

## Prayer

Lord God, we are profoundly grateful for the privilege of salvation, won for us by Jesus Christ; help us to witness to your love in everything we do. May we see the world around us with eyes of compassion, may we listen to it with ears of wisdom, and may we feel its pain with a heart of genuine concern. May Your Kingdom come in this troubled world, even through us who are Your people, Lord God: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Prayerfully imagine what the Lord might be saying to you this day, and assume that He wants to love you. Dare to believe that He will help you today, and live with this picture in your mind*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray blessings on your neighbours** *Pray blessings on the people with whom you work. It will be easy to bless those with whom you have much in common, and less so those you normally avoid. Nevertheless, it is the Lord's will that as His representative on earth, you bless.*
- *Give thanks to the Lord for your health, and for His power to help you whatever your problems*
- *Pray today for relief agencies attempting to deal with problems that are currently giving cause for concern around the world*

## Meditation

### Perception

Is knowing that truth and falsehood, right and wrong  
Exist side by side within the world in which we live  
and God has made it so

### Discernment

Is knowing that evil is personified in Satan  
Who rejoices not so much in being wrong and wicked  
But in blurring the divisions between the two

### Wisdom

Is knowing that the only lead worth following  
to find the truth about how right conquers wrong  
is the historic path of Christian faith

### Power

Is knowing that in the name of Jesus Christ  
Satan's destructive illusions and ruinous lies  
Fall down before the Cross, and always will

### Peace

Is knowing that the keys to eternal liberty and life  
Are found in the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift  
And the evidence of God's love in Christ, with us

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 42:1-9

- <sup>1</sup> Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom I delight;  
I have put my Spirit upon him;  
he will bring justice to the nations.

- <sup>2</sup> He will not call out or shout,  
or let His voice be heard outside;
- <sup>3</sup> He will not break a bruised reed,  
Or snuff out a flickering wick;  
he will bring faithful justice.
- <sup>4</sup> He will not give up or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth,  
and the coastlands will wait for his teaching.
- <sup>5</sup> Thus says God, the LORD,  
who created the heavens by stretching them out,  
who spread out the earth and its produce,  
who gives breath to the people on it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:
- <sup>6</sup> I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,  
I will take you by the hand and watch over you;  
I will make you a covenant for the people,  
and a light to the nations,
- <sup>7</sup> to open eyes that are blind,  
to release the prisoners from the dungeon,  
and those who sit in darkness from captivity.
- <sup>8</sup> I am the LORD, that is my name;  
I give my glory to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.
- <sup>9</sup> Look! the former things have come about,  
and now I will declare new things!  
Before they sprout into life,  
I will tell you of them!

## Bible Study

### Review

This is the first of Isaiah's great prophecies, called the 'Servant Poems', because it speaks directly of God's Servant, who does His will on earth. It is a very important text, and we can perceive within it something of the Gospel and the person of Christ. The previous two chapters of Isaiah introduced some important themes; the return of the Lord to Jerusalem to be with His people (40:1f.), the authority of God come to save (40:18f.), and the Redemption of Israel and the Lord's victory over other gods (41:21f.). Now, the whole of this 'good news' is focussed in the figure of God's own servant (42:1), one whose humble yet glorious work of doing God's will is guaranteed by God Himself; '*I am the Lord ... I give my glory to no other*' (42:8).

No other figure like this is found within the Old Testament, so who is this servant? Isaiah has already used the word 'servant' before, firstly speaking about himself (20:3), and then about David (37:35) and most recently about Abraham (41:8,9). Yet none of these individuals fits God's plan for the future. The one who is to come will be a more perfect servant than Abraham or David, or even the prophets themselves.

Some of those who have studied this text reckon that Isaiah's description of the servant fits the historical figure of King Cyrus. He was the Persian emperor who released Israel from exile around 540 BC, and is mentioned in Isaiah 44:28 – 45:1 where he is described as the Lord's 'anointed'. However, the servant is surely not Cyrus, because this oriental king makes only one brief appearance in Israel's history, and we know nothing about his character, something that is very important to God's prophetic revelation through Isaiah. The only other earthly possibility is that the servant is Israel herself, God's people transformed by the experience of Exile and ready to do God's will. But unfortunately, we must discount even this idea because despite the best efforts of many, the people of Israel never measured up to this prophecy.

We can therefore only draw one conclusion, which is that this passage of Scripture is Isaiah's report of a prophetic vision in which God announces the coming of a new Servant. The Servant would have a special relationship with God, and the prophecy speaks of His unique blessing, '*my chosen in whom I delight; I have put my Spirit upon him ...*' (42:1). Moreover, this Servant would accomplish God's work of redemption (41:14) and take the good news of God to the whole world (42:1,4,5 etc.)! This prophecy is unique and

specific, and in the light of the coming of Christ, centuries later, it is impossible to sustain an argument that Isaiah means anything else.

These words are unlike any other passage in the Bible, and the description of the Servant bears no relationship to anyone else in the Old Testament; it is a description of spiritual perfection. The servant does not have to resort to human methods of making his work known, shouting out or forcing his will on others; and neither does he give up until his task is fulfilled (41:4). He does God's work, and the blessing He receives (42:5,6) uses words that remind us of the Covenant blessing of Abraham, but extending it in a way that points directly to the New Testament. In his vision, Isaiah saw signs of redemption such as the eyes of the blind being opened, prisoners set free (42:6,7), and the Lord Himself prophesying '*new things!*' (42:9).

This prophecy was delivered to a hurting people in Babylon, God's people waiting for their deliverance from an earthly hell, and it certainly offers them hope. The people of Israel of the sixth century BC would have warmed to its message of hope and the fulfilment of God's promises. However, it says so much more. We can now look at these words and find them completed in the person and life of Jesus. It was He who was first blessed with a baptism in God's Spirit, and He demonstrated supreme trust in God for His mission on earth. He was the guarantee of God's covenant relationship with His people and He was the means of redemption and liberation for all people. This prophecy is like the Gospel in the Old Testament!

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The introduction of the Servant
- The announcement of the work of the Servant

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V1 'My servant, whom I uphold'**

*The Hebrew word for 'uphold' is hard to translate, although almost every translation has 'uphold. It means 'to grasp, support, sustain' or in some forms of the verb, it can mean 'to give honour to ...'*

### **V1 'My chosen, in whom I delight'**

*In Hebrew, the strict translation is 'my chosen in whom my soul delights'. The phrase 'my soul' when said about oneself, simply means 'me' or 'I'. I prefer to use 'in whom I delight' because it save us making assumptions about what we might mean by talking about God's 'soul'!*

### **V1 'He will bring justice to the nations'**

*Most translations have 'He will bring forth justice to the nations', but it is not necessary to have the word 'forth' in the sentence and it makes more sense when said simply like this. It is not a threat, but a glorious fact!*

### **V2 'He will not call out or shout'.**

*The Hebrew says 'He will not cry out or lift up ...' and most translations add the words 'His voice' which are part of the next line of verse. I suggest that 'lift up' in this context means something like 'shout louder', and by using this I have kept close to the Hebrew text and not added to it.*

### **V3 'He will bring faithful justice'**

*The Hebrew says 'He will bring justice to the faithfulness (or reliability)', and we must assume this is a figure of speech. My translation, like all others is a best informed guess.*

### **V4 'the coastlands will wait for His teaching'**

*It is almost impossible to work out what this last phrase here means. It could read 'In His teaching the coastlands place their hope.' But this does not help us make sense of the verse.*

### **V9 'Before they sprout into life ...'**

*The Hebrew says 'before they spring up'; and you will find this is some translations. This is a poetic way of saying 'about to happen'. However, the word 'spring up' connects with other themes in Isaiah, so I have used the expression 'sprout into life to connect with these themes (see Isaiah 6:13)*

## Going Deeper

The grand picture painted by this prophecy is wonderful indeed, but its details are equally awe-inspiring. The language of this passage is about the spirit of God, and it contains descriptions of God's work through His

servant not found before in scripture, but which link with the New Testament. The Hebrew text itself is poetic and direct, with occasional words which are hard to explain, but which speak powerfully of a great prophetic revelation.

### ***The introduction of the Servant***

The prophetic vision begins with God's introduction to the servant. 'Here he is,' says the Lord with a flourish! 'This is my answer to the world's problems!' The word 'uphold' indicates that the servant is special and God has taken hold of him and blessed him for the special task ahead! Even though we know that there is yet more to be revealed about this servant in the coming chapters of Isaiah, we cannot just forget that for the whole of the first part of Isaiah, the great prophet spoke about the problems created by the rejection of the Lord by Israel and Judah. He prophesied that God would indeed judge His people for their sins, but despite the problems and the punishment His people would have to bear, Isaiah found hope. Time and again, at the point where we might have thought that God's people were not worthy of anything more, Isaiah was given a prophecy of hope; as in the prophecy of Immanuel (7:14f.), the prophecy of a new King (9:6 and 11:1f.), and the glory of God's Kingdom (35). Now, having read so much about the sins of God's people, the whole second half of Isaiah picks up this theme of hope, and we can be in no doubt that the servant is introduced as God's answer to these human problems.

All those who do God's will are chosen for their task, and the servant is as well (42:1), but more than this, he has the breath of God, the 'Spirit' on him. Throughout the Old Testament, we can read of God's deeds and the work of His Spirit either in Creation, or when resting on a king, a prophet or group of prophets (see 1 Sam 10:6,16:13f. 2 Chron 18:21f.). Each time, the Spirit had a special work to do, but His presence on earth was not permanent. The servant, however, was given the Spirit for a work far greater than any other described in the Old Testament; 'he will bring justice to the nations' (41:1)! The very idea of establishing justice amongst all the nations of the world was unique, because Israel and Judah had both failed to provide an example of such justice. However, Isaiah saw a vision of one who could do this, and the methods he would use would be extraordinary!

Naturally, we think of Jesus as soon as we begin to interpret this passage, and this is what Matthew did when he explained the nature of Jesus' call by quoting verses 1 2 and 3 of this passage (Matt 12:18-20). Jesus was just about to leave Galilee for the long road to Jerusalem, and the completion of His call, and although there were a few moments when He responded strongly to events around Him, most people agree that in the circumstances, Jesus' patient, non-violent, long-suffering and careful teaching was essential to the completion of His call as God's 'servant'.

Does this remarkable prophecy, though, have any meaning for anyone before the time of Jesus? Would Isaiah have regarded it as speaking of anyone else? Again, people persist in suggesting that Isaiah had in mind all the different candidates we discussed in the first part of the study, but why are we not able to suggest that Isaiah spoke what he saw, and history has struggled to provide any other complete example of such godly service, except Christ? Prophets of Israel and the people of Israel herself strived to live up to the patient and peaceful path to justice described so clearly in this passage, but no one has lived up to this except Christ. Of all the prophecies in Isaiah so far, this passage speaks of God's ideal servant, uniquely identified and called, and all other explanation of this figure apart from Jesus, the Messiah, fall short.

### ***The announcement of the work of the Servant***

Isaiah then has a fuller vision of the work the servant is called to do, but it comes in a special way. From Isaiah 42:5-9, God Himself announces what He will do in a series of pronouncements, but it is clear that the one who will do the work is the servant, just introduced.

God makes His announcement by stating His authority to act in sending His servant, and begins with His authority as Creator (42:5). The summary of His creation describes His 'stretching out' of the heavenly canopy and His 'spreading out' of the earth, and in addition, His giving 'breath' and 'spirit' to living people. There is no description of Jew and Gentile here, because the vision is universal, just like the great picture of Creation, so it is certain that God is making His announcement for the benefit of all people. Then, as if speaking directly to His chosen and beloved servant, the Lord makes a series of promises (42:6-7) about what He will do. The servant will be watched over and kept as precious to the Lord; he will become a 'covenant for the people', in other words, a new covenant with all peoples of all races, unlike the old covenant which was limited to the descendants of Abraham.

Then, as if to confirm and cement what has gradually become obvious, God says 'I will make you ... a light to the nations' (42:6). This great promise of God has its origins in the old covenant promise made to Abraham that he would be a 'blessing to the nations' (Gen 12:3), but after the failure of Israel, it had to be renewed so that it could be completed! Some scholars say that the Old Testament has no sustained 'theology' of God's mission to the world, but these are the same theologians who think that the servant may be 'Israel', or one of the great figures of later Israel, such as Zerubbabel (see Haggai and Zech 4:6f.). This text along with many

others can easily explain to us God's deep desire to overcome the tragedy of the 'fall' and establish a 'righteous' relationship with humanity again. It is prophesied in the Old Testament, and fulfilled in the New!

The glory of God's work is beyond description. He announces sight to the blind, the release of prisoners (42:7), and Jesus did not pick up these prophecies as mere ideas from the Old Testament. Neither did the Gospel writers suddenly notice the connection between this text and Jesus' ministry after His death. This is exactly what Jesus knew He was doing from the commencement of His ministry, as all the Gospels testify (for example, Matt 10:1f. Luke 4:18 – though this is a direct quote from Isaiah 61, which says virtually the same).

The Lord concludes His dramatic announcement of liberty and redemption through the work of the servant by declaring His own authority again; 'I am the Lord ... I give my glory to no other!' The truth was that in this revelation, God had declared the coming of His own son Jesus. Isaiah could only see and report what He saw in the vision, but we are at liberty to see and rejoice in its accomplishment.

## Application

There is a great deal within this passage of optimism and faith. Isaiah was himself convinced that God had a plan for the salvation of the world, even though He did not fully understand many of the things shown to Him. It required special faith on his part to pass on a vision that may have seemed very mysterious to him and only partly understandable. He may well have felt rather like we do when we read the book of the Revelation of John, today! Isaiah's faithful example in writing this vision is a powerful part of this revelation, for God chose him because he knew he would be faithful to the task, just as He chose the servant because He knew that the servant would do His bidding. Whatever our own feelings about what we understand or do not, and about our own faith and shortcomings, the Lord will use us according to the faith that He sees we have, and this is often far greater than we perceive.

Today, we are caught up now in the work of the servant, our Saviour Jesus, who has come and begun this work amongst us. We owe a great debt to Isaiah for faithfully recording the vision, although the Hebrew is sometimes rather difficult to interpret (perhaps because he did not fully understand what he was seeing?). The excitement and power of this passage is a reminder to us of the importance and the power of the Gospel today, and our great privilege in living it and preaching it.

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## Discipleship

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

1. In your groups, discuss what you believe to be the key work to be done by the servant on earth.
2. In what ways do you see Jesus Christ within this passage?
3. There is a certain excitement to this passage of scripture. How can we regain the sense of excitement and vigour when talking about Jesus today?

### **Personal comments by author**

*I find it profoundly moving to write about this passage of scripture, because of what it means to many people. Most commentaries describe it with mild enthusiasm, but refrain from making the extensive connections with Jesus that I have done throughout this study. I wonder why it is that the field of Christian theology and Biblical studies finds it so hard to read and interpret scripture as a sacred text for Christians, and as a testimony to Christ. I hope that my own explanations will make sense of this passage to people of faith.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Read carefully through this passage and ask yourself the question, 'What does this passage say to me?' We often ask ourselves this, but this text is so rich with meaning and importance to our faith. It is a good text to work with and from which to hear God's voice speaking to us.*
- *Pray for those who read this passage and find it difficult to understand. Pray for the Lord to reveal Himself to the world through this passage and through Jesus, the servant.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Gracious Lord; give us humility which seeks to serve, a servant heart which seeks to learn, knowledge which seeks to inspire, and inspiration which seeks to express itself in the purest worship. Lead us on, Lord Jesus, according to Your will. AMEN

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