

Prayer

Help me listen, Lord Jesus, so that I may clearly hear what You are saying to me through Your Word and through other people. May I hear Your voice in the great stories of the Bible, and learn the lessons of faith; may I listen to Your voice in the cries of the poor and defenceless, and respond to their need; may I listen to Your voice through the stories of inspirational Christians, and follow their example. Speak to me, Lord Jesus, that I may listen for, and then do, Your perfect will: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Look back at recent events and pray about the effects they are having today. Think carefully about this. All manner of things you did in the past have important consequences today!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who are handicapped** Pray for those who are hospitalised for long times because of their handicaps, through injury, illness or circumstance of birth
- Pray for young people, especial young girls, who have been forced to work in conditions akin to slavery, for whatever reason
- Give thanks to God for the many ways in which you have been blessed by other people; be specific and give God the glory

Meditation

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

So we are more than brushed by heaven's fresh air,
And breathe more deeply of the things of God.

So we receive the Father's unconditional love,
Which sweeps all our troubles and fears away.

So we rejoice in the awesome power Your Spirit,
To do in us what may seem to be impossible.

So we obtain the unqualified gifts of God's grace,
The guarantee of faith and the means of ministry.

So we are comforted by Christ's comforting presence,
And feel His ever present power to heal.

So we wonder at the mysteries of heaven we see
In awe of things that are greater than ourselves.

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

Bible passage - Isaiah 43:14-24

¹⁴ This is what the LORD says,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
For your sake I have sent to Babylon
to bring them down as fugitives;
all the Chaldeans in their prized ships.

¹⁵ I am the LORD, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.

- ¹⁶ This is what the LORD says,
 who provided a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who drew out chariot and horse,
 a powerful united army:
 (they will lie down and not rise,
 extinguished, and quenched like a wick).
- ¹⁸ Do not remember events of the past,
 or consider the things of long ago;
¹⁹ For look! I am doing something new!
 It is beginning now,
 do you not recognise it?
 I will also make a way in the desert
 and rivers in the wilderness.
- ²⁰ The wild animals will honour me,
 the jackals and the ostriches;
 for I provide water in the desert,
 and rivers in the wilderness,
 to provide drink for my people, my chosen
- ²¹ This people whom I will make for myself,
 they will declare my praise!
- ²² But you have not called on me, Jacob;
 for you grew weary of me, Israel!
- ²³ You have not brought me the sheep for burnt offerings,
 or honoured me with your sacrifices.
 I have not burdened you with offerings,
 or wearied you with incense.
- ²⁴ You have not bought me sweet cane with silver,
 or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices.
 But you have burdened me with your sins;
 And you have wearied me with your offences!

Bible Study

Review

Today, we use the word 'new' too often. Someone starts a 'new' church here or there, all we hear of a 'new' speaker, someone we have never heard of before. Other Christians will sometimes say, 'we've seen it all before', and sometimes with good reason. The passage of Scripture we have read today is focused around Isaiah's call, *'for look! I am doing something new! It is beginning now, do you not recognise it?'*. Now we already know that God is doing a new work, for we have just read chapter 42, in which Isaiah announces that by anointing a 'Servant', God will do a new work to achieve his plan of salvation. So is this passage of Scripture mere repetition? Does it tell us anything we do not know?

To put it bluntly, God was repeating Himself to Israel because of the dangers that she would not recognise what he was doing as fundamentally new. We should be willing to read this passage ready to confess that we are not good at recognising what God is doing ourselves, especially when He does something radically new. Like the people of Israel, we mistakenly think that things we have personally never encountered before are somehow 'new', when they are merely only new to us. It is only when God acts that does something new is done in heaven and on earth, and the task of the Christian is to watch for this.

Now look at this passage of Scripture. God repeats Himself to try and persuade His people that he was indeed doing a radically new work of salvation, something quite different from all He had done with them in the past. When God saved the people of Israel by bringing them out of Egypt, an event commonly known as the Exodus, He did this to deliver Israel and to enable them to be a witness to the whole world of God's power and authority. Now He was doing something different; by bringing them out of Babylon, He was not giving Israel another spectacular deliverance with the hope that they would use this to testify to the world

about God. He now saved His own people in order to demonstrate His power to the world by Himself; Israel had become an observer, and because of her failures she had lost her commission!

The passage begins with a description of God saving his people from Babylon (43:14). The prophecy also confirms that the same God who saves his people now is the same God who saved his people from Egypt many years previously. In verses 16 and 17, Isaiah speaks of the dramatic events when Moses led Israel through the Red Sea. Now as a Jew, we would expect Isaiah to glory in this, but He does not; remarkably, the prophecy instructs the reader to forget these events! God's new work will be more dramatic! Moreover, Isaiah says that God's new work will be so public that it will be visible to the whole world, and recognised even by animals (43:20)! Then God will go further, and make a new people to do what Israel could not, and 'declare my praise' (43:21)!

Despite this clarion call, the Jews still failed to understand this message and never began the work of proclaiming God's salvation to the whole world. When they returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, great leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah focused on helping God's people discover their identity, and they never embraced this wider call. Indeed, further prophets such as Zephaniah and Malachi had to reinforce the message; they said resolutely that God would indeed do something new. They picked up on Isaiah's message about the Servant, and called this figure God's anointed; His 'Messiah'. Many centuries later when Jesus came, Israel had still not embraced God's commission. So God's message of salvation was revealed eventually by Him, and Him alone.

Surely therefore, God's people today should be very cautious about proclaiming something as 'new'. God has done one 'new' work in heaven and on earth, which was to send Jesus to be the Saviour of the world. Yes, God needs to renew this message from time to time, because it needs to be bought again to each generation. Revival never brings a fundamentally new message, but a renewal of what God has said and done in the past, through Jesus. Renewal will enlighten us but if we think that God brings something fundamentally 'new', then we expose our ignorance of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- Babylon and Egypt, the two examples of redemption
- Forget the old, and bring in the new!
- The failures of Israel!

Notes on the text and translation

V14 'For your sake I have sent to Babylon ...'

Most of the verse from 'for your sake' onwards is uncertain, and one word (ships) is rarer than the rest, causing most Bible translations to give different readings for this verse. I have translated it on the 'theological' understanding that God will act for His people in doing something to Babylon for them, as their Redeemer. See study.

I have translated this in the past tense. This is a prophetic feature in which the prophet speaks of something yet to happen – in this case, the Babylonian exile, as something which is sure to happen, it may be regarded as done.

V16 'who provided a way in the sea'

The Hebrew reads literally 'the one who gives a pathway in the sea' This clearly refers to God's actions to save the people of Israel through the Red Sea, so I have translated the verb 'give' as meaning 'to provide'.

V17 'who drew out chariot and horse'

The Hebrew verb means something like 'who made to come out', so with our knowledge of what happened when Pharaoh chased Israel towards the Red Sea (Exodus 14:6), we can say that God 'drew out' Pharaoh's army.

V17 'a powerful united army'

You will not find this in any of the other translations, most of which ignore the small word 'together' which is attached to 'power' and 'army'. I have made sense of this group of words with the phrase 'powerful united army', but you will find other versions vary considerably e.g. the NIV which inexplicably has 'army and reinforcements ...' The idea of a very powerful army is important to the meaning of the text, see study.

Going Deeper

The details of the text, as ever, hold more. It is hard for us to appreciate how people received these prophecies in their own day. At the time Isaiah wrote these prophecies, they must have seemed impenetrable in parts, and it is difficult enough to gain a perspective on them today. It is easy to take a small section such as 'Look, I am doing something new' and mould this into almost any Gospel message, but scripture challenges us to see the whole. As we study the passage further, we will find that it is always God's nature to redeem His people, and it is His driving purpose to bring all creation back to glory again.

Babylon and Egypt, the two examples of redemption (43:14-17)

Everywhere in scripture where we hear about the Exodus from Egypt or the return from Babylonian exile, we read about the Lord winning battles, bringing His people through deserts, and taking nations captive in order to deliver His people, and the two prophecies about Babylon and Egypt here are no exception. Isaiah uses his favourite expression for the Lord; 'the Holy one of Israel' twice in this passage, indicating the special importance of these two great acts of deliverance.

Verse 14 contains the first mention of Babylon in Isaiah since his early prophecies about her evil (chs. 13 & 14), his bold prediction of her military fall at the hands of the Lord (21:9) and his deep concern at Hezekiah's lax attitude towards Babylonian future interests (39). Most Bible versions (see notes above) translate this passage in the present tense because the translators cannot accept the idea that Isaiah actually foresaw the Babylonian exile and return; least of all that the Lord would then bring down Babylon, Israel's great oppressor. However, v14 describes the Babylonians as reduced to fugitives with their 'prized ships' ruined. It is uncertain what the 'prized ships' could refer to because we think of Babylon as an inland capital of a desert country. However, we forget that Babylon was strategically placed between the great Euphrates and Tigris rivers, providing excellent water routes through the deserts from the Persian Gulf to the Armenian mountains.

We do know from the prophet Daniel that the final collapse of Babylon (see Belshazzar's feast – Daniel 5) was dramatic and at the hand of God (Daniel 5:30). Jewish people would have certainly seen Daniel's story as a fulfilment of Isaiah's oft-stated prophecy of the destruction of Babylon.

The story of the Exodus (43:16,17) is much more well known to us, and these verses describe the military defeat of Egypt's armies as they pursued Israel into the Red Sea. You may not have noticed that in the Exodus story (Ex 14), the Lord insists that the defeat of Egypt is a demonstration of 'His glory' before the nations (14:4,17,25,31). It was always God's intention that military victories over these two great powers of Egypt and Babylon should be not just the key acts of deliverance in Israel's history, but a testimony to the world of the Lord's authority and power. One reason why God gave the Servant (Jesus) a role as a 'humble' servant operating in peace, may well be the failure of Israel to testify to these victories before the world, and the failure of the world to appreciate these military victories as evidence of God's love!

Forget the old, and bring in the new!

Our conclusion must be that although redemption through war was sufficient for Israel, it could not be for the whole world, and Isaiah's vision confirms this. He spoke for the second time about a new work; 'I am doing something new! It is beginning now, do you recognise it?' (43:19). This is the most important part of our passage, because it links with the announcement of the Servant (ch 42), and after all the prophecies Isaiah has provided us with, the Lord is entitled to ask 'do you not recognise this?'

If people are stuck in the past, then they cannot appreciate the benefits of what is new; and this is what lies behind Isaiah's call in verse 18, which is an extraordinary statement for a Judean prophet. Isaiah tells his listeners to leave the past behind; yes, he says 'do not remember' the Exodus and the Exile! We must be careful with the words however, because the Bible does not in general support the idea that God's past redemptive acts should be forgotten. The word 'remember' in Hebrew means 'call to mind', and the opposite of this does not mean 'forget', but simply 'do not call to mind'. This is not just a matter of playing with words, because what the prophecy really says is that the power and value of these 'past' events have no connection with the new work planned by the Lord for His Servant. Indeed, now we know what Jesus has done, the Exodus and the Exile remain as helpful examples of God's redemptive power, but they do not form the focus of our understanding of what Jesus did for us on the Cross. They are a help, but not a guide.

In verse 20, the newness of the Lord's work is so radical, Isaiah illustrates it with prophecies about the transformation of the desert (see above), which match with his earlier announcement of comfort and cheer (40:1f.) at the incredible work of God. It also indicates the radical transforming power of God's creative work, which even we have not yet seen in completion. Then, in a small verse at the end of this great prophecy, Isaiah slips in another staggering announcement; one which we read and recognise quite easily, but which must have shocked Isaiah's readers and listeners to the core. The prophecy speaks of a new people that

God, in the future, 'will make for myself'! (Incidentally, modern translations obscure this point by putting the whole verse in the past tense, in flat contradiction to the tense of the verbs and the grammar of the verse!)

The failures of Israel!

The last three verses of the passage sharpen our focus on the real state of Israel yet again; blind and deaf (43:8f.) and unable to understand what was happening (as Isaiah was warned on the day of His call - 6:10-13). The prophecy itself has a weary feel as it recounts sheep for burnt offerings, sacrifices, incense, gift offerings ('sweet cane') and whole burnt offerings (the 'fat' of the sacrifices'). The whole round of religious observance has little significance without the living truth of God's redemptive acts to give them meaning! Religion had become a burden to the Israelites and to God, who complained that the real burden was His, in dealing with the Israelites persistent 'sins' and 'offences'!

These few verses help us keep things in perspective, and also set up the prophecy which comes next, which is about God's great promise of forgiveness (43:25-44:8). When we read this tomorrow, we must expect that the Lord will reveal something new about forgiveness from sin; something which goes far beyond the forgiveness available in the sacrificial laws of the Jewish religious system.

Application

It is impossible to study this passage like this unless you are happy with the idea that through prophecy, God gives His servants a glimpse of the future. Of course, the remarkable thing about this prophecy is that Isaiah not only saw ahead to the Babylonian exile and return (he had seen this himself for a long time, as the first half of Isaiah testifies), but he was shown a vision of something beyond even this. The majority of commentaries you will read on Isaiah will explain all these prophecies as songs and poems expressing the feelings and aspirations of Jewish people around the time of the exile, and as I have already explained, most commentators do not believe that Isaiah wrote these prophecies. They are regarded as the work of 'Deutero-Isaiah' (meaning 'second Isaiah'), possibly a prophet who had access to Isaiah's work but wrote in his name, after the exile.

The reason I have not accepted this premise in my interpretation is because there are plenty of examples within the Old Testament of God telling His prophets about things that will happen in the future, and Isaiah is no exception. A true prophet naturally begins with the plight of the world around, but is open to hear how God will deal with the problems to hand. In Isaiah's case, almost uniquely amongst the prophets, he had to prophesy about the failure of Israel and their loss of faith in God at critical times in their history. God used Isaiah's just and deep concern to reveal the truth about His plan for the salvation of the world, and slowly but surely, Isaiah was shown first the Servant, then why Israel had failed, and then more about the Servant's work. We will eventually discover that Isaiah is shown so much detail connecting with Christ, the idea that he also foretold the Exile seems somewhat unsurprising!

We should thank God that we have Isaiah's prophecies in writing to help us make sense of the story of Israel and Judah; a story which would otherwise seem baffling and incompatible with the God who has saved the world through Jesus!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Does God use war to achieve His ends today, or has He given up on this since the coming of Christ?
2. If God has told us 'not to remember' events of the past (43:18), what is the point of using the Old Testament and knowing church history?
3. How does church ritual (in terms of music, worship or words) get in the way of the true worship of God?

Personal comments by author

When I begin each day and read the passage to hand, I sometimes wonder what more there can be for Isaiah to say; yet the things that crop up constantly surprise me! Today, I was frustrated by what I felt was the persistent refusal of the translators to accept the verb tenses in Hebrew which might demonstrate the true prophetic nature of the text. It is as if some just do not want prophets to prophesy! Nevertheless, the consistent themes of Isaiah must be our guide, so that scripture guides us, rather than the other way round.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through Exodus 14, or some of the other texts quoted in this study, and see whether they help you understand more about this passage. Connecting different parts of the Bible is an important part of Bible study.*
 - *If you are able to gain access to them, read some other commentaries on this passage of scripture; or perhaps even internet articles to compare this study with what others say. Reflect on what prophecy means.*
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Final Prayer

Jesus, my Saviour, speak words of grace into my soul, and remove from me those moods and temperaments of mine which dishonour You because of their effect on my speech. I ask You, Lord, to change my heart and make it worthy of Your presence, so that all I say may be worthy of Your Name, this and every day. AMEN
