

Prayer

All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for You have shown us light instead of darkness, peace instead of strife, joy instead of sorrow, love instead of hatred and trust instead of fear. Open up our lives to the enormous possibilities of our spiritual walk with You, through Your compassionate and powerful agent of grace, the Holy Spirit. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Speak to the Lord out loud. Listen to yourself as you speak, and ask yourself whether you put on any special 'voice' for God; if so, what is this voice and why do you do it?

On-going prayers

- **Pray for God to forgive his people their sins.** *Pray that God will forgive His people their disunity, and pray that they will be ready to hear the consistent Word of God that their divisions are not God's will.*
- *Pray for those who work at sea, and face the ever present perils of the oceans.*
- *Praise the Lord for the beauty of flowers and butterflies, and other natural wonders in the world.*

Meditation

Show us who You are, Lord God;
Reveal Yourself, in unambiguous truth.

Through creation, reveal the ingenuity of Your Spirit;
Through salvation, reveal the integrity of Your will;
Through forgiveness, reveal the brilliance of Your love;
Through healing, reveal the extent of Your compassion;
Through righteousness, reveal the justice of Your will;
Through guidance, reveal the wisdom of Your counsel;
Through insight, reveal the true vision of Your eternity;
Through power, reveal Your awesome control;

Show us who You are, Lord God;
Let there be no misunderstanding.

Bible passage - Isaiah 57:1-13

- ¹ The righteous man perishes,
but no one takes it to heart;
Loyal people are removed,
while no one understands.
For when facing evil
the righteous man is taken away:
- ² Those who walk in uprightness
should go in peace
they should die upon their beds.
- ³ But as for you, come here,
you children of a sorceress;
offspring of adultery, you commit prostitution!
- ⁴ Whom are you mocking?

- Against whom do you sneer
and stick out your tongue?
Are you not children of rebellion,
the offspring of deceit?
- ⁵ You inflame the gods,
under every green tree;
You who murder children in the valleys,
under the clefts of the rocks?
- ⁶ Your place is amongst the pebbles of the ravine;
they, they, are your lot;
Also, you have poured out an offering to them,
you have brought a grain offering.
Shall I relent for these things?
- ⁷ You have made your bed
on a high and lofty mountain,
And you also went up there
to offer up a sacrifice.
- ⁸ Though you set up your memorial
behind the door and the doorpost,
You deserted me,
When you went up onto your expansive bed;
You have made a covenant with them,
because you loved their bed,
and you have seen their nakedness.
- ⁹ You reached arousal using oil,
and added your perfumes;
You continued your writhing, on and on,
even down to Sheol.
- ¹⁰ When you grew weary from your many ways,
you did not say, 'It is useless.'
But you found your desire increased,
and you did not weaken.
- ¹¹ Whom did you dread
Or fear when you lied,
Did you not remember me
or give me a thought?
Have I not kept silent and closed my eyes,
so that you would not fear me?
- ¹² I will declare your righteousness and your deeds,
but they will not benefit you.
- ¹³ When you cry out,
Be delivered by your collection of idols!
The wind will carry them off,
a breath will blow them away.
But those who take refuge in me
Will take the land and inherit my holy mountain.

Bible Study

Review

It is with great trepidation that I present you with this text from scripture and offer these comments upon it. Without doubt, this is the hardest and most difficult passage of our studies in Isaiah so far, because as you will have already seen, the language is that of someone who is furious and very angry. Secondly, it clearly refers to the worship of pagan gods and likens this to adultery; and in places, it uses sexual imagery of an explicit nature (e.g. 57:9), and it is shocking for us to read about such things in scripture. In this study, I will

attempt to explain what is happening in this prophecy so that we can understand why Isaiah spoke and wrote in this way.

To begin with, the first two verses go together and complain about a lack of godly attitudes within society. Isaiah says that people do not take notice of 'the righteous man', or 'loyal people', and when a good person faces evil, he is 'taken away' (57:1). Verse 2 continues by making a point unfamiliar to us today, but common in Old Testament times. It stems from the persistent belief that God will bless good people, and the evidence of this is that they will have a long and happy life, and die peacefully in their beds. Indeed, ancient people believed this so completely that if a man died in war or violence, they concluded that he must have been evil to deserve such a terrible death! So you can see that verse 2 is an anguished cry to God; surely it is not right that a 'righteous person' (as in verse 1) should face opposition and evil and even be taken away (by implication, to prison); surely such a person should be able to expect to die peacefully in bed!

Verses 1 and 2 beg the question; who is this about? The answer is this; this is about the Servant. Remember, He was righteous, was raised up before others, but was 'despised and rejected' and suffered appallingly, eventually dying a horrible death to save us from our sins and all according to God's will (52:13-53:12)! With this connection, you can see that verses 1 and 2 are a cry to God exclaiming how terrible it is that no one 'takes to heart' or 'understands' the work of the Servant; indeed, what happens to Him seems totally unfair! In his prophecy, Isaiah shows irritation and anguish at people who pay no attention to what God does through His Servant even though He has died to save them from sin. They not only refuse to accept the Servant's work, they question why He had to die at all!

It is at this point that Isaiah's prophecy overflows into what can only be described as sheer anguish, if not wrath. In the remaining verses 3 to 13 Isaiah speaks to these people directly; he calls them 'offspring of adultery ... you who commit prostitution!' (57:3). Then, the Hebrew text becomes jagged and emotive, and at the heart of the passage it contains some very obscure language which is sexually suggestive (57:7-10). With a mixture of cutting critique and extremely angry poetry, Isaiah unleashes a terrible series of accusations against those who knowingly reject the Servant, likening their behaviour to those who are addicted to sex! It is not what you expect to hear in God's Word, and understandably, many people find this text very hard. Indeed, you will find that many of the sexual references have been erased in common Bible versions in order to ensure that people are not offended!

Isaiah's prophecy is an expression of outrage at those who reject the Servant when they know what He has done for them; for all God wants to do is to save them! Remarkably, however, God's offer of salvation is always open, and despite the problems, still stands: 'Those who take refuge in me,' says Isaiah, 'will take the land and inherit my holy mountain!' (57:13).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The righteous man (57:1,2)
- Children of rebellion (57:3-6)
- Idolatry (57:7-10)
- The Lord's Word to His people (57:11-13)

Notes on the text and translation

V1 'for when facing evil the righteous man is taken away'

The sense of this verse is governed by the way the translator deals with two particles, small words like 'for' or 'when'; there are only a few in Hebrew and they are mostly fairly flexible. I feel that 'when' best expresses the particles used in the Hebrew here.

V2 'Those who walk in uprightness should go in peace, they should die on their beds.'

This verse is highly contentious. When translated literally, it says 'he goes in peace, they lie on couches the one who walk in uprightness.' Different translators attempt to find meaning within this in different ways, however, the ancient Septuagint, whilst clearly wrong in part of its translation clearly thought that this verse referred to someone's death, saying 'his burial will be in peace.' I have therefore translated this to reflect the well attested belief amongst Jews that a godly and upright person should really die a good death at home in his bed, and not to be taken off as a captive (see previous verse).

V3 'offspring of adultery you commit prostitution!'

This is a surprising translation, but it does follow the Hebrew carefully and appears to be a comment about what the offspring of adultery are doing.

V5 'You inflame the gods'

This extraordinary expression is, I assure you, exactly what the Hebrew says here, but because most translators cannot make sense of it, they find ways of trying to connect the words with pagan worship in some way, for example 'you that burn with lust amongst the oaks (sacred trees)' (NRSV). I prefer to keep this according to the Hebrew and will explain it in the study.

V8 'you have made a covenant with them.'

Literally 'you have made a cut with them.' Which was a colloquial way of saying 'make an agreement', such as a covenant. There is a great deal of confusion in this verse concerning how the elements of each line go together, and you will find considerable variation between all Bible versions.

V9 'you reached arousal using oil'

The implication of sexual arousal is in keeping with everything the prophecy describes here but is nevertheless shocking. The details of why this is a reasonable translation of the Hebrew are complex, but I have followed the Septuagint ('you increased you prostitution...') whose translators clearly believed that the first line was a colloquial reference to sexual activity (see Word Biblical Commentary – John Watts)

V9 'you continued your writhing on and on.'

The Hebrew has 'you sent your writhing far away.' The main problem is that the word for 'writhing' (which is often used in the Biblical text for 'birth-pangs') is also used for an 'envoy'. Because the two words are the same, most translators take the second meaning without question, but the shockingly sexual nature of the verse has already been established – see notes.

Going Deeper

I hope you will read at least some of the translation notes in order to understand what is happening here in this passage of Isaiah. The text is difficult because of its emotive nature and the sexual innuendo, and it would be easier to thin this water down as most Bible versions do. One powerful reason why I have not is that the most ancient Greek version of the Old Testament in our possession, the Septuagint (translated in the second century BC), clearly understands that what Isaiah said was sexual in nature. It was and is shocking, but sometimes the truth is shocking, especially when people who claim to be religious reject what God has done in Christ (the Servant).

The righteous man (57:1,2)

The general theme of these verses is explained above, where I have interpreted the 'righteous man' as the Servant because this fits with the flow of Isaiah's prophecies. Behind this, however, is Isaiah's keen ability to perceive human behaviour, and God uses this to make some important points. Isaiah saw in his own day as we also see today, that good and godly people who are righteous and do good are not necessarily loved or welcomed by the world. People will often shun those who are a good example, and those who are loyal in their work place or in public affairs are often not appreciated. Perhaps it was whilst reflecting on this that Isaiah was inspired by God to understand the eternal truth that the Servant had to suffer if He was to do God's work of righteousness.

Nevertheless, what riles Isaiah here is more than this, it is the fact that even when God has provided an example of righteousness and loyalty, people will still not 'take it to heart' or 'understand' (57:1). The people of Israel who came back from exile tried hard to rectify the errors of their fathers (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah) but they struggled to overcome the spiritual and practical obstacles placed in their way; so they would have understood something of Isaiah's message. Now that Jesus has fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy of the Servant, the problem persists; people still hear His good news and say 'no thanks!' Jesus has died as a righteous man for all people, but only some accept this love of God, and others do not 'take it to heart'. If we have ever been frustrated because people persistently turn away from the love of God, then we know the sense of spiritual frustration which welled up within Isaiah. He had declared what God would do through His Servant, so why would people not believe His message of love for all the world, and His suffering which removes all sin (see Isaiah 53)?

Children of rebellion (57:3-6)

Isaiah rounds on those who reject the Servant and continue to worship other gods. He spoke according to what he saw in his day, but Isaiah's words stand as scripture and as a challenge to those who mock Christian faith whilst being in love with themselves, the world or anything else, religious or not. It is an uncompromising message; the 'children of rebellion' (57:4) exist in every generation because rebellion is part of fallen human nature.

In his own day, Isaiah saw people worshipping the god 'Molech', a god who was associated with people who lived near the Dead Sea (largely the east). The worship of Molech required people to sacrifice their eldest children, hence the awful reference to 'murdering children in the valleys' (57:5). In addition, people still worshipped the Ba'als, the traditional gods of Canaan who were worshipped under 'every green tree' (57:5), a reference to the fertility rites which had accompanied Ba'al worship. It is possible that when Isaiah's anger was kindled when he saw people continuing to worship the Ba'als, for it was Ba'al worship that had led the people of Israel astray in the first place (see Isaiah 1,2 and 5). How could they still do this after being punished by God (in the exile), and how could they do this when the Lord God had promised them a Servant who would take away their sin? Why did they continue to insult God by going elsewhere?

In utter frustration Isaiah said 'your place is amongst the pebbles of the ravine; they, they are your lot!' The expression seems remote to us, but Isaiah was telling people who lived in Jerusalem that their real dwelling place was at the bottom of the mountain and not at the top! Would God relent yet again because of His people's rebellion? But something further was stirring inside Isaiah and about to burst out. The worship of the Ba'als involved sex; a great deal of it and of all kinds. This was because Ba'al was a god of fertility, so in many Israelites towns and cities there were cults of 'prostitution' whereby people would have sex with official prostitutes of the Ba'als as part of their religious observance. The practice is well attested, and spoken about widely in the Old Testament, from the prophets of Ba'al fought by Elijah (1 Kings 17f.) to the terrible experience of Hosea when marrying one of these 'cult' prostitutes (Hosea 1,2,3). Using sex to worship a god is a disgusting thought, and Isaiah turned the whole subject against those who continued to do it (57:7-10)

Idolatry (57:7-10)

People worshipped the Ba'al's on the tops of hills, where in Israel to this day the remains of altars to Ba'al can be found alongside altars to the Lord God on a variety of hill tops. These altars have holes in the ground next to them, in which large poles were once placed as symbols of fertility, and referred to colloquially as 'oaks'. So when you read in the Bible a phrase which speaks about worshipping the Ba'al's 'under the oaks' (e.g. Hosea 4:13, Isaiah 1:30, Ezekiel 6:13), it is almost certain that scripture is alluding to some kind of sex act committed as a fertility ritual at one of the hill tops where Ba'al was worshipped. Here in verse 7, Isaiah mocks this practice, speaking about the hill-tops as 'beds' using the same connection between 'sleeping together' and sex which we make today, and making it clear that such things were done as a form of 'sacrifice' (57:7) in worship.

Then in verse 8, Isaiah is incensed. The same people who celebrate the Passover by marking the doorposts of their houses with the blood of a sacrificial lamb ('though you set up your memorial behind the door and the doorpost ...') were the same people who deserted the Lord God by practicing the worship of Ba'als in such a disgusting manner. They 'went up on their beds' and saw each other's 'nakedness' (a possible euphemism for sexual activity)! Isaiah was furious. The next verse of his prophecy is the most explicit and awful; please read the translation notes for why the text uses terms such as 'arousal' and 'writhing'. Frankly, little needs to be said, except that Isaiah's theme is unrelentingly clear. He is beside himself with rage at the very thought that people continued to deliberately 'prostitute' themselves to other gods. In concluding this section of prophecy, he added in desperation; 'you grew weary ... but ... your desire increased and you did not weaken!' It is disgusting, and Isaiah was intent upon exposing it as disgusting.

The Lord's Word to His people (57:11-13)

At this point, Isaiah's prophecy changes tone, as if an anguished Lord was speaking to these rebellious people; 'did you not remember me or give me a thought?' We should remember that just a few chapters ago, we were reading about the Lord's adamant, absolute and faithful love for His barren and infertile wife (54:1f.) with whom He wanted to make a new family of people who would spread out all over the earth (54:2,3). He had made His proposal, and those who continued to worship the Ba'als had rejected Him! In addition, the Lord was amazed that despite the many times He had punished His people for their sins, they still had no 'fear' of Him; how astonishing, when the Lord had been so forbearing and kind throughout centuries of their neglect of Him (57:11)!

In desperation, Isaiah declared the Lord's forgiveness; 'I will declare your righteousness and your deeds, but they will not benefit you'. In other words, despite all the forgiveness offered, some will always turn away from God! As the people of rebellion were walking away into the distance, the Lord called out to them with a heavy sense of sarcasm 'when you cry out, be delivered by your collection of idols!' There was nothing more the Lord could do; by giving His Servant and offering forgiveness He had given everything. Then, as if turning from rage after its force has gone, Isaiah returned to the safer ground of speaking about God's passionate love; he said, 'but those who take refuge in me will take the land ...'

Application

What an awful journey we have travelled on whilst studying this text! Its power to shock is still apparent even in versions of the Bible that cover up the awful details clearly present in the Hebrew of v9. The question we face is what does this all mean for us? This prophecy is not just about the idolatry of those who choose other gods, but the idolatry of those who know about God's work of salvation and redemption by the Servant, and still prefer their own idols, as if fixed to them like sexual partners. Such idols can be anything, from money to home comforts, and from drinking to anger, or even alternative medicines or sport. They are our idols when they dominate our lives above the Lord God.

The truth is that there may be a few places in the world where gods are worshipped through sexual means, but it is not common. Nevertheless, Isaiah's prophecy and the real history that generated it, remind us of the awfulness of rebellion against God especially by those who know His salvation. In the church today, there are many who like to attend worship, but openly confess that they have their own beliefs about God and do not necessarily believe that Jesus to be God's unique 'Saviour of the World'. Paul warned that Christians would walk in such paths in some of his letters (1 Cor 15:12f. 2 Timothy 4:3), yet still we find it hard to accept that this problem is real. For myself, I have talked to pastors who do not believe in the resurrection or that the Holy Spirit is anything to do with God Almighty; I have counselled people who have been to church for more than half a century and never wanted to accept that Jesus has actually done anything for them at all. In addition to this, I have seen countless people receive the love and grace of God in blessing, but later decide that they don't want it; but they still like the church to be around for their convenience. This may not seem to us to be like the awful sexual misadventures described by Isaiah in this text, but we should imagine what all this feels like from God's point of view: it is constant rejection and rebellion.

God's people are called to act with grace towards all people whatever their circumstances and beliefs, but sometimes, a divine imperative overtakes and we are compelled to speak out against the false belief and presumption practiced by many who give lip service to the church today. Isaiah's outburst was shocking, but it reminds us that sometimes, the Lord requires His servants today to speak out about what the Lord really thinks of those who sneer at Him and turn away from Him, knowing that He is love, and that His Son has died for all.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways can this text be used by the church of God today? What message does it have for us?
2. Does the sexual content of this passage offend people, and is this a good reason to 'amend' scripture?
3. Discuss in your group; why was Isaiah so cross?

Personal comments by author

Frankly, this has been a most difficult piece to prepare and write. It would have been so much easier to avoid the issues and ignore what the Hebrew text says. I am aware that this is largely a matter of interpretation and most Bible versions stand back from the full effrontery of this text. However, all of us who study God's Word must do all in our power to interpret it as it is, however challenging it may be.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If you are aware of people in your church community who have a problem accepting the truth of God's love in Jesus, then pray for them, and ask the Lord how their rejection may be overcome*
- *Fast and pray for God's church, that its witness may be pure and undefiled. Fast and pray for those who struggle to remain faithful to the God who has saved them through Jesus Christ.*

Final Prayer

It is good to know, heavenly Father, that Your Love conquers all. Grant that I might know this truth throughout my life, and that no moment may pass when I lose sight of the victory of Your Love. May I always live for Your love, be guided by Your love, and be judged by Your love, for my life is complete in You. AMEN