

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father, we often feel that we are trapped, unable to get out of our habitual behaviour and be truly free in Christ. Yet we believe that you can guide us through our trials and difficulties, and if we keep our eyes fixed on You, You will lead us into freedom. Strengthen us, we pray, so that we do not become downhearted by our trials, but lift our eyes towards the greater things before us. We praise You, Lord and Father: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Think back over the things you have said to people in the last 24 hours. Submit your feelings about these things to the Lord and pray about any issues that arise which give you cause for concern.

On-going prayers

- **Pray blessings on your neighbours** *Pray blessings on those who live immediately next to you, either in the same or adjacent buildings. Ask the Lord to give you the courage to speak to them appropriately about your faith*
- *Pray for the airline industry and for all who work to make this as safe as it is possible to be. Pray that future developments will not compromise passenger safety.*
- *Give thanks to the Lord for your health, and for His power to help you whatever your problems*

Meditation

Am I ready for the call of God,
The touch of His hand upon my life?

Am I ready to submit to Him,
So that He can use me however He will?

Am I ready to accept His challenge,
To live for others and not for myself?

Am I ready to put a stop to my sins,
And testify to the saving grace of God?

Am I ready to deal with evil,
By the Spirit's power and the truth of the Word?

Am I ready to help a stranger,
Because this is how I must show God's love?

Am I ready to declare the Gospel,
By word and deed, and in all I do?

Prepare me, Father, to do Your will,
So I may live by faith throughout my life.

Bible passage - Isaiah 42:10-17

¹⁰ Sing to the LORD a new song,
His praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea and everything in it give Him glory,
the coastlands and those who live there.

¹¹ Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,
the settlements where Kedar dwells;
let the people of Sela sing for joy,

- let them shout from the mountain tops.
- ¹² Let them give glory to the LORD,
and shout out his praise in the coastlands.
- ¹³ The LORD goes out like a soldier,
like a warrior He stirs up zeal;
He cries out, He shouts aloud,
He shows his strength against His foes.
- ¹⁴ I have kept silent for a long time,
I have kept quiet and held myself back;
now like a woman in labour I will cry out,
I will gasp and pant.
- ¹⁵ I will lay waste mountains and hills,
and dry up all their vegetation;
I will turn the rivers into sand beds,
and dry up the pools.
- ¹⁶ I will lead the blind
by a road they do not know,
I will guide them
in paths they have not known
I will make darkness into light before them,
And make rough places smooth.
I will do these things,
and I will not abandon them.
- ¹⁷ Those who trust in carved images,
who say to idols, 'You are our gods,'
they will be utterly ashamed.
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Bible Study

Review

This magnificent poem is a song of the Lord, in which He rejoices to do the work of salvation and redemption throughout the world. Through His Servant, just announced in the first nine verses of chapter 42, the Lord will finally act to deliver His people and extend their blessings to the whole earth!

The poetry in this passage of scripture is remarkable. Scholars reckon that it may have started life as a song of victory sung by people returning from the Exile in Babylon, but it speaks to a far broader audience. It's context in the prophecy of Isaiah suggests that it is part of Isaiah's great vision of the redemptive work. Of course, it was powerfully relevant to the people of Israel as they left Babylon in triumph after being given permission to return home to Jerusalem. It was also a powerful source of encouragement to future generations of Jewish people, but it is only fulfilled completely by great work of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The song is introduced as a 'new' song, which means that it is to be sung when God has begun His 'new' work through the Servant. It also contains several essential themes, all of which explain God's salvation and redemption. Indeed, the sheer variety of contrasting themes used in the song to illustrate God's work is astonishing, and the more we study them, the more we will discover about salvation and redemption, and what they mean.

For example, the description of the Lord as a warrior (42:13) is followed almost immediately by the picture of a woman in labour (42:14), and both of these pictures describe God! At a point in the song where God's praises are being sung (42:10), we might wonder why the poem uses this extraordinary and stark contrast. However, each theme speaks of the sacrifice and cost involved in God's work of salvation and redemption. The male example is of the powerful soldier going out to war not knowing whether he will come back or in what condition, and the female example is of a woman giving birth not knowing the consequences of her agony and labour in days before modern facilities which help keep a mother and baby safe and well. Both these powerful images speak of the risks God is willing to take to bring about His salvation, and they offer a powerful breadth of vision of the hope of victory and safe deliverance.

This, however, is only one example of how this poem works. The other major themes of this song are equally important. The first is obvious from the very first line; the idea of a 'new song' suggests giving praise to God for a fresh revelation of His saving love and care. In the song, His love is extended far and wide, recognising that God is interested in far more than the interests of His own people. Yesterday's passage announced God's desire to bring His message of salvation to all the world, and this passage drives it home. God has indeed had a special relationship with His own people since the time of Abraham, but He is always wanting this to trigger a 'new' revelation to the whole world!

Another great theme here is that of God's leading of His people (42:16), and this is contrasted with the blindness of those who '*trust in carved idols*' (42:17). Yet another is the timing of God's plan; in verse 14 between the double example of the soldier and the woman about to give birth are these brief words, '*I have kept silent for a long time, I have kept quiet and held myself back*' (42:14). This phrase strongly suggests that this prophecy will come true at a specific time of God's choosing, when the servant will come and salvation will begin, bringing the new covenant.

There is much for us to discover if we can appreciate how this prophecy would have been received by those who first heard it, as well as value what it says about God's plan of redemption. At the very least, we should rejoice with Isaiah that God does indeed want to help both His own people and the whole world. The span of the Bible is indeed extensive, but this is its consistent theme.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The song with news for all the world! (vv.10-12)
- The song for men and women (vv.13,14)
- The song with a future! (vv.15,16,17)

Notes on the text and translation

V10 'Let the sea and everything in it give Him glory'

Most translations have 'you who go down to the sea ...' but there is a problem because the Hebrew word 'go down' does not make literal sense and does not connect properly with the rest of the sentence. Every translation has to make assumptions about how to translate the word. I have followed the suggestion by Voltz and others that the true verb in this sentence is related to a known word for 'majesty', hence my translation 'give Him glory'. This makes sense because it fits the theme of the verse.

V14 'I have kept silent for a long time'

The Hebrew word 'for a long time' also means 'from antiquity'. It implies that He has kept silent 'since the beginning'.

V15 'I will make rivers into sand beds'.

Most translations have 'I will make rivers into coastlands'. However, the word for 'coastlands' is based on a word for 'sand', and so when speaking about the drying up of a river, I suggest that the word mean the dry sand bed of a river.

V17 'they will be utterly ashamed'

This phrase appears in most translations as the first line of the verse. I have placed it at the end because this allows the poetic power of the verse to have its full effect.

Going Deeper

As we continue the study, we will look at each verse in turn and see how the contrasts and themes work together to create a picture of God's salvation. Though some of the illustrations are not the kind of things we experience today, we can easily understand them, and see how they press us to accept the importance of what God is doing for us, especially through the newly introduced servant.

The song with news for all the world! (vv10-12)

A song of praise wells up within us when there is a reason for us to be glad, and as we have seen, the coming of the servant is a cause for joy and celebration. To this day, folk songs of all kinds celebrate the great events of life, but for centuries such songs have been a means whereby ordinary people can remember what happened. In Isaiah's prophecy, God contributes to this tradition in a special way, but giving a song in advance of an event, not after it. It is a prophetic song capable of a wide range of interpretation,

but its place in Isaiah's prophecy ensures that we must return to God's intended purpose which is to celebrate His work and His salvation. The song is bigger than the Judean experience of the Exile, and bigger than the snippets of it we include in our songs today because we like it. For example, over the years I have come across many songs which have the words 'let us sing a new song to the Lord ...' (42:10), but they all veer off towards themes which were dear to the musicians who wrote them, and none that I have come across follow the theme of God's own 'new song' here in Isaiah!

As if broken away from the strict bounds of His covenant with Israel and Judah, the Lord sets out His ultimate goal in this song, calling the whole world to sing about salvation! He asks for the song to be sung 'from the ends of the earth' (42:10), a Hebrew expression which meant the very edges of the known world as they perceived it. From there, the song sweeps to another extreme, seeking praise from the 'sea and everything in it', and the 'coastlands and those who live there'. If you read my notes on verse 10 (above), you will find that there are some technical difficulties with this verse, but if we realise that the whole song is full of sweeping contrasts such as this, it helps us focus in on the real meaning of what is otherwise an awkward text.

In verse 11, other contrasts are drawn which illustrate this universal call of God; from the deserts to the mountain tops and from the towns and those who lived in them to nomadic communities such as 'the settlements of Kedar' (42:11). Incidentally, the name Kedar is associated with one of the sons of Ishmael (Gen 25:13) and his descendants; and after this, the song mentions Sela, which is a major town in Edom (possibly the modern day Petra). Ishmael, the ancestor of Kedar was of course a son of Abraham, and in addition, the founder of the nation of Edom was Esau, Jacob's brother and also a descendant of Abraham. If we were uncertain about whether the salvation of God through the servant was ever intended to be for people beyond the old covenant with Abraham, then these quotes within the song should be enough to quell our doubts. Verse 12 says emphatically 'let them give glory to the Lord!' It is a message of hope, which prophesies the overcoming of enmity and hostility between the tribes of Abraham and the peoples of the world.

The song for men and women (vv13,14)

We have already seen some of the power of verses 13 and 14 and the meaning of the contrast it presents between soldier and woman-in-labour, and between male and female. However, there is more within these compact verses.

In verse 13, the Lord is described as shouting out, and in the third line, out of sight within an English translation, is a small Hebrew word 'ap' between 'he cries out' and 'he shouts out'. This little word means that what follows goes further, in this context, more of the same! The Lord shouts louder and louder! We might even say the Lord is screaming at the top of His voice so that all people might hear; like the shout of a man going into battle 'showing strength against His foes' (42:13). Battle, for the Lord, is judgement; judgement between right and wrong, judgement which defeats all evil and disposes of the enemy, and in a spiritual sense a judgement finally pronounced on the Cross of Christ as He let out a 'loud cry' and gave up His spirit (Mark 15:37).

But in dramatic contrast, verse 14 begins 'I have kept silent for a long time ... I have kept myself back'. The truth is that the Lord had been supremely patient with His people for centuries. For centuries after Isaiah and centuries after the Exile, He continued to bear His own people in patience, knowing that He could send His servant whenever He wanted. We who know that God has indeed sent His servant now as Jesus, should note that our Lord is still patient, waiting for centuries until His final judgement is made and the servant and the Saviour, Jesus Christ, comes again in power to complete His work!

In the light of this, the latter part of verse 14 makes more sense. The contrasting picture is of a woman in labour shouting out, crying in pain to bring to birth a child! Perhaps Isaiah was aware, as we are, that he had prophesied once before that a child would one day be conceived and certainly come to birth, who would be 'Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14). The whole theme of pregnancy is strong in the Old Testament, from the crucial pregnancy of Sarah to the story of Moses' mother, and the pregnancy of Hannah (who bore Samuel) and others. In all these, pregnancy is the symbol of the promise of God to do something to save His people, and do it through someone born into the world as a child! It would be impossible to have a song of salvation which did not hint at the coming birth of 'Immanuel', who is Jesus, the Servant of God.

The song with a future! (vv15,16,17)

Then, the Lord presents another contrast which appears to be unfathomable. After a previous prophecy about the blooming of the desert (41:17-20), the Lord now speaks about laying mountains waste (42:15), and drying up vegetation, rivers and water supplies! How can the glory of the Lord be demonstrated by this! The answer comes in the next verse, which describes the Lord, no longer as a warrior but as a gentle and patient guide, leading 'the blind by a road they do not know (42:16). With total devastation and war comes reliance upon God, because when everything has been taken away from us and we are blind, then there is nothing

left, and we are as we were born, utterly dependent upon God. The Lord had to lead His own people on that path, and a similar story is often spoken of today. People who have come to know the Lord in a radical and life-changing way have often been through the experience of being completely devastated before God has been able to guide them into newness of life. For them, the Lord will 'make the darkness light ... and make the rough places smooth.'

All of the contrasts and themes of the song have a wonderful and glorious setting, which is the amazing work of God through His servant. But right at the end of the song, the Lord includes a final contrast, but it does not celebrate the servant; it is a contrast between those who join in the new song, and those who continue to place their trust in 'carved images' and 'idols' (42:17). On the one hand, those who sing the Lord's song will be joyful and exuberant, blown away by the sheer magnificence of God's vision for salvation. On the other hand is the pathetic shame and idiocy of those who persist in their false religions and beliefs in the face of God's triumphant song. What will they do, where will they go? What can they do when the Servant comes again in glory, and they are found with nothing but man-made images of metal and wood, and nothing but the material evidence of their existence?

We know that people continue to choose their own ways and reject the Lord, despite all the evidence of His power and glory in Jesus, the Lord's patience is long-suffering, but finite. Just as He came once before to do the work of the servant, He will come again!

Application

We can probably never fully sound the depths of this song. As I read a number of books about it, each commentator added depths of meaning to it; and you will see in it things which I have not seen and hopefully be excited by them. There is a certain amount of 'application' within the study already, but one theme deserves a final airing, and this is central to the saving work of God through the servant; it is the enormous cost of this to God.

This cost is symbolised in the song by the soldier's awesome cry and mother's 'crying out', gasping and panting. As we can plainly read, there is no doubt that God is speaking about Himself in this revelation. It is a terrible thing to think that God sent His own Son into the world to be His servant and do His will, and eventually to die for us. There are some Christians who cannot stomach the idea that God should accept that His Son should die for the sins of the world; and there are learned books that argue this is a wrong understanding of God and Jesus. However, right in the midst of this great new song of salvation lies a dreadful anticipation that terrible things might lie ahead, and the cost of this salvation might be high. It is like the odds facing a warrior who goes to battle or the natural imperative of a woman to give birth whatever the cost, because a child must be born and there is no other path ahead except to face whatever lies ahead.

At Passiontide and Easter, all Christians face the truth of their salvation, and the price at which it was won by Jesus, the Servant. Let us sing this song of salvation with the Lord, but let us not sing it in ignorance.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. This passage expresses the praise of God in a song. What other forms of worship might convey this message?
2. In your group, see if you can spot other contrasts and themes which have not been highlighted in the study.
3. Does it hinder our understanding of scripture when it uses imagery which we cannot easily relate to, such as that of a soldier, or a nomad?

Personal comments by author

This song is very powerful, and I have a strong urge to attempt to re-write it, not with modern themes, but using the same essential contrasting elements in a format which can be sung. Perhaps if we had God's 'New song' available to sing in its original form, we might know a little more of its power and glory! I am not sure that I will have time to do this, but the thought persists!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *How can you or I do justice to this song and what it means? Consider re-writing this song with a few illustrations which might be more pertinent today, and using contrasts which illustrate the same themes of salvation.*
 - *If possible, and you are a part of a church fellowship group in which you are free to do this, ask others to read this passage, and then try to explain it to them yourself. The exercise will help you understand this passage far more deeply.*
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Final Prayer

My prayer dear Jesus, Saviour of the World, is this. Bring hope to the world; bring love to the world; bring faith to the world; and bring peace to the world. Fulfil Your promises and complete Your work on earth in Your good time, I pray. AMEN
