God's intention was to love and protect His people and not simply judge their sins for all eternity. This, of course, is just the beginning of Isaiah's prophecy; there is much more to come!

Discipleship

Application

Some people find it convenient to believe that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath. This is not true in this passage, and it is not true of Isaiah generally. God is intent upon helping His people, and His people are all those who are prepared to come to Him in faith, for help. All of us need the 'cover' which the Lord provides, for without it, the enemy will attack us through the 'storm and rain' (4:6). This is picture language for all that shakes us up and disturbs our life within our troubled world. It is undoubtedly true that the Lord does indeed provide cover for all who believe, but the truth is that everyone who is a Christian will testify that whilst they still live and have faith, the enemy will sometimes make their lives a misery.

One way that the Lord uses to provide us with the cover of His love and protection is through other people; their friendship, their prayers and their active care for us. Some object and say that the Lord's cover must surely come from Him alone, but the Lord normally works to do His will through His people; and we should expect this. Many people I know who work in ministry or leadership in the church would simply not be able to continue unless they had people praying for them and making real the Lord's cover and protection from the works of the enemy. The cloud, smoke and fire (4:5) of the Lord's presence must have been impressive in the days of the wandering through the wilderness. For all God's people who need His cover and protective care, the love, prayers and care of friends is impressive evidence of the Lord at work.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group whether this prophecy is a picture which is fulfilled in Christ or will be fulfilled at the End Times.
2. How does the Holy Spirit work to cleanse us today?
3. In what ways do you experience the cover and care of the Lord either directly, or through other people?

Discipleship challenges

- *Would you say that you are full of hope for the future, or deeply concerned about it? Pray about this and wait on the Lord for what He would say to you.*
 - *Write down some of your hopes for the future, and ask the Lord to help you look ahead to do His will.*
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Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we are grateful for Your protection and care. Help us when we become unsure about what is happening to us and feel uncertain about Your presence. Lead us back to a place of confidence so that we do not become prey to the enemy, and give us peace we pray. AMEN
