

Prayer

Open our eyes Lord God, so that we may see You within Your Creation. May we find You in the natural world, where the marks of Your craftsmanship are abundant. May we discover You in the midst of our work, where Your hand is always seeking to guide. May we discern You in our conversation, where You lie waiting to instruct and inspire. Open our eyes Lord God, to embrace our Saviour and Lord, for He is with us, and He is precious. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

if you are used to having your eyes closed whilst praying, then open them. If you are used to having your eyes open whilst praying, then close them. Let God surprise you.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the stability of the world.** *Pray about the difficult issue of the world's many different religions. Unfortunately, these differences sometimes creates cultural and racial tensions that affect the stability of our world. Pray that God's people will truly be a light to all people.*
- *Give thanks to God for his mercy, and make sure they stay that you have confessed your sins*
- *Pray for the newspapers, whose headlines can significantly influence world and local affairs*

Meditation

Don't stand back:

Don't let other people do for you
what God would have you do;

Then you will grow in confidence
as a loved and trusted servant.

Don't let your heart be quickly swayed,
put your life in the Saviour's hand;
Then you will find His powerful love
will give you strength and guidance.

Don't let the devil catch you unawares
keep alert, don't drop your guard,
Then you will curb the tempter's power
and keep the enemy at bay.

Don't let the world be your idol
never serve its wants and needs
Then you will have the freedom to live
In Christ, the Word of God.

Bible passage - Isaiah 59:14-21

¹⁴ Justice is driven backwards,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
because truth had stumbled in the public square,
and honesty is not able to enter.

¹⁵ Truth is now lacking,
and whoever turns from evil becomes prey;

- The LORD saw this,
And it displeased him that there was no justice.
- ¹⁶ When He saw that there was no one,
He was appalled that no one intervened;
so his own arm brought him victory,
and his own righteousness upheld him.
- ¹⁷ He put on righteousness as a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation on his head;
For clothing, He put on garments of vengeance,
and wrapped Himself in a cloak of zeal.
- ¹⁸ According to their deeds,
so He will repay;
wrath to his adversaries,
payback to his enemies;
to the coastlands
He will complete his payback.
- ¹⁹ Then those in the west will fear the name of the LORD,
and those in the east will fear His glory;
for He will come like a rushing stream;
the Spirit of the LORD drives Him on.
- ²⁰ The Redeemer will come to Zion,
to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,
says the LORD.
- ²¹ On my part, this is my covenant with them, says the LORD: my spirit that is upon you,
and my words that I have put in your mouth, will not depart out of your mouth, or out of
the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the
LORD, from now on and forever.
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Bible Study

Review

This passage of Scripture is a forthright prophecy declaring how God will deal with the evil that afflicts the world, and also His own people. Isaiah first spoke these words to the people of Israel, in circumstances far distant from those of the time of Jesus or from those of today. Nevertheless, this is a true prophecy that transcends time, and it was given by Isaiah after he had revealed God's plan of redemption through the Servant (ch.53). It therefore contains a number of key features of the Gospel and it is therefore easy for preacher to find the text from which to preach.

The first two verses describe God's concern about the continued presence of evil within His world and amongst His people. After the coming of the Servant, we might imagine that truth and justice should be established within the world, but this does not happen (59:14). Righteousness may certainly be found through the Servant, but where people continue to choose their own ways and do not turn to the Lord, sin persists (59:14), and God is displeased (59:15). He has therefore decided to act with military force, *'his own arm brought him victory'* (59:16). Then, once His judgement is complete, God is able to do what He wants, and sent His Holy Spirit into the world indeed even to Zion (59:20) so that a new covenant may be established between Himself and His people (59:21).

It is easy to launch into this passage of Scripture and pick out its pearls. To begin with, a Christian will quickly recognise what Isaiah says in verse 17, because it speaks about the things of God as if they are pieces of armour. Righteousness is a breastplate, salvation is a helmet, and God's just vengeance and zeal are likened to garments. Undoubtedly, when Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians and spoke about the *'whole armour of God'* (Ephesians 6:13-17), it was from this verse that he gained his inspiration. He did not quote Isaiah exactly, but he took Isaiah's words and expanded the vision. He might well have assumed that his readers knew Isaiah's famous Old Testament prophecy, which describes God's characteristics as armour! Isaiah's prophecy certainly helps us see that the armour is in fact God's armour, and as Paul says, we are given the privilege of putting it upon ourselves.

'therefore put on the full armour of God ... With the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place ... With shoes ... the Gospel of peace ... The shield of faith ... the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.' (Ephesians 6:13-17)

in verses 18 to 20, Isaiah's prophecy foresees a time when God will be victorious over His enemies, and He will send His Spirit like a '*rushing stream*' (59:19). We might be tempted to think that this is a prophecy of the coming of the Holy Spirit, fulfilled in the New Testament in the Acts of the Apostles (chapter 2). However, it is more likely to be a prophecy of Christ's final return, when '*the Redeemer will come to Zion*' (59:20), and God will indeed be triumphant over all evil and the sins of his people will cease.

In the wider context of Isaiah's prophecies, this passage occupies an important place. It stands between prophecies describing the response of God's people to the coming of the Servant (53-59), and a new series of prophecies. In our recent studies, we have studied prophecies that agonise over why people do not respond fully to the coming of the Servant, and continue to sin (e.g. see 59:2f.). But after the forthright declaration in this text, Isaiah turns in a different direction and delivers a final series of prophecies (chapters 60 to 66) which offer us a glorious new vision. It can never be God's will that His redeemed people become stuck in the ways of the world, struggling against sin all the time, and fighting it in constant battle. So Isaiah is given a vision of the glory of the Lord finally coming to earth. Isaiah begins to catch a glimpse of victory, and of what we now call Christ's 'return'. His vision of a covenant at the end of this passage is of an agreement completed, as God's people live by grace in the victory of the Redeemer (59:21)!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The cry for justice which spurs the Lord to action (59:14,15),
- The Lord's preparation for action (59:16,17)
- The nature of the Lord's judgements (59:18,19)
- The coming of the Redeemer and the Spirit (59:20,21)

Notes on the text and translation

V14 '*Justice is driven backwards*'

The verb in this sentence is forceful, and indicates far more than 'turned back' which is found in most Bible versions.

V15 '*and it displeased Him that there was no justice.*'

This is the commonly accepted translation of this phrase, but it comes from the Hebrew which means 'and it was evil in his eyes that there was no justice.'

V17 '*wrapped Himself in a cloak of zeal*'

Many versions of the Bible have 'wrapped Himself in fury as a mantle', but the Hebrew word 'qinah' combines a sense of urgency and passion. This could be fury, but there is another word for this in Hebrew, so I have preferred to use 'zeal' which reflects ardent emotion in English.

V18 '*according to their deeds, so He will repay*'

This is a strange expression in Hebrew which is literally like this; 'for like dealing, like completion.' Our translation tries to keep as close to this as possible whilst making it sensible to the reader in its context.

V18 '*payback to his enemies*'

This verse is difficult to translate because it plays on words which are not easy to translate (see previous note). However, the things done to the enemy are a form of retribution for what they have done, hence my use of the term 'payback', which is a more modern word than is used by most Bible versions, but fits the picture here far better.

V19 '*He will come like a rushing stream*'

The Hebrew says 'He will come like a narrow stream' which is a way of describing water thrust into a small space, hence 'rushing stream'.

V19 '*the Spirit of the Lord drives Him on*'

This is an awkward passage of scripture, but the main issue is whether the Spirit of the Lord is responsible for driving on the stream (of the previous verse) or the one who is coming. I have come to the conclusion that it is the latter because the stream is only an example, hence my translation.

Going Deeper

In studying this passage, we will look at the cry for justice which spurs the Lord to action (59:14,15), the Lord's preparation for action (59:16,17), the nature of the Lord's judgements (59:18,19), and the coming of the Redeemer and the Spirit (59:20,21).

The cry for justice which spurs the Lord to action (59:14,15),

Throughout the Old Testament, we have read that the Lord is stirred to action by the lack of justice and righteousness in the world. From His bringing of the Flood (Genesis 6) to the treatment of the Israelites by the Egyptians (Exodus 1,2), to His abandonment of His covenant with the people of Israel because of their sin (2 Kings 17 – but not the remnant of the tribe of Judah and the line of David). In each case, the breaking of the moral laws of Creation set by its Creator has spurred Him to act with sovereign power; to cease standing back and letting His people do as they will in His world, and come to save them. Mostly, people have been blessed by God's actions, but sometimes, they have reaped the consequences of their sin (as in the Flood, and also the destruction of Israel by the Assyrians).

Isaiah's prophecy reads like a perceptive summary of why God acts in the world. He does not see the difference between moral injustice and lack of respect for God; it is all alike to Him; when 'justice is driven backwards, and righteousness stands at a distance' then the Lord is stirred to action. He is particularly appalled when those who attempt to do good become the prey, and 'whoever turns from evil is plundered.' This insult threatens all who attempt to do what is right both in terms of deeds and in terms of their relationship with God. So 'when the Lord saw it, it displeased Him ... He was appalled that no one intervened.' (59:15,16). God saw this throughout ancient history and sent His servant the prophets. He saw this in the centuries before the coming of Christ, and then sent His Son, Jesus, the Messiah and Redeemer. There are also times when He sees this today, perhaps at the time of the Reformation, or before the evangelical revival under Wesley, or the Great Awakening in the USA, and in more recent times in various parts of the world where He has come in great power to renew His people. In addition, there will come a time when He decides that the world has run its course, and He sends Jesus again to complete His victory and remake the world! This is the nature of God.

The Lord's preparation for action (59:16,17)

The description of the Lord's preparation for coming is fearsome. Victory is announced before He has even put His armour on (59:16), so we know in advance that God will achieve His aims! Isaiah then discloses a picture which has captivated people ever since. Upheld by righteousness, and wearing this as a 'breastplate', the Lord wears 'salvation' on His head like a helmet, and wraps Himself with the clothes of 'vengeance' against those who have sinned against Him within His world! The clothes are also described as a 'cloak of zeal' It is easy to see the idea behind all this, for what people wear tells us something about their purpose; one who wraps up well intends to walk in the cold, and one who dresses up for the night intends to go to a special event, or a party. Indeed, what a soldier wears in battle says something about his preparedness and the likelihood of his victory, certainly in armies of ancient times. This armour is a vision of power and ultimate victory!

As we read this, we cannot stop from noticing that it is like the famous 'whole armour of God' described by Paul in Ephesians (Eph 6:10-17). Paul also speaks about a 'breastplate of righteousness' and 'helmet of salvation', but he adds to this great prophetic picture some further elements of the belt of truth, the shoes of the Gospel of peace, the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit. He did not take up the theme of the 'cloak of zeal' or the 'garment of vengeance' as mentioned by Isaiah, but if you read the Ephesians passage you will be in no doubt that the whole armour of God is a copy of God's armour, described here by Isaiah, adapted for human circumstances. God's purposes are more straightforwardly defined than the complex battle against flesh and blood in which Paul saw Christian people fighting evil. God's motivation is righteousness, and His purpose is always to bring salvation; and He is always engaged in the work of vengeance against evil. Some people find it hard to read about God being 'vengeful', but unless He was vengeful on our behalf against all evil, then we would be in danger of being defeated by it. Our Lord can defeat it!

The nature of the Lord's judgements (59:18,19)

All this preparation of the warrior is for war, and war against evil and all its effects in the world. We who live in the time of Christ's work of salvation find it hard to read about a God who comes to judge and act against anyone or anything. We have perhaps been spoiled into thinking that there is no such thing as eternal justice. We must remember that in the New Testament as well as the Old, God is always prepared to act against evil, and in the end, the consequences of turning away from the Lord and His ways are dire. Jesus talks about people being thrown into hell fire, where there will be 'weeping and wailing ...' (Matt 13:42, 22:13 etc.), and Paul speaks about the absolute and terrible consequences of the human rejection of God's moral ways in Romans 1:18f. On the one hand, we are offered through Isaiah and the Redeemer of whom he

prophesied a way of salvation and peace with God that brings us back to Him, but the alternative is to face His wrath, as is clearly described here in verses 18 and 19.

Nowhere will escape the Lord's absolute justice, and what is described here as 'payback'. The Hebrew expression is strange, but it indicates (see notes above) the Lord's action to confront and turn around evil, sin, wrongdoing and rebellion. The consequences of all these sins are dire for all humanity, and unless God acts, the world is set on a path of self destruction. We need our God to act, from west to east, and to the farthest 'coastlands', for the good of the whole world and its future, not just in the past or the future, but now.

Isaiah also had a vision of the Lord sweeping through the world, like a river; a rushing river that sweeps everything before it (59:19). This, of course, is the way that the Lord has worked time and time again in history since the coming of Christ. At critical times, He has brought revival in different forms, sweeping through human history to change things dramatically, as in the Reformation and the other examples given above. The picture of God's coming like a stream is one Isaiah returns to in his last prophecy (66:12), speaking about an overflowing stream of God's love. The Lord may have come in power to defeat evil, but He also comes with love for His own who have turned to Him and accept Him.

The coming of the Redeemer and the Spirit (59:20,21)

The reason why we may have confidence to say this is because Isaiah switched immediately from the one picture of the victorious conqueror to the compassionate Redeemer, and in one verse, the transformation is complete. This same God who has dressed for war appears in Zion as a Redeemer, come to protect 'those in Jacob who turn from transgression!' (59:20) By this time in Isaiah, there should be no difficulty in our understanding that Isaiah speaks of a new Zion, or dwelling place of God, which is the church of God today, and the 'Jacob' to whom he referred is the Israel of the Old Testament and the people of God in the New. The message is the same throughout history, repentance is the road to receiving redemption, and turning from transgression is the right response for any of us to whom the work of the Servant has been revealed. This is salvation.

The last verse of this text is a remarkable passage, but one that merely begins what happens next in the prophecies of Isaiah. The Lord announces a new covenant with His people, and it is unlike the covenant with Abraham, even though the old covenant was the means whereby God worked in the world for centuries. The first covenant was a covenant of faith (Gen 15:6) but it needed rules and regulations, and a relationship of obedience based on circumcision and the history of a particular people. The new covenant (as we now know) is also founded on faith, but as Isaiah saw here, it is placed within the human heart by the Spirit of God! Jeremiah had a similar vision (Jer. 31:31-33). What is fascinating about this prophecy is that the Lord places it within us for the purposes of communication, and this is represented by the way Isaiah emphasises the 'mouth' and 'words' throughout this prophecy. Jesus Himself said (in the particular circumstances of a discussion about defilement) that what comes out of a person is what is within them (Matt 15:11-18). Isaiah, however, prophesied that if people had the Spirit within them, this would come out within their speech and all that they did, for generations to come! This is God's covenant Word, revealing the work of the Redeemer.

Application

This is certainly not an easy passage to interpret. On the surface it contains fascinating words and phrases, and some pictures with strong connections to what we know from the New Testament. However, if we are to interpret the prophecy aright, then we must be prepared to try and understand how it fits into the pattern of Isaiah's prophecies in this particular part of the book. Some people reckon we should not be worried about this, or that the prophecies were not necessarily arranged in any order, but this is to play down scripture and the work of those who have preserved it in its present form for us today.

The transformation of the prophecies of Isaiah throughout the book are fascinating, and if you have followed it from the beginning, you will have noticed a variety of considerable changes since the early chapters (in chapters 7 and 8, chapters 36-39, chapters 40 and 53). This prophecy heralds the final change, as Isaiah moves to his final work about the glory of the Lord. The prophecy we have read today tells us that there is a general principle involved in how God works in the world. He comes to deal with evil and sin when it shows itself in injustice and unrighteousness, but He also comes to bring relief to His people and all who will turn to Him. He did this supremely in Jesus, He has done this again and again through history, and we do not know what will happen when the Lord comes in power and glory next time; it will either be in great renewal for His people, or it will herald the final judgement and the end of the world!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How does God deal with evil in this passage of Scripture? How can we explain to a doubting world the way God works to defeat evil?
2. Read the famous passage Ephesians 6:10f., and compare this with the description of armour found in this meeting. What are the differences between the two, as does it matter that they are different?
3. Read the description of the covenant found in Isaiah 59:21. What does the covenant mean now, and how may it be demonstrated in the life of the church?

Personal comments by author

It is some time now since I realised that evil exists, and that God has overcome it in Christ. Of course, I always knew that this was part of the Gospel. However, it's truth did not dawn on me until I felt the power of evil myself, and had to accept that it was only possible to overcome it through God's strength. Over the years, I have met many who struggle to accept that God actually 'does' anything in this world, let alone deal with the very real evils that exist all around us. But without such faith, the world is surely lost, so that those of us who believe in the power of God live victorious lives that demonstrate the gospel we preach. In Christ, we have the victory!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to do:** Read through a newspaper, and try to make a judgement about the evil nature of some of what you read. How much evil is there really in the world? Talk about this with others.
- **Something to pray:** Pray for those who find it hard to believe that God will indeed come into this world in sovereign power to do His will. Pray for an outpouring of God's glory so that more and more will discover that God is alive and active and loving.

Final Prayer

Dearest Lord, You know the trials of life and You have overcome them on the Cross. Come upon us now like a great torrent of water, and flow through every corner of our lives. Cleanse us anew by the power of Your Holy Spirit, and make us victorious, for the sake of the Kingdom. Thank You Lord: AMEN
