

Prayer

We worship You, Holy and gracious Lord! You are awesome beyond our understanding and yet you are close beside us each and every day. We are blessed by the love You have showed us in granting us salvation, and we are glad to be known as your people, a people of faith and love. We are grateful that You have given us many gifts and graces, and we rejoice in it to be a part of Your Church, Your Bride, who will soon be made perfect! We worship You, Holy and gracious Lord! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Stretch out your hand as you pray, and imagine yourself receiving whatever the Lord God wishes to say to you. Take up any other posture you feel is right.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who are handicapped** Pray for people who are mentally impaired, especially any you may know in your own family or church
- Give thanks to God for the many ways in which you have been blessed by other people; be specific and give God the glory
- Pray for those who are seeking to set up small businesses, to make a living and provide employment for others

Meditation

(Inspired by Job 38)

Who will contend with the One who made everything!
Who will answer the questions of the Lord?

Where were you when creation was formed?
When air and sea and sky were made?
Speak if you understand, and explain if you know!

Who set out the boundaries of the Universe?
And created the soul out of flesh and blood?
Speak if you understand, and explain if you know!

How can you know the mystery of the future?
Or account for the insight of a gifted artist?
Speak if you understand, and explain if you know!

When will true peace on earth be found?
And when will sickness and sin disappear?
Speak if you understand, and explain if you know!

The Lord has asked, and demands an answer;
Reply to Him now, before He comes in power!

Bible passage - Isaiah 43:8-13

⁸ Bring out a people
who are blind but have eyes,
who are deaf but have ears!

⁹ All the nations have gathered together,
and the peoples have assembled.

Which of them has disclosed this,
Or told us about former things?
Let them produce witnesses to justify themselves,
Let them hear and let them speak the truth.

¹⁰You are my witnesses to a revelation of the LORD;
and my Servant whom I have chosen!
This was so you may know and believe in me
and might discern that I am He.

Before me no god was formed,
And after me there will be none.

¹¹I, even I, am the LORD,
and besides me there is no saviour.

¹²I have spoken, saved, and let it be heard;
and this is not strange to any of you;
You are my witnesses to a revelation of the LORD!
I am God.

¹³So from today I am He;
no one can snatch this from my hand;
I do this; who can prevent it?

Bible Study

Review

In this extraordinary prophecy, the Lord makes a dramatic announcement. He calls Israel and all the nations together (43:8,9), to announce the key features of His revelation and His plan for salvation. Unfortunately, this passage is not well translated in many versions of the Bible, and it therefore does not receive the attention it deserves from preachers. Yet this is one of only a few places within Scripture where we can read a concise description of God's eternal plan of salvation, including the place of Israel and His Servant the Messiah within this plan.

The whole tenor of this passage is that of urgency, and the best way to read this passage is to assume that the Lord is speaking, and Isaiah is reporting His words as through a vision. Firstly, God summons the people of the world (43:8,9) including His own people Israel, but they are called the '*blind and deaf*' (43:8)! We recognise this as Isaiah's unique description of Israel, but here, it has the symbolic meaning that Israel is unable to bear witness; she has not seen and she has not heard, so she cannot speak! None of the other nations can say anything about the 'former works of God (by this Isaiah means God's works of power such as the Exodus from Egypt). Now, because she has failed to tell the nations about their God, this task now falls to the Servant, standing beside God, as it were, as He speaks!

The Lord God then speaks directly and warns all the nations, telling them twice that they are '*witnesses to a revelation of the Lord*' (43:10,12). He declares that they can see, and they will see His revelation, but not through the testimony of Israel, only through the testimony of the Servant. These important words are reinforced by dramatic speech, for God refers to Himself three times with the words 'I am' (43:10,11,12). Now God had revealed himself to the forefather Abraham by means of the name, '*I am*' (Genesis 15:7, 17:1), and also to Moses (Exodus 3:14 and 20:3f.), so we can be sure that this is a massively important revelation. He also says '*before me no God was formed, and after me there will be none*' (43:10) and immediately adds '*I, even I, am the Lord, and besides me there is no Saviour*' (43:11). The closer we look at this passage, the more we realised how closely God and the Servant are bound together, in order to deliver God's work of Salvation.

Still, the Lord mourns Israel's ineffectiveness (43:10). How could she forget God's love and saving power? She had been saved from Egypt and received God's Law; she had been given her own land and had been called to be a 'light to the Gentiles' (42:6). She had received the privilege of being God's chosen people, but had not been obedient to her call! Yet because God's eternal plan of salvation remains the same, (43:11), He had to rectify the situation Himself, and be His own witness, through the Servant! God declares His sovereign right and authority, as the only Lord and God of all Creation, to do whatever would be necessary to achieve His will; no one would be able to stop Him (43:13)!

Now today, we accept that Jesus Himself is the Servant, and He has brought us our salvation, but let us not treat this ancient prophecy casually. It tells us that more than 600 years before Jesus came on earth, God was working, slowly but surely, to achieve His eternal plan. Let us also remember that salvation is not just one of the messages God has given to his church, alongside caring for people and worshipping him. Israel was rejected by God because she failed to deliver this message to the world, so let us make sure that we do not fail!

Everything that God does is focused upon this one thing, the open offer of salvation to all who will have faith in him through His servant Jesus Christ! Moreover the delivery of this plan has been entrusted to Jesus, the Servant completely. Our only message for the world is to find Jesus Christ, and in Him, the fulfilment of all their hopes.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The testimony of people
- The revelation of God

Notes on the text and translation

V10 *'You are my witnesses to a revelation of the Lord!'*

This translation is very close to the Hebrew, but surprisingly few versions of the Bible have anything like this. They take the word 'revelation' as if it was a verb indicating speech and translate 'You are my witnesses, say the Lord'. However, this cuts right across the purpose of the prophecy, which is to call all people to witness the revelation of the servant! The translation I have given makes much more sense – see study.

V12 *'and this is not strange to any of you'.*

Again, you will find that most translation have something quite different here, based on assumptions about what the passage means. I have kept close to the text, in which there is no reference to 'other gods', as is suggested by most other Bible versions.

V12 *'I am God'.*

Earlier in the text at the beginning of verse 11, the Lord said 'I, even I am the Lord'. Here in verse 12, the text says virtually the same, but uses completely different words. For example, verse 11 uses the word 'JHWH' the sacred name for God, but verse 12 uses 'EI' a common name for God. It appears that the prophecy is being as broad and extensive as possible, using every conceivable name for God to emphasise the holy nature of what is being said!

V13 *'I am He; no one can snatch anything from my hand'*

Again, an extraordinary phrase emphasising God's supremacy. Most translations have 'no one can deliver from my hand' These words can suggest that the sentence has something to do with deliverance. It does not; it is an affirmation by God that nothing can be taken from His hand, not who He is or what He has done.

Going Deeper

This passage confirms the general picture of what God is doing in these prophecies. However, its one distinctive feature is what it says about testimony. We tend to think of testimony as a personal matter by which we share with other people what the Lord has done for us. However, as we read this passage further, we will realise that testimony is essential to the way in which God's message of salvation works, though we might not have expected the Old Testament to teach us about it!

The Testimony of people

There is no escaping the fact that if we read Deuteronomy 28 to 31, Moses set out before God's people at the point of their entry into the Promised Land, that their duty was to live in the world as a visible example of God's love, and a testimony to the world of the things of God. Moses said that if the people of Israel were obedient to their Lord, then;

'All the peoples of the earth will see that You are called by the name of the Lord, and they will fear you ... the Lord will make you the head and not the tail, you shall be only at the top and not at the bottom – if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God.' (Deuteronomy 28:10,13)

However, if they failed in their duty to be obedient then they would fail in their testimony to the nations, who would turn on them;

'You shall become an object of horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you.' (Deut 28:37)

It is the terrible truth that over a period of around 600 to 700 years, Israel drew the curses of Deuteronomy 28 on herself by failing to maintain a godly life and testimony to the God of their fathers. The great exception to this tale of tragedy is the story of David (2 Samuel) and the story of the establishment of the Temple under Solomon. The books of Kings and Chronicles place a strong emphasis on David, Solomon and the Temple for this reason. During Solomon's reign, 'all the kings of the earth' came to see Solomon (1 Kings 4:20,21) including the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10), and the Lord commended His people for their obedience and public testimony to Almighty God (1 Kings 8:60).

Since then, things had not gone well; the people of Israel split into two separate kingdoms of northern Israel and southern Judah, and Israel in particular had quickly fallen into the social, political and religious structure of the surrounding nations. Judah fell less quickly, but eventually succumbed. So when Isaiah received his call around 750 BC, he was filled with a sense of the unworthiness of God's people; 'for I live amongst a people of unclean lips' (6:5), and he was told by the Lord that his prophecies would not change Israel, because she was already blind and deaf (6:10).

The court scene in our passage today is like the Lord's summary judgement of what had happened. He had wanted His people to uphold His name and give Him glory in the earth, but this had not happened (43:8), moreover, when summoned, the nations of the earth did not know anything about the saving work of God. In particular, they knew nothing of the Exodus (see 'former things' in verse 9), which the Lord regarded as the supreme public evidence of His power to save (see Exodus 14:4 etc.). All the Lord was seeking was the truth from all parties, just as is required in any court, and the truth was that the Lord was little more known in the world than when He had first chosen Israel, in the time of Abraham and his descendants.

I emphasise this because we should be aware that the same call falls on us who are God's people today. It is important for us to know that God's primary purpose for His people is to give testimony to His saving power, and to make this known throughout the world. If we have nothing to say when called to answer to this call within the Lord's court, then we will be in the same place of failure before Him as Israel!

The revelation of God

From verse 10 onwards, we can learn about the testimony God expects His people to give. This is because in the face of Israel's failure, the Lord Himself gives the testimony He requires, and it is therefore a model for us.

Firstly, we have a 'revelation of God' to declare. Twice in this passage, the Lord calls out 'You are my witnesses to a revelation of the Lord', moreover, these words are watered down in most translations so that we do not even hear about 'a revelation' of God. The word used in Hebrew ('n'um') means divine word or action, but at the heart of this is the idea that God is revealed through word and deed, and as He goes on to say, through 'my servant whom I have chosen!' (43:10). Because of the focus on the failure of Israel at this point in the prophecy, I suggest that here, God is speaking of His newly announced 'Servant' (42:1f.) who will come and do His work of salvation. The Servant is of course Jesus, who died for us on the Cross; and this was His open, public revelation of the love of God. When Jesus said to His disciples 'take up your cross ...' (Matt 10:38 etc.), He was asking them to do what the Father wanted of Him and of all His people, which is to show their faith publicly and without fear, whatever the cost.

We need to pay heed to the Lord's powerful testimony in this text because it says a great deal. The Lord God is unique; He said, 'Before me, no god was formed, and after me ... none.' (43:10). Secondly, the Lord God is exclusively concerned to save people from their sins; He said, 'I, even I, am the Lord, and besides me there is no saviour.' (43:11). Thirdly and lastly, no other testimony is required other than to be faithful to what we know; God said, 'I have spoken, saved, and let it be heard, and this is not strange to you ...' (43:12). Christians today are not in need of any fresh revelation of God, because the Lord has already spoken, saved His people in Jesus Christ and announced this to the world through His Servant Jesus. Our work is to pursue this call. Anything else is a distraction.

Then, in the last verse of the passage, the Lord gives a thunderous call saying that He will bring about His will, because He is God, alone. No other God exists and no-one can take the Lord's plan of salvation out of His hand (43:13). It is set in motion and He will complete it. This is the Lord's seal of approval on His own work, given to us.

Application

In view of what this passage says, Christians should ask themselves questions about their testimony. Firstly, are we living lives which speak of the majesty and power of God? Paul thought about these things when he was writing about the failed testimony of the Jewish people in his letter to the Romans (10:5-17), and he concluded that unless the testimony was spoken out, it hardly had any value. Speaking of Gentiles, he said;

'But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in One of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim Him? ... so faith comes through what is heard' (Romans 10:14-17)

Paul's conclusion is similar to that of Isaiah (whom he quotes elsewhere in Romans 10), which is that the deeds of God must be spoken of by people. This is the heart of testimony. It sounds simple, but many shirk from it and many Christians try to avoid having to say anything about their faith at all; so there is no doubt that problems persist. In our passage, the Lord was longing for His people to speak out their testimony, but blind and deaf, they had nothing to say; let us not be found in the same position!

However, if we take courage and are prepared to speak not merely about our personal experiences of faith, but about the God who has touched our lives, then we join with the testimony of saints through the ages to the immeasurable grace of God. The touchstone for this is a testimony consistent with scripture and the truth about God, because if we tell others simply what we think about God, then we are in danger of placing ourselves at the heart of our testimony and not God. Our testimony is that the Lord alone is God, His sole intent is to save His people, and He has saved us.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do you learn about the nature of God from verses 10, 11 and 12.
2. Discuss in your group the question 'what is testimony?' bearing in mind what God requires of His people in this passage.
3. How can God's people best testify to the saving work and power of God to the rest of the world today?

Personal comments by author

I found it very hard to write this study because the translation of this passage in most modern versions is not helpful and perhaps incorrect. Consequently, I found myself travelling down too many blind alleys before I could be sure of the meaning of the text. I found the two declarations of God 'You are my witnesses ...' (43:10,12) to be a powerful call rising above the whole text, and hope that all who read this will find themselves encouraged to testify to the Living God and to speak the truth about His salvation.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Can you write down a statement of testimony by which you can declare to others the God in whom you believe? Can you state the truth about God and be content that you have testified to Him and not yourself? Try and write down a brief statement of testimony after reading this study.*
- *Pray for the church of God and its leaders and ask the Lord to bless it with a renewed sense of its calling, to testify to the Living God.*

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father; come into my life and do those miracles of grace which help me to know Your hand is guiding me and leading me. And if I am not 'right' with You, bring me to a place of repentance where I can be set free, and therefore find glorious liberty: AMEN
