

Prayer

Save us, Lord, from the evils which are present all around us within our troubled world. Take our eyes away from the world's difficulties, and give us sight of all the good You are doing. By Your victory, may we live in the light of Your love, and in Your strength, may we fight all manner of evil and rejoice in Your triumph over Satan. We pray this through Your name, Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Think back over the past few days and recall the prayers you have said. Have any of them been fulfilled in any way? if so, give thanks to God

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who do not know the Gospel.** *Pray for those who have been brought up to disparage the Gospel and reject the church, especially those who despise the church without knowing anything about it.*
- *Give thanks to God for the blessing of eternal life and the assurance of sins forgiven*
- *Pray for those who entertain us in sport. Pray for the leading sports figure in your country*

Meditation

All around us, dear Jesus, people suffer dreadfully;
You know how to overcome all the suffering in the world,
So bless us now with Your presence and power.

All around us, Lord God Almighty, the world is in decay;
You hold the mystery of life in the palm of Your hand,
So show us how we should save our planet, now.

All around us, Comforter divine, many souls are trapped in sickness;
You alone can transform the broken hearted,
So come to us to heal and liberate the sick.

All around us, Holy Spirit of peace, we see world's brokenness;
You have the answers to all of our troubles,
So break through our pain by Your presence and love.

Father God, majestic Lord of all; show Yourself today
We need You.

Bible passage - Isaiah 54:11-17

- ¹¹ O needy, storm-tossed, and bereft one,
I will set your stones in antimony,
and your foundations with sapphires.
- ¹² I will make your towers of rubies,
your gates of crystal jewels,
and your entire boundary-walls of precious stones.
- ¹³ All your children will be taught by the LORD,
and your children will be greatly blessed.
- ¹⁴ You will be restored in righteousness,
and be far from oppression;

You will not be afraid or be in terror,
for it will not approach you.

¹⁵ Look, if trouble is stirred up, it is not by me;
and whoever stirs up trouble with you
will fall because of you.

¹⁶ Look, it is I who have made the smith
blowing on the coals of a fire,
and producing a tool fit for a purpose;
so it is I who has made
the destroyer to wreak havoc.

¹⁷ No weapon that is made against you will succeed,
and every voice accusing you will fail.

This is the inheritance of the LORD'S servants,
and their righteousness comes from me,
says the Lord.

Bible Study

Review

Our passage today in Isaiah 54 continues a theme of the consequences of the Servant's work described in chapter 53. Earlier in chapter 54, Isaiah used the picture of the barren woman to illustrate the opening out of God's love and compassion to all people, so that the family tent and dwelling place had to be extended (54:1-3). Then he used the imagery of husband and wife to illustrate the close 'covenant' relationship between God and His people achieved through the sacrificial work of the Servant (54:4-10). Now in the verses we have read today, the picture changes to another of Isaiah's favourite themes; the people of God as a city, frequently called either Jerusalem or Zion. For the whole of our passage up to the last verse, the Lord addresses His people (in the singular) as being like a single, unified city, but then in the last verse, the grammar changes and He addresses God's people as a whole with an amazing prophecy which describes them as 'the Lords servants' (54:17). Coming so soon after the prophecy about the work of the Servant, the significance of this cannot be overestimated.

Indeed, as we read through this prophecy, it is clear that Isaiah was speaking about a renewed and revitalised city, and some scholars think that this is simply an idealised picture of the rebuilt city of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. However it is so much more than this, and as you read it, Isaiah does not mention Zion or Jerusalem at all. It is as if Isaiah saw beyond the existence of a mere mortal city and saw something of God's heavenly city, built through His people on earth but only completed in heaven. The reason for this is because Isaiah's powerful vision of a city, previously bereft but now built in precious and semi-precious stones (54:11,12) is prophetic of the new city of Jerusalem come down out of heaven (Rev 21:2). Revelation speaks about a city made from glass 'clear as crystal' (Rev 22:18) and set with an array of precious stones, and although Isaiah's vision is not quite as stunning as this, it is the only prophecy in Scripture that points the way to this great revelation.

The reason why the city in Isaiah's vision is magnificent but not as perfect as that described in Revelation is because Isaiah's city is a prophecy about God's people after the time of the Servant, in other words, about us, His church. We still look forward to the completion of God's new work (Rev 22:1f.) and see some of the evidence of what God will do amongst us now, but it is by no means perfect! The rest of our passage today speaks powerfully about the life of God's people, indeed, in verse 13, they are described as 'taught by the Lord' with a Hebrew phrase which is barely different from 'disciple of the Lord'! In addition, it goes on to speak about the city (God's people) as living in 'great blessing' (or great 'peace' – see translation notes), and with a restored 'righteousness' before God. Neither should the city be afraid (54:14), for whereas the Lord previously disciplined Zion (see 10:5-11 etc.) He has now become their protector! He declares that if anyone stirs up trouble it is not Him (54:15)! All of these pictures remind us of Christian themes of discipleship, healing, righteousness by faith and peace with God. There is no accident to this, because these words are truly prophetic, and have already been shown to be so through the life and death of Jesus and the founding of the church.

The whole prophecy is a song of assurance given to God's people who respond to the work of the Servant (Isaiah 53) and thus receive the benefit of God's love and care. For Christians who feel that they live in troubled times today, such a passage from the Old Testament can be a source of great comfort. It speaks to us about the great faithfulness of God's love for His people, throughout history.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The poor citizens (54:11)
- The city's structure (54:11,12)
- The city's inhabitants (54:13,14)
- The defence of the city (54:15,16)
- The inheritance (54:17)

Notes on the text and translation

V11 *'I will set your stones in antimony and your foundations with sapphire'*

This translation is close to the Hebrew, but it is very puzzling and hard to work out what it means. Technically, the Hebrew word for 'antimony' refers to a mineral substance used as a cement, dark when set, and which shows off semi-precious stones or ornaments inlaid into stonework. 'Sapphire' is a loose term here, and the word probably means 'lapis lazuli', the bright blue pigment famously used by Egyptian craftsmen and made from a mined sodium aluminium silicate.

V12 *'I will make your towers of rubies ...'*

The whole of verse 12 is difficult to translate because the exact precious and semi-precious stones referred to are unclear. The 'rubies' could refer to any of a number of precious stones, 'crystal jewels' is my attempt to translate the Hebrew 'sparkling stones'. Some have translated this 'carbuncles' because of the red-glowing characteristic of this stone. The other word in this sentence which is uncertain is that for 'towers' in the first line (often translated 'pinnacles') The Hebrew refers to those polished stone features of embattlements or walls which catch the light of the sun, making a city visible from a distance.

V13 *'Your children will be greatly blessed'*

The Hebrew suggests 'your children will have great welfare/peace' and the last word here is the famous Hebrew word 'shalom'. It is difficult to create a satisfactory translation using the word 'peace', so because the word is used as form of blessing, I have used the word 'blessing' to convey all we might mean by God's 'shalom' or 'peace'.

V14 *'... it will not approach you'*

The seems strange at the end of the verse, but what it is saying is that the fear and the terror mentioned in the previous line will not come near God's people.

V15 *'and producing a tool fit for a purpose'*

This phrase could refer to a piece of armour suitable for war (as some translations suggest), but the Hebrew is too general for this, and it is best to allow the next part of the poem which is about weapons of destruction, to make its own point.

V17 *'every voice accusing you will fail'*

The Hebrew here is complicated and convoluted, and if it was to be translated fully, it would be something like this; 'all tongues set up against you in judgement you will condemn' Allowing for the colloquial use of certain words, this simply describes the refutation of any legal charge.

Going Deeper

As we study the text further, there is much to look at. The lavish and precious structure of the city (54:11,12), the description of God's people living within the city (54:13,14), God's protection from trouble (54:15,16), and the extraordinary inheritance of God's people who are called 'the Lord's servants (54:17). This vision has spoken to many different people at many different times in history, and that is the nature of true prophecy.

The poor citizens (54:11)

It is Zion, a poor and needy city, that is re-vamped, rebuilt and glorified with precious stones. Isaiah begins the prophecy by describing the city as; 'needy', 'storm-tossed' and 'bereft'. The word for 'poor', is the Hebrew equivalent of the word Jesus used when He said 'blessed are the poor in spirit, for they will inherit the Kingdom', (Matt 5:3). Certainly, Jesus and Isaiah agreed that God's priority has always been the poor, but the other two words here in Isaiah 54:11 will help us understand more about this, and enlighten what

Jesus said in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-11). Isaiah spoke next about those who were 'storm-tossed', meaning those who had endured the consequences of going their own way, just as the people of Israel had done for years before the collapse of their nations (721BC and 597BC). Israel had needed to learn that she was dependent upon her Lord, and dependent upon the work of the Servant; and so in general, we can say that when people realise that their 'storm tossed' distress is a result of their own sinful actions, they are ready to benefit from the redeeming work of the Servant. Next, the 'bereft' are those who feel uncared for or abandoned; and in this case, the whole story of Isaiah demonstrates that God had previously abandoned His people because of their sin, but refused to abandon them forever. Hence, God's re-creative love is for those who are poor, who repent and who know their sin. This prophecy is remarkably similar in tone to Jesus' ministry to the poor and sinners; He was the embodiment of Isaiah's Servant.

The city's structure (54:11,12)

The amazing vision of a magnificent city built with beautiful stones and ornamental splendour is spectacular. Of course, the range of ornamental stones available and the manner in which they were used in building cities was quite different in the past, but archaeology tells us that cities were built with amazing care in ancient times. For example, we know that the Pyramids were finished off and polished to an almost glass-like exterior which would have had a magnificent visual impact; something we can only wonder at today. There is also evidence of the use of all manner of brightly coloured ornamental building material, the like of which we can only imagine. The building of structures has fascinated people since the building of the 'tower of Babel' (Gen 11:1-9)!

There is little doubt that Isaiah's vision reflects all the magnificence of ancient building techniques. Stones 'set in antimony' means ornamental stonework set in a dark cement which brought out the colour of the stonework. 'Antimony' (in Hebrew) describes a material used for an early form of mascara as well as setting stones, so this gives us an idea of how buildings were beautified! The other precious stones mentioned are rubies, sapphires and other crystal jewels (for more information, see notes). One of the interesting features of the text is the reference in verse 11 to a material known as 'lapis lazuli', the famous blue colouring used by the Egyptians and Phoenicians, which is usually translated here as 'sapphire' on account of its colour rather than the quality of stone.

The last line in verse 12 describes the city as surrounded by boundary walls of 'precious stones'. The boundary walls of a city were not usually decorative; their job was to repel all invaders and be impressive. The very idea that they were made of precious stone indicates extraordinary extravagance and the impressive nature of the city's defence; so impressive that Isaiah says that it removes fear (54:14) and secures all its citizens in safety.

The city's inhabitants (54:13,14)

It is amazing that the poor inhabitants of the city are described as 'taught by the Lord' (54:13). One of the complaints of the prophets about the priestly regime that ran the spiritual life of Israel was that the people were not taught about God. Hosea said 'there is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land' (Hosea 4:1); a sentiment echoed by Isaiah's early prophecies (see Isaiah chapter 1). The work of the Servant meant that God would be able to teach the people Himself! In subsequent history, the New Testament describes how the teaching of Christ recorded in the Gospels and the coming of the Holy Spirit was used by God to teach the truth about God. As Jesus said, 'the Holy Spirit, whom my Father will send in my name, will teach you everything ...' (John 14:26).

Isaiah says that the consequences of this new knowledge of God will be that 'your children will be greatly blessed ... and be restored in righteousness' (54:14). The combination of two great Hebrew words in this sentence ensures that we sit up and take notice, and they are 'shalom' and 'righteousness'. We now know that Jesus, the true Servant fulfilled this prophecy, enabling people to find peace with God (Romans 5:1) and enjoy the fruits of salvation, because of 'righteousness through faith' (Romans 1:16,17). These powerful connections with the work of Christ and the faith of the early church as reflected in Paul's letters are not casual. They help us see how the Old and the New Testaments connect, for through prophecies like these we see how God works consistently through history to fulfil His promised work of salvation.

Lastly, in verse 14, we are promised that those who dwell in God's city will have no need to fear. Why should they, when the protection of the Lord is magnificent and beyond description and understanding (54:11,12)? The work of the Servant has dealt with the punishment of sin, even death itself (53:11,12)! Sometimes, we need to read these truths in the Old Testament in order to discover them afresh and so be challenged to take hold of all the great promises of God!

The defence of the city (54:15,16)

The next promise of God is remarkable. The text of the Hebrew is not straightforward, and I suggest you check out my translation against another modern Bible version and read the translation notes. I have attempted to convey in the simplest possible way (and faithful to the Hebrew text), the promise of God that if

there is trouble amongst His people, it is not He who is the source of it! What an insight! We might say that this is obvious, but we do not always behave as if it were so. What the Lord says within this prophecy is that those who stir up trouble within God's people will 'fall', and the word is not used lightly, in view of our understanding of Genesis 3 as the 'fall'!

Verse 16 is a plain matter of logic following on from this revelation, and it tells us that evil will still afflict those who turn away from the Lord. We do not like to think it, but God who has made all things is also responsible for the 'destroyer', indeed, the prophecy speaks of the Lord making him. We should remember that Israel experienced the hand of destruction as coming from the Lord when she was disobedient, so that destroyer is present where sin is present. In other words, we are safe when we place our complete trust in the Lord within the city of our God, but when we fall, the 'destroyer' is still active. The Old Testament rarely speaks of a personified evil as it does here, and Satan, for example, is only mentioned in a few places in the Old Testament (1 Chronicles 21:1, the book of Job, and Zechariah 3:1f.). However, we face a choice whether to accept the protection of God within His city in the spiritually united people of God, or allow ourselves to fall into the ways of the world where we can still fall into the hands of the 'destroyer' (54:16). There is no 'automatic' salvation, even after the incredible work of the Servant!

The inheritance (54:17)

An amazing inheritance awaits us within the city of God. At this point in the prophecy, God speaks to His people as individuals rather than as a group, saying that their inheritance is to be received insofar as they are 'the Lord's Servants'! What can this mean? It is hard to see that it can mean anything other than that after the Servant has done His work, God's people must follow in the Servant's footsteps. They, too, must become servants! There is a powerful connection here between this word of God in Isaiah and the call of Jesus for His disciples to 'follow Him', even to death, and through death to new life! The last sentence confirms our interpretation, for the phrase 'their righteousness comes from me; says the Lord' makes an emphatic end to the prophecy, with the Lord claiming the He alone has done the work which enables this all to be true. He has sent the Servant, and now righteousness is available through Him for all who will accept it from Him.

Application

There is a great deal which we can take from a passage of scripture such as this. The study has frequently made connections between the text and the New Testament, and hence our faith today; and these arise naturally from the text. Of course, Isaiah would not have known how we might respond to these words, but this does not mean that God has not worked through them by His Spirit to inspire us now. We know that the Servant (Jesus) did indeed work for the 'poor and storm-tossed', and that he worked hard to establish a Kingdom, which is another way of speaking about the people of God and their life in this world as empowered by the Holy Spirit. This of course, is none other than the church of which we are apart today, and also the 'city of God' which is being renewed here on earth, but will one day be completely transformed in beauty at Christ's coming again.

Other revelations in the text are fascinating, but the one in verse 15 stands out. The Lord says that we must be aware of where trouble comes from in our midst, and it is not from Him. Too many Christians excuse the differences and divisions between Christians as merely an expression of 'how we are made by God', for example. Frankly, this text is God's way of saying 'not so!' to this. The divisions and the strife existing within the Christian church are not God's fault or a natural function of how we are made. They are a matter of our sin and (or) the Devils work in our midst. This is the natural consequence of this passage, and we should not ignore it.

Lastly, we should take hold of the idea that we have received an amazing inheritance of faith from the Lord by the work of the Servant. It is amazing because 'no weapon that is made against you will succeed'. If we live in faith then this inheritance is not something for us to enjoy, but to pass on with joy and hope. It is an immense privilege.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does architecture say about what we believe? What do our buildings say to the world about us as Christians today?
2. How do people imagine they are 'taught' within the church, and how is it we can be 'taught by the Lord'? Discuss the possibilities.

3. If the city of God is so magnificent, why is 'the destroyer' (54:16) still evident in our midst, and why did God make Him?

Personal comments by author

This is yet another great passage of Isaiah which, I have to confess, I was not really aware of until I studied it for the purpose of writing about it now. Some scholars wince at those who do what I have done in this study by connecting the prophecy immediately with the work of Jesus and also the life and faith of God's people. However, the way in which we naturally read a text such as this cannot be ignored. It is impossible for people of faith not to see connections between this text and Jesus the Servant, as well as their own lives; and the literary analysis of a text such as this and the search for its original meaning is just one part of the way we can explore a text. In the end, what matters is how it affects our lives.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through Revelation 21 and 22 to gain a picture in your mind of the heavenly 'city of God' and let this inspire you visually. Read today's passage again and let the Lord help you see connections between this prophecy and the work of God in His heavenly city.*
- *Speak to a friend in the church about how we can avail of the Lord's 'teaching', and ensure that people feel they are able to access what the Lord is teaching them.*

Final Prayer

All glory to You, God of laughter and smiles, of conversation and happiness. Bless us now in the good things of life, and may we radiate the happiness of those who are at peace with themselves and with You. May we declare with every part of our being that You are the One who 'makes the difference' to our lives! Thank You Lord God: AMEN
