

## Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the joy of knowing You; for the pleasure of finding You in others and the happiness we can find by living our lives according to Your will. Remind us of this when we feel low, and that even though our own love falters, Yours does not, and we are loved for eternity. We praise You for this great assurance, and pray that we may never lose sight of it or forget it through ignorance. Thank You Lord Jesus; AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*In the midst of conversations today, do your best to stand back and try to listen to God's voice whilst other people speak. If you are shy, then listen expectantly to God's voice telling you to speak!*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the military.** *Pray for officers within the armed forces who have the job of keeping the discipline of the military and effecting action. Pray that Christians within the military will be an example of morality within this difficult world*
- *Give thanks to God for rain and sunshine, and the growth of crops*
- *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*

## Meditation

Jesus Christ, You break into our world with

Fresh insight which inspires us to new heights;  
Awesome visions by which we see the Father;  
Profound wisdom to strengthen our minds;  
Divine energy which breaks through barriers;  
Amazing beauty through which we find joy;  
Superb kindness to transform relationships;  
Incredible sensitivity which values all life;  
Astonishing bravery by which evil is defeated;

Jesus Christ, You are our inspiration!

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 41:11-20

- <sup>11</sup> Look, all those who rage against you  
will be ashamed and humiliated;  
Those who dispute with you  
will be as nothing, and perish.
- <sup>12</sup> You will seek but not find them -  
those who contend with you;  
they will mean nothing at all to you -  
those who do battle against you
- <sup>13</sup> For I, the LORD, am your God;  
I will support your right hand;  
I say to you, 'do not fear,  
I will help you.'
- <sup>14</sup> Do not fear,

you worm Jacob,  
 you mortal Israel!  
 It is I who help you, says the LORD;  
 your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel!  
<sup>15</sup> I will make you a sharp threshing sledge,  
 new, with double toothed rows;  
 you will thresh the mountains and crush them,  
 and you will make the hills like chaff.  
<sup>16</sup> You will winnow them and the wind will lift them up,  
 and the storm will scatter them.  
 Then you will rejoice in the LORD;  
 You will glory in the Holy One of Israel.  
<sup>17</sup> As for the poor and needy;  
 they seek water and there is none,  
 their tongues are dry with thirst,  
 But I, the LORD, will answer them,  
 I, the God of Israel will not forsake them.  
<sup>18</sup> I will open rivers on plateaus,  
 and fountains in the valleys;  
 I will make the wilderness a pool of water,  
 and the dry land springs of water.  
<sup>19</sup> I will place the cedar in the wilderness,  
 the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;  
 I will set the cypress in the Arabah,  
 the plane and the pine together,  
<sup>20</sup> so that they all may see and know,  
 may consider and understand together,  
 that the LORD'S hand has done this,  
 Israel'S Holy One has created it.

## Bible Study

### Review

These magnificent prophecies of Isaiah continue the sequence of poems begun in chapter 40. All of them announce the Lord's intent to come and save His people, and they begin with God's declaration of compassion for Jerusalem (40:1f.) and a call for judgement (41:1f.). In principle, such prophecies are common, but this passage confirms something new and important within God's revelation to Israel; He has begun to do something new. He will not sit back and watch the world as if what happens is of little consequence, He cares about His world, and in particular, He cares for His chosen people. If necessary, He will intervene in the world to save them (41:18-20).

Of all the great prophets, Isaiah is the one who says most about God's desire to save both His own people and the whole world. Here, the three sections of this passage demonstrate this great theme. The first three verses speak of God's unqualified support for His people and His desire to care for them (41:11-13), the next three contain powerful promises of God's help (41:14-16), and the last are the revelation that God will indeed intervene in human history to effect salvation (41:17-20).

You may think that you have heard all this before, and you have, for the first ten verses of this chapter say similar things. Everything we have read in chapters 40 and 41 has been about God's desire to save His people, but each passage we study reveals just a little more of His great plan. Here, the emphasis is on God's power to intervene in human history to achieve His will. This may seem a small point, but throughout history, people have been prone to doubt this, and it needs to be emphasised. Isaiah is utterly confident that God will accomplish what He wills.

Throughout the Old Testament, we read of Israel's struggle to have faith in their God and do what was required of them. Isaiah was aware of all this, yet within his spirit he perceived God's remarkable Word, confronting Israel's sin, but never rejecting her. Despite everything that had gone wrong (as told in 1&2 Kings and 1&2 Chronicles), the Lord had not given up on His people. He was determined to go on loving them and prove to them and the whole world the strength of His saving love and His power to save. Isaiah

saw as perhaps no one before had, that Israel's total failure gave God the opportunity to redeem both His people and the whole world. When we read today's prophecies, we must remember this to avoid misinterpreting the prophecy.

Some of the details of these prophecies are inspiring. In the first section (41:11-13), God's people are promised complete victory over their enemies, so much so that it would be impossible to find them! If they leant on Him, they would find that He was there, '*I am supporting your right hand ... do not fear!*' (41:13). In the next prophecy (41:14-16) God reveals Himself as Israel's redeemer. Now in Isaiah's day, people knew that a 'redeemer' was someone who did what was right to both get justice and show love; someone who would step into crisis and deal with it properly, just as Boaz stepped in to marry Ruth to resolve the injustices done to her and do the right thing before God. Isaiah's message therefore speaks of God's pure love. God will redeem His people out of both justice and love, moreover, His redemption will bring them into a new relationship with Him, so that they will have a new ability to praise His Holy name (41:16)!

Then, as a guarantee, God said that He would answer the prayers of the needy and those in despair (41:17f.). At this point, Isaiah's prophecy bursts into an amazing poetic description of the blooming of the desert (41:17-20), with water appearing in the desert enabling trees to grow in abundance! It is a passage that has inspired generations!

All in all, this scripture reveals the tender mercy of God who wants to save and redeem His people despite their problems. If they would receive His Word, they would know that He is working in their midst (41:20)! Isaiah's prophecies make up a unique collection of promises of salvation, redemption and deliverance, and they remain a source of great inspiration to this day.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- 'I will deal with your enemies'
- 'I will help you and you will help me'
- 'I will transform you prospects'

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V11**

*This verse is very difficult to translate, and you will find a great deal of variation between Bible versions. The Hebrew text does say; 'Look, they will be ashamed and humiliated, those who rage against you ...' but in English, it makes much more sense to switch the lines around and say 'Look, those who rage against you will be ashamed and humiliated ...'*

### **V13 'For I, the Lord, your God, strengthening your right hand ...'**

*The translator is left to make sense of this by adding a verb to complete the sentence. I prefer this; 'I, the Lord, am your God ...' because this is a classic formula for God's self revelation in the Bible. The rest of the verse fits around this, and I have translated the rest as dependent on the first line, each stanza beginning 'I am ...' This conveys the sense of God's action.*

### **V14 'Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you mortal Israel'**

*This verse begins strangely, and you will find that some versions of the Bible add '... you maggot Israel', and some have '... you men of Israel'. The word translated 'maggot' or 'man' is rare, but normally it means 'man' in the sense of a mortal being. Modern translators tend to change the word slightly because they think the word 'maggot' makes more sense next to 'worm'! I prefer, however, to keep close to the Hebrew text and use the word 'mortal' because the prophecy is all about Israel's human nature.*

### **V15 'I will make you a sharp threshing sledge, new, with double toothed rows.'**

*The verse contains a selection of words capable of being connected together in various ways. The translation of 'double toothed rows' of teeth comes from a similarity between this text and Psalm 149:6; 'two-edged swords in their hands'. Most translations you read do not pick up this subtlety.*

### **V19 'the Arabah'**

*Most translations refer to 'wilderness, but the Arabah is the specific name of a desert region in the rift valley near the Dead Sea.*

### **V20 'May consider and understand together.'**

*Some translations miss out the 'together', which is an important part of the text and a separate word in Hebrew. God's people need to be 'together' in response to what God has done for them*

## Going Deeper

Each part of this passage holds great treasures, telling us much about God's purposes for His people as well as His promises for them. Some of the words in this passage are a little strange, and some of the sentences do not appear at first to follow the same thread of God's self revelations. We will now look at them to see how they fit into the characteristic pattern of blessing found in this passage.

### ***I will deal with your enemies!***

The first promise of God found in this passage is God's pledge that He will deal with His people's earthly enemies (41:11-13). Isaiah had witnessed what happened when the Assyrian army had come to up the very gates of Jerusalem, and then suddenly dispersed as an angel of the Lord came and struck down 'one hundred and eighty five thousand' of the enemy camp (Isaiah 37:36f.). This was a miracle, and one that the people of Jerusalem clearly felt was a miracle, giving them a victory over the great Assyrian Emperor and the boasts of his army commander (see Isaiah 36). What Isaiah did was to use this deliverance as a pattern for God's work amongst His people which would happen again and again. The promise of God was that when He had delivered His people, they would have no more need to worry about their opponents, because they will have disappeared. The text says; 'those who dispute with you will be as nothing, and perish ...' (41:12), and the words used in Hebrew could well be translated '... will have vanished and be obliterated!' (but this would destroy any sense of poetic metre in English!).

This prophecy would come true after Isaiah's time when the people of Israel were liberated from exile in Babylon, and it would come true yet again when Christ died on the Cross, defeating all evil in a miraculous way which can only be attributed to God! This is the reason why the Lord is able to say 'do not fear ...' People are fearful when they feel threatened; but if God has removed and obliterated the threat, then fear is destroyed! Isaiah had seen this happen in his past, he prophesied that God would do it again, and his words point towards the ultimate work of God in delivering His people from Satan and the fear of death and all evil. Today, we can therefore take this prophesy as a promise that if we trust in God, then He will not allow Satan to harm or destroy our relationship with God.

The heritage of our faith is a message of liberation and deliverance, and this prophecy declares this so that we may have confidence that this is the way God has acted.

### ***I will help you and you will help me!***

Going on into verses 14 to 16, it appears at the beginning that the Lord's words about Israel are somewhat less than affectionate. Most translations have; 'Do not fear you worm Israel you maggot Israel!' (see above), but modern translators have placed too much emphasis on the idea of a 'worm' as a derogatory expression. However, it need not be, and my translation shows that the Lord spoke to Israel in a more kindly manner. The only other reference to a 'worm' in the Old testament is found in Psalm 22 (verse 6), where the writer says 'I am a worm, not human' as part of a classic Hebrew Psalm which expressed the repentance of a worshipper. Our passage may therefore reflect God's answer to this abject confession of a sinner, saying something rather like this; 'Do not fear, Jacob you worm; you are human, but it is I who help you ...' (this is my paraphrase of verse 14).

I am convinced that verse 14 is intended to be a positive verse, because the last line announces; 'your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel!' Nowadays we are used to using the word 'Redeemer' to refer to God, but at the point when Isaiah said this, the word 'redeemer' meant something different. As I explained above, it was attached to a role essential to the smooth running of society, rather like that of charities today which pick up social problems not otherwise covered by government agencies. The title 'Redeemer' which we give to God is almost exclusively found in Isaiah, but is also found in some Psalms and also in Job (Job 19:25; Psalm 19:14 and 78:35). When Isaiah first used this word as a title for God this was not its normal use. People knew what it meant to 'redeem' something in the sense of buying it back or restoring it to its proper place or glory, but Isaiah introduced this into the understanding of God's nature like a lightning bolt of revelation. God would save His people by redemption; in other words, He would take over responsibility for the problems, the debts, the sin and all the evil amongst God's people. He would take it and deal with it!

In addition to this, having acted as Redeemer to His people, God would put them to work to do His bidding and His will. The following verses (15,16) speak of Israel being made (poetically) into 'threshing sledges' not for normal human use, but for the divine work of crushing mountains and levelling hills! This is exactly what the Lord called for as part of His return to Jerusalem in the previous chapter ('every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain be made low' – 40:5). Most commentaries on the Bible do not know what to make of

this part of the prophecy, but it seems obvious that having saved His people, the Lord would use them to do His will; no more, no less.

### ***I will transform your prospects!***

The last part of this prophecy is a famous text with a number of features of interest. When God is revealed as Redeemer, then He will immediately act for the 'poor and needy' (41:17). Those who lack the water of life will find it because He will 'answer' them, and neither will He 'forsake' them. Here, the word 'answer' means more than speaking, it means 'respond by action or words'; in other words, the Lord will not abandon the poor and needy amongst His people, He will help them immediately.

The help that the Lord gives His people is then described in the form of a wonderful poem about the 'flowering of the desert' (41:18,19). We do not know for sure what some of the tree names used in this passage refer to or whether they refer to trees at all, but it is clear that the whole eight lines are a tight knit poem which prophecies God's renewal of the land. From the beginning of the occupation of the 'Promised Land', God's people were warned by the Lord that if they abandoned the rule of God or forsook Him, then the land would suffer (Deut 28). This of course, is what happened over the years as Israel suffered drought after drought (1 Kings 17f.) and the people turned to the Ba'al's to restore the land's fertility. All this terrible history would be swept aside by God in His recreation of a new land, fertile and productive!

Some people think of this prophecy as being completed in the recent half century as Israel has returned to cultivate the land. This is of course a great achievement and one which the Lord delights in, but from a Christian point of view, the renewal of the land in the Old Testament describes the coming Kingdom of God; this is the spiritual reality in which we experience the thirst quenching 'water of life' (John 4:14; Rev 21:6).

## Application

The last verse of this passage speaks about what happens because of all that the Lord has said He will do. God's people who receive the benefits of His deliverance and redemption will understand 'together' what has been done for them, and they will be evidence that 'the Lord's hand has done this' (41:20). Isaiah could see that the result of God's activity of redemption would be a people who would be a powerful witness to the world about Lord who saved them, and this part of his prophecy is now fulfilled only through Christ and the through the establishment of the Church. Before this, the people of Israel may have known that God had saved them, but they did not testify to this in the world as God intended. It was only when Jesus came that God's work of Redemption was completed, according to Isaiah's prophecy.

There are a number of features of this passage which are deeply inspirational and challenging. We are led by this prophecy to trust in God to take away our enemies and our fears; we are promised that the Lord will deal with all our problems and give us a work to do for His Kingdom; the poor are promised the Lord's attention and help, and we are encouraged to witness to the Lord's work, together. These are words of great encouragement, and they should be treasured as such by God's people. Too many Christians today are still afraid, even fearful of what life has for them, but they have no need to be. There are those who will talk about what it means to be 'redeemed' by God through Jesus Christ, but do not know it personally, or the power of what this can mean for the individual. Some will not accept that the Lord's priority is for the poor and He will bless them with a spiritual abundance which is beyond the understanding of those who have all they need in this world; for if you have what you need, you do not need the 'desert to bloom'! A good preacher can make a great deal out of most of these points, but here in Isaiah's prophecy, they are but part of an on-going prophetic revelation of the nature and character of God. It is important that we measure ourselves and our understanding of God against these prophecies, but not that we measure such wonderful prophecies against our own more limited experiences of God and of life.

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## Discipleship

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

1. How does the Lord help us overcome our fears today? Share testimony about how the Lord has delivered you from fear.
2. Discuss in your group what you believe the word 'Redeemer' means to you.
3. How does the Lord work for the poor and the needy today? Does He require us to do His work?

## **Personal comments by author**

*This scripture is a continual progression of revelation, but much of it can be considered as familiar to us, and we need to take a step back if we are to receive the full benefit of what it has to offer. By this I do not mean disregarding what we already know through Jesus Christ, but doing our best to see how these words came afresh to people of ancient times who had not heard these things before. We take too much for granted today!*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Look through a hymn book at random, and see how many times the word 'Redeemer' appears, and look up hymns such as 'I know that my Redeemer lives', or 'There is a Redeemer'. Check out what the hymn writers suggest that 'Redeemer' means.*
  - *Pray for people who live in fear, and need to know God's blessing and deliverance; especially those who you know from your own church.*
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## **Final Prayer**

I love You, Lord; for Your love is the power of the Universe and it shines as fiercely as the sun. May it shine on me as well; and even when I am uncertain or troubled, when I feel ill or in distress, and when I have been hurt by someone else, Your love helps make sense of my world. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN

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