

Prayers

Opening prayer

Thank You, merciful Lord Jesus, for Your forgiveness, which sustains us each and every day. May we be forgiving people who show love in all we do, so that by forgiving others, especially those who have offended us, we may be the light of love in this world of darkness and sin. May we put love into practice in every part of our lives, and show the whole world that the Gospel is real and effective in this world. We ask this in Your name and for Your praise and glory: AMEN.

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: SCHOOLS

1. For yourself

Pray for the schools close by to where you live and work, and pray for any schools workers in your church

2. For your friends and family

Pray for any children who are going to school within your extended families. Pray for their safety and progress

3. For the church and its work

Pray for those who teach in the Sunday School or equivalent, in your church, and pray that they will teach young children the truth about God's love

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for those who make the policy for schooling within your country, and pray that they will be blessed with wisdom

Meditation

Shadows pass us by, almost unnoticed;
The suffering of a victim of rape; unspoken:
The bullied child or office worker; petrified:
The sick, whose pain is always there; constant:

But the shadow leaves its moment's mark;
If it stirs up true compassion in a stony heart,
If it switches on a light within a stubborn mind,
If it shames a rigid man or woman into bending.

When the shadow moves, it has not entirely gone;
For Christ has stirred the passions of a soul,
For human hearts have felt the Spirit's breeze,
For God has made His mark on consciousness ...

And something of the pain of those who suffer
Will begin to be healed if someone truly notices,
And if, for just one moment, the shadow of the Cross
Reminds one human soul to stop and help another

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 6: 9-13

- ⁹ He said, 'Go, and tell this people:
 'Listen so that you hear,
 but do not understand;
 Look so that you see,
 but do not perceive.'
- ¹⁰ Make the heart of this people unreceptive,
 dull their ears,
 and cover their eyes;
 lest they see with their eyes,
 and hear with their ears;
 then understand for themselves,
 and turn to receive its healing.'
- ¹¹ Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?'
 And he said:
 'Until cities lie ruined
 without inhabitants,
 the houses lack people,
 and the land is completely laid waste.'
- ¹² When the LORD abandons the people,
 and in the midst of the land
 the greater part will be desolate.
- ¹³ If there is but a tenth part remaining in it
 and it turns, it will be burned.
 like a terebinth or an oak,
 which leaves a stump
 when it is felled:
 The holy seed is the stump

Review

Isaiah 6 is one of the most famous passages of scripture in the Bible. In verses 1 to 8, it describes Isaiah's powerful experience of the presence of God, and at the conclusion of the vision, the Lord calls for someone to be willing to do an unidentified task (6:7), saying 'who will go for us?' Isaiah then responds with the famous words (6:8), 'Here am I, send me'. Now, in the second half of this great chapter, the Lord reveals an astonishing, and almost incomprehensible message. It is God's word for His people Israel, but there are few who read this and are not utterly confused at its meaning, in particular the first part of it in verse 9 and 10. We will nevertheless discover that these extraordinary words are essential to God's plan to bring salvation into the world. You will notice, for example, that verses 9 and 10 are partially quoted or referred to many times in the New Testament (e.g. Matt 13:10-15, John 12:39-41 and Acts 28:26-7); and this is our warning not to slip past the passage too quickly!

You will find considerable differences between the different Bible versions of this passage, because the Hebrew text is almost incomprehensible at times. A close analysis shows that the original might have been altered in ancient times, and this indicates that the passage must have been of great interest to the people of Israel from soon after it was written. The translation reflects the choices I have made about what the Hebrew means (particularly in verse 13), and I have attempted to keep an eye on the logic of the wider story of Isaiah, and the evidence of what God said through Isaiah throughout his prophetic ministry.

Up to this point, Isaiah's prophecies have been similar to those of Amos, Hosea and Micah, his contemporaries. His message, like theirs, speaks of the judgement of Israel for her sins. However, Isaiah speaks more forthrightly of God's intent to do a new work, typified in his grand vision of the heavenly Zion (chapter 4). However, in our passage today, we hear of God's special call in the form of a unique message to deliver to Israel (6:9-13). It should never be forgotten that although we read in scripture about the call of many of the prophets, this special commission to Isaiah marks him out as a unique prophet.

There are two parts to what God said to Isaiah. Firstly, God's message is found in verse 9 and 10, and then after Isaiah's fascinating enquiry, '*How long?*' (6:11), the Lord reveals more about the time-scale of His plans (6:11). The news for Israel was bleak. In seeking the Lord by listening to His words and looking for His works, they would be unable to understand or receive their covenant blessings! God had drawn a dark cloud over Israel's sight and muffled their ears, and they would therefore no longer receive the Lord's healing and

forgiveness. This is an extraordinary prophecy; the prophet says that his message could not be understood by those to whom it was given!

Isaiah was fully aware of the meaning of this message, but he did not question it or seek clarification. This suggests that what the Lord said was no great surprise to him! Consequently, he merely asked how long this state of affairs would last. It was an intriguing question, presupposing that God had a long term plan for His people extending well beyond the rebellion of His people. The reply to this was that this state of affairs would last until Jerusalem was destroyed (6:11)!

Such a suggestion was scandalous to most in Israel, and Isaiah added an important prophesy to the Lord's message (6:12,13). If God was at work to destroy and cut off His people by judgement, then only the smallest fraction, a remaining part or 'remnant' would remain to give hope for renewal; and in describing this work of God, Isaiah then used two words that would become important for his remaining prophecies, 'holy seed', and 'stump' (6:13). It will not be long before we find this theme more prominent in Isaiah's prophecies.

Going Deeper

Looking carefully, we find that the Lord said two things to Isaiah, firstly in verses 9 and 10, and secondly in verse 11. The last two verses are Isaiah's prophetic comment on what he has heard, in which he reaffirms his belief that the Lord will bring salvation to His people not by re-establishing the past, but only through a new 'holy seed'.

Misunderstanding and lack of healing

When Isaiah replied to the Lord by saying 'Here am I, send me!' (6:8) he could not have known that he would be given the most impossible of tasks, which was to tell the remaining people of God in Judea and Jerusalem that their relationship with God was irretrievably damaged. The first message God gave Isaiah for the people of Judah is in the second part of verse 9 and also verse 10. At first, these words read as if God is instructing His people to search for Him but they will not find Him! (6:9b) How can God be so heartless? The Lord then goes on to tell Isaiah to confuse the people so that they do not know what He is doing, and it is not His intention to heal them from their sickness! It seems very 'out of character' for God even though the people had sinned.

We might expect God to announce a powerful deed or sign to draw the people back to Him, like He had done many times before in times past, as with Moses (Ex 34:27-35) or Samuel (1 Sam 7:7-11), but those times had passed. Before God could do anything to deal with the sins of His people, He had to make it clear that if the people persisted in them, then they broke their covenant relationship with Him, and they could not simply turn back again 'to receive healing' (6:10) as if there was not a problem; there was.

If we are to understand what God was saying, however, we must recognise that these words were not an announcement of judgement, but a prophetic description of what was going on in Isaiah's day. The people were 'listening but not hearing', in other words, they were attending their worship and religious ceremonies, but not knowing what they meant nor being receptive to God. In the vision (6:1-8), Isaiah heard the Lord calling out 'who will go for us?' but no-one replied except Isaiah. Who knows how many other people had been called by God but failed to respond because they were spiritually deaf? It is said today that 'history is written by the victors', but the history of God's salvation is written by the 'God inspired' deeds of those who have responded to His call!

When Jesus used this passage of scripture (Matt 13:10f.), he used it to explain why the common people who heard Him listened to the parables he taught and appreciated them, but did not understand them. In fact, they explained how Jesus was bringing into existence the eternal Kingdom of God in their midst. Something of God's power was stirring in the world around them through Jesus and the people did not perceive it; just as in Isaiah's day, when God was beginning to set in motion a plan of salvation for the world which his own covenant people did not recognise. Following this revelation, Isaiah knew this, but the people as a whole did not. It was Isaiah's job to announce it.

Ruin and exile

Isaiah's reaction to what he had been told was to ask a question; 'how long, O Lord?' Isaiah wanted to know how long it would be before God would act. The words which the Lord said were chilling, speaking of a time after war had laid waste the land of Judah and Jerusalem.

It is understandable that Isaiah should have received these words, and they confirmed what Isaiah had already prophesied about the coming of war as God's means of cleansing the land (see 5:25-30), but we must remember that Isaiah spoke at a time when the Assyrian hordes were gathering to the north of Judah and Israel, threatening both nations. In reality, the Assyrians invaded and destroyed the north (721BC), but Judah was saved (see Isaiah 36-39). The word God gave to Isaiah about invasion and exile (6:11) did not

come true until many years later and Judah was invaded by Babylon. However, we must be clear that at the time when Isaiah received his call it was around 740 BC, and more than a century would pass before Jerusalem itself was decimated in the manner this prophecy described.

It is vital that we learn the lesson that God sometimes works in a timeframe beyond our experience and we must have the faith to hold on to what He tells us even though we may not live to see the answers. What we do and say may affect future generations, and we should not imagine that God gives prophetic words just for the present.

What is left?

Some scriptures indicate through their editing that they believe the Lord's words continue until the end of verse 13. However, the Hebrew suggests that the Lord's answer to Isaiah's question is contained in verse 11, and from verse 12 it reads more naturally as if Isaiah speaks (prophetically) after hearing what the Lord has to say. He concludes that when the Lord comes to destroy the Promised Land, the very sign of His covenant relationship with His people, then He will do so completely, so that 'if a tenth part remains ... it will be burned' (6:13). The only hope for God's people will come through the way that life springs up again on the land after any fire or drought or disaster, which is through seed, the 'holy seed' (6:13).

Verse 13 is notorious as one of the most difficult passages of Hebrew in the Old Testament. The original text does not make literal sense at all; an attempt to provide a literal reading would be something like this; 'if yet in a tenth part, it turns, it will be for burning; like the terebinth or like the oak which is felled – a monument of it. The seed of the holy will be a stump.' The only way that scholars or translators can arrive at meaningful English (or any other translation) is to make assumptions about what may have been meant, and I have taken the simplest route to this (though your version of the Bible may read quite differently).

The idea behind the verse is relatively simple (see above), but we should remember that the tribe of Judah is sometimes referred to as a 'tenth' of all Israel (not counting Levi, the tribe of priests, and leaving out the tribe of Simeon which is often included with Judah). If this is taken into account, then it seems that Isaiah was specifically concerned that even if the northern tribes of Israel were invaded by Assyria, it was his opinion that the time would come when God's justice would fall on Judah and Jerusalem, and all that would be left would be 'holy seed', like a 'stump'.

Discipleship

Application

The amazing conclusion of this passage is that the only hope for the salvation of God's people (and through them the whole world) is through this 'holy seed'. The scriptural word 'seed' may seem strange to us because it is often used to refer to a 'descendant' or 'a child born'; as in the expression 'the seed of Abraham'. So although Isaiah 6 is full of talk about the devastation of the Promised Land and of cities, and the exile of people from Jerusalem, this ending is incredibly dramatic. What does it mean, how would Isaiah have understood it, and how might we understand it? The whole of Isaiah 6, with its spectacular call of Isaiah and the affirmation of his prophetic call is remarkable enough; but these last few words are more important than the rest! They indicate to us that in the light of what God said to Isaiah, it was revealed to Him that a new 'holy descendant' of God would be the 'stump' from which the new Israel would grow, now that both Israel and Judah had shown themselves to be corrupted by sin. In coming days we will see how this is born out in what happened next to Isaiah.

From our perspective, this conclusion points us to Christ. Isaiah had much to learn about the 'holy seed', but his prophecy reminds us that God sometimes gives one person the essential 'seed' or 'germ' of an idea about His intentions for the future, for this message is found nowhere else in the scriptural records of Isaiah's day. Consequently, we should realise that if we remain faithful to our Lord, then He may reveal something to us which is important for all God's people and for the future. Too often, we assume that our own lives are insignificant; when in God's great plan of things, what we do for Him is important. When the church is functioning well, we learn to treasure what God does for and says to each individual, because it may be something deeply important. Let us respect each other accordingly and be open to hear the 'seed' of His Word through whomsoever He wishes to give it.

Questions for groups

1. Read what Jesus says in Matthew 13:10-17 and discuss this in your group in the light of this passage.

2. To what extent does verse 10 describe people today?
3. Isaiah prophesied about God's new beginning through a 'holy seed'. What did this mean to Isaiah, and what does it mean to us?

Discipleship challenges

- *What was it like when you first felt the presence of God and received His Word spoken to you? If it is a long time since you knew this, then seek the Lord in prayer and ask Him to reveal what He would say to you. He is always willing to engage with us, that is, if we are open.*
- *The Lord has words of judgement for today, but how does the Lord judge the world, or His people today? Think about this, and talk about it with others at your church.*

Final Prayer

Thank You Lord Jesus, for the many ways in which You support us. We appreciate Your help and we hope to learn from You, not so that we do not need Your help again, but so that You can teach us more and lead us on to greater things. Fulfil Your purposes in us we pray: AMEN
