

Prayers

Opening prayer

When I look at You, Lord Jesus, I see the truth about the world, for You were there at the beginning of Creation and You will be there at its end. I see in You the truth about God, for in Your death and resurrection You have revealed the love of God the Father. I also see in You the truth about myself, for You have lived a life on earth and You can look me in the eye and search my heart. Come, Lord Jesus, bless me now I pray, for You are my life and my destiny: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: PREJUDICE

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to save you from becoming prejudiced in your attitudes to others who are of a different race, age, gender, church, or who are different from you in any other way

2. For your friends and family

Pray for the Lord's protection against any prejudices that may arise within your family; it may be that you alone know what can happen, so you alone must pray for this

3. For the church and its work

Pray to ask the Lord's protection against all forms of prejudice within the church; pray that God will bar this way by which Satan tries to enter into God's Kingdom to spoil it

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for any in your neighbourhood or in your country who experience prejudice from officials; from the police, from housing authorities, from universities and much more

Meditation

(a word of prophecy for all God's people)

Be liberated, my people, be set free to be.

I made you and I saved you;

no-one is above you in my Kingdom.

Those who do so claim a place that I have never given.

Read my Word, and as you do so, I will guide you:

Pray to me and speak to me; and I will tell the truth to you:

Worship me and seek my face, let nothing else distract you,

Come into my presence with an honest, contrite heart.

I knock, so make your choice to open up the door and trust me:

I am with you as you break the bread, when you remember me:

I build my church through you, I challenge you and empower you,

I have given you your work, and I will go before you and protect you.

Be liberated, my people, by the Gospel you have received;

Love each other, fear no-one but me, and do what I tell you.

But do not stand in my way; let me build my Church.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 5: 18-25

¹⁸ Woe to you who tug at guilt with cords of deceit,

- and at sin as if with cart ropes,
¹⁹ who say, 'Let God hurry,
 let him speed up his work
 so that we may see it;
 let the plan of Israel's Holy One happen,
 so that we may know it!'
²⁰ Woe to you who call evil good
 and good evil,
 who put darkness for light
 and light for darkness,
 who put bitter for sweet
 and sweet for bitter!
²¹ Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
 and clever in their own sight!
²² Woe to you who are heroes in drinking wine
 and champions at mixing liquor,
²³ to those who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
 and deprive the innocent of justice!
²⁴ Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up stubble,
 and as dry grass shrivels in the flame,
 so their root will become rotten,
 and their flowers scatter like dust;
 for they have rejected the law
 of the LORD of hosts,
 and reviled the word of Israel's Holy One.
²⁵ Therefore the anger of the LORD
 burned against His people,
 and He stretched out His hand
 against them and struck them;
 the mountains quaked,
 their corpses became refuse in the streets.
 For all this His anger has not turned back,
 And His hand is stretched out still

Review

In this passage, Isaiah continues to cry in anguish at the peril of Israel. This is the second part of a poem that began in yesterday's reading (5:10-17), and it is full of prophetic snippets introduced by 'woe' or 'therefore'. Here, there are four 'woes' and two 'therefores', and each 'woe' describes some sin of Israel that rejects God, and each 'therefore' describes an aspect of God's judgement firstly on the land (5:24) and secondly on the people (5:25).

The four 'woes' describe a generation of God's people that has known about God in the past or been brought up knowing God, but decided it knows better, and to this extent, they could be applied to people even today. As a whole, the woes seem to describe a superior attitude towards God, something that is typical of our own world, where people feel that they have grown out of dependence upon God, and by the 'miracles' of science and technology, are able to provide sufficiently for themselves while they live. The fact that this scripture was written in the eight century BC suggests that these sins are indeed sins of humanity in general.

Verses 18 and 19 speak of deceit, but it is hard to know exactly what is meant by the phrase 'who tug at guilt with cords of deceit' (5:18), and verse 19 explains this for us. God's people initially believed that their God would always help them, but as the years went by, they began to feel that God was distant and remote, and they failed to see the evidence of God at work, they said 'let God hurry, let Him speed up His work ...'. The message of doubt, however, was deceitful because it misunderstood the nature of God's work, which as Isaiah said, was very much at hand.

The next woe (5:20) speaks about the classic failure of those who misinterpret God's words and deeds, and get them mixed up, light for darkness and darkness for light; this is a sin that even Jesus spoke against when the Pharisees began to say that Jesus was 'Beelzebub' (Matt 12:24f.). It is also reflected in the 'woe' found in verse 21, which speaks about those who have misunderstood the nature of knowledge and become 'wise in their own eyes'. The last 'woe' is more practical, addressing the well known sins of drunkenness and

bribery, and we can recognise their danger to society, and assume that Isaiah mentioned them because they were particularly prevalent in his day within Jerusalem.

Such sins do not go unpunished amongst God's people, whatever the consequences for those who do not know God. Verse 24 describes the consequences for God's people, and in a summary few lines of Hebrew poetry, Isaiah says that the results of human sin are that the land will suffer. This is a constant theme within Isaiah, and although we will only notice it occasionally, it is dramatically turned around in Isaiah's later famous work, such as the great poem of God's re-creation, found in Isaiah 35; 'the desert and the parched land will be glad, the wilderness will rejoice and bloom ...' (35:1f.).

Lastly, the Lord's just wrath will come against His people, against those who have rejected all He has done and the evidence of His presence with them. Like one who has been unjustly treated and rejected, the Lord's 'wrath' or 'anger' (5:25) will cause Him to 'stretch out His hand and strike them'. The language of mountains shaking and bodies being strewn around sounds like 'earthquake' to us, but for ancient people, this was a description of war. Isaiah warns, for those who sin, God's hand is 'stretched out still'. It is an ominous warning.

We may struggle to read some passages in the Old Testament, but there are surely enough connection here with the world in which we live for us to identify some of its warnings, whether against people in general or His people, the church. It may be difficult for Christians to hear, but this funereal song is sung for those who walk away from the Lord of any generation. It is a serious problem in our day.

Going Deeper

Four 'woes' (5:18-23)

The four 'woes' in these verses are acutely descriptive of a generation which has known about God in the past or been brought up knowing God, but has decided it knows better. To that extent it could be said to be similar to today! As a whole, the woes seem to describe a rather superior attitude towards God, just as we often find in the world today!

The deceit mentioned by Isaiah in verse 18 is that of people who say God doesn't matter and neither does what you do! With such values propounded within society, people often feel guilty because they know inwardly that certain things are wrong, but society does not allow them to deal with that guilt. It is common for people in such a setting to say 'all's fine, don't worry, you're not a sinner, and forget God.' It is not easy to work out exactly what is meant by 'tug at guilt with cords of deceit' (5:18), but this is close!

The passage continues with all manner of ungodly attitudes exemplified by Isaiah. The arrogance which calls on God to prove himself by showing what he can do (5:19) reminds us of the Pharisees who asked Jesus for a sign (Matt 12:38,39), baiting the Lord to see what he will do! This kind of attitude comes from those who have confused evil and good, darkness and light, bitter and sweet (5:20), and those who are 'wise in their own eyes' (5:21). Also, like many evils in society such attitudes can be fuelled by alcohol (5:22) and although they appear clever, are often accompanied by corrupt behaviour (5:23). Isaiah is colourful in his language as he identifies these details, but it is fascinating to read a passage of scripture from eight hundred years before Christ which speaks of human behaviour with such extraordinary detail and insight, such that we can recognise all these things today. For that, these prophecies are valuable.

Two 'therefores' (5:24,25)

Because of all this godlessness amongst His own people, 'the anger of the Lord burned against His people' (5:25). Why should we doubt that this is an appropriate response from God? His anger is because He loves those who have rejected Him, and as God, He cannot just disregard such rebellion or let it go unchallenged. The people who behave in this way are supposed to be a 'light to the world' (42:6, 49:6) but they have changed direction completely to become an example to God of the excesses of the world, rather than an example to the world of the Covenant love of their God.

These last two verses describe God's 'wrath' as like a hot wind which burns the land and whips up fires in parched scrublands (5:24). Isaiah is, I believe, shocked at what he sees going on around Him. He sees God's hand stretched out towards His people; not 'for' them, as when Moses stretched out His hand over the Sea and the people walked through on dry land, but 'against' them. He saw no end to this judgement; 'His hand is stretched out still' (5:25), but this prophecy came before Isaiah had his famous experience in the Temple, and his life was changed forever by the commission he received from the Lord (Isaiah 6).

Discipleship

Application

So it is entirely clear that God's wrath is applied to those of His people who decide to live according to their own ways and not those of the God they claim to worship. We began to agonise over this issue yesterday, but today we must take this further. It seems that we must conclude that if God's people will not respond to Him as their true Lord and God, then they come under judgement, just as the dry wind blew across Israel in our text today (5:24). We live at a time when humanity as a whole is confident of its own abilities, and this attitude affects the church as well (see 5:21). The church is full of schemes and programmes, and one can hardly pass a week without hearing from one or other Christian organisation about some scheme that it believes will have a fundamental impact on the life of the church in this or some other country. Certainly in England, the impression is given that the only way people think they can deal with the diminishing size of the church is to have schemes and plans to deal with it. All of these have been thought out and prayed over by many people, and yet the evidence is that for the great effort that is put into them, most achieve very little in terms of the global picture of mission or the life of the church.

When will God's people today search to find out why they are under judgement, and when they have found the answers, seek to address the reasons why they are unable to reflect the love of God in our world. Just as in Isaiah's day, God's people get on with life as if they can live as they please, and assume that they are covered by God's protection and love when they have often placed themselves far outside it. By refusing to believe that they have an inherent problem with their relationship with the Lord, and that their God is calling them to repent and turn again to Him, they delude themselves about the life of the church. At present, I see no end to the circumstances of decline within the churches of the UK because they show no signs of collective repentance for their self-evident sins of ignorance about God and His moral values, inability to stand with other believers for the sake of the Gospel, and profound insularity in their practice of the faith. In writing this, I am only touching at the surface of the problem. However, this passage of Scripture begs us to seek God's perspective on our struggling spiritual life as God's people and accept the hot wind of His judgement, so that we can return to the place where we witness effectively to our Saviour, once again.

Questions for groups

1. What sins, mentioned in this passage, remind us of sins committed today, and how many of them are prevalent amongst God's people?
2. In your group, give each other examples of people who are 'wise in their own eyes' and unable to see the things of God.
3. Does the Lord punish His people today, and if so, how? Do these prophecies hold for people today, or are they somehow fulfilled in Christ?

Discipleship challenges

- *Can you imagine what would happen if a preacher were to speak like this in church today? Try to work out for yourself whether you believe that there are sins that persist amongst the body of Christ, which mean that God's will is not done, and that true faith has been rejected.*
- *Pray with others about the sins of God's people, and make sure that you include yourself in such prayers.*

Final Prayer

Bless those we love this day, Lord Jesus. Keep them in Your care and protect them from all evil. If there are problems between us, may we be humble enough to confess our sin and let you heal us. May we give You the glory, for in our families, You have given us each other. Praise be to You, Lord Jesus, AMEN
