

Prayer

We love You, Lord Jesus, because Your grace has proved to be sufficient for all our spiritual needs. You have stayed with us on difficult paths, ministered to our broken hearts, received our worship when we have lifted You in praise, and guided us through troubled times. We depend on You, Lord Jesus, and we praise You: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Turn to a favourite passage of scripture and read it slowly several times over. The more you read it, let your heart dwell on what it says, and let your mind explore any message it may contain for you.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the military.** *Pray for the young people who are entering the military forces at this time. Pray that in the midst of their training they will be respected as people and helped to understand their terrible responsibilities*
- *Give thanks to God for the love that other people show to you.*
- *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*

Meditation

The freshness of each day anticipates God's generous blessings
The glorious gifts He offers us are given to all who receive them:

The treasury of cherished moments reading the sacred Word;
The richness of quiet times of peace, replenishing the soul;

The opportunity to love again, where yesterday we failed;
The chance to be forbearing to all who need forgiveness.

The challenge of sustaining work we must not fail to do;
The joy of knowing that life has more, and we have more to give.

The privilege of following Christ, who sought to serve the poor;
The freedom to share in prayer with others who love the Lord;

The wonder of giving ourselves to God for rest of our days; forever;
The amazing truth of the Gospel lived in the light of Christ.

The opportunity is given us every day, to praise our Lord and Maker.
The more we do it, the more we receive the wonder of His love.

Bible passage - Isaiah 40:25-31

²⁵To whom will you compare me,
or who is like me? says the Holy One.

²⁶Lift up your eyes on high:
See who created these things?
He who brings out the stars of heaven
and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
by His great strength,
and the might of His power,
no one piece is missing.

- ²⁷ Jacob, why do you declare,
and Israel, why do you say,
'My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my cause is ignored by my God'?
- ²⁸ Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is God everlasting,
Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or tire;
His knowledge is unsearchable.
- ²⁹ He gives strength to the weary,
and vigour to the powerless.
- ³⁰ Even youths toil and wear out,
and those in their prime fall exhausted;
- ³¹ but those who wait for the LORD will renew their strength,
they will rise up on wings like eagles,
they will run and not tire,
they will walk and not faint.

Bible Study

Review

When Isaiah presented his great vision of the coming of God to Jerusalem (40:1-11), he knew that many people would not be able to receive what he was saying because they did not have a proper understanding of God. Isaiah was enraptured by the thought of God's coming to be with His people, but he knew from experience that other Judeans had lost any personal sense of attachment to the God of their ancestors; they were too busy with their own affairs and they put their faith in 'household gods' (40:18f.). Without doubt, the vision which drove Isaiah to prophesy about God's coming is recorded in the first eleven verses of chapter 40, but the rest of the chapter is a prophetic defence of 'who God is'. It is an argument designed to be put before people who claim belief in God but have lost sight of the truth about who He is; God the Creator, the One who tolerates no substitutes and who is in control of all history!

Most of Isaiah 40 can be regarded as a 'standard' scriptural view of God, and the passage which we have read today is an appeal to God's people to accept this. It asks them to stop playing around with alternative gods, to take hold of the truth that God created all things, to stop complaining that God doesn't care, and to accept both the teaching and the evidence already available that God is supreme, omnipotent, omniscience and compassionate! All these things are embedded within our text today in powerful and succinct phrases. Isaiah is desperately concerned for God's people to accept what is on offer; which is that God wants to be with His people and longs to bring to an end the awful barriers of sin which had grown between Himself and His people.

This passage switches between probing questions (40:25,27) which expose the problems there were between God and His people, and prophecies about the nature of God which answer those questions, appealing to people to believe what has been revealed. 'To whom will you compare me?' is the first question, but this is unanswerable! There can be no real comparison between the God who is so great that He has both made all things and yet can account for each individual item in His creation by number (40:26)! Even people like us cannot grasp both the enormity of the universe and the detailed knowledge of each of its parts! In the field of science today, the physics of astronomy is a vastly different speciality than microbiology or the physics of sub-atomic particles. The sum of our knowledge is so vast no one person can only cope with it all, so we need specialists. However, our God knows it all because He made it!

Isaiah's next question reflects the problems and doubts which many people have when faced with talking about God. On the one hand people tend not to believe that God is really interested in what they do, and on the other they complain when God appears not to help them when things go wrong! (see 40:27!) Isaiah responds to this illogical but common complaint about God with a wonderful and powerful poem which proclaims the truth about God. He is the Creator, He knows everything and can do anything (40:28), and He cares for people by helping them not just in a general sense ('He gives strength to the weary' 40:29), but in spectacular and specific ways as well! He transports the needy human spirit and revives the soul; 'for those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength and will rise up on wings like eagles!' (40:31) giving us the spiritual energy we need to face life and the world and live as God intended!

There are many wonderful phrases within this great Biblical text and each of them can be taken for inspiration; but as a whole, it presents a substantial range of statements about the nature of God Himself, and if we have learned from its spiritual treasures (such as verse 31), then it is best remembered for this.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- How great is our God
- Complaints about God
- God is manifest in the world

Notes on the text and translation

V26 'He who brings the stars out of heaven.'

The Hebrew at this point has the phrase 'He who brings out the hosts ...' and some versions of the Bible take this to mean the armies of God, whilst others (as I have done) prefer to understand this as the host of stars in the heaven. The Hebrew word 'tsabar' (hosts) can mean either of these. I have chosen the starry hosts of heaven because this is what the whole sentence is about in verse 26.

V27 'Jacob, why do you declare, and Israel, why do you say ...'

The Hebrew verbs are singular here, as God's people are addressed as one entity, firstly as 'Jacob' and then as 'Israel'. This is paralleled with 'have you not known, have you not heard ...' in verse 28 which is also in the singular.

V27 'My cause is ignored by my God.'

The Hebrew for this reads literally 'my judgement is passed over by my God.' The picture this brings to mind is of someone bringing an issue or a cause to God for judgement but feeling that they have been passed over as time goes by. This is a complaint against God.

V30 'and those in their prime fall exhausted.'

Most versions of the Bible have 'the youths fall exhausted', but the word for 'youths' means young people in their prime, or 'in the prime of life' so I have tried to convey this in the translation.

Going Deeper

The whole passage is built on Isaiah's solid belief in God's creative power and authority that sweeps away all human questions and petty complaint. This passage is rather like a Psalm which contains a protest against God (40:27) but it affirms that God is more than able to deal with human complaints. Our further study of the passage will delve further into each part of this text and draw out more about the awesome nature of God.

How great is our God

Within the book of Isaiah we can find some great themes about the nature of God, and some of them are repeated frequently within his prophecies. One of these is the majesty of God in Creation, which we have already seen in previous passages (40:12-24), and is never far away from what is said here in our passage today (40:25-31). The Hebrew word 'bara' means 'to create', and it is used in Isaiah more than in any other book of the Bible, including Genesis! (see Isaiah 40:26, 41:20, 42:5, 43:1,7, 45:8,12,18, 54:16, etc.)

Alongside the creative power of God awesomely portrayed in this text, Isaiah speaks of God's holiness. The word 'holy' is mentioned only once in the passage; 'who is like me? Says the Holy One' (40:25). However, 'holy' means special and set apart, and God is set apart from His creation because He is its Creator. In the world, something is 'holy' by definition if it is directly connected to God, and in Old Testament times, God designated objects, events and things as holy when they served the purpose of connecting Him to His people. For example the office of kingship was regarded as holy because it was conveyed by God's anointing and the blessing of the Spirit, whereas the King as an individual would never have been regarded as 'holy'. The Sabbath was 'holy' because it had been commanded by God (Gen 2:1-3 and Ex 20:8-11) as were objects used in Temple worship (see the priestly vestments described in Leviticus 16, for example). God's people Israel were called to 'be holy as I am holy (Lev 11:44f. 21:6f Deut 28:9 etc.) because of their contact with God.

It was Isaiah's concern, however, that God's people had not kept themselves holy because they had been idolatrous (40:18f.) and followed their own ways (Isaiah 7,8). By contrast, other ancient peoples believed that what happened on earth was largely governed by the stars, the sun and moon, and they worshipped these objects in the sky as gods, and there is some evidence that Israelites were tempted to do the same (Jer 8:2, Amos 8:5). So Isaiah's prophecy appealed to people to look at the heavens and what they contained (40:26), and refuse to believe that the objects they saw were gods, but rather that they were made

by God. Objects in the sky did not control human affairs, said Isaiah, only God could do that; the same God who could count the stars and name them (at a time when no technology existed to count or name the stars in the sky which were visible to the naked eye).

Complaints about God

People have always complained that God does not help them. Most of our complaints arise from the attitude that we are the centre of our own world and that if God is relevant He will help us when we call Him, as if we could summon Him with a bell and get the results we need. In Isaiah's day, the people of Israel complained that God had let His people down by not protecting them from foreign powers, and not answering their prayers. The phrase 'my way is hidden from the Lord, my cause is ignored by my God' (40:27) sounds like a complaint that could come from any number of psalms (e.g. Ps. 44:24 or Ps. 10). However, if we read the book of Psalms, then we will find out that such complaints are generally the result of one of two circumstances. Either the people have rebelled against God to such an extent that they are unable to see His ways and consequently cannot see how they have deviated, or the people have become blinded to God's ways because of some worldly oppression (such as the people of Israel in Egypt – Exodus 2:23,24) or other circumstances which have left them confused (for example the insanity of King Saul – 2 Samuel 20f.). In this case they need guidance and help to find God's pathways again.

Those who have not known God's true care and love (through no fault of their own) should therefore be amenable to a prophetic appeal; and Isaiah does just this, starting from verse 28 onwards; 'have you not known, have you not heard, the Lord is God everlasting'. People may have changed, says Isaiah, but God does not; it is people who turn away from His care and counsel and not, as it may seem, the other way round. In this part of his prophecy, Isaiah makes a bold move, identifying God as Creator not just in the sense of having made all things at some time in the past, but also as the God of time who is Lord of both the beginning and the end of the world and also its sustenance during the time it exists. He is 'the creator of the ends of the earth!' (40:28)

The more we study Isaiah, the more we will come to appreciate that through these prophecies God gave him an appreciation of time which was far broader than we might expect for someone of his day. The words 'forever' appear in numerous places in scripture but with little real concept of the grand scale of time in the Old Testament, let alone history as we know it. However, the word 'everlasting' with the addition 'from the ends of the earth' here in Isaiah is very different, and the idea that Isaiah had a more modern concept of history than his peers lends weight to the general theory of these studies that Isaiah knowingly spoke prophecies which were about what would happen long after his death.

God manifest in the world

In verse 27, Isaiah reflects the questions some people had about God's commitment to His people (40:27). Isaiah responded by speaking about the everlasting nature of God (as above) and then homed in specifically on the power and authority of God to do things in this world; 'He gives strength to the weary, and vigour to the powerless ...' (40:29). To a certain extent, this prophecy reminds us of what God has done in the past, and it was common in Isaiah's day for people to look back on the days of the forefathers or the days of Moses and the Exodus as great times when God had been 'manifest' amongst His people.

The word 'manifest' is not a word we use much today, but it is an important word because we do not have another more modern way of expressing what it means, and it says something important. To say that God is made manifest is to say that He becomes visible in certain ways. For example, a kind deed done in the name of Jesus may be called a 'manifestation' of His love. We use the word more frequently in church when talking about Jesus, who is God 'made manifest' amongst humanity; that is, made real, visible and touchable.

When Isaiah describes in these famous words how someone may be strengthened by God; 'those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength and rise up on wings like eagles' (40:31) he is talking about a spiritual vision which powerfully reflects what we feel about God's strength and support. However, when He says 'they will run and not tire, they will walk and not faint', he is talking about the 'manifestation' of that vision. This is because strength to keep going whether physically or mentally is a real and tangible thing to which we can give testimony and others can witness. However powerful the vision, it is when it is made manifest that we see the evidence of God's power and work amongst us!

Application

The word 'manifestation' helps us understand more about what testimony can mean. When we call for testimony in church, people will speak of the Lord's help in their lives, sometimes through spiritual support, sometimes by speaking of pictures and visions, but also by testifying to times when God has done something in a physical and measurable way. A testimony might indicate that someone was led to take an action which saved them from a dangerous situation, for example, or perhaps they will tell of miracles of healing which

can be verified physically. This is what we can call a 'manifestation' of God in our midst! God's people are truly blessed when they receive manifestations of His presence and testify to it!

Isaiah spoke to the people of Israel to challenge them to raise their expectations of God and to help them anticipate the presence and power of their God, doing things in the real situations they faced. Isaiah was intent upon calling on Israel to believe that God would act to save them, would assist them in times of trouble, would love them and help them when they were oppressed, and would give them strength when their energy failed. All of these things lie behind this great text and Isaiah brings the same challenge to us now. Isaiah knew that God had said that He was coming to be with His people (40:1-11), and he expected this 'manifestation'. He was heartbroken that other people of Israel and Judah found this hard to accept and raised objections to his prophecy (e.g. 40:27), and he challenged them directly to believe their own history (40:12-31). However, Isaiah's spirit was indefatigable, and the last great verse of Isaiah 40 summarises his optimism:

'but those who wait for the LORD will renew their strength, they will rise up on wings like eagles, they will run and not tire, they will walk and not faint' (40:31)

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Make a list of the properties of God you see mentioned or exemplified in this passage, and discuss whether they are understood properly today.
2. Why did the people of Jerusalem and Judah find it hard to continue to believe that God would save and protect them?
3. In your group, share testimony of God's 'manifestation'.

Personal comments by author

This prophecy could be used as the basis for a sermon, taking the great properties of God and teaching them as the classical teaching of the Old Testament about the nature of God. Most of the great aspects of God's nature are there, coloured of course by the setting. There is no great emphasis on salvation in this passage, but it is there in the last three verses as Isaiah prophesies about the manifestations of God.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Discuss with a close Christian friend your view of the nature of God. Answer the question, what is a sufficient description of God?*
 - *In what ways have you known God 'manifest' in your life? This is an important question because we tend to spiritualise things and can often avoid talking about the specifics of how God does things for us, or what He does. It is important to be precise, and then people will understand our testimony better!*
-

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, deal kindly with us today, we pray. Open our hearts to people around us so that we become people of compassion, willing to hear and respond to those we meet with the same love with which You have paid attention to us and our needs. Make us more like You, we pray: AMEN.
