

## Prayer

Holy Spirit of God, surround my day with Your peace, steer me through the day with Your power, touch my mind with Your wisdom, and comfort my heart with Your love. May I live to the Glory of God as long as I have breath to proclaim it and time to live it, and may I always witness to the truth of God found in Jesus Christ my Saviour. Alleluia; AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Shout out your praise to God at a time and place that will not cause embarrassment! Tell the Lord how much you love Him, and make sure that you can say this with truth and honesty*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the military.** *Pray for the politicians who have the responsibility of governing the military in your country. Pray that they will act with consideration and moderation.*
- *Pray for the many people caught up in civil turmoil within the world today. Pray that Christian people will be an influence for good within our world*
- *Give thanks to God for the love that other people show to you.*

## Meditation

Be comforted, you who have felt the power of sin,  
There is One who has the victory over Satan's evil sway.

Be strengthened, you who know cruel oppression,  
There is One who has the courage to bring you freedom.

Be heartened, you who struggle with your burdens,  
There is One who takes the weight you suffer on Himself.

Be encouraged, you who need to hear good news,  
There is One who broke through death to bring you love.

Be enlightened, you who have the heart to understand,  
There is One who taught the way of life, and lived it perfectly.

Be enthused, you who are willing to speak your faith,  
There is One who works through you in authority and power!

Be blessed, you who have walked in hope and joy,  
There is One you know who has a place for you in heaven!

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 41:1-10

<sup>1</sup> Keep silence before me, you coastlands;  
let the peoples regain their strength;  
let them come near, then let them speak;  
let us draw near together for judgment.

<sup>2</sup> Who has aroused from the east,  
Who has summoned righteousness to his feet?  
Who gives nations to him?  
Who gave him authority over kings?  
Who makes them like dust with his sword,  
like blown chaff with his bow?

<sup>3</sup> He pursues them and passes by safely,  
by a path his feet have not trod.

- <sup>4</sup> Who has done this and executed it,  
calling the generations from the beginning?  
I, the LORD, am the first,  
and I am last; I am He.
- <sup>5</sup> The coastlands have seen and are afraid,  
the ends of the earth tremble;  
these things are near and happen!
- <sup>6</sup> Each one helps his neighbour,  
saying to the other, 'Be strong!'
- <sup>7</sup> The artisan encourages the goldsmith,  
and the panel beater encourages the smith,  
saying of the join, 'It is good';  
and they pin it with nails so that it cannot move.
- <sup>8</sup> But you, Israel, my servant,  
Jacob, whom I have chosen,  
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
- <sup>9</sup> you whom I have taken  
from the ends of the earth,  
and called from its farthest corners,  
I called you; you are my servant.  
I have chosen you and not abandoned you';
- <sup>10</sup> do not be afraid, for I am with you,  
do not be dismayed, for I am your God;  
I will strengthen you, I will help you,  
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
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## Bible Study

### Review

God governs what happens in His world, and He moves nations and events to achieve His ultimate purpose and will. This is the general theme of this passage, which lies behind each section of what seems to be a complicated text. Isaiah had already prophesied that God would come to Jerusalem (40:1-11), and spoken about the loving nature of God (40:12-31) and His will to save His people. So his prophecy now continues with a sweeping description of God's work in judgement and salvation, and His people's reaction to it.

On difficulty however is this. Because the passage is difficult to understand, the reader may be tempted to ignore most of it in favour of the last three verses. They are easy to understand, and they are encouraging to any reader of scripture. Moreover, verse 8 is interesting because it describes Israel as God's 'servant', which is a new prophetic description of Israel. Yet if we are to understand this passage fully, we must look at all of it, so this is what we will seek to do here.

The first few verses clearly pronounce judgement. The Lord calls people together (41:1) and they are then visited by someone '*from the east*' who comes to do God's work, and Isaiah says little about who this person is! He reveals that this figure brings 'judgement and righteousness' and he comes with authority over nations and kings. People who first heard this prophecy could well have thought that this was someone like the king of Assyria, who invaded Israel and Judah during Isaiah's lifetime (see Isaiah 12 and 36f.), bringing judgement on God's people. From our perspective, however, things are different. Isaiah could have described 'the king of Assyria' if he wished, but did not. His prophecy projects forward to a time when God would come with a new king to judge His people. This should not surprise us because Isaiah has spoken about such things since his earliest prophecies, when he spoke about the coming of an 'infant king' (9,11).

The most powerful part of this prophecy is surely the amazing strength of conviction that lies behind the prophecy. Isaiah reveals God's stunning words of power and authority, saying '*I, the Lord, am the first and the last; I am He!*' This is one of the most remarkable descriptions of God's nature found in the prophets, and it reminds us of God's self revelation to Moses when He said 'I am' (Ex 3:6f.), and also the great 'I am' sayings of Jesus, found in John's Gospel (John 4:26, 6:35, 6:41, 8:12, 8:58, 10:11 etc.). So these events are fixed by the supreme authority of God, they will happen, they are part of God's plan for His world.

What happens next is fascinating, because it reveals two possible reactions all this revelation of God. Firstly, some are afraid (41:5-7), so they come together to help and encourage each other in pursuing their natural gifts and abilities, or so it seems. In truth, Isaiah is mocking these people because they are indeed making objects of false worship, idols mocked by Isaiah in the previous chapter (40:19f.)! So it seems that when God comes, some will always reject God and resort to self sufficiency.

In the last three verses however, Isaiah describes a different reaction to God's revelation and judgement. He speaks about people who are chosen, like Israel, who are a 'servant' to Almighty God (40:8f.). Who is this? Isaiah cannot mean the old Israel, because his prophecy has already presented Israel as rejecting the Lord God and refusing to hear His voice or seek His help. Nevertheless, the new '*Israel, my servant*' (40:8) must be a new people of God, who are called and chosen (41:9) and the '*offspring of Abraham, my friend*'.

In Isaiah's day, those who heard the prophecy may have thought that these people were a 'remnant' of Israel as Isaiah has previously described (10:20f.), or perhaps people who accepted the rule of the coming king (see Isaiah 9:6, 11:1f.). Perhaps they were people who were looking for a 'Messiah' who would fulfil this prophecy. Today, we recognise this as a prophecy of God's work in Jesus and the establishment of a new people of God through His death and resurrection. This is exciting, but we must read on to find out much more about this 'servant'. This passage is the starting point for a journey of discovery!

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Who is the one who comes in judgement?
- Judgement – for salvation

## Notes on the text and translation

**V2** *This whole verse is a mass of complex Hebrew which is not clear. I have translated the text with some figure in mind who has been aroused (see text) and decides to fight. You will find that each line of this verse is rather different in nearly all the translations currently available, yet the general picture is of someone used by God to do a great and impressive work.*

**V3** **'by a path his feet have not trod'**

*Poetic words meaning that he has not passed this way before.*

**V4** **'I, the Lord, am the first, and I am last; I am He!'**

*The Hebrew of this sentence is brief and succinct, emphasising the 'I am' part of the sentence. As is typical in Hebrew, the simple verb 'to exist' does not occur, so the Hebrew looks something like this; 'I, the Lord, the first and the last; I, He.' Different translations put this together in different ways, but I suggest the translation above is the simplest and most direct.*

**V7** **'the panel beater encourages the smith ...'**

*The Hebrew describes with more detail one who 'smoothes with a hammer' and one who 'strikes the anvil'. I have interpreted this as referring to the crafts of the panel beater and smith, both of them involved with idol manufacture.*

## Going Deeper

Few commentaries you will read agree on how to interpret this passage, and yet it shows us Isaiah's revelation of the work of God in a remarkable way. Firstly, we will have to look at the different ways people interpret this passage, and then explain carefully why it is best understood as a prophecy of judgement and salvation which is timeless.

### ***Who is the one who comes in judgement?***

If you read the first three verses of chapter 41 you will see that God has decided to act in judgement. In verse 1, peoples are summoned for judgement, and in the next two verses, a question is asked which appears rhetorical; 'who is this ...' is repeated five times as if we know perfectly well who Isaiah is talking about, but the trouble is that we do not! The figure used by God to bring judgement is not specifically identified! Some of the earliest scholars who wrote about the text assumed that because the whole passage was about Israel, Isaiah was talking about Abraham. Of course, God had summoned Him to be a great nation of people by calling him from the East (see Genesis 11:31-12:3). He had fought with Kings (Genesis 14) and exercised authority over them, passing through the land of Canaan, the land that would one day be occupied by his descendants. This seems to fit with the great affirmation in verse 4; 'I, The Lord, am the first,

and I am last; I am He!', and it also seems to fit with the 'trembling' of the coastlands (see verse 5) which were regions occupied by Philistines, the long term enemies of Israel. All in all, this prophecy was seen as a description of God's work of judgement amongst His people, who are called His 'servant' in verse 8, summoned from the farthest corners of the world!

Within the last two hundred years however, it has become far more common for commentators to suggest that in keeping with the general theme of the second half of Isaiah, verses 1 to 3 describe not Abraham, but the Persian King Cyrus who lived in the sixth century BC. He became Emperor of a vast area of land after the defeat of Babylon in 550BC and he proclaimed the release of large numbers of captives including Jews, thus enabling the Exiles to return to Jerusalem. Cyrus came from the far east, beyond Babylon (41:2) and his armies swiftly controlled the entire region (41:2) even though he did not personally travel with his armies (41:3). Later generations of Jews clearly believed that Cyrus was anointed by God for this task because he gave liberty to the Jewish people (see Ezra 1:1,2f.)

So which are we to believe; does this passage describe Abraham or Cyrus? My own opinion is that Isaiah, characteristically, prophesied with an eye to the story of Abraham, which he knew, and he also prophesied with an eye to the story of the invasion of Israel by Assyria which he personally knew about from his own past (Isaiah 7,8f.). However, the prophecy anticipates what God would do for the Exiles, in the future after the Babylonian invasion, and Isaiah had begun to prophesy about this many years before it happened (Is.13,14,39). This whole passage is therefore a sweeping prophecy about God's work in the world from beginning to end, calling judgement on the world for its sins (41:1) and choosing to save His people, chosen through Abraham (41:8f.).

### ***Judgement – for salvation***

In all the talk about judgement in the Old Testament, we forget that salvation is itself a consequence of judgement. For example, it is when we realise that we are lost without God that we take our first steps towards trust and faith in God and in His son Jesus Christ. The evangelist always places before people a choice, and people have to decide whether to accept the call of Christ and of faith in Him, or reject Him; and this challenge is itself a form of judgement.

The situation we are faced with in the Old Testament is that God had chosen His people through Abraham and promised to work through them to bless the world. However, they had not accepted the long term consequences of living with that calling and they had fallen away from their God by worshipping idols and other gods (as we have found frequently throughout Isaiah). As a consequence, God had to reveal to His people that their own salvation would not come simply by accepting a birthright. His prophecies in the first half of his work (chapters 1–39) spoke occasionally and enigmatically of various solutions to the problem presented by God's people (see review above), but it was only now that Isaiah was prophesying without constraint and looking into the future that a new figure emerges, God's 'servant'. The introduction of 'Israel, my servant' stands at the beginning of a great theme in the second half of Isaiah which culminates in the description of the 'suffering servant' in Isaiah 53, and we will learn a great deal about this figure in the coming chapters. The servant is linked to many of the great themes of the Old Testament, but essentially, it looks ahead to God's great salvation, won for us in Jesus Christ.

Surrounding the announcement of the servant in verse 8 there are two great texts within this passage that make this clear. Firstly the profoundly strong pronouncement of God in verse 4 which announces His authority in judgement, and secondly the last verse. The promise in this verse (40:10) is a precious treasure of the Old Testament which could be lifted out of where it is and placed in almost any book of the New Testament and be at home (theologically if not literally!). It contains the ancient promise of God 'I am with you' made to Abraham, David and the great prophets, the promise which becomes the Saviour's name, 'Immanuel', as prophesied by Isaiah himself (7:14 and Matt 1:23). It also contains a promise of peace with God, through the words 'do not be afraid ... do not be dismayed ...' These are promises made both to the servant and through the servant, alongside God's promise to strengthen and uphold. This is talk of salvation, not in the complete sense which we now know through Jesus, but a salvation which Isaiah foresaw.

## Application

I have read through the relevant sections of at least six different commentaries on this passage of scripture, all by eminent scholars, and I can find no common thread of agreement about any interpretation of this text! Most of them agree that the prophecy best describes the work of Cyrus, and though many of them qualify this, none would go as far as I have in saying that the prophecy is not intended to be specific. It is astonishing that even the division of verses and the interpretation of individual words and phrase are radically different from one scholar to the other. You will have your own opinion about what I have written, and may agree with it, but you should be aware that the interpretation of this passage has certainly proved to be contentious in recent times!

Despite this, it is still amazing that if we look at these words without trying to tie them down to circumstance and events, then they speak in a magnificent way about how God goes about bringing both judgement and salvation into the world. It is also a summary reminder that one cannot come without the other! If we want to find the real God who made the world, the One who exists and says 'I, the Lord, am the first and the last ...' and the one who instils fear in the godless and pronounces freedom from fear to those who love Him, then we must accept that He comes to judge in order to save.

This passage reminds us that those of us who have received God's call have been 'chosen' by Him. We must confess our sins otherwise He will find them out and we will be filled with fear, and if we do then we can receive His promise that there is nothing that we need ever fear, because He is with us, 'Immanuel'! I have often wondered whether this passage from Isaiah was in Paul's mind when he was enraptured to say 'I am convinced that ... nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord' (Romans 8:39).

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## Discipleship

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

1. Read through the first three verses a few times and consider yourself whether you think that there is a reasonable answer to who is being described in verse 2.
2. Discuss in your group (with reference to verses 4 to 7) the circumstances under which anyone should be afraid of God. What is the solution to this?
3. Describe to one another what it feels like to be told that you are safe after having been deeply fearful. Recall examples of this in your life.

### **Personal comments by author**

*I honestly thought I was going no-where with this study when I read the books I have in my study in preparation for this piece. Isaiah's words are best viewed as 'grand prophecy', and the more you can stand back and try to see the overall picture, the more it will make sense. I reckon that as we go further into these great prophecies, we will find more and more to help us understand the fullness of the vision granted Isaiah by God, and it is exiting!*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *In prayer, ask yourself whether there are times when you have lived in rebellion against God and preferred solace in the company of people who are not Christians! What has been the consequence of this, and how can you guard against its negative consequences?*
  - *If you know someone who would regard themselves as an evangelist, try to take an opportunity to discuss this passage with him or her. Discuss the potential for preaching evangelistically from this passage of scripture.*
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## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, there are times when I do not seem to take hold of either You or what You say. Take hold of me, therefore, and hold me in Your firm grasp, so that I do not slip away to follow my own path. Tutor me in Your ways, my Lord, and show me Your paths. AMEN

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