

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God, Your power and majesty lie behind all creation, and everything I experience in this life. I praise You for the splendour and originality of Your world, for the beauty of a flower, for the power of electricity, and for the intricacy of music. Open my heart and my mind to see You afresh wherever I look, so that my life is filled both with the glory of Your world, and also the glory of Your eternal Word by which all things were created. I praise You, Lord Jesus, ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: PREJUDICE

1. For yourself

We can sometimes feel that we are the victims of prejudice, or at least the victims of other people's aggressive attitudes. Pray for these people and ask the Lord to bless them

2. For your friends and family

Pray for any difficult family relationships especially where difficult attitudes prevail. Pray for God's love to be shown and pray for the wisdom to hold on to the love of God at all times

3. For the church and its work

Pray for those who find themselves outside of the church not because of their lack of faith but because they do not get on with those within it. Pray for God's grace to overcome such difficulties

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

Pray against racial prejudice, wherever it rears its head, especially in the governance of countries.

Meditation

God has made us needing friendship and love
And to grow each day through sharing and trusting

By sharing what God has placed on our hearts
And trusting that others will listen, and care

By sharing together both our trials and joys
And trusting that in faith, we will help each other

By sharing our frailties in the safety of friendship
And trusting the respect we owe to each other

By sharing the blessings of our gifts and graces
And trusting the unconditional nature of love

By sharing the new life we have found in Jesus
And trusting the unity of the body of Christ

God has given us the potential for glorious fellowship
So let us enjoy His gift, and bless each other in love

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 5: 8-17

- ⁸ Woe to you who join house to house,
who add field to field,

- until there is no more room,
and you are made to live alone
in the midst of the land!
- ⁹ The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing:
Many houses will be in ruins,
large and fine houses,
with no one to live in them.
- ¹⁰ For ten acres of vineyard will yield but one bath,
and a homer of seed will yield a mere ephah.
- ¹¹ Woe to you who rise early in the morning
To run after strong drink,
who stay up late in the evening
to be inflamed by wine;
- ¹² who have at their feasts lyre and harp,
tambourine and flute and wine,
but who pay no attention to the LORD's deeds,
or consider the work of His hands!
- ¹³ Therefore my people go into exile
without knowledge;
their nobles are dying of hunger,
and their crowds are parched with thirst.
- ¹⁴ Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite
and opened its mouth without limit;
the nobility and the crowds go down,
all the hordes and revellers in Jerusalem.
- ¹⁵ People are humbled, all are brought low,
and the eyes of the haughty are lowered.
- ¹⁶ But the LORD of hosts is exalted by His justice,
and God shows Himself holy in righteousness.
- ¹⁷ Then the lambs will graze as in their pasture,
Strangers will eat in the ruins of the rich.

Review

After the parable of the useless vineyard (5:1-7), the rest of Isaiah 5 is full of sadness and despair. Isaiah prophesies the anguish of God at being rejected by His people, weeping because of the ignorance and rebellion of the nation He created, loved and blessed. Twice in this passage Isaiah calls out 'woe', an almost untranslatable word that has more to do with funereal wailing than the pronouncement of judgement, and twice he calls out 'therefore ...', to announce the consequences of Israel's defiance. The hand stretched out to Israel by God in love had become a hand of judgement and wrath (5:13). This is a poem full of emotion, but with care, we will find within it much to help us understand what Israel was doing to offend God.

Before we look at this passage further, I need to explain something about the study of Isaiah. So far, we have read and studied Isaiah verse by verse and paragraph by paragraph, treating it sequentially, one prophecy after another. We could do this with the rest of Isaiah 5, but although each verse is fascinating, some of it repeats what we already know from Isaiah's previous prophecies. For example, today's passage tells us again that the punishment of God on Judah and Jerusalem would come in the form of war and exile, and while Isaiah predicted this just like other prophets (e.g. Amos and Hosea), he would not give up on his belief that God had something more for His chosen people (see chapter 4). Unless we remember this, we will misinterpret the prophecies. The wrath of God is not loveless anger, it is an anger that arises from love rejected, and it longs to return to love; the last two verses of today's text are a vision that reminds us of God's plan to overcome the problems of humanity and establish justice and righteousness in His own way and His own time.

In the first woe, the prophet bewails the manner in which property and land were used in Israel. Most human social and economic history can be focussed upon the subject of who owned what land; battles have been fought over this, lords have enslaved populations to work the land, and kings have used the land as a bargaining tool since earliest times, and much of this is reflected in verse 8. God had set down laws for the ownership of land and its exchange (see Deuteronomy 15:19,26f. and Leviticus 25,27) that were fundamentally egalitarian, but Israel had set these aside to allow people to get rich and oppress the poor.

This was an offense to God, and He was intent on destroying such injustice (5:9f.). Feasting was an important part of worship, as defined by the laws of God (), but the people had made this into partying and excess, in drinking, revelry and gluttony. The picture painted by Isaiah in verse 11 and 12 is familiar to people even today, and those who are drunk are in no position to appreciate the good things of God or 'consider the work of His hands' (5:12)!

These are the reasons why the Lord God had declared 'my people will go into exile' (5:13). Isaiah saw the horror of death as the consequence of rebellion, and in death, all were reduced to the same level, 'nobility' and 'crowds' together (5:13), all would be 'brought low' (5:15). We have already seen this warning before in the prophecies of Isaiah, but this is the first verse where Isaiah which mentions 'exile'. This is a loaded word, because we now know that around 150 years after Isaiah said these words, Judah and Jerusalem were indeed taken away into exile to Babylon. This passage suggests that Isaiah foresaw this 150 years before it happened.

Some people think it farfetched to imagine that Isaiah could predict this and suggest that this passage must have come from later times and perhaps another author. Yet Isaiah knew the politics of his day, and he knew that small corrupt nations would be swallowed up by larger ones; what he said is entirely logical for one who saw the consequences of Israel's behaviour.

Going Deeper

There is in fact a great deal more for us to find in this passage, which we will now explore, but we should be aware that these verses are the final set of prophecies before a great upheaval came in Isaiah's life, together with a revelation from God which changed Isaiah's prophecies and his whole life. We are in the last stages of 'setting the scene' before the powerful work of God's Spirit in Isaiah's life recorded in Isaiah 6.

It is also worth noting that the prophecies in today's reading are very similar to those found in 10:1-4, later on in Isaiah. If you have read other commentaries on Isaiah you may be familiar with theories about the 'fragmentation' of the prophecies found in Isaiah. This may sound rather strange to you if you are unfamiliar with this idea, but think of it like this; in today's reading there are 6 'woes'. However, there is plenty of evidence from other prophets that 'woes' were grouped together in 'whole' numbers (see Amos 5:18f and 6:1f.), either three or seven. Now if we have six of them here, where is the seventh? Some say it occurs in Isaiah 6:5, and others in Isaiah 10:1. We will discuss this later when we look at these texts.

Two 'woes' (5:8-12)

It is extraordinary how these words of Isaiah encapsulate some of the most ancient sins of humanity. Most of human social and economic history can be focussed around 'who owned what land; battles have been fought over it, lords have enslaved populations to work it, and kings have used it as a bargaining tool since earliest times. In addition, people have moved from land to land in order to find fertile ground on which to grow the food they need to live; land has always been essential to human identity and wealth. So it was that God set down His laws for the ownership of land back in the 'Law' (see Deuteronomy 15,19:14, 26f.), which if read together with the laws relating to Sabbath and Jubilee (Leviticus 25,27), are a radical system of land ownership which is fundamentally egalitarian. This was the norm for God's people; every Judean was supposed to own some land and even if it was sold, it should by law return to him or his descendants every fifty years.

It was Ahab who broke this tradition of equality in the northern kingdom of Israel when he had Naboth killed for his vineyard (1 Kings 21:1f.), but despite what happened to the northern kingdom, it appears that during the reign of Uzziah in the south, Jerusalem itself became wealthier and wealthier with a larger and larger number of rich families buying up the surrounding Judean lands (5:8) and like mediaeval lords, making the people of the land work it for them. Because they had thrown aside the 'law of the Lord', God said he would abandon them, making the produce of their land worth less and less. The measures of wine and seed mentioned in this verse are not familiar to us, but they indicate that the landlord would get less in produce than their investment in it (5:10).

Partying and feasting have always been a delight to all people, but where individual growth grows unchecked, there are always dangers in reckless excess, whether eating, drinking, or revelry. The picture of such excess painted by Isaiah in verses 11 and 12 are somewhat familiar to us, particularly drunkenness. One who is drunk is in no position to appreciate the good things of God or 'consider the work of His hands' (5:12)!

Two 'therefores' (5:13-15)

As a direct consequence of these sins, Isaiah prophesied 'my people will go into exile' and described the cruel manner in which death reduces all people to the same level, 'nobility' and 'crowds' together (5:13), all would be 'brought low' (5:15).

We have already seen this warning before in the prophecies of Isaiah, but this is the first verse where Isaiah which mentions 'exile'. This is a loaded word, because from our perspective, we know that around 150 years after Isaiah prophesied, Judah and Jerusalem were indeed taken away into exile to Babylon. Did Isaiah foresee this 150 years before it happened? Some people think it rather farfetched to imagine that Isaiah could predict this and suggest that this passage must have come from a later time and perhaps another author. However, within Isaiah's own lifetime, he often saw the consequences of war and battle amongst the nations around him, and he certainly saw the northern kingdom of Israel invaded by Assyria (in 721BC) when many people were taken into exile (see 2 Kings 17). As far as he was concerned, exile was the terrible consequence of the invasion of one land by another, yet by prophesying as he did, he did indeed speak of a time when this would happen to Judah and Jerusalem, and he said it would be God's doing.

Discipleship

Application

I always find it distressing to read the considerable quantity of evidence in the Old Testament of how God's people can be unfaithful to Him. The reason for this is because as I read passages such as this, I see echoes of how people in the church behave today, and it makes me cringe. I believe that God is working powerfully through His own people in the churches of the world today, but there are still many people, many congregations and many theologians who talk about God or manage their general wealth and belongings as if nothing had changed since the days of the people of Judea and Jerusalem at the time of Isaiah! And for all our joy at the presence of Christ who enables us to deal with all manner of sin and problems in the church, and the joy of proclaiming the Gospel which has been given to us, it seems as if we still battle some of the same ungodliness today.

Personally, if I were to choose a moment to preach about the 'wrath of God', I would not speak against the people of the world who have had little to do with the church, or do not know the Gospel or the power of Jesus. I would speak to God's people and warn them about the terrible consequences of presuming upon the God they claim to believe in without living the transformed lives and changed characters which are a result of the true work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. There are too many people who think they are Christians and in practice are not; their behaviour is too like that described in this passage. And there are also many people who think of themselves as unworthy of the Lord's name yet who are far closer to the Kingdom, and they need to hear the Gospel and receive the Spirit. Those of us in God's church must read the words of the prophet Isaiah with caution, lest they refer to us!

Questions for groups

1. What does this passage tell us about how God responds to human sins, such as injustice and revelry?
2. How can we apply this passage of Scripture to the world in which we live? How can we apply this passage of Scripture to the church today? What is the difference?
3. Discuss verse 17. What does this verse tell us about how God responds to the sins of the world?

Discipleship challenges

- *Read through a newspaper and see how many articles describe problems in society that are similar to those mentioned in this passage. If God has a plan for this world, how do you think He plans to deal with these things today?*
 - *If you feel that any of the sins alluded to here are things that you have been involved with in the past, then talk to the Lord about them prayerfully, do not miss the chance to submit this to Him*
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Final Prayer

Bring us peace this day, Lord Jesus, bless us with peace, love, joy, hope, and all the good things of faith which sustain us through the ups and downs of life. You are our helper and our guide, and You are our King, and for this, we praise Your Holy name: AMEN

