

## Prayer

Dear Saviour, remind me of what You have done for me, again and again. Show me the bitterness of death You endured and the scars of sacrifice You bore for me, and if I am too proud to look on You, challenge me repeatedly, lest through ignorance self-centredness I lose my way. Give me the grace and humility, I pray, to look at You, my crucified Lord, and know You did it all for me. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

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

### Prayer ideas

*Share your thoughts with someone close before praying. Sometimes the very act of saying something out loud to someone else can help to filter out the important from the unimportant, and the casual from the wise.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the stability of the world.** *Pray for leaders of industries such as Google, Microsoft and Apple, whose products define our generation, and whose stability affects virtually all people*
- *Pray for the newspapers, whose headlines can significantly influence world and local affairs*
- *Give thanks to God for the benefits of His grace, which You have received.*

## Meditation

This is true praise of Almighty God;

to respect His authority as Creator and Lord;  
to accept His grace as effective prior to faith;  
to discipline the soul to His Word and His will;  
to pursue His will with self-effacing vigour.

to declare Him in the world by word and deed;  
to aspire to the high moral standards of Christ.  
to act with compassion towards all people;  
to show love for family, church and world;

So let us praise our Maker while we have breath!

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 59:1-13

- <sup>1</sup> Look, the LORD'S hand is not too short to save,  
nor his ear too deaf to hear:
- <sup>2</sup> Unless your sins have become barriers  
between you and your God,  
and your sins have made Him hide His face from you  
so that he does not hear.
- <sup>3</sup> For your hands are defiled with blood,  
and your fingers with guilt;  
your lips have spoken lies,  
your tongue mutters wickedness.
- <sup>4</sup> No one calls out with just intent,  
no one goes to law with integrity;  
they trust in empty pleas and telling lies,  
thinking up mischief and giving birth to trouble.
- <sup>5</sup> They have broken open snake's eggs,

- and woven a spider's web;  
 anyone who eats their eggs dies,  
 and a viper is let loose from one that is crushed.
- 6 Their webs cannot make clothing,  
 and they will not cover themselves with what they do.  
 Their works are works of iniquity,  
 and in their hands are violent deeds.
- 7 Their feet run to evil,  
 and they rush to shed innocent blood;  
 their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity,  
 ruin and destruction are in their highways.
- 8 They have not known the way of peace,  
 and there is no justice in their paths.  
 They have dug out for themselves crooked roads;  
 no one who walks in them will know peace.
- 9 So justice is far from us,  
 and righteousness does not reach us;  
 we wait for light, and look! Darkness!  
 and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.
- 10 We grope like the blind along a wall,  
 Feeling our way like those who have no eyes;  
 we stumble at noon as if it was twilight,  
 among the strong but like those who are dead.
- 11 All of us growl like bears;  
 we moan repeatedly like doves.  
 We wait for justice, but there is none;  
 for salvation, but it is far from us.
- 12 For our rebellions in your sight are many,  
 and our sins testify against us.
- Indeed, our transgressions are with us,  
 and we know our sins:
- 13 Rebellion, and denying the LORD,  
 and turning away from following our God,  
 Speaking oppression and revolt,  
 conceiving and speaking from the heart  
 words of deception.

## Bible Study

### Review

What are we to make of the passage of Scripture such as this? It begins on what seems a hopeful note, *'look, the Lord's hand is not too short to save'* (59:1), but soon launches into a typical prophetic denunciation of sin, *'for your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with guilt'* (59:2). Up to verse eight, the prophecy complains about the destructive evils found amongst God's people, but from verse nine, there is a subtle change. Isaiah includes himself within the prophecy, and identifies with people who complain that they are not the perpetrators of sin but the victims of it, *'we wait for the light, and look! Darkness!'* (59:9).

How are we to make sense of these verses? In passage after passage, we have had to remember that at this point in Isaiah, his prophecies refer to a time after the Servant has done God's redemptive work (ch53). Uniquely within the whole of the Old Testament, Isaiah's prophecies speak about the relationship between God and His people, after the coming of the Messiah. They remind us that although God's promises have been fulfilled, sin still afflicts the people of God. Redemption is available through the Servant, but people either choose to accept it, or reject it. If God was upset and disappointed when His people rebelled against Him before the coming of His Servant, how much more will He be upset, now that He has given Himself sacrificially in order to remove evil and sin!

With this clear understanding, we can now go on to look at the subtleties of this text. Verses 4 to 8 come in the form of 10 simple Hebrew sentences, each one describing some sin or evil and its effects. The overall

impression is given of a series of teaching aids designed to remind young people about their obligations to be faithful to God and do what is right. Isaiah offers straightforward advice, *'they think up mischief and give birth to trouble'* (59:4), and goes on to prophesy with a mixture of comment and allusion; *'their feet run to evil'*, and *'ruin and destruction are in their highways'* (59:7). In this way, Isaiah warns people about playing with evil and finding that there are unforeseen consequences (59:5,6). Ruin and destruction await those who sin (59:7), a theme found in a number of Psalms (e.g. Ps 10). There is no peace for those who follow such pathways; they go downhill, digging themselves *'crooked roads'* (59:8). This is clear warning against the dangers of sin.

In the last section (59:9-13), Isaiah changes tack again, and this time he identifies with the people. You can see this from his use of the word 'we', repeated seven times between verses 9 and 12. Tantalisingly, he describes the collective consequences of the sins of individuals, which cause people to grope around as if in the dark, as if dead whilst having strength (59:9,10), impatiently waiting for salvation whilst frustratingly aware of sin (59:11,12). His conclusion is found in verses 12 and 13, and it is this; we must surely know that as long as we live on earth, sin remains with us.

The power of this prophecy is immense, because it describes the divine paradox of our condition even today, whilst living after the coming of Jesus. The Messiah has done his work of redemption and we are its beneficiaries, awaiting the time when God will complete his creation and all sin and evil will be finally destroyed. In the meantime, our Lord is always willing to save, but our sin prevents Him from acting; He does not want to withhold His love, but without repentance, our sinful words, deeds and actions prevent Him from saving us.

Remarkably, Isaiah seems to understand for himself something that is true for us to this day. His prophecies have provided God's people throughout history, both before the coming of the Messiah and after, with clear guidance about facing sin and its consequences. God is always in the business of overcoming sin, and if we are defeated, we must turn to Him.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- Seeking what's right?
- The general path of sin
- Sin affects us all

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V2 'That is, unless your sins ...'**

*Most translators avoid this clear and direct translation of the Hebrew here, which enables us to make sense of the whole passage (see study). You will find many Bible versions have 'but your sins ...' and this makes it harder to perceive the nature of what the prophet is saying.*

### **V2 'your sins have made Him hide His face.'**

*The Hebrew contains only three word 'roots' (basic words) which roughly translate as 'your sins have caused a hiding of face' and God is the subject of the sentence.*

### **V4 'No one calls out with just intent.'**

*The Hebrew says 'No one calls out in justice', which does not make sense when translated directly, however, what is meant is that no one makes a call on the services of the law with a pure intent to obtain justice – by implication, they just want their own way (see study).*

### **V5 'They have broken open snake's eggs'**

*Most translations have 'they hatch snake's eggs', but this is not concept of careful brooding and hatching, but rather, the Hebrew verb indicates the violent ripping open of the eggs, letting little snakes loose – it is a poetic picture of creepy disaster!*

### **V8 'They have not known the way of peace'**

*Many translators place this in the present tense, but it is clearly in the past as far as the Hebrew is concerned. This is the prophecies generalisation of the past condition which needs God's grace (see study).*

### **V12 'For our rebellions in your sight are many'**

*There are many different versions of this, but this is the plainest way to translate the Hebrew, using the Hebrew expression 'before You' to mean 'in your sight'.*

## Going Deeper

Clearly, we must go through each section of this prophecy and look at what it has to say to us. I have summarised this above, but there is more for us to discover. We will have to try and understand why Isaiah speaks about snake's eggs, for example, and whether the very different character of the three prophecies means that we need to look at each one in a quite different light.

### **Seeking what's right?**

It is not clear whether Isaiah was speaking to any particular group of people when he delivered the first of these three prophecies, but I tentatively suspect that he was speaking to a group of people around him. The god-fearers of one kind or another, whether Jews or proselytes (those of other races who chose to believe in the God of the Jews). This gives the whole section a rather religious flavour, and when Isaiah begins, what he says appears to answer a question put to him previously, and roughly of this nature: 'How great is the Lord's power to save, and can He deal with any human situation or sin?' You will see that verse 1 follows such a question quite well.

Isaiah's first point is that it is we who are responsible for the barriers between God and ourselves, and we cannot blame anything else. Theologically, we must be talking about the state of those who have responded to the redeeming work of the Servant, for without this, sin's natural barrier is primarily and exclusively the result of the 'fall' (as described in Genesis 3). As we have seen throughout the story of the covenant relationship between Israel and her God, only the Lord could overcome these barriers; therefore, Isaiah's prophecy must speak of the time after the work of the Servant; that is, to us who live after Christ.

In the light of this, Isaiah's words are a little strong; 'your hands are defiled with blood ...'. But although we may react by saying 'surely not', is it not true that all God's people today must surely be concerned that people are dying for lack of food, whilst good Christians across the world both eat well and know about starvation elsewhere? This is not comfortable, but it does at least remind us that we are not in a position to stand before God and suggest that the death and suffering in this world has nothing to do with us and the way we live.

The main problem Isaiah highlights is the issue of justice. He envisions people who go to the law courts without any intention of getting justice, merely pursuing their own ends and for their own interests. It sounds like a picture of what happens in many court cases across the world, but that may not be what Isaiah had in mind. The key words here are those for 'just' and 'right' and 'integrity' (or 'honest'), and they all have strong undertones of morality. I suggest tentatively that amongst God's people today there is considerable injustice, and the relationships between God's people in many a city or village are rarely wholly good (in my experience). There is an enormous amount of antagonism created between Christians by what one church says about another, and such mischief has certainly given birth to 'much trouble (59:4).

This is only an example of what Isaiah was talking about, however, and his general point is that if we who have been redeemed fail to act with justice and right attitudes towards each other and others, then we will certainly build up barriers between ourselves and our God.

### **The general path of sin**

The central section of this passage is more simple, though at first we need to be careful to work out what Isaiah is talking about in verse 5. Serpents have signified evil for centuries, and this is why the serpent is regarded by many as a representative of Satan in Genesis 3. It appears that part of Isaiah's picture language about snake's eggs represents the beginnings of evil, hatched in human thoughts and deeds. Isaiah makes the picture more complex by talking about the eggs as 'broken open' in a violent manner (see translation notes), but his overall point in verses 5 to 7 is that evil begets evil, and once it has been 'given birth' it grows and hurts even more. People do not fully realise what they are doing when they release evil, or that the end result of it will be death; Isaiah says that those who 'eat their eggs' will die (59:5)!

The illustration of the spider's web may be similar, but apart from Job (8:14) there are no other references to spiders in the Old Testament, and no other 'webs' (apart from the plaiting of Samson's hair – Judges 16:13f.!) There is some evidence in other cultures of beliefs about spiders as representing evil, so if this was indeed a belief of Israel in Isaiah's day, then it would be a suitable parallel for Isaiah's prophecy about the snake's eggs. Isaiah caustically says that the intricate weaving of a spider's web will not clothe anyone (59:6) and like works of iniquity, they do not meet human need ('cover them' – 59:6).

Yet from small beginnings, people still rush to do evil, adding one sin to another; 'their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, ruin and destruction are their highways ...' (59:7). Isaiah's picture is similar to that found in Psalm 7:14-16:

See how they conceive evil  
and are pregnant with mischief, and bring forth lies.  
They make a pit, digging it out.  
and fall into the hole that they have made!  
Their mischief returns on their heads,  
and on their heads their violence descends.

Isaiah concludes; 'they have dug out for themselves crooked roads, and no one who walks in them will know peace.' In other words, the example provided by those who have followed evil pathways will not help people. What Isaiah is describing here, according to our understanding of the passage, is the 'way of the world', in contrast to the example of the Servant already made public. Now the Saviour has done His work, the world still prefers to go its own way, and it delivers a moral and spiritual example that few can follow.

### ***Sin affects us all***

Finally, Isaiah speaks with a fair degree of anguish about the state of God's people who are afflicted by sin in their midst, and we read the prophecy in this way because Isaiah includes himself throughout the section (using the 'first person plural', 'we'). He describes the Lord's people as expecting light but still in darkness, groping around as blind people 'who have no eyes' (59:10). This is an uncomfortably close description of God's people who lose their way because of sin established in their midst. The phrase 'among the strong but like those who are dead' is a telling comment on the powerless state of such a church. All the power of God is available to God's people, but because of sin, perhaps selfishness or lack of care for others, this power cannot be accessed and people find themselves on a pathway leading to the death of the congregation.

Isaiah's pictures of sinfulness conclude with the strange description of growling bears and 'moaning' doves. Isaiah will have used these creatures because of their symbolic significance, but it is hard to find out what this could be. Bears are mentioned in scripture a few times, principally as a powerful but protective beast, highly defensive of her cubs (2 Sam 17:8, Hosea 13:8). It may be that the talk of growling like a bear conjures the idea of unleashed power, perhaps indicating the frustration of knowing that power is available but not being able to use it? The 'moaning' of doves sounds strange to our ears because today our positive attitude towards doves in general means we describe their sound as 'cooing'. Doves are mentioned in scripture on a number of occasions however, and although Noah's dove returned to him as a messenger of deliverance (Gen 8:11), there are other occasions when the Bible speaks about the 'moaning of doves' as a picture of longing after something (see Ez 7:16, Hosea 11:11, Nahum 2:7). Here, it is longing for the pleasures of sin

Isaiah concludes by warning that holding on to rebelliousness or sinfulness when we know what we are doing is to 'deny our Lord' (59:13). The awfulness of God's people sustaining sin in any form has previously been the subject of one of Isaiah's most extraordinary outbursts (57:1-13), but here, it is dealt with in sober reality and with dread. Who of the Lord's people willingly 'turns away from following our God, speaking oppression and revolt (against God), conceiving and speaking from the heart words of deception.' (59:13). It is terrible to think that those who know the work of the Saviour and the power of His redemption act in this way. However, the history of the church shows that there are times when they do, and Isaiah was strong enough as a prophet to speak this out by God's grace many years it began to come true.

## Application

There are some hard consequences to what we have studied today. It is easy enough to ignore and cut out the parts of this prophecy which enable this interpretation, and some commentators find ways of treating this prophecy as just another in a long line of prophetic complaints about sin amongst God's people. If this was all there was to these words, then together with all the other prophecies that say the same, we are left with some pretty lengthy and boring prophecies in Isaiah. By taking the view that Isaiah did indeed write these prophecies, and that they do indeed speak about the state of things after the work of the Servant, everything comes to life and we find ourselves able to apply the spiritual truths of the text to the life of the church today.

There is no doubt that the church of God is riddled with sin, and we should not be surprised at this because all of us in the church are on a journey of discipleship and have yet to reach perfection! Of course, God's Word teaches us that when we discover some sin in our lives, the right thing for us to do is to repent and seek the Lord's redeeming forgiveness. However, the truth is that people sometimes choose to hang on to those sins which either give them pleasure (such as sexual sin) or other worldly comforts (such as the

luxuries available to us through wealth). Often, Christian people can persuade themselves that what the Lord has told them is sin does not apply to them. Unfortunately it does.

Isaiah's teaching here is part of that body of work in scripture which warns us of the consequences of going our own way. The points are made already in our study, and we should have no difficulty applying it to our own circumstances. Despite the rapidly changing nature of our world, the nature of sin in our midst is pedantically and repetitively the same, and we need to learn how to stand against it, lest we become frustrated and ineffective as God's people, as Isaiah so pointedly foresaw (59:10-11).

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## Discipleship

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

1. What are the main barriers between God's people and their Lord in the life of the church today? How can they be removed?
2. How can the church help people avoid the pathways of evil, which tend to lead God's people away from truth and happiness? Identify some of these pathways.
3. If we are '*groping our way along a wall*' (59:10) like the blind, why does this happen to God's people and how may we be saved?

### **Personal comments by author**

*I have read these passages of scripture on a number of occasions before, and have a general idea of what I think of them. However, these prophecies challenge me deeply, and as I write, I find myself constantly re-evaluating how I handle them. You will not always be aware of the spiritual journey I have travelled in order to write as I do, but you will sometimes see quite plainly, as today, that the route has been extensive! It is my constant hope that this work will help you explore God's Word in the same way, for we learn by letting the Holy Spirit affect what we think and changing our minds as He leads us. We do not learn simply by reading what has been written.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- **Something to think about:** Reflect for a time on the sins God's people commit together, rather than as individuals. What are these, if any? Pray, and ask the Lord for help to understanding how a group of people might confess to collective sin and repent, so that they may be forgiven.
- **Something to do:** In the course of your day, look out for anything that draws you into something unwise or sinful you would not otherwise do. Offer these situations directly to the Lord and seek His grace to draw you out of such sin.

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## Final Prayer

Jesus, stay close to us ... Holy Spirit, breathe on us ... Father Almighty, take control ... For in You, we are complete. AMEN

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