

## Prayer

In all I do this day, I praise Your Name, O Lord. When life is unrewarding, I will praise You by being faithful, when life is difficult or hard, I will praise You by my persistence, when life is wearisome, I will praise you through a cheerful smile. I will do all these things and more, because Your Spirit is with me: thank You Lord: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

*(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)*

### Prayer ideas

*Reflect on the many prayers you have said in the last week, and ask the Lord to show you His answers to your problems.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for God to forgive his people their sins.** *Pray about the sins of Christians in the past: confess to the Lord the damage caused by Christians fighting each other, and fighting others. Ask the Lord for forgiveness, and pray that future generations will learn the true lessons of Christian love.*
- *Praise the Lord for the beauty of flowers and butterflies, and other natural wonders in the world.*
- *Pray for the people in southern USA who are struggling to come to terms with the devastation of typhoons.*

## Meditation

How glorious, Lord Jesus;

For in deepest despair, we may turn to You  
and find hope again at the foot of the Cross.

In life's hardest struggles, we may stand  
and take hold of the whole armour of God.

In work's toughest challenges, we persevere  
and find inspiration in Your example.

In the midst of the greatest tension, you hold us firm  
and offer us Your presence and Your peace.

In disastrous situations, we may find Your pathway  
and walk it into liberty and freedom!

And in our spirit's yearnings, in all life's circumstances,  
You have more love for us, forever and ever ...

How glorious, Lord Jesus; we praise You!

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 56:9-12

<sup>9</sup> Every beast of the field,  
Every wild animal of the forest,  
come and devour!

<sup>10</sup> His watchmen are blind,  
they are all ignorant;  
they are all dumb dogs,  
unable to bark;  
dreaming, lying down,

- enjoying their sleep.
- <sup>11</sup> But the dogs have a formidable appetite,  
And do not know when they have had enough.  
And these are the shepherds  
who have no discernment;  
They have all turned to their own way,  
everyone for their own gain  
and their own ends.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Come on,' they say, 'let me get wine;  
let us get drunk with liquor.  
May tomorrow be like today,  
But greater, and more in abundance!'
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## Bible Study

### Review

This is a relatively short passage of Isaiah; one you may not have read before, and if you have read it, you may not have stopped long to consider what it means. It comes as something of a shock after the wonderful and uplifting passages of scripture we have just read, which describe the redeeming work of the suffering Servant (52:13-53:12) and begins to explain the nature of the new community of God's people who will come into being because of that work (54:1f., 55:1f. etc.). Although our passage is short and we can easily understand something of its critique of 'watchmen' and 'shepherds' who do not know what they are doing and live for their own interests and desires', we are left asking what is going on in Isaiah's prophecies? Why do we appear to be back where we were at the beginning of Isaiah, reading a prophecy criticising the leaders of God's people again, just as we found in the early chapters of Isaiah!

The conclusion of modern scholars who limit their view of this text to the return from exile, is that this passage simply represents their failure. When the exiles attempted to rebuild Jerusalem they had great difficulty; the walls were not complete, dogs and wild animals roamed the city, and those who should have been doing the work to rebuild the walls were looking after their own needs, not that of the community of God's people. You can read a story similar to this in the first few chapters of Nehemiah. Jews of that time may have been entitled to read the prophecy this way, but I suggest as with yesterday's passage, that the prophecy goes beyond this to speak about the general condition of God's people and indeed the world, but after the time of the real suffering Servant, who is Jesus Christ.

Our passage therefore provides a general comment on the condition of humanity, and it also comments on the way in which sin as a whole affects God's redeemed people. The question is pertinent because it tells us what happens when people do not hold fast to the Sabbath and covenant commitments asked for by God in the opening verses of this chapter. In this way, Isaiah forewarns us about the way in which the new covenant people of God will be led astray. In addition, the awful description of sin and evil within this text is in fact quite different from the general criticism of God's people and their leaders found in the early chapters of Isaiah. At the beginning of Isaiah, his concern was religious unfaithfulness and injustice (see Isaiah 1 and 2, and most of the prophets Amos and Hosea). Now, however, the problem is the basic problem of an inclusive people of God rather than an exclusive one, which is that the 'beasts of the field' can 'come and devour', in other words, there is a route into the community for any evil which wishes to abuse it because it is by nature and call, open.

The passage as a whole identifies a series of problems for God's people, and these problems attack it from the outside and yet affect it deeply. These are ignorance and lack of care on the part of its 'watchmen', lack of discernment on the part of its 'shepherds', and waywardness on the part of all who are concerned for their own affairs, not the good of all.

As you read this section of prophecy, you may also recognise one small section of text, and if you do it will probably be this; 'they have all turned to go their own way, everyone for their own gain ...' (56:11). This sounds remarkably similar to Paul's argument in Romans 3:12, but if you research further you will discover that Paul obtained this idea not from Isaiah 56, but from Psalms 14:1-3 (and 53:1-3 which is identical). I quote; 'They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one; have they no knowledge?' (Psalm 14:3,4). Clearly these words are used in scripture in a number of places to describe the general state of human sin, and these connections support the view that our text today has a wider setting than just the exiles who went to Jerusalem.

## Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- Connecting with Psalm 14
- The devouring beasts (56:9)
- The watchmen (56:10)
- The shepherds (56:11,12)

### Notes on the text and translation

#### **V10 'His watchmen ...'**

*You will find that most translations say 'Israel's watchmen ...' but the truth is that the Hebrew simply says 'His', and the other translators have attempted to help us by defining who this 'His' is, and they have concluded it is Israel. As you read this study, you will find that there are other possible options!*

#### **V11 'And these are shepherds who have no discernment.'**

*Most translations have this, but the Hebrew is not easy. It is confusing, and the choice is between 'ra'ah' (one grazing) and 'ra'a' (evil one) which are so similar that the transposed versions of the words in English are barely different! I accepted the traditional rendering (despite the support of the ancient 'Septuagint' Greek version of the Old Testament for 'evil ones') because the Hebrew word as written is not used to refer to 'evil ones' anywhere else in the Bible, although from a purely grammatical point of view, it could!*

#### **V12 'Come on ...'**

*The Hebrew verb here is a poetic form which indicates evil intent. Some translations simply have 'come ...' but I have attempted to add a sense of this evil intent.*

#### **V12 'but greater and more in abundance!'**

*The Hebrew in the last line contains three words, meaning 'large, excess, even more'. Most translations struggle to find an expression which does justice to this; for example 'great beyond measure (NRSV) and 'or even far better' (NIV). It is like a definition of excess!*

## Going Deeper

We will begin our in depth study by looking further at Psalm 14 and how it connects to our text (and also Romans 3), and then go on to look more fully at the details of what the passage describes.

### **Connecting with Psalm 14**

In order to help us, I have copied out Psalm 14 below, and this will help us see the many connections between our passage and this Psalm:

To the worship leader. Of David.

- <sup>1</sup> Fools say in their hearts,  
'There is no God.'  
They are corrupt, they do appalling things  
and no good is done by anyone.
- <sup>2</sup> The Lord looks down from heaven on everyone  
to see if there are any who are wise,  
who seek after God.
- <sup>3</sup> They have all gone astray,  
and all alike are perverse;  
there is no one who does what is good,  
not even one.
- <sup>4</sup> Will they not learn, those evil doers  
who consume my people as they eat food  
and who do not call upon the Lord?
- <sup>5</sup> They have good reason to be afraid,  
for God stays with those who are righteous.
- <sup>6</sup> You would mock the plans of the poor,  
but they have the Lord as their help.
- <sup>7</sup> O that salvation for God's people

would come from Zion!  
Jacob will rejoice and Israel will be glad  
When the Lord restores His people.

Typically for a Psalm, this ends with optimism and a call for salvation to 'come from Zion'. However, is it just possible that a well known psalm such as this (as indicated by the fact that it is repeated word for word in Psalm 53) could have been in Isaiah's mind as he was given the prophetic message we have read today? Isaiah had just proclaimed the coming of the Lord's salvation by explaining the devastating but effective work of the Servant (52:13-53:12), but many of the features of his plunge into the depths of depraved humanity in today's passage are to be found within the psalm as a whole. The psalm refers to appalling and ignorant deeds and foolishness, the lack of direction in people who prefer to go their own way without God; evil doers who 'consume my people ... and eat food' and the mocking of God.

One suggestion is that all Isaiah had to do was to add the images of the watchman and the Shepherd to Psalm 14, and most of the elements within the prophecy would be set in place! Of course, we can never know the exact process by which the Lord reveals His will to the prophets, but we are entitled to spot these connections and see what the Lord might say to us through them. It is even more significant when we discover that Psalm 14 together with a later section of Isaiah (59:6-8) are quoted by Paul in Romans 3:10-18, when explaining the general nature of sin throughout the world; 'there is no one who is righteous, no, not one ... all have turned away ... they do not know the way of peace, there is no fear of God'. The pedigree of our text in scripture is that it stands together with other texts which speak to our hearts about the general problem of sin in our world, and that if we look at it simply in terms of the Jews of the exile we will miss much of its prophetic value.

### ***The devouring beasts (56:9)***

There is a considerable body of texts in the Old Testament which use the image of the 'beasts of the field' as pictures of the abandonment of God's laws (e.g. Lev. 26:22, Deut. 28:26, 32:24, 2 Kings 17:25), and this is what we are presented with here in verse 9. With great power, Isaiah's prophecy warns God's people that they are open to attack. The new Kingdom of God on earth, the new Zion, is a vulnerable city, being built, but not yet complete. It has more in common with the incomplete Jerusalem of the days of Nehemiah (see Neh 4:10f.) than the perfect and finished Temple project of King Herod which Jesus saw in Jerusalem, and is therefore open to attack. There is also some evidence in scripture that the term to 'eat flesh' means to attack and destroy (see 2 Kings 9:36, Ezekiel 39:18, Micah 3:3), and this adds to the sense of foreboding within this verse. We will have to wait further for Isaiah to reveal the Lord's protection for His people against such attack (see 60:1f.), but the rest of our passage tells us something about the beasts that have ravaged God's people.

### ***The watchmen (56:10)***

Earlier in Isaiah, we read about watchmen who faithfully carried out their task, announcing the coming of the Lord (21:6f., 52:8), and this figure will appear again (62:6). These other references are to watchmen who do their job, but here in our passage they do not. Isaiah likens them to ignorant, dumb dogs, a considerable insult to come from a Jew! Moreover, they cannot perform their task because like an ineffective guard dog, they are 'unable to bark!' They prefer sleeping whilst there is trouble all around, instead of alerting God's people to the dangers all around. There is one brief addition to this appalling picture, and this is the rather disgusting fact that these dogs, whilst sleeping on the job, consume a disproportionate amount of food; they 'do not know when they have had enough.

This is a picture of self-satisfied leadership amongst God's people. The picture of 'blind watchmen' painted by Isaiah may even have inspired Jesus' cry to the Pharisees; 'blind guides; blind leaders of the blind!' (Matt 15:14, and Matt 23:16f.). When Isaiah says that they are 'ignorant', this is not a general comment on their state of mind, but the root cause of their ineffectiveness as watchmen for the church. They do not know what they are looking for. As with the Shepherds (see next section) they have no discernment to know the difference between good and evil, or even to know what is salvation and what is not. Instead of looking after the needs of the community and performing their function, they lie consuming provisions and meeting their own needs!

### ***The Shepherds (56:11,12)***

The picture of poor leadership flows over into the classic figure of the pastor, the 'Shepherd' (56:11) who has no 'discernment' and cannot therefore show the sensitivity required of his office. It may be characteristic of sheep to go their own way in order to search for food, but true leadership is lost when the Shepherds behave in the same way as the sheep beyond the fold, pursuing their own 'way', their own 'gain' and their own 'ends'. Unless those with pastoral care exhibit a better and more disciplined life than this, and act in shepherding their sheep according to their own knowledge of God and example of faith, then they do not deserve the title 'Shepherd'. Incidentally, the use of the word 'shavah' meaning 'to turn' in the phrase 'they

have all turned to go their own way' is linked with decision making; people either turn to God or away from God, and this is the heart of the matter. Pastors motivated by their own needs will not, by definition do God's will, for their eyes are looking in the wrong direction.

The last part of our passage is found in verse 12 which describes the appalling end of those who go their own way. They become consumed by meeting their own perceived needs, and this is exemplified by drunkenness and the endless consumption of liquor, and the illusion that whatever the consequences, tomorrow and the next day will be the same; and the only state capable of generating human happiness is inebriation.

In describing the text in this way, I have so far refrained from making too much comment about what the text says, and have not connected this to the experience of God's people today. I shall do this in the application, but the power of this text lies precisely in its ability to make us wince, and wonder whether we, or any we know in church leadership, have fallen into the awful selfish human presumptions described in this text. Without a doubt, this is all designed to shock. On the one hand, Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 56 calls us to stand firm and hold on to being a covenant community of God's people who are faithful to Him through worship and service; and on the other hand, Isaiah paints the blackest of pictures about the consequences of letting our guard slip. For if we fail to protect our community, by God's grace, against the evils of this world which pull people into selfishness, then we invite the severest troubles into our midst. Isaiah saw as no one else did, that the new covenant people of God, the church of God, would face serious trouble even though it would possess the great gift of the Gospel, and we will discover more about this in the coming prophecies. In the light of the state of the church in our age, we have to say he was right.

## Application

It is almost too painful to try and make connections between the passage we have just read and the life of God's people today. One theme I have not addressed in detail is that although the Shepherd is the figure of the pastor, we should not think just in terms of church leaders. General scriptural teaching tells us that although we have pastors in our church for our help and guidance, all of us who follow Christ have pastoral, shepherding duties to perform with respect to the rest of the world. In other words, we cannot just point the finger at others in the church; we must consider ourselves in the light of this text.

Having said this, it is worth saying that it would help the church to be analytical about its past and attempt to see how much the problems of ignorance, selfishness, lack of discernment and social evils such as alcoholism have hampered the life of God's people. If we can be level head about this and accept that not everything in the life of the church is perfect or untouchable, then we may find answers that will help the present generation avoid these problems. Many people today have a degree of optimism about what is happening in the creating of new expressions of church in our midst. However, because the church is essentially open to all, Satan will find ways of entering what we do and if our watchmen and our Shepherds do not know what he is up to then he will disrupt the work of the Kingdom. This is not to diminish the power of God to do His work, but to expose the weakness of our human response to that work, which can lead to difficulty.

The church needs to know its Saviour, and to know its Scriptures which tell us God's Word about all we need to know in order to be His people and interpret the Kingdom in our own times. Our passage today tells us no more about sin and trouble within the church than we can find from Paul's letters about the works of the flesh, for example. The fact that it is said here in this part of Isaiah in this way is nevertheless shocking.

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## Discipleship

### *Questions (for use in groups)*

1. Who are the watchmen in the life of your church community, and to what extent are all God's people 'watchmen'?
2. Who are the Shepherds in the life of your church community, and to what extent are all God's people 'Shepherds'?
3. How do you react to this passage of scripture and its message? Do you think it addresses us today, or should its meaning be limited to the people of Israel?

## **Personal comments by author**

*This is quite a challenging passage. Speaking about problems is always challenging because identifying problems is always difficult, but the exercise must be done. It would be easier to suggest that Isaiah's words were for the people of Israel many years ago, and then it would be hard to find a way to suggest that they might have something to say to us. Personally, I reject such a way of dealing with scripture, or indeed literature. I am deeply concerned that many who set up churches and experiments in church today are not fully aware of the pitfalls which are identified in scripture, in relations to leadership in particular and the life of God's people in general. Too many ventures fail, and we excuse this by saying 'God blessed that for a season'. I doubt it; God wants His church to be everlasting.*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *The issues today are about the life of the church, so the best way to find a discipleship task is firstly to discuss this passage with someone else, and then see if the text can inspire any specific action to protect God's people.*
- *Pray for those who may feel under condemnation when faced by the piercing light of scripture. If you are aware of people who are struggling to live a godly life commensurate with their church role, then seek to help them.*

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## **Final Prayer**

I trust You, Lord Jesus; guard my faith so that I do not compromise my soul. I hope in You, Lord Jesus; protect my feelings so that I do not wander from the path. I love You, Lord Jesus; heal my heart so that I do not lose my strength. Complete Your work in me, Lord Jesus, for Your eternal Glory. AMEN

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