

## Prayer

Heavenly Father and Lord of all, You have made each one of us with love and care. Release us from the ever present trap of selfishness, which prevents us from sharing ourselves with others. May all we have, all we know and all we are be shared with those we meet, for the sake of the greater good of all and for the sake of our own growth within the Kingdom of God. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Whatever happens today, give God thanks for it, and seek to make sense of what happens in the light of what you know about God and His salvation*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray blessings on your neighbours** *This week we will place the emphasis on prayers of blessing, especially blessing those who you come into contact with, live nearby or meet, in others words, your neighbours*
- *Pray today for relief agencies attempting to deal with problems that are currently giving cause for concern around the world*
- *Give thanks to God for your health and your vitality, whatever your circumstances in life*

## Meditation

Your work Lord God, is always

to bring together what had been undone;  
to mend lives that have been broken;  
to restore order to what has been shattered;  
to heal those who have been suffering;  
to bring wholeness to what has been damaged;  
to bind up whatever has been torn apart;  
to release those who have been bound;  
to restore what has been lost or mislaid;  
and to complete what has been left undone.

For You have been doing all this since the beginning of time,  
And You will continue to do it until the world is completed.  
All things are re-created by You and in You. AMEN

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 41:21-29

- <sup>21</sup> 'Present your case,' says the LORD;  
'Set out your defence,' says the King of Jacob.
- <sup>22</sup> Let them bring them,  
and reveal to us what will happen,  
Or tell about previous events  
to let us make up our minds;  
so we may know their results,  
or predict things to come.
- <sup>23</sup> Tell us what is happening later,  
that we may know you are gods;  
do something! good or evil,

- that we may be afraid  
and see it together!
- 24 Look! You are nothing  
and your work is worthless;  
whoever chooses you is an abomination!
- 25 I raised up one from the north, and he has come,  
from the rising sun he will call on my name.  
He will trample on rulers as on mortar,  
as the potter tramples clay.
- 26 Who said this from the start, for us to know,  
or beforehand, for us to say, 'He is right'?  
But no one said it! No one made it known,  
No one heard what you said!
- 27 I was the first to tell Zion, 'Look! See!'  
and I gave Jerusalem one who brings good news!
- 28 But when I looked there was no one;  
There was no counsellor among them  
who, when asked, replied a word!
- 29 Look, they are all a worthless;  
their works are nothing;  
their images are empty wind.

## Bible Study

### Review

Suddenly, Isaiah changes tack, and this reading speaks not of God's love for Israel and His desire to save. Instead, it is written in the form of a challenge. The prophecy challenges Israel to prove the effectiveness of the other gods she has worshipped (41:21-24) and she is challenged about why she has not responded to all that God has done for her (41:25-29). These are important questions of course, because they are designed to remind God's people of the uniqueness of their God and make them think carefully about how they respond to His love.

To begin with, we must spot one key feature. The Lord has called a heavenly court to decide who is a real 'God', and He challenges Israel to respond; *'present your case ... set out your defence'* (41:21). He issues invitations to the court as the *'King of Jacob'* (41:21) and various gods are invited to prove their abilities (41:22,23). Why does God do this? Israel has wandered from the Lord to worship other gods (1:11, 2:8 40:18 etc.), so if they are real they must prove themselves!

This is a fundamentally important challenge. The Lord asks, 'Who really is a god?' Who can demonstrate control of history (41:22), and who can demonstrate a knowledge of the future (41:23,26)? The Lord God requires evidence of this supernatural ability to be presented at court if anyone dares to challenge His authority! Such evidence must be transparent and provable, *'that we may be afraid and see it together'* (41:23). Truth must be established, and the standards of proof in heaven are like those on earth, but infinitely more demanding!

As soon as the court is called, the Lord asks for the assembled 'imaginary' gods to prove themselves and *'do something'* whether *'good or evil'* (41:23). It is a remarkable challenge, and the matter before the court must be decided. Either these other gods worshipped by Israel are indeed gods with power to act in this world or they are false, and the prophecy stridently affirms only one true God with this power and authority. No alternative to God exists, according to any truthful measure of godliness. All other gods are worthless (41:24), and the Lord condemns those who choose to believe in them. They are 'an abomination'.

In the second half of our passage (41:25-29), God sets about establishing His rights and authority as the only true God. He has previously brought judgement on Israel but no one subsequently believed Him (41:25,26)! He has warned Israel about what was happening in the world, and also announced news of deliverance from exile (41:27), but no one took notice! The people were without faith, without counsel, and leaderless (41:28), and their work was of no earthly or heavenly consequence (41:29). This was the extraordinary true state of the Israel God loved; how extraordinary is God's love!

At this point, we face a problem. For many years, Western Christian scholars have insisted that Isaiah 40-66 was written by a different prophet than the one who wrote chapters 1-39! They believe this because whilst Isaiah 1-39 clearly relates to the eighth century BC, Isaiah 40-66 speaks of a time almost 150 years later when Israel came out of Exile in the sixth century BC. Surely, they say, no man could write both halves of Isaiah! However, this viewpoint discounts the idea that God is in control of history and can reveal His plans to His prophets, and it renders the prophecies of this passage meaningless. There is no God except He who can control history!

I have always maintained that it is perfectly possible for Isaiah to have written prophetic poems about the Exile 150 years before the events took place. I do not have space here to argue this point in detail, but it is done throughout these studies. Isaiah had a vision of the future based on God's power over history, and his prophecies were later discovered by Israel to be historically valid! Without this, they would not be included in scripture!

God's people are always called to believe that God is in charge of history and can control it. The integrity of Isaiah's message depends on this.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- A God for all nations!
- Competition between the gods!

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V21 'Set out your defence'**

*The setting is clearly that of a court. Israel is in the dock, and is being asked to respond. The Hebrew for this phrase is literally 'draw near your defence', but it makes more sense in English to say 'set out your defence.'*

### **V22 'Let them bring them'**

*This means, 'let the Israelites bring their case ...' because it refers to the 'case for the defence' brought before God.*

### **V22 'Or tell about previous events ...'**

*The Hebrew reads 'of former things, tell what they were'. Different Bible versions differ considerably in how they make sense of this in English.*

### **V23 'That we may be afraid, and see it together.'**

*This sounds odd, but the point is that evidence is being called for which can be seen by all parties. This need for openness is why the Hebrew has the word 'together' at the end – which is missed by a number of translations.*

### **V25 'from the rising sun he will call on my name ...'**

*The term 'the rising sun' is a way of saying 'from the East' in Hebrew, and it is not easy to determine which is the best translation. Here, it is unclear (see below)*

### **V27 'I was the first to tell Zion, "Look!, See!"'**

*The Hebrew reads 'First, to Zion, see! see!' This means that God is claiming to be the first to reveal the news of the coming of His saviour to Zion. The news comes from no one else!*

## Going Deeper

The details of the two halves of this passage explain the lengths and the depths to which God will go to perform His task as Redeemer (as we found out yesterday). The visions in this part of Isaiah are not randomly put together, but for a reason. It is vital that now God has declared His intention to redeem, it is made clear to God's people that this is for all people and not just for the Jews or the returned Exiles.

### **A God for all nations!**

In the back of our minds since yesterday, we have the wonderful news that God intends to intervene in world history to perform an act of redemption. It is firstly announced to Judah and Israel (41:14), but in this passage of scripture, the Lord sweeps away all the claims of other gods to the nations. Only He is capable of performing the salvation of a people, by planning it before hand, revealing it to His prophet Isaiah (so that

the people knew what to expect and were warned) and then accomplishing it, as future generation (including ourselves) are invited to discover!

It is at the end of this passage of scripture that we discover the Lord, watching with care and interest over the need of the Gentiles. He has been announced as the returning God of Zion and more than hinted that Jerusalem was no longer just the seat of His presence but the starting point of His mission to the world (see also 40:9). The world of Gentiles was without a 'counsellor' to help them, and there was no 'god' to speak to them, their gods were all sham and without power or wisdom; they were all 'worthless ... nothing', and in a cutting phrase Isaiah said 'their images are an empty wind'. The Hebrew word for 'wind' is 'ruach' which means 'breath' or 'spirit' and is frequently used in the Old Testament for God's 'Holy Spirit'. Looking back at the text, it seems that Isaiah could see the need of the Gentiles for God's Holy Spirit!

You may think that this emphasis on the Gentiles is only secondary to the passage, but we will find that in coming passages of these great poems, Isaiah famously hints at this need, and does so more than once. In tomorrow's passage we will find that the Lord specifically talks about the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles (42:6) and does so again later on in chapter 49 (verse 6) and in other places. Typical of these prophecies, once a theme has been introduced, it becomes a part of the greater revelation brought to us by Isaiah's great poetic prophesy.

It is perhaps only a small point, but for the Gospels in the New Testament this is very important matter. Jesus' insisted that His ministry was firstly for the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' and secondarily for the Gentiles, and this agrees with these prophecies of Isaiah. Some New Testament scholars find it hard to explain why Jesus insists upon this priority, but from an Old Testament perspective, it is obvious; it fulfils Isaiah's prophecies.

### ***Competition between the gods!***

The vision in today's passage is yet another description of God taking part in a heavenly 'court' or place of justice. In many such instances, the Lord God is in the highest seat of justice, governing affairs, In this vision, the Judge has come down to make a side by side comparison between Himself and the other 'gods'. He challenges the other gods 'present your case ... set out your defence!' (41:21). Then, in verse 22, there is a triple set of double lines of verse. Firstly, God challenges the gods to say what will happen in the future, then to account for what has happened in the past, and then He presents the real challenge, which is to be able to predict the outcome of events and therefore demonstrate real control of history. This is the key test of whether a 'god' is a 'god', for without being able to effect things on earth, any claim to the courts of God is fatuous. The issue is put again in the next verse, as God challenges 'Tell us what is happening later, that we may know you are gods! Do something!' (41:23). The Lord mocks the false gods, they have no reality and cannot grasp the difference between right and wrong, let alone make a common assessment of the morality of anything (41:23)!

Then, in the second half of the prophecy, the Lord presents His own evidence, as found in verse 25. The verse itself is something of an enigma, because the Lord says that He has chosen someone 'from the north' to do His will, and then in the second line, the text says 'from the rising sun he will call on my name', and as I have explained above, this means from the East! Some commentators suggest that this refers to the fact that Cyrus lived to the East of Jerusalem, but when his armies came to the Promised Land they came from the North, as did most armies of invading countries!

Instead of this rather limited interpretation, I suggest that the One who comes to do God's will is only desecrated in the most general of terms here, and it could apply equally to others who had come to the land of Israel, including Abraham and the Assyrians (as I explained when writing about 41:1-10). It is worth adding that the term 'he will call on my name' implies the worship of God, which does not really apply to people like the King of Assyria or to Cyrus the Persian. It did apply to Abraham, and it would also apply one day to Jesus, who came to Jerusalem 'from the north' (that is, Galilee) to do God's will by dying on the Cross. The second half of verse 25; 'He will trample on rulers ... as a potter tramples on clay' is a general description of authority over earthly rulers and the cities they build as monument to their names (hence 'trampling ... on mortar' which means destroying cities).

## Application

Today, there are countless religions operating in the world, and in many secular countries, people practice various beliefs which do not effect others very much (or, at least, they claim this to be so). However, in ancient times, a nation's 'gods' were linked to its identity, whether it was big, small, powerful, warlike or peaceful. If a country was regarded as successful when it grew large and controlled nations round about, then its gods were credited with this success. It is therefore understandable that in ancient times, it was important to establish an answer to the question 'who is the most powerful god?' and to do it by warfare. Some people reject much of what the Old Testament says about God because they say that this kind of God

is irrelevant to today, when with suitable toleration, all should be able to believe what they want. The challenge we face today as Christians is to make again the argument that there is only one God, just as Isaiah did in his own times through the visions he received.

The passage we have read today must be understood according to what it says to the people of Israel and how it points eventually to Christ; but it can also be an example to us of how to argue that there is only one God. Historians have done a great deal of damage to the argument for God in our secular world by presenting Christian history as coloured by terrible things done in the past (and usually in war) by people who have claimed the Cross of Christ. However, we need to argue again that our real history has been made by godly Christian people who have change the word for the better. I refer to people like Florence Nightingale, John Wesley, William Wilberforce and countless other Christian people who have done so much because of their implacable belief in God and complete trust in Him. The more we read the history of justice, or science, or social history, then the more we will find Godly people at the forefront of all that is good in the world today. They are the evidence that God has changed our world for the better, and the source of our trust that God will change our world for the better in the future. Ultimately, He will re-make it anew when He comes in glory, but He does not give up on us and His message of salvation does not change or go away.

Isaiah's message reminds us that we need to be involved in the religious arguments of our own day to make sure that people know the truth about the One True God.

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## Discipleship

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

1. What are the gods we need to fight against today, and how may we overcome them?
2. Discuss in your group how this passage of scripture could be used evangelistically, if at all. How can it help the mission of the church today?
3. Many people believe in things which do not exist; they 'touch wood' or believe in superstitions. Do they matter? How may these be overcome in Christ?

### **Personal comments by author**

*I find the picture of a heavenly court to be awesome. It keeps cropping up in scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, and it reminds me of the 'Final Judgement' when Almighty God will pass His judgement even on me. I know that I place my trust for this on Christ, but the nature of God's court-room is awesome, and I do not have much experience of ordinary human courts! Perhaps the various pictures of God operating in His courtroom are there to give us a glimpse of we are to expect?*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *If you are someone who goes to a place of work where there are other people with whom you meet on a regular basis, spend a little time observing your work colleagues and see if you can spot anything which gives away any 'belief' or religious affiliation. Compare how their 'religion' affects their lives with how your faith affects yours.*
  - *Fast and pray for the salvation of peoples of other faiths throughout this world.*
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## Final Prayer

We bless You, O Father, Lord of all. You know everything and can move and change the whole world according to Your will. We praise You for the wonderful promise we have of Your assistance and help in every area of our lives. May we always demonstrate our thanks through our faithful love in the service of Your Kingdom. AMEN

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