

## Prayer

Praise You, Lord Jesus Christ! You burst into our lives by giving us Your Spirit, healing our bodies, opening our eyes, enlightening our minds, encouraging our hearts and enabling us to respond to Your leading. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the many different ways You reveal Yourself to us and lead us on in the path of faith. Alleluia! AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Find a suitable place where you can pray out loud. Express your feeling to the Lord about all this is happening in your life right now. Let Him know the strength of your feelings; God may well know these things already, but it may not be until you show it that you know them!*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the military.** You may or may not be a supporter of the military, but whichever way you feel about them, they are part of the world for which pray. Pray for the military forces of your country
- Pray for those who work on the streets of our cities offering love and help to people who have no real security in life, and often no real home. Pray that the message of God's love will be put into practical reality
- Give thanks to God for the many friends you have and the prayers they say for you

## Meditation

Jesus, friend and comforter; renew my heart:  
Let the fire of love burn brighter still.

Jesus, healer and deliverer; repair my body:  
Let the joy of wholeness fill my life.

Jesus, master and teacher; refill my mind:  
Let the truth of faith not pass me by.

Jesus, saviour and redeemer; remove my sins:  
Let the beauty of God's peace revive me.

Jesus, encourager and guide; restore my zeal:  
Let the path of faith be opened up for me.

Jesus, counsellor and guide, revive my spirit:  
Let the promise of my future excite me.

Jesus, great and mighty God; rebuild my strength:  
Let the challenge of the Gospel lead me on.

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 40:12-18

<sup>18</sup>To whom then will you liken God,  
or what image will you compare to Him?

<sup>19</sup>The workman casts the idol,  
a goldsmith melts gold and gilds it  
and makes silver chains.

<sup>20</sup>An expert in sacred objects  
selects wood that does not rot;  
he then seeks out a skilled craftsman  
to design an idol that will not fall over.

- <sup>21</sup> Do you not know?  
 Do you not hear?  
 Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
 Have you not discerned how the earth was set up?
- <sup>22</sup> He who dwells at the extremities of creation  
 sees it inhabitants as like grasshoppers;  
 He who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
 spreads them out like a tent to live in;
- <sup>23</sup> who consigns princes to naught,  
 and makes the rulers of the earth void.
- <sup>24</sup> Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,  
 scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
 and when he blows upon them they wither,  
 and the storm carries them off like straw.

## Bible Study

### Review

Isaiah began chapter 40 by reporting the wonderful promise of the return of God to be with His people (40:1-11) and after that launched into a powerful prophetic poem which challenges all who hear it to think deeply about the nature of the God in whom they believe. Of course, Isaiah spoke to the people of his own day to challenge their misperceptions about the nature of God, and we saw yesterday how he hammered home the idea of God as the Creator, the One who has made the heavens and the earth and all things. Today, Isaiah's prophecy goes on to challenge the way that people tend to create 'likenesses' of God in the form of idols or objects of worship, and he parodies the difference between the real God and the pictures we make of Him; finally, he emphasises the supreme authority of God over all earthly powers. As before in this remarkable prophetic poem, the language is astonishing and at times, Isaiah uses rare words which are not part of the normal Hebrew vocabulary. It is fascinating reading!

Many of the prophets mock the fact that people make images of God or idols for worship and then 'bow down' to them (Hab. 2:18, Ez 1:3f. 23:49, Jon 2:8 etc.). In each of these scriptures there is more than a hint of mockery at the stupidity of the whole ideal of making objects for worship. In his earlier prophecies Isaiah wrote:

*'Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made.'*  
 (Isaiah 2:8)

And writing many years later Jeremiah said;

*'Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field! They cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, nor is it in them to do good ... They are both stupid and foolish; the instruction given by idols is no better than wood! Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Uphaz. They are the work of the artisan and of the hands of the goldsmith. (Jeremiah 10:5-9)*

However, the sad truth is that many people naturally worship God according to what they have learned from others about God throughout life, rather than through personal experience. Often the picture they have of God is therefore only a pale reflection of the true God revealed through the Bible. It is possible to find Christians, for example, who believe that God is an authoritarian figure who will quickly punish wrongdoing and has no compassion or empathy. For many, it is much easier to worship with an inadequate mental picture of a 'Gentle Jesus', or 'The Holy Family' for example; an idea reinforced by a picture they saw as a child or a symbol of faith they have seen at church. Then, when tough questions arise about life and faith, their understanding of God is not sufficient for them to stand firm, and their problem is that the 'God' they worship is an 'idol', a human alternative to the true revelation of God in His Word.

Isaiah knew that the 'gods' worshipped by other nations in his own day (Ba'al or Molech, for example) had a powerful influence because of the havoc they had created in successive generations amongst the people of Israel, but his parody in this prophecy was not aimed at these. If Isaiah had wished to challenge the prophet 'Ba'al' for example, then he would have argued like Elijah that Ba'al had no real power over the fertility of the land (see 1 Kings 18). No, Israel and Judah had the prophecies of Elijah and others to warn them about such gods. Isaiah went to the heart of the matter by attacking the human reasoning which led people to hold on to idolatrous objects and images to which they were attached and which had nothing to do with the true God revealed to Israel, thus corrupting the true faith.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The mocking of idols
- Appealing to truth
- The authority of God

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V19 'The workman casts the idol'**

I have followed the Hebrew closely here because Isaiah is simply describing the process of making an idol. Some translations try to make the idol more important in the sentence by giving it emphasis saying 'an idol; a craftsman makes it ...'

### **V19 'a goldsmith melts gold and gilds it.'**

The words used in Hebrew here are not straightforward and translations vary enormously.

### **V20 'an expert in sacred objects ...'**

You will find that no other translation is like this, and most speak of someone who is 'impoverished' having to choose non-rotting wood, or some variation on this theme. The Hebrew word here is rare and virtually indecipherable. I take the same line as John Watts in the 'Word' Commentary who believes the first Hebrew word in the sentence to be derived from an ancient rare word meaning 'familiar with', which in the form of the verb used here (participle) gives 'expert'. Once this has been accepted, then the rest of the verse logically and easily follows the original Hebrew

### **V21 'Have you not discerned the setting up of the earth.'**

Many translations add the word 'since' to this sentence but it is not necessary. Isaiah is astonished that God's people have not worked out that their God made the world!

### **V22 'He who dwells at the extremities of creation.'**

Literally, this reads; 'He who dwells on the vault of the earth' This refers to the ancient idea that the earth is a disc with the heavens like a hemispherical bowl or vault over it. Isaiah describes God as dwelling at the very edges of the creation as they perceived it, so I have translated the sentence using this notion.

## Going Deeper

It would be very easy to read this scripture and keep it in the past, without accepting that it is highly relevant to today. Idolatry is holding on to wrongful pictures of God that divert faith, and Isaiah exposed this not just in His own day, but generally. He mocked the making of idolatrous objects to which people were attached in his own day (40:18,19,20), and then he appealed to God's people to turn to the one true God (40:21,22) and spoke firmly about His power and authority (40:23,24); and we will now explore these further.

### **Mocking idols**

The picture of the manufacture of household gods in verses 19 and 20 is almost comical if it was not deadly serious. We do not have many examples of items made to be idols around our churches today, though there are many things that can be treated like idols or made into them. The cancer of household gods in Israel surrounded Isaiah in his own day and it was first mentioned in scripture when Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, stole the 'household gods' from her father Laban (Genesis 31:19f.); Jacob had to insist upon their removal before his family could enter the Promised Land (Gen 35:2f.). Years later, Joshua had to tell the people to abandon them when the people of Israel came into the Promised Land after the Exodus (Josh 24:15f.), and cast idols featured in the lawless tales of Israel during the time of the Judges (Judges 18,19). The prophets of the eighth to the sixth centuries BC did not speak forthrightly about the matter for no reason; personal devotion in Israel was being dominated by 'man-made' objects, and not the devotion of the heart which God so longed to have with His people.

Verse 19 is straightforward enough, and in most translations the idea is clear; Isaiah is mocking the making of such idols. Even costly and expensive skills were lavished on them! For the second line of the verse, most translations have 'a goldsmith overlays it with gold', but the Hebrew (as I have mentioned above) is more complex, and contains words for smelting and gilding gold. We do not know exactly what was done, but it certainly sounds very expensive, and much craft was put into these idols! The next verse (20) is not clear in most translation (see above), but in my opinion continues the theme; there were experts in these crafts who could command high prices; wood was specially selected, seasoned wood that would not rot or bend in shape and without imperfections which would make the resulting idol unstable and liable to fall over! Isaiah mocks the people of Israel for their attention to detail over idols when they lacked a sense of personal devotion to God. Where were the examples of attention to detail in the worship of God? These had all been ritualised into centralised worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, and few who lived outside Jerusalem could afford to go there regularly to worship (read about this in 2 Chronicles 34,35)

### **Appealing to truth**

Isaiah appealed to God's people to go back to the origins of their faith; not to the Exodus experience when they became a nation under God or even to their forefather Abraham who showed them the obedience and righteousness God required; but to the beginning of history, to creation itself. Isaiah's prophecies typically appealed to God's people to remember that the God who called them to worship was the One God who made the world.

This time, Isaiah's prophecy does not glory in the majesty of God as in the verses we read yesterday (40:12-17), but addresses Israel directly. He asks in a mocking tone why the people do not know that God is their Creator and knows everything about them; he 'sees its inhabitants like grasshoppers' (40:22) from His vantage point at the very boundary of the Universe, not missing anything. 'Do you not know? Do you not hear?' He says. What has happened that the teaching of Genesis and the ancient traditions of Israel which taught that God was everywhere were not accepted or passed on? How could the history of God's people make sense without such foundations?

In Isaiah's day and in later years until after the time of the Exile, the sacred writings of God's people were stored as scrolls which were kept in jars in the Temple, and used as required by priests for reference and guidance; moreover copies were not generally available. It was only from the fifth century onwards that the Jewish people formalised scripture into the pattern we know, with the books of the 'Law' at the beginning starting with Genesis. The great insistence on the part of all the prophets that the One true God was the God of Creation, was eventually reflected in giving the stories of Creation a priority in the Bible. There is good reason why God's Word begins by the great affirmation in Genesis 1 and 2 that God is our Creator!

### ***The authority of God***

The power and authority of God are therefore absolute because He is Lord of all, and this is the obvious logic of Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah's words were a little different and made this point in words which the people of his day would have understood; 'Who consigns princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth void ...' (40:23). Unknown to us, the language used by Isaiah is cryptic. We might think he was talking about earthly rulers and princes, but the words he used were more commonly used to refer to spiritual 'authorities' and 'rulers', indeed, objects or idols to which people gave authority in their lives instead of acknowledging God. Isaiah's prophecy was continuing to mock the idols people made and the power and authority that they allowed them to have in their lives!

The last verse (40:24) may appear to be yet another comment on God's authority as the Creator God who could control nature; 'scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root ...' However, there is just a hint within the words used for 'stem' and 'taking root' that Isaiah was talking here about the planting of trees! Why should Isaiah mention this? Earlier in the prophecy, he had spoken about the special selection of cultivated wood for the making of idols, and it is well known that trees were cultivated for wood and domestic use in Lebanon since Biblical times. These words were Isaiah's prophecy that God could deal with the problem of idols by blowing down the trees and ruining the wood from which they were made!

As Creator God He could destroy forests at will, but as God who desires a relationship with His people, he does not do such things outside of the natural way the world works, because He wants people to love Him as He loves them. All that God was asking from His people was that they honour Him and worship Him above all else, and the worship of household gods and the devotion and expense spent on them stood in the way. This is the heart of this prophecy of Isaiah.

## Application

It is very easy to read this passage of scripture and distance ourselves from what is being said because the words appear to speak to a time far too distant for us to feel connected to. I purposefully gave an example of how we have succumbed to idols even in our own day in the opening of this study, with the aim of bridging this gap. It remains a serious problem in the church today that many people have a picture of God which is far from the truth about God which is conveyed in the Bible. Some think that the Old Testament demonstrates the wrath of God and the New Testament demonstrates the love of God, for example; and this is untrue. The same God is consistent throughout the Bible, and Jesus demonstrates God's justice and wrath as well as His compassion and love within His teaching and His work (if you don't believe me, please read a whole Gospel and find out for yourself). The redemption of God through Jesus and our salvation from sin is the ultimate goal of God's work from Genesis to Revelation, not from Matthew to Revelation!

Moving away from the Bible, many people have difficulty with the idea of God as a father, and so wish to address God as mother, or have difficulty singing hymns which speak of the fatherhood of God. For similar reasons related to racial issues and slavery, some modern liturgies have deleted all references to God's 'lordship', because the word 'lord' is not regarded as appropriate to today's world. You may not have come across these examples, but they are not hard to find, and close on the heels of any playing about with the images of God we have inherited from the Bible come modern 'idols' to replace them. The more I have

talked to people who go to church throughout my own country, the more I come across people who speak and come to church as Christians, but they place their confidence in yoga (an eastern religious system completely foreign to God's revelation in the Word) to obtain what they regard as mental 'health'. They place their confidence in diets, health products and alternative therapies rather than trust God for their health; they are superstitious about objects and things at home or in the world with a devotion which should belong to God alone.

There are too many examples of modern idols for a mere conclusion to a study such as this; I hope you understand what Isaiah says and how I have interpreted it. Anything we place our confidence in which does not evidently come under the ultimate authority of God in our lives is an idol. Anything that distracts us from the purest worship of God alone is an idol. At the very least, our discipleship should include a commitment to root out our 'idols' and cast them out. Then we will be able to hear God's message to us in its purity.

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## **Discipleship**

### **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group the possible idols that divert people from God today. How do they affect the church?
2. How can we best worship God without using any images of Him, and is a banner depicting Jesus an idol?
3. What authorities stand in the way of God's work in the world today? How can they be overcome?

### **Personal comments by author**

*It is not easy to speak about this subject because I fear that the particular example I have chosen to give may affect some, whilst leaving untouched those who may need to be challenged about idolatrous attitudes to other things (such as music, houses, land, possessions, holidays, T.V. etc). The principle of the matter is what is at stake, and only we can say what idols have tempted us away from God.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *In private, pray about whether this study has challenged you about something which is idolatrous in your life. If it is, then should it go? If so, pray about how this can be done.*
  - *Discuss in a fellowship group the subject of idolatry in church today. You may find that people can get quite animated about this!*
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## **Final Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, we praise You for the day You have given us. Help us approach it with the same vigour and enthusiasm needed to live our lives to the full, and may all around us see that we love the life that You have given us. Through Jesus Christ we pray; AMEN

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