

Prayer

We praise You for Your plans for the World, Lord God Almighty, for they are timely and great, they are magnificent and perfect. We praise You for the good things You have in store for all of us, for You have blessed us with Your Word and given us Your guidance. We praise You for the redemption won for us by Jesus Christ, for You have done all things necessary for our salvation, and the fulfilment of our humanity: We praise You, Lord God Almighty: Amen

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Each time you eat or drink, say a prayer of thanks to God for His provision

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who do not know the Gospel.** *Pray for people who are devoted to other faiths, and whose example of apparent 'godliness' can put some Christians to shame. Pray that people of real faith will be drawn to God's Son Jesus Christ, and pray that our witness to Him will be acceptable.*
- *Praise God for the amazing events that took place after the Resurrection, and thank God for what they mean to you*
- *Pray for the people of Syria, and for all those involved in forming and governing the future of that nation, either for good or for ill*

Meditation

I need your grace, Lord Jesus Christ,
to show righteousness in all I do.

So that I accept the life I have been given
without bitterness or anger;

So that I refrain from being jealous
about what You have given others;

So that I hold my wayward tongue
and refrain from unhelpful petulance;

So that I smile because I mean it,
and not let myself be miserable;

So that I question my motives carefully,
before I judge other people;

So that I submit my frustrations to You
before they rise to overpower me;

So that I give my full attention to others,
And let them know that I hear them;

So that I strive to be a peacemaker,
and demonstrate true mercy and love,

May I become more like You Lord Jesus Christ,
my Redeemer, my Saviour and my God.

Bible passage - *Isaiah 55:6-13*

- ⁶ Seek the LORD while He may be found,
call Him while He is near;
- ⁷ let the wicked forsake his way,
and the troublemaker his thoughts;
let him turn to the LORD so He may show him mercy,
to our God, for he will freely pardon.
- ⁸ For my intentions are not your intentions,
And my ways are not your ways, says the LORD.
- ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my intentions than your intentions.
- ¹⁰ For just as the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return there
until the earth is watered,
making it sprout and bear fruit,
giving seed to the sower
and bread to the eater,
- ¹¹ so it is with my Word
that goes out from my mouth;
it does not return to me empty,
unless it has achieved what I require,
and been successful in what I sent it to do.
- ¹² For you will go out in joy,
and be carried along in peace;
and the mountains and the hills
will break in song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.
- ¹³ The cypress will rise up instead of the thorn,
the myrtle will grow instead of the briar:
This will be an everlasting sign of the LORD'S name,
Which will never be cut down!

Bible Study

Review

For chapter after chapter of Isaiah we have followed the tale of God's love for Israel, and we have heard about the astounding lengths to which the Lord will go to overcome the rebellion and sin of His own people and maintain His covenant love for them. Now we know that God has done a new work through the Servant (52:13-53:12) in order to make His covenant love available for all (55:1-5)! What more can be said? Isaiah's core message has been delivered! It is clear to any reader that there are many more chapters of Isaiah yet to come. However, before we read and study them (chapters 55 to 66), and come to discover the further revelations of this great prophet, an amazing summons to hear God's call and heed His work concludes the prophecies so far (55:6-13).

The whole passage we have read today is not merely a summary of God's work as yesterday's passage was, in part. It is a bold conclusion to the work of the Servant, calling the whole world to 'Seek the Lord while He may be found ...' (55:6). It is possible that this prophecy was a 'stand alone' prophecy used by the prophet as required, because it does not refer to any of the specific themes of the previous chapters such as the Servant or the covenant (see 54:10, 55:3). However, its staunch and steadfast call upon all people to listen to God, submit to Him, accept the truth of His Word and live in the light of His will is perhaps more relevant at this point in Isaiah's book of prophecies than anywhere else. The Servant has made the Lord

accessible and a covenant relationship with Him awaits, so this hearty summons appeals to all people, to anyone, to respond to God with an open heart.

It is the general nature of the call to which we respond today, because the passage can easily be understood and used today as it stands and with little clarification or explanation of the Old Testament context. The Lord is still there to be found, and He still calls on troublemakers and sinners to repent (55:6,7). The purposes and intentions of God remain far beyond our comprehension (5:8-9) even though we know much more about them now through the life and witness of Jesus; and the Word of God still achieves what it is sent out to do (55:10,11). God's people have a mission today full of joy and peace for all people, and as Paul eloquently confirms in Romans 8, all creation rejoices at the activity of the Lord God in the world (55:12). God also has a permanent witness in the world in the form of His people, the church, which will never be removed ('cut down' - 55:13); this is because she is herself the Lord's intended, that is, His 'bride' (to use an image from a previous chapter - 54:5).

The power and confidence flowing through the veins of this text are extraordinary, and it is right that a general call such as this should be used to summarise the great 'Servant' songs. According to Isaiah, the Servant does everything necessary to enable anyone to have a relationship with God, so His work is universal and general in nature. Yes, His suffering is explicit and His alone, but the result is universal hope and the universal 'good news' of redemption. It therefore seems logical that the Lord should announce His work generally to all creation, with flamboyance, confidence and style!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- 'Seek ... and find' (55:6,7)
- God's intentions (55:8,9)
- The Word of the Lord over all the earth (55:10,11)
- The mission and the testimony (55:12,13)

Notes on the text and translation

V7 'and the troublemaker his thoughts'

The line is well known as 'and the evil man his thoughts'. I have taken the slightly bold step of translating the Hebrew expression 'man of troubles' as one word, 'troublemaker', because it fits the text.

V7 'for He will freely pardon'

Here, the Hebrew reads 'for He will greatly increase pardon'. In the context of these prophecies and in particular the free nature of God's provision in the first half of chapter 55, it seems appropriate to translate 'freely'.

V8 'for your intentions are not my intentions'

The usual translation of this is 'for your thoughts are not my thoughts ...' so why is there a difference? This is because the Hebrew word 'machabashah' means 'deep thoughts' in the sense of planning and purpose, rather than mere reflection for the sake of it. Our word 'thoughts' does not convey this, but 'intentions' comes closer.

V10 'making it sprout and bear fruit'

This is not exactly what the Hebrew says because the colloquial expression used does not make much sense to us today; this is 'and it bring forth and sprout'. This phrase refers to the fertility of the land roused by water, and I have used a similar English expression which conveys the same ideas and is not too far from the Hebrew.

V11 'so it is with my Word'

I have translated this whole sentence in the present tense as signifying a general principle, rather than the future which might indicate some work of God yet to come. The tense of the Hebrew verb is 'imperfect' which can be translated as either, however, the concept of a general principle fits this passage better because this enables the verse to carry on directly from the previous verse, which also outlines a general principle.

V12 'for you will go out in joy and be carried along in peace'

The word 'carried along' comes from the Hebrew 'yaval' meaning 'to bear along or carry'. This makes my translation correct in all points. It is astonishing therefore that many modern translations (e.g. see

NRSV) incorrectly say ‘... and be led back in peace’, on the presumption of scholars that this refers to the return of the exiles from Babylon! Whilst we may be right that many who returned from Babylon did so in peace, this does not give us reason to tie down a general reference in scripture to being ‘borne along’ to a specific historic event!

V13 ‘The cypress will rise up instead of the thorn.’

Most translation present this the other way round, as does the Hebrew; however, the emphasis is on the positive not the negative, and on the cypress and myrtle and not the thorn and briar. Therefore it is better in English to indicate this by giving them priority in their sentences.

V14 ‘This will be an everlasting sign of the Lord’s name ...’

Many translations vary considerably at this point because the Hebrew could be translated in a number of ways. However, it seems sensible that any translation should connect the last part of the verse with the first, which is what I have done. The replacement of the scrub with forest will be a sign of the Lord’s ‘name’ (that is, His power).

Going Deeper

As we go deeper, we will look at each section of the passage (roughly each pair of verses), and see how this call arises from within Isaiah’s prophecies and also describes the Gospel call of the New Testament. As with yesterday’s passage, this scripture is one that appears to span the Old and the New Testaments. Of course, the people of Israel who first heard it probably interpreted it differently to us, and Isaiah Himself may not have known the full potential of His words; but we simply cannot pretend that God’s Word is limited in time so much that we must only read it with the eyes of the ancients, and not our own.

‘Seek ... and find’ (55:6,7)

The direct call of the Lord to His creatures is to return to Him. The world is a fallen place with sin, death and destruction an ever present enemy. Sometimes, according to the Old Testament, even God has used what seems like evil in order to test His people (as in the story of Job) or punish them for sin (as in the story of the nation of Israel), but only to bring them back to Him if at all possible. However, dealing with sin and evil is not just a matter of defeating an enemy, for although the whole Bible accepts the existence of heavenly evil which affects all people, it is the sin within humanity which God so longs to overcome.

In Isaiah’s day, the call of the Lord to return to Him was always directed firstly at the people of God, the Israelites and Judeans, those who had endured the turmoil of the end of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah and learned that God must be bigger than sacrifices, rules, Temples and commandments written on stone. All the great prophets make this call in one way or another. However the big difference between Isaiah and almost every other prophecy in the Old Testament is that this call to repent is made now beyond the bounds of Judaism to the whole world, because of the work of the Servant. For Isaiah, his prophecy looked seven hundred years into the future, and although a few people in that time perceived the universal nature of his prophecies, most Jews could only interpret it as a hope for a Messiah who would come in person from God to reveal all. Part of their continued sin was that they could not accept the idea that God’s call was for all, not just for them.

Today, the wonderful phrase ‘seek the Lord while He may be found’ (55:6) may be a clarion call for the evangelist and the preacher, but it is a call made not to a congregation who want to hear a good sermon, but to all the people of the world who suffer personally because of their sin. Tragedy occurs if the church behaves like the people of Israel and thinks of this scripture as like a personal memo with the organisation rather than a broadcast to the world! Out in the world today, sin still covers everyone including corrupt politicians and scoundrels, criminal drug abusers, people of all faiths and the obscenely rich. It also affects nice people who have difficulty thinking that they might be involved in anything ‘wrong’ at all; Scripture teaches us and life’s spiritual truths demonstrate that sin is all-pervasive. Fortunately, God’s call is spiritually adequate for all people because it is universal, and the Servant has taken the punishment for all sin in His own death. All we have to do is accept this and follow Him.

God’s intentions (55:8,9)

The struggle the Jewish people had for the centuries before Christ is testimony to the difference between human thinking and God’s thinking, for despite having the evidence of Isaiah’s work, they did not perceive its good news until the coming of Christ, and then only a few were able to make the connection.

Our text uses the graphic ‘picture’ of earth as a disc set in a vast cavern of the heavens to illustrate the magnificent panorama of the world available to God. This enables Him to survey the whole world in time and space and operate His plans for the good of all, even if individual people or individual nations cannot see this greater vision of things from their place on earth. Israel had been punished and after the Exile would return

to Jerusalem and try to rebuild her nation, but the damage had been done; her work of being a light to the nations (42:6, 49:6) had been taken away from her and given to the suffering Servant. She failed to see this, and languished for centuries.

Most Bible versions translate verse 8 'for my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways.' Unfortunately, the way we think about things is that 'thoughts' generally means 'musing about things'. It is perhaps an illustration of the gap between us and God that the Hebrew word used here in Scripture is more about plans and decisions rather than preliminary 'thinking'. The fact is that God runs His world according to a plan which is unseen by us. The only part of it we see with clarity is that part which has been made visible to us, and this is the work of the Servant as prophesied by Isaiah and performed by Jesus Christ in real history. However much we would like to think that we can understand the things of God, He is far greater than us, and His plans for the world are His and His alone. Only two things are possible for us, to accept that which has been shown to us and done for us, and to be ready for what the Lord calls us to do (which includes being ready for His coming again!)

The Word of the Lord over all the earth (55:10,11)

Verse 10 and 11 are slightly longer verses which form the centre of this great call of God in Isaiah. The prophecy continues with the theme of the heavens and the earth introduced in verse 9 to illustrate one other permanent aspect of God's revelation which is discernable in the world. Just as the seasons come and go and the agricultural processes cycle around year after year, God's message and invitation are conveyed around the world with predictable regularity and with certain results. 'So it is with my Word that goes out of my mouth; it does not return to me empty, unless it has achieved what I require, and been successful in what I sent it to do.' (55:11).

In the Old Testament, this astounding prophecy cuts like a knife through Israel's sensibilities. God's Word is not confined to prophets or to the greats of the past like Moses. It is alive and active, doing great deeds in their midst according to plans they do not understand or know. Today, this powerful call is well known amongst Christians who use it together with similar phrases from the New Testament (such as Ephesians 6:17 and Hebrews 4:12) to describe the power of God's Word in all its forms. The written Word in Scripture, the preached Word, the revealed Word and Jesus the Word of God; these all work together in harmony to make up God's effective presence in the world today.

The one unique feature of this text is the promise of God it contains, which is that God's Word does not 'go out' and then 'come back' empty! Many presumptions have been made over the years about schemes and plans and the effort put into them by scholars, church officers and pastors. Sometimes, people believe that merely by doing evangelism or bearing a witness in the world, the Lord will necessarily use this and it will be successful, even if it is not seen. This passage appears to suggest that God will do something with His Word, even if it is hidden from us. That is unfortunately not what is said, however. The truth is that people sin, and Christians do get things wrong sometimes. We should not assume that God will just 'pick up the pieces' of our mistakes if we have sinned. His Word goes out according to His plans and fulfils His will, not ours. Our work must be to remain in tune with the Spirit of God, not to think up new things for the church to do.

The mission and the testimony (55:12,13)

If, however, our lives are lived spiritually close to the Servant, and in tune with the will and the plans of God, then the Lord provides us with evidence that we are doing what is right, through harmony with the Creation! Speaking not of the Word, but of His people, God says through this prophecy, 'you will go out in joy and be carried along in peace.' (not 'come back' – see notes), and then says that the evidence of this will be the joy and applause of nature; the mountains and hills will 'break into song' and trees will 'clap their hands'!

This vision is of course poetic, but it is also a spiritual vision which indicates that when we are in a right place before God, then the Lord will confirm this through the natural world in which we live. It may sound a little far-fetched, but many have testified that when doing God's work, they have been supernaturally blessed by the elements, or by other forms of unexpected provision which they can only account for by divine grace. The picture of the hills and trees of the countryside rejoicing in the journeys of God's people when going about His will come from ancient times and must surely have encouraged the people of Israel as they returned from exile; but the spiritual truth of this vision has a deeper significance for us.

Indeed, the Lord says (verse 13) that such testimony is a permanent sign of 'His own name', a phrase meaning His power at work in the world. It is an ongoing truth for God's people that the testimony of God's provision remains the irrefutable evidence of God's blessing and the presence of His power to do and achieve His will.

Application

The call of this passage is a powerful summons to God's people today, both to respond to the Gospel of salvation, and also to submit ourselves to God's ways so that He can work through us to declare His Word to the rest of the world and bring us the spiritual contentment of knowing that we do His will. I have attempted to encapsulate the general teaching of this prophecy within this last sentence so that we can see the way in which the whole message holds together.

Looking at the whole prophecy, God's intention is to bring us to a place of peace with Him through the redeeming and saving work of the Servant, who is Jesus Christ our Lord. However, God's plans for us do not stop there. His will is that we become immersed in His work and become a part of the spreading of His Word throughout the world, and unless we do this, our souls will remain unsatisfied. A relationship with God is not a once only event, but an ongoing partnership in which we become wrapped up in the things of God and find fulfilment in this. Too many people within the church have been fed a Gospel which says 'come' but does not offer a full salvation, either by not preaching the full Word of God about redemption in the first place, or by winning souls and then leaving them without vision or help to become fully involved in the things of God. For us all, it is only when we are fully involved in the furtherance of the Gospel and the extension of God's Kingdom that we will feel complete, and no-one should make us feel that we are unworthy of this a call. The Lord has sent His Word to us, and when we fully respond, it does not return to Him empty!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How can the challenge of this text be met individually or by the church as a whole?
2. Discuss within your group what you believe to be God's plans for the world, and for His church.
3. To what extent do people share experiences of God's provision within your church, and how can you help this take place?

Personal comments by author

This is another of Isaiah's incredibly important passages, and more than any other, it leaps from the pages of the Old Testament and illuminates our lives today. One of the features of the prophecy is the heavy reliance on imagery from nature; rain and snow, sprouting and bearing fruit, and mountains and hills singing to the applause of the trees! This is a challenge for all Christians to see their faith in a wider context, for the state of our world and the condition of our planet does not exactly 'sing for joy' to us today. Nature is delivering a firm message not just to all nations to sort out how people can live on the planet, but to the church to be conscious of the whole of God's created world and how He works through it.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through the whole of chapter 55 again, and see how the whole chapter holds together. Check out in your own mind where you stand with the 'good news' which lies behind this great chapter of Isaiah.*
 - *Pray for all who struggle with their faith, for one reason or another. You may well know some within your family who are unwilling to express faith because of how others will react. Ask the Lord to help you be a channel of the true Word of God to all you meet, and pray that through faithfulness, it does not return to Him empty!*
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Final Prayer

It is through Your Passion, Lord Jesus Christ, that You showed how much You love and care for us. We know that You understand us, even if we do not always understand You; so forgive us our lack of insight, and inspire us to firmer faith and greater things. Thank You for all You have done for us, Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour, Redeemer and Friend. AMEN
