

Prayer

Sovereign Lord, bring Your miraculous power to bear on the lives of those who need you most. Heal those who suffer, liberate those who are in bondage, raise up those who are dead in their sins and declare Your Good News for all humanity. May we be ready to hear Your Word and do Your will, O Lord: AMEN.

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Open the Bible at a place where you have not recently read. Read slowly and pause when you feel that the Lord is saying something to you through the text. Take this word, pray about it, and seek to apply it in the course of your day.

On-going prayers

- **Pray blessings on your neighbours** *Pray blessings on the people you pass by each day but do not necessarily know, neighbours you have not spoken to, people you pass on the street though you know by sight, for example.*
- *Give thanks to God for the people you have met today, and pray for them and their needs*
- *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.*

Meditation

Do not worry, the Lord will provide for you,
Whatever you do and wherever you go.

Do not stray, the Lord has shown you His path,
A safe route to follow, tried and tested.

Do not delay, the Lord calls you onwards,
There's no security if you stay where you are.

Do not sin, the Lord has warned you before,
Turn to Him if you have trouble, not to Satan.

Do not fear, the Lord will keep you secure,
He has bound all that frightens you.

Do not weep, the Lord has seen your distress,
The source of your pain has been covered.

Do not be fickle, the Lord will not change,
Be secure in the One who cares for you.

Bible passage - Isaiah 42:18-25

¹⁸ Listen, you deaf;

you blind, look up and see!

¹⁹ Who is blind but my servant,
or deaf like my messenger whom I send?

Who is blind like one committed to me,
or blind like the servant of the LORD?

²⁰ You see many things, but do not pay attention;
Your ears are open, but you do not listen.

²¹ Yet it pleased the LORD, for the sake of His righteousness,
to make His instruction great and glorious.

- ²² For this is a people robbed and plundered,
all of them are trapped in holes
and hidden in prisons;
they have become a prey without a deliverer;
Loot, with no one to say, 'Give it back!'
- ²³ Who among you will listen to this,
will attend and listen for the future?
- ²⁴ Who gave up Jacob to be plundered,
and Israel to robbers?
Was it not the LORD,
against whom we sinned?
They refused to walk in His ways,
and they would not obey His laws.
- ²⁵ So He poured out His wrath on him,
and the violence of war;
it set them on fire all around,
but they did not understand;
it consumed them,
but they did not take it to heart.

Bible Study

Review

In the previous verses, Isaiah has given us a wonderful and uplifting message about the coming of His new Servant, a figure that we now equate with Jesus, the Messiah. It therefore comes as something of a surprise for us to read this passage, in which Isaiah implies that this same servant is blind and deaf (42:19)! In addition to this, Isaiah launches into completely different theme. He berates Israel as a people trapped (42:22), who have failed to do God's will (42:24) and consequently bear the punishment of His wrath (42:15)!

We must certainly be very careful with this passage lest we misinterpret it, and we need to look at the broad sweep of Isaiah's prophecies, in order to gain some perspective on the text. Although we naturally recoil at the description of the servant as blind and deaf, this is not the only place in Isaiah where he surprises us with what he says about the Servant, who we think of as the Messiah. Later in this prophetic book, we are told that the Servant is not only '*blind and deaf*', but '*marred beyond human semblance*' (53:14), and '*there was nothing in his appearance that we should desire him*' (53:2).

Christians have always interpreted these latter prophecies from chapters 52 and 53 as speaking of Jesus suffering on the Cross. These powerful prophecies drive home the point that although the Servant was God's messenger, he was also a man, who suffered in order to do God's will (53:4-9). Now the words in our prophecy here say something similar, for although the Servant comes from God, he is one of the people of Israel, who are indeed 'blind and deaf', which is exactly what God said about the people of Israel when He called Isaiah (6:9-13).

So this prophecy is not a slur on Jesus, it is a powerful comment on the limitations of his humanity, and Jesus' personal identity as a Jew, a nation of people who had failed to do God's will. Moreover, the prophecy goes on to say that despite these limitations, God's instruction and the message of His righteousness was not compromised; '*yet it pleased the Lord, for the sake of His righteousness, to make His instruction great and glorious*' (42:21)! It is utterly extraordinary to hear from Isaiah that God can send His Servant to bear the personal limitations of being a Jew, and yet successfully reveal God's righteousness and deliver His instruction! A Christian will revel in these connections with the life and ministry of Christ!

This passage, however, is about more than this. After the magnificent poems of the previous chapters, there is clearly a change of theme here. Most of the passage speaks damningly of the state of the people of Israel. The '*deaf and blind*' in verse 18 are the people of Israel, who are called to listen to and look at the Servant; He is one of them, but He alone fulfils God's law (42:21). In the meantime, Israel remains condemned for her apostasy (42:22-25).

There is indeed a massive change of tack here in this part of the 'Servant Songs' of Isaiah. From writing about the Servant, Isaiah begins to write about why it was necessary for Him to send the Servant. The whole of 42:19 to 44:23 is a lengthy defence of God's decision to send the Servant and a denunciation of

Israel for forgetting the Lord. Here, they are described as a people *'trapped in holes'* and they have been abandoned by their God, who will not rescue them (42:22)! The message is reinforced in the next verse where we are told that it was the Lord indeed who handed Israel over to her enemies because of her sins (42:23,24), and this is why His wrath has been poured out on her (42:25).

One of the remarkable things about the Old Testament is the way in which it never holds back from criticising the people for whom it was scripture! Here, as elsewhere in the prophets, Israel is roundly condemned for her sins; but everything we read is part of God's great plan. God will send His Servant, one of these same sinful people, to establish His righteousness and *'make His instruction great and glorious'* (42:21). Yet again, Isaiah shows himself to be the prophet who connects the Old and New Testaments.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The disabling of the Servant (42:18-20)
- Israel has been compromised (42:22-25)

Notes on the text and translation

V18 *'... look and see'*

At the end of the verse, the Hebrew implies that the blind must look in order to see. It could be translated like this, but the poetry of the line would be lost.

V19 *'who is blind like one committed to me'*

The Hebrew word for 'one committed to me' is not clear, because it appears like a name in other parts of the Old Testament, but the name of a person (it would be Meshullam) does not seem right here, and no translator agrees with this. Because the root Hebrew word is from 'shalom' the Hebrew for wholeness and completion, I have interpreted the word to refer to someone in a whole relationship with God, 'one committed to me'.

V20 *'seeing many things, he does not pay attention'*

Most translations have 'seeing many things, he does not observe them'. But these translations do not do justice to what the text says here. The point of the contrast in this verse is that the individual does not do anything with what he sees; or in our words, he does not pay attention. Hence my translation.

V23 *'will attend and listen for the future'*

There is no Hebrew word for 'future' in the general sense that we use the word; however, the Hebrew word here means something close to 'hereafter', but not in the sense of death, so the word 'future' fits best what is needed here.

V25 *In this verse I have in common with many translators referred to the subjects of the sentences as 'them' or 'they', whereas you will find that others change between the singular 'he' and 'him' and the plural 'they' and 'them' as the text does in Hebrew. This is confusing, but it is because the subject of the poem at this point is God's servant Israel, and sometimes the poem address Israel in the singular as the servant, and sometimes in the plural as the people of Israel; but from our perspective in English, the subject is in fact the same, and is always Israel! So I have preferred to use 'them' and 'they' for clarity and understanding!*

Going Deeper

In this poem, the Lord summons His people, the blind and the deaf (42:18). After that, two sets of questions are put to the reader (42:19 and 42:23,24). These are followed by God's comments on the issues raised by the questions (42:20,21 and 42:24,25). By keeping this simple structure in mind, we will find our way through the details of what these poems say.

The disabling of the Servant (42:18-21)

Isaiah knew from his earliest days as a prophet that God's people were fatally flawed by an inability to see and hear God. Indeed, when Isaiah was called (6:9-10) God told him that the more he spoke in prophecy the more the people would fail to understand; *'speak to this people; keep on listening but do not comprehend; keep on looking but do not understand ...'* (6:9). This was originally a baffling prophecy, but the mysterious words stayed with Isaiah and coloured all his later prophecies. The main point about Isaiah is that not only did he accept this strange prophetic call but he asked what would come next (6:11) and was told the astonishing news that God would accomplish His work after Israel and Judah had been punished by

war (6:12,13). Now an older man, Isaiah was able to find perspective on his call through writing down the visions and prophecies of the latter part of his book.

The questions ring out in the prophecy; 'who is blind ... who is deaf ... who is blind ... who is blind (42:19)? It is puzzling why deafness is only mentioned once but blindness three times. The answer may be that this places an emphasis on blindness, which is the greater problem because blindness means 'non-comprehension' of God. If Israel was deaf and did not listen, she was guilty of failing to pay attention. However, if she failed to perceive and understand God's revelation then she had failed in her covenant task. Throughout her history, the problem with Israel is her spiritual blindness, as Isaiah says in verse 20: 'you see many things, but do not pay attention ...'

The Lord had given everything 'servant Israel' needed in order to know Him; and supremely, He gave the law through Moses (42:21). We should not think of the law as mere regulations, as the word tempts us to do. It means God's guidance for living in His world, and the 'torah' (the exact word used in v21) includes the stories of Creation, as well as those of Abraham and the forefathers (as a 'standard' of how to live in covenant relationship with God). The Law, God's greatest gift to servant Israel, had been 'made great and glorious' (42:21) through the amazing Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, but servant Israel was now living like a nation of the world, and the simple but correct attitude of seeking God's will had been replaced by worldly ways. Isaiah had spent most of his life advising the kings of Israel, and he knew what he was talking about.

The result of servant Israel's self inflicted spiritual disablement was that the nations of Israel and Judah had become 'political footballs' kicked around by the emerging powerhouse empires of the Middle East; Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. There is hardly a chapter of 2 Kings or 2 Chronicles which does not have in it some reference to a king seeking help from one of these Empires or being held to ransom by them for money or land. Living in the world without God, servant Israel was like 'loot, with no-one to say "give it back!"'

Israel has been compromised (42:22-25)

The real trouble was that having had so much from God and having wandered away Him, servant Israel had nowhere to go, and this, of course is a spiritual analysis. The remaining people of Israel in Isaiah's day were limited to those who lived in Jerusalem and the surrounding villages and towns. Most of these were of Judean origin, but representing other tribes as well through the presence of individuals from those tribes who had escaped to Jerusalem after the Assyrians overran the northern Kingdom of Israel. In Isaiah's last days, Assyria had disappeared (see Isaiah 36-39) after decimating almost the whole of Israel except Jerusalem herself, and in later years, Babylon would come and finish the Job, as Isaiah so poignantly hinted (Isaiah 39).

Against this backcloth, Isaiah's concluding prophecy becomes clear. First, the questions are asked; 'who ... will listen; who will attend ... to the future; who gave up Jacob ... and Israel? The answer to the first question was already clear; there was no one listening or attending to the future amongst the people of servant Israel, so the task of sorting out what would happen fell to the Lord. The answer to the second question was a sharp reminder to servant Israel of God's attempts over the previous centuries (42:25) to draw their attention. We instinctively dislike talk about God's wrath, but here in verse 25 the word means precisely the deep felt rejection of heartfelt love that drives the strongest of emotions. God had sought to catch servant Israel's attention through floods and droughts (see the story of Elijah – 1 Kings 17f.), violence and war (as in the Assyrian invasion – 2 Kings 15:19f.). It was as if the people had not noticed the spiritual fire set by the Lord and ignored it; a fire which was intended to get a reaction from servant Israel, but which through ignorance and failure to comprehend, would eventually consume her.

In the middle of this part of the poem, Isaiah includes as he does in most of his poems, a brief and succinct summary of the whole work. It is written almost like a confession of Isaiah himself, heartbroken (like Jesus and then Paul, centuries later) at the failure of his own people. 'Was it not the Lord against whom we sinned? But they refused to walk in His ways and they would not obey!' (42:24).

Application

In summary, God did choose His servant Israel and had a covenant agreement which conferred blessings on her to enable her to accomplish her task, but she did not. Isaiah's message describes this as the Old Testament, the old covenant and the old servant. The failure of this old process meant that God had to act to bring salvation to the world in a different way; building on what He had already done and introducing His new Servant, with a task to establish a new covenant, anticipating a New Testament!

Some people in the church disagree with what I now say, but I do believe that God's people, the Church, are as capable of rejecting God even today as were the people of the Old Testament; for we are all alike, as people. Today, the Church is successful in bringing salvation to the world because of Christ, not because of us or the church, and it is only insofar as we reflect and do the work of Christ that the Kingdom comes in our

midst in power, and in a way which was impossible under the old covenant. Christ is all things to a Christian. Christ makes the difference, so it is wise that we look carefully at how and why our ancestors failed, even the Old Testament ones! The New Testament does say, after all, that the Old Testament is there for our teaching (2 Tim 3:16) and for our 'building up' as God's people. We must learn from this passage today.

One of the best things we can learn is that as people, we do have a tendency to be deaf and blind, but through Christ alone we may find how to break out of the spiritual blindness and deafness which afflicts us all in different ways. We will not break out of it through being religious, studying hard, or doing any good or proper thing in the life of the church; only through Christ can we escape the problems of God's people of old, and then everything else opens up before us; religious devotion, learning, good works and true worship. This is God's way under the New Covenant.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. To what extent is the church of God like the people of Israel of ancient times, and how does Jesus make a difference to you?
2. Does God show His wrath against His people today? If so, how?
3. How may we best share our faith with the people of God's old Covenant, the Jews, today?

Personal comments by author

Although this is a rather dour part of the great prophecies of the second half of Isaiah, it is nevertheless important. Unless all of us learn from scripture the sharper lessons we will have difficulty in the practice of our faith. It is no good living a life of 'happy clappy' faith without facing the very real consequences of spiritual blindness. Christ is all in all.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Fast and pray for God's people throughout the world, especially those who face difficult and critical times and perhaps feel under judgement because of failure. Pray for new life in Christ to be the spiritual truth of God's people, and all they do.*
 - *If you have the opportunity, try to find a Jewish person prepared to discuss with you their own view of these prophecies of Isaiah which mean so much to Christians. Do not be dogmatic, but seek in Christ's name, to learn.*
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Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, may we keep ourselves free from sin by being obedient to Your will, serving the people around us and seeking to honour You through all we do. Then, when we fall foul of evil's trickery, may we have the courage to come back for your forgiveness and help. Keep us on the narrow way, Lord Jesus; AMEN
