

## Prayer

Gracious Lord, You poured out the Holy Spirit on the disciples so that the church might be born in power. Release Your Spirit in my life so that I may be effective in all that you require of me. Strengthen me for this work, and make me an effective witness to Your amazing love and the incredible power of Your redemption. Praise You Lord God, for You are the giver of all good gifts! Your Spirit brings light to my life: Alleluia!

## Prayer Suggestions

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

### Prayer ideas

*Ask the Lord to bless the circumstances of your life; the place where you live, the house you live in, the people with whom you live, the wealth you possess etc.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the stability of the world.** *Pray for the economic stability of the world, and the relationships between national interest and international interest in reflected in the practice of manufacturing and the management of the markets.*
- *Give thanks to God for the benefits of His grace, which You have received.*
- *Pray for people who face difficult health problems today, perhaps those who face operations or radical treatment such as chemotherapy*

## Meditation

What have I done to deserve Your attention?  
yet You are always with me, guarding my soul with compassion.

Nothing I say is worthy of Your ear;  
yet You listen, You hear, and You pay attention to all I say.

Nothing I achieve is worthy of Your praise;  
yet You guide me and strengthen me as I work for Your Kingdom.

Nothing I learn compares with Your wisdom;  
yet You utilise my intellect and emotions to achieve what is good.

Nothing I give matches Your sacrificial love  
yet You gladly receive my praise, and the whole offering of my life.

I know that I do not deserve Your generosity, Lord God,  
but You have given it; and through it, my life is transformed!

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 58:9-14

- <sup>9b</sup> If you remove from among you  
the yoke, the finger pointing,  
and speaking wickedness,
- <sup>10</sup> if you give of yourself for the hungry  
and meet the needs of those who are afflicted,  
then your light will rise in the darkness  
and your gloom will be like the noonday.
- <sup>11</sup> The LORD will constantly guide you,  
He will satisfy your soul in the dry places,  
and will strengthen your bones;

- and you will be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
where the waters never fail.
- <sup>12</sup> Your people will build up the ancient ruins;  
you will raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you will be called 'The Repairer of the Breach',  
'Restorer of Streets to Live in'.
- <sup>13</sup> If your feet return to the Sabbath,  
from doing what you want on my holy day;  
if you call the Sabbath a delight  
and call God's holy day honourable;  
if you honour it, instead of making your own way,  
pursuing your own interests,  
or acting on your own advice;
- <sup>14</sup> then you will take delight in the LORD,  
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
and feed you with the heritage of your father Jacob,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.
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## Bible Study

### Review

Our passage today contains some wonderful verse from which it would be easy to preach. Texts jump out at us, such as '*the Lord ... will satisfy your soul ... and strengthen your bones*', and '*you will be like a spring of water ... where the waters never fail*' (58:11). Alongside this, there is some godly advice about what people should do if they want to receive God's blessings and the benefits of His grace, '*give yourself to the hungry and meet the needs of the afflicted*', then '*your light will rise in the darkness ...*' (58:10). It is tempting to head straight for such tempting texts, but if we are to understand the passage, then we must do two things. Firstly, ensure that we remember the general drift of Isaiah's prophecies at this point in his book, and secondly, take account of the simple and clear structure of this prophecy.

Scholars generally suggest that this prophecy is a form of advice to the Jewish community as they return home from the Babylonian exile. The text appears to say that Israel tries a little harder, stops internal argument and evil speech (58:9), and if the nation returns to keeping the law and the Sabbath (58:13), then the Lord will bless His people again (58:14). Then, the people will not only be renewed as a community (58:11), they will also be empowered to rebuild Jerusalem (58:12). All this seems reasonable, but it does not take account of all we have recently discovered about Isaiah's prophecies.

The passage was most certainly an encouragement to Israel, but there is more to it than that. As we have discovered, the prophecy is about what God will do amongst His people after the Servant has won redemption (52:13-53:12, etc.); it speaks about more than the Jews and the Exile. The immediately previous chapters of Isaiah have told us that the Lord is heartbroken because of His people's continued failure to bear His 'light', even after the work of the Servant. This prophecy therefore continues by offering direct advice for the new people of God, the new Israel now known as the Church. It instructs God's people how to behave (58:9,10), but far more than that, it reveals a far greater and remarkably constant presence of Almighty God (58:11) than was experienced even by Israel, even after the exile. So these are promises for us to claim now, even if they come with some warnings.

The prophecy is split into three parts, verses 9 and 10, 11 and 12, and 13 and 14. The first two verses give a set of conditions for the Lord's blessing; these are to deal with social injustice and evil practices within the community (58:9), notably meeting the needs of the hungry and afflicted (58:10). The second part describes the Lord's subsequent blessings in the form of His presence, guidance, healing and provisions for life (58:11), and the setting up of a new buildings '*on ancient ruins*' (58:12). For the ancient Israelites, this meant the re-establishment of the Temple; but for Christians, this means the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

The third section begins with some further conditions for God's blessing; it cites a return to the Sabbath and the honouring of God's ways, His interests and advice (58:13). To do these things will mean that God's people will receive what He has promised them, a contented relationship, spiritual blessings ('*ride upon the heights of the earth*') and the receipt of Israel's full inheritance (58:14). Remember that these blessings are being promised to all who accept the redeeming work of the Servant. Remarkably, the prophecy ends with

some powerful prophetic words; *'for the mouth of the Lord has spoken!'* (58:14 – see also Isaiah 1:20 and 40:5), this is not a prophecy to be taken lightly!

There is no doubt that Christians should take heed of this advice today, and we cannot say that God's people are without firm advice for godly living! Consistent with the whole of Scripture, we are urged to accept that if we are faithful to what we believe then God will be with us, and He will lead us to confront social injustice and establish godliness. God's blessing await all who will do His will!

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The conditions for earthly blessing
- The earthly blessing
- The conditions for heavenly blessings
- The heavenly blessings

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V10 *'if you give of yourself for the hungry'***

This sounds strange, but it is fairly close to what the Hebrew text says. It means more than merely giving people food, of course (see study). The word for 'give' could also mean 'bring out' or 'promote', and gives the idea of being personally involved in the plight of the hungry in general.

### **V11 *'He will satisfy your soul in the dry places.'***

The Hebrew says 'he will satisfy your soul in the scorched regions', and the best way for us to give meaning to this phrase is to speak colloquially of 'dry places' which still means something like unpromising circumstances, or difficult situations.

### **V12 *'your people will build up ...'***

Strictly, the Hebrew says 'those from within you will build up ...', but this is rather too complex, and it simply a way of emphasising that 'your people' will do the building.

### **V12 *'you will raise up the foundations of many generations.'***

At first reading, the Hebrew appears to suggest that like the sentence before, it could refer to building on the past or raising up a past inheritance. However, the Hebrew poetry could indicate a comparison rather than a mere parallel, in which case it could mean creating a foundation for future generations! (see study).

### **V13 *'if your feet return to my Sabbath'***

This is a poetic way of speaking about returning to God's laws. The Hebrew says 'if you make your feet turn back to the Sabbath', which is an extended way of saying 'if your return ...'

### **V13 *'acting on your own advice'***

At the end of this verse, the Hebrew words mean either 'doing deeds' or 'saying words'. Every translation is something of a guess at what this colloquialism may have meant. I suggest it is something like 'doing what you've said', or as I have eventually translated it in this context, 'acting on your own advice.'

## Going Deeper

Each section of this prophecy has important things to tell us as we delve further into the text. It is relatively easy for us to make a connection between verse 9, for example, and various aspects of human behaviour that a Christian should avoid. However, we need to be careful to interpret properly phrases such as 'your light will rise in the darkness' (58:10), and calling 'the Sabbath a delight' (58:13); and this is the purpose of our further study.

### ***The conditions for earthly blessing***

The beginning of our passage picks up the social justice themes of yesterday's passage, together with the insistence of the whole prophecy that doing good deeds is not some different kind of way of being religious than 'believing in God'. Isaiah would not have understood this false way of looking at religion, for him, being one of God's people meant doing what God said, and it was a clear instruction of the Lord to refrain from fighting (58:9 - see also (58:4), and to put one's efforts into setting people free from every kind of burden (the

'yoke' – 58:9). It is interesting that Isaiah picks up a theme which is also prominent in many New Testament letters, which is that of evil speech, or as his prophecy says 'speaking wickedly'. Out of all the New Testament letter writers, it is James who speaks about the great danger to God's people of malicious gossip and anger (James 3:5f.), but the Old Testament is full of caution against the evils of the tongue (see Ps 12:3, 33:13, Prov 10:31, 17:20).

Probably the most interesting phrase of this part of our passage is the first line of verse 10, which reads; 'if you give yourself for the hungry ...'. Now, it would have been relatively easy for the prophecy to say 'feed the hungry', and connect with the previous prophecy in the same chapter; 'is not this the fast that I choose ... to share your bread with the hungry.' (58:6,7). However, this phrase goes deeper. As the translation notes tell us, the Hebrew expression implies that we are called to go further than merely providing food. It tells us to identify ourselves personally with the poor, and to give of our very souls. In today's world such a challenge may be highly political, and requires commitment from us, but it is the kind of commitment the Lord requires of His people if He is to bless them in earthly things so that their 'light shines' (58:10). This is a powerful word!

### ***The earthly blessing***

We know that the Lord's blessing is coming when the prophecy says 'then ...', and goes on to tell us that God's light will be shown on earth if we behave in this manner; 'your light will rise in the darkness and your gloom will be like the midday'. The one difficulty we may have with this is that it seems as if the Lord's blessing is dependent upon what we do; for if we behave well, then God will reward us. This, however, sounds rather close to what some people might call a 'gospel of works'.

We must always be careful to distinguish between the relationship between good deeds and being saved, and good deeds and the mission of the church. In the first case, no amount of good deeds will make God love us more or less, or make the work of the Servant any more or less effective for us or anyone else. The Servant (Jesus) has done more for us than we deserve, and we are saved by His grace and not by our merit. However, the work of God in the world must be done by our effort, and it is vital that we hear the Lord's call to live rightly as His people, so that His light will be seen on earth (see also Matt 5:14). It is our mission to bring light to the world, and obviously, if God's people do not behave in a godly way, then other people in the world will not have before them the 'light' of the evidence of right living, or 'righteousness'.

The promises of God in verse 10 and 11 are that the light of the Gospel will shine, the gloom will lift from the church, the Lord will be present with His people, meet their need and heal them, and make them like a 'spring where waters never fail.' These are magnificent promises, and we all seek them and long to see them evidenced in greater abundance amongst us. However, as part of the work of God in the world rather than the work of salvation itself, these blessings are dependent upon our controlling our tempers and identifying with the poor, just as Isaiah said in verses 9 and 10. If we think about it, we will realise that the blessings and benefits mentioned here are all secondary to our redemption and salvation, and they are a part of the witness of God's people in the world. It is true that they contain personal benefits such as healing, but even this is part of our worldly witness, and we would be wrong to believe that healing is more important to our salvation than our redemption by Christ, for example.

The last part of the earthly blessings is mentioned in verse 12, which contains something of a dilemma. The verse is about building up the work of God, and this follows on well from what we have just been discussing, but the second line of the verse is unclear. 'You will raise up the foundations on many generations,' could refer to building upon the generations of God's people in the past, or it could mean creating the foundations for the growth of the church to come. The dilemma comes from a Hebrew word used in the verses which means 'continuity', and could refer either to the past or to the future, depending on the context, and the context here is not clear! It may be that God intended this to be so, for both ways of understanding the text are relevant, and 'work'. We are indeed called to build on the foundations of the past, and also, through the Servant (Christ), build in such a way that future generations can continue to develop our inheritance on earth.

### ***The conditions for heavenly blessings***

In verse 13, the prophecy turns to the conditions for heavenly blessing. Again, I do not think this refers to the blessing of our salvation or the redemption of the Servant, but to the on-going relationship we have with the Father through our religious devotion and practice of worship. This is the reason why Isaiah says 'if your feet return to the Sabbath, from doing what you want on my holy day ...'. The Sabbath represents God's holy instruction to all people to rest, and to worship and honour Him through that rest. We are all aware that the worship life of most churches has built a virtual industry of 'busyness' around what we call 'Sunday worship', and I believe there are a whole host of issues which need our attention if we are to purify our worship today in order to honour God. However, this passage teaches us that if we pursue our own interests, ignore God's clear instructions in scripture, do our own thing and act on our own advice, then we will limit the spiritual blessings the Lord is able to give us here and now.

Again, this seems to be a hard message, but it is one that must be heard. In the matter of our salvation and redemption, God is prepared to take the total responsibility for the whole work; but consequently, the life of faith and spiritual devotion places claims on us which we need to attend to, as Isaiah makes very clear. In the church of God we are blessed with many great and holy gifts of God; the scriptures, the great traditions of faith which have borne the Gospel to us (whether we like them or not), and the great body of written work which represents the insight and inspiration of thousands of godly men and women through the ages. Like the Sabbath mentioned by Isaiah, none of these holy things should be ignored. 'God's holy things' (58:13) are important, yet too often today, people are happy to ignore them and assume that they will find their own way irrespective of the foundations laid for them. To walk a pathway closer to oneself risks wandering from the Lord.

### ***The heavenly blessings***

Finally, Isaiah prophesies the spiritual blessings of obedience in verse 14. His words 'take delight in the Lord' surely reflect a secure and confident relationship between the individual and the Lord, and Isaiah has made it very clear that this depends on our giving Him the highest place of honour in our lives. We give Him this honour because He has redeemed us through the work of the Servant, and it gives us the greatest of pleasure and satisfaction to know that the Lord is able to do His will through us. Not surprisingly, we do not easily perceive the possibility of this joy and satisfaction before we commit ourselves to the Lord; but it is the testimony of millions that once we respond to Him, then life takes on new meaning as we work with the Lord to do His will. This is one of the greatest of spiritual blessings, and it is true whatever our family or work commitments. The Lord understands the nature of the life we lead, and He is concerned for the whole of our lives, including our families and our work.

In the last stanza, Isaiah's prophecy says that the Lord will 'feed you with the heritage of your father Jacob'. This, of course, is the heritage of Israel, for Jacob was renamed 'Israel' (Gen 32:28) and was the father of the 'twelve tribes' of Israel. The purpose of this saying is, I believe, to point to the importance of the story of God's people, something which is found in scripture and which the Lord 'feeds' to us from the Bible; God's Word. It is reasonable to suggest therefore that this line of scripture urges us to get to know God's Word and story of His people within it; and the final line emphasises this with a classic call of God's Word from the prophets 'for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it!'

## Application

There are obligations for Christian people to keep, and this passage of scripture contains as good a guide to these as we will find in some New Testament letters! Verses 9 and 13, which warn us about what we must do in order to obtain God's on-going blessings read a little like one of Paul's lists of things to do or not to do in order to live 'in the spirit' or 'in the flesh'. It is observably true that people can indeed respond to the Gospel, receive the forgiveness of their sins through the salvation offered by Jesus Christ and begin the life of faith, and then fall away, lacking the blessings intended for those who are God's beloved. This Old Testament text, together with many other New Testament texts, tells us that once we are saved, we are called to high standards of behaviour and personal life which will be used by the Lord both for the furtherance of His Kingdom and for our personal blessing. It is when we back down from these standards, or we fail to ask the Lord's help when we have difficulty maintaining them, that we fall away both from the Gospel, and from the personal blessings.

It is nevertheless important for us to have our eyes on the good things our Lord promises us, such as the constancy of His presence and His healing power, being a means of blessing to others and people who have the privilege of building up so that others can continue our work. When we look at what Isaiah says here, the blessings he spoke about seven hundred years before the time of Christ speak directly to us today, and this is remarkable. Only the truth of God's eternal Word is capable of spanning human history and culture in such a way. Isaiah's message has been there for people to read for 2,700 years and it has blessed many, and the Lord longs to bless many more.

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## Discipleship

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

1. If we had to create a list of things we should not do if we want to receive the Lord's blessing, what should be included?
2. If we had to create a list of things we must do if we want to receive the Lord's blessings, what should be included?

3. What does this passage say that is relevant to today about the Sabbath?

### **Personal comments by author**

*I think it would be true to say that I have preached on this passage in the past and done exactly what I should not, which was to take the 'nice' bits and ignore its full meaning. I am fairly sure that I will have preached a comfortable sermon about the graciousness of God. Now I think it likely that the Lord uses such efforts, and can make a great deal even of our most ignorant efforts to use His Word. But how much more might He be able to use our preaching if we were to study our texts with care?*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- **Something to do:** Find an opportunity to spend some time in personal prayer, and have a good look at the specific things mentioned in this passage. It may reveal issues you need to deal with, or hopes of blessing you aspire to together with what you need to do to follow the Lord's will.
- **Something to think about:** To what extent do you feel that the things you do are a good or a bad witness to the Christ in whom you believe? Pray about this, and share your thoughts with a friend.

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## **Final Prayer**

Keep us close Lord Jesus, in our families; and through You way may we be close to each other. Save us from the dangers of a world that seeks to draw people apart, and grant us the grace to be loving in what we say to each other and what we do for each other. We pray this through Jesus Christ our Lord: AMEN

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