

Prayer

Lord God, Your glory extends far beyond what we or anyone has ever seen. Teach us to be cautious about assuming we know more than we do, so that with our limited knowledge we may be able to take delight in the greatness of Your creation and the glories of the world in which we are set. May we show humility before the magnificence of creation and before You, who has made all things. Thanks be to God; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Look at your body, and pray today about what you see. Be honest about this, but do not indulge in self-ridicule! Remember that God created you as you are, an incredible and complex individual; so pray that your body will do the work for which it was designed.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for your family.** Pray for any within your family who are estranged from others. Be bold to pray about why such estrangement exists, and bring it before the Lord; let Him be your judge, not other members of your family.
- Pray about the problems of political scandal, and why they exist within your country. Pray against the demonic temptations of power that can all too often disrupt proper and peaceful government
- Give thanks to God for the glories He has revealed to you and the salvation He has won for you

Meditation

When the ground we walk is hard,
grant us strength to endure the journey.

When the ground we walk is uneven,
grant us courage to hold our balance.

When the ground we walk is filthy,
grant us wisdom to take each step.

When the ground we walk is slippery,
grant us the safety of a hand to hold.

When the ground we walk is unsafe,
grant us speed to pass on through.

But when the ground we walk is easy,
grant us faith to press on firmly.

For the ground we walk is holy,
and we can only travel in humility.

And the end of our pathway is glory,
with the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

Bible passage - Isaiah 60:17-22

¹⁷ Instead of the bronze I will bring gold,
instead of the iron I will bring silver;
instead of wood, bronze,
instead of stones, iron.

I will appoint Peace as your governor
and Righteousness as your taskmaster.

¹⁸ Violence will not be heard in your land again,

- nor ruin and destruction within your borders;
you will call your walls 'Salvation',
and your gates 'Praise'.
- 19 The sun will no longer be
a light for you by day,
nor will the moon
give you light, as brightness;
but the LORD will be an everlasting light for you,
and your God will be your glory.
- 20 Your sun will set no more,
nor your moon wane;
but the LORD will be an everlasting light for you,
and your days of mourning will cease.
- 21 All of your people will be righteous,
they will possess the land forever:
The shoot that I planted,
the work of my hands,
for the display of my glory.
- 22 The youngest child will become a thousand,
and the least significant a mighty nation;
I am the LORD;
And when its time comes I will do this quickly.

Bible Study

Review

These words conclude Isaiah's great prophecy about the coming of God's glory. As the prophecy has unfolded (Isaiah 60), all manner of visionary pictures have cascaded forth, and some reappear in this last section, especially the theme of light. At the beginning, Isaiah announced; '*Arise, shine, your light has come!*' (60:1f.) and then at the end of our passage, he gives a picture of the all sufficient light of God's glory, which replaces natural light, '*the Lord will be an everlasting light for you ...*' (60:19,20). These are profoundly important prophecies, which announce God's ultimate victory and authority over all His Creation. In His time, evil will be defeated (60:18) and replaced by 'peace', 'righteousness' and 'salvation' (60:18).

The central portion of this prophecy (60:6-16) contains many promises, as we read yesterday. They include the in-gathering of God's people from both near and far (60:4,6f.), and a remarkable picture of the new 'Zion', which is open for all who will come (60:6-16). It is made of materials of the highest quality, '*instead of bronze I will bring gold ...*' (60:17 etc.), and instead of the pain of earthly labour, the work of God's Kingdom (as it is called in the New Testament) will be governed by '*Peace*' and '*Righteousness*' (60:17). There is surely no one who not would rather work for such a manager!

Isaiah's prophecy of Zion has much to teach us about God's intention and purpose for His world, and it is all good. However, it can only be accessed by those who accept their God and who want to be a part of what He plans. The city is walled by 'salvation', which tells us what the city looks like from the outside; it is a place of salvation from the storms of life and the place where God will protect His people from all evil (60:18). Moreover, the city can be entered only through gates of 'praise'; it is not entered by religion, spirituality or culture, only by the pure activity of praise, which honours God without prejudice.

The prophecy about God being the light that provides all energy and life for the city is remarkable. If we look through the whole of Isaiah and study those passages that speak of 'light', then we can see how the theme dominates all of Isaiah's writing. At the beginning of his book, Isaiah calls on Israel to '*walk in the light of the Lord*' (2:5), but the people are set on their own way (2:6f.); he then bewails the ignorance of God's people who have mistaken darkness for light (5:20f.). Isaiah is then told that God will have to do a new work to bring light to His world, and his amazing prophecy of the coming of the Messiah says this; '*in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned*' (9:2), and Israel's Saviour is described like this, '*The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One, and flame!*' (10:17). Of course, Isaiah never gives up on his belief that God will shine His light through His people, '*I will make you a light for the Gentiles*' (42:6, 49:6), but this can only

happen through the Messiah. He prophesies that the suffering of the Servant will be effective in bringing light into the world, *'after the suffering of His soul, He will see the light of life and be satisfied'* (53:10).

Our passage today concludes Isaiah's theme of light by revealing God's new city of light. Light gives energy and life to creation, as is recognised by the most ancient of people as well as modern science; it should not surprise us that Creation begins with God's declaration of light (Genesis 1:3), and all modern science is dependent upon one fundamental parameter, the 'speed of light' (as famously established by Einstein). God's light is everlasting (60:19) and continuous and defines God's provision for all (60:20). In the light of this great light, those who accept God's city of salvation and enter into it by praise are made safe, *'they will possess the land forever'* (60:21), and within this city the generations are secure (60:22)

This is a vision of astounding comfort and relief which Jews and Christians alike have treasured it for centuries. We should not allow the passing of time to dull our appreciation of these promises, for without them, the future holds little hope. When thinking about the future and the coming of Christ in glory, Christians can sometimes become entangled in speculation about eternity and the time of His coming. It would do us more good to dwell on God's great promises here in Isaiah, which He will indeed fulfil for our benefit.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The general benefits (60:17,18)
- The New Light (60:19,20)
- A vision beyond (60:21:22)

Notes on the text and translation

V17 *'I will appoint Peace as your governor and Righteousness as your taskmaster.'*

The translation of this verse is relatively straightforward, but it is worth noting that the word I have translated as 'governor' can also mean an official 'who exercises oversight'. In this, it is remarkably similar to the Greek word used in 1 Timothy and Titus ('episcopos') which is often translated 'bishop', or 'overseer'.

V19 *'nor will the moon give you light, as brightness.'*

This is exactly what the Hebrew says, but the traditional Latin, supported by some ancient Targums, suggest that the words 'by night' can be added. They make the poetry of the passage smoother in Latin and also in English, so I suspect that this is an addition simply for this reason, and have therefore left it out.

V19 *'... your God will be your glory.'*

The word for glory ('tiparah') is not the usual one used for the glory of God ('cavath') but a word meaning 'beauty', like the glory of something visible, like fine clothes or beautiful jewellery, or even something of which one can boast. Glory is indeed the right way to translate the word here because it refers to God, but it adds to our understanding of the word 'glory'.

V20 *'your days of mourning will cease.'*

The word translated 'cease' is in fact the famous word 'shalom'. When used as a verb it means 'make complete' or 'bring to an end'. I have preferred the word 'cease'.

V22 *'and when its time comes I will do it quickly.'*

The Hebrew here is two words, one meaning 'in its time' and the other meaning 'I will do this quickly', however, I have slightly paraphrased these two expressions so that we get the meaning of this more clearly.

Going Deeper

As we go deeper, we will spend further time with each of the three last phases of this prophecy; the general benefits (60:17,18), the new light (60:19,20), and the final glory (60:21,22). There are a number of places in Isaiah where his visions take us beyond earthly reality (see Isaiah 27, 35, for example). It is entirely consistent with these other prophecies that Isaiah should look forward to a new work of God to create a new dwelling place with His people.

The general benefits (60:17,18)

The hint of something more glorious is contained within the way in which wood and stone, bronze and iron, and silver and gold are described within this text. The great rich and unsurpassed metals of gold and silver replace bronze and iron, and the bronze and iron replace the wood and stone (60:17). Is there any significance in these objects, minerals and metals? The answer is that there is. All of them are listed as being used within the building of the great Temple of Solomon (1 Chron 22:14, 1 Chron 29:2 etc.). However, if we look closer in scripture we will find that wood and stone are the basic materials used for the ark and the Tabernacle (the 10 commandments are written on stone and the Ark and Tabernacle are made of wood and other materials). Scripture also describes other gods as made of 'wood and stone' (Deut 4:28, Deut 29:17). Bronze and iron were also used as building materials, but there were also symbols of strength and power (Job 40:18, Psalm 107:16, Isaiah 45:2). Gold and silver denote quality, beauty and richness, and are mentioned in scripture frequently both in the building of the Temple and also in reference to the wealth of Israel (Gen 13:2, Num 22:18, 1 Kings 7:51).

What are we to make of this? What Isaiah saw was the replacement of one building item with another of greater value and worth, and this is more than a hint. The building done by people from foreign lands bringing gold and silver (60:9) now makes sense, it is to upgrade the place of God's dwelling. Zion is getting a refit, and the quality of materials used is to be increased! Some people feel that this prophecy points forward to a time when God will establish His rule on earth and Christ will come again, but in previous studies I have explained that this is not right. If we were to look at the crystalline structure of the new creation of God's dwelling in Revelation (21:18), we would realise that God had much more in store for His heavenly abode. No, this is a vision of earthly upgrading from the time of the coming of the Redeemer.

This is confirmed by the last part of verse 17 and verse 18 in which Isaiah's vision extends to non-violence, together with the appointment of 'Peace' and 'Righteousness' as the rulers of the people, and 'Salvation' and 'Praise' as the structure of the city. Altogether this part of the vision is a challenge to God's people in the light of the Servant's task of redemption (53) to take hold of the heritage available to them. Non—violence is possible amongst God's people, if they dwell in His presence, 'Peace' and 'Righteousness' are to be the governing principles of life, and 'Salvation' and 'Praise' are to be the visible evidence of our spiritual life in this world

The New Light (60:19,20)

In a similar way, the two verses 19 and 20 are sometimes thought to propel the reader further forward towards the final time of God's re-creation of all things, because the natural light of the sun and the moon are described as ceasing to give their light and the light of God replaces this. Clearly, this appears to tie in with the New Testament vision of God as the light that shines in the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:5). However, a closer look at the Hebrew (see notes above) directs us in a different way. Verse 19 says quite literally, 'the sun will no longer be a light for you' and the description of the moon's light does not suggest that it stops, but that it will no longer be the 'brightness' people require in order to see at night. The emphasis is not on the ceasing of the sun and the moon as in the end of the world, but in the coming of a new 'light'; 'the Lord will be an everlasting light for you' (60:19). This is more like the prophecy of one coming who will be a 'light to the world', something John believed had come true in the life of Jesus, centuries before our own day and certainly before the time of His coming again (John 8:12, 9:5).

Then, in verse 20, Isaiah reiterates the same theme, but we must be careful about interpreting the first two lines. It could be that they simply mirror the first few lines of the previous verse, but I suggest that they really reflect the new reality. The sun that does not set and the moon that does not wane is indeed the Lord, who is an 'everlasting light for you'. When God's people have accepted the work of the Redeemer, this is the spiritual truth available to them, which should banish all mourning from people's hearts.

A vision beyond (60:21:22)

We cannot expect Isaiah to have a full understanding of the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus, but I do suggest that his vision took him deeper and deeper into a picture of what we now call the Kingdom of God. This is something we experience now, in part, whilst we await the final completion of this kingdom at Christ's coming again, and although the language of the last two verses seems to invite us to go further, it is fulfilled in God's church.

The Kingdom we possess even in this earth is something which is our eternal inheritance; 'they will possess the land forever' (60:21). This idea is rarely preached about, and yet it is a truth which comes from the teaching of Jesus and also, as here, from the prophets. The Promised Land was given to the people of Israel with strings attached (see Deuteronomy 29,30), but the church is part of a Kingdom which does not perish and will not be taken away. Sometimes, when God's people are in the midst of their occasional bouts of deep angst at what is happening to the church, it is worth remembering that God's people bear an eternal inheritance just like this and despite all the problems, God does not take this away. His people are the 'shoot that I planted, the work of my hands, for the display of my glory!'. This is our wonderful calling, and if our

eyes are fixed firmly on this our godly call, then our apparent problems will be seen in their proper light, the light of the Lord Himself.

It is wonderful to read the final stanzas of this vision of Isaiah's vision; 'the youngest child will become a thousand, and the least significant a mighty nation!' These could almost be the words of Jesus, after taking a child in his hands (e.g. see Matthew 19:1f.)! These words contain the whole theme of turning the values of the world upside down which characterised Jesus' teaching, and they also contain the important idea of the significance of the 'least' in the Kingdom of God (see Matt 11:11, 25:40,45). These themes have little direct meaning here in Isaiah unless we allow that Isaiah's words point us to the ministry of Jesus, the one true Redeemer.

The whole prophecy comes to an end with the concluding words of the Lord, which come with authority and power; 'I am the Lord' is the classic Old Testament statement of the authority of God Almighty, and it places the final stamp of approval on the vision. The last line then adds a remarkable and enigmatic feeling to the whole work; 'when its time comes I will do this quickly!' Again, some believe that this is a comment about the Lord's second coming and the final judgement, but I believe that in this context, it is God's comment about the speed with which the Christ child will come. Remember, so many of Isaiah's prophecies are about the coming of redemption and salvation through the birth of a child (7:14), the coming of a king (9:6, 11:2f.) and the coming of a Redeemer (52:13-53:12). In this great vision, He speaks of nothing more and nothing less. For us, Isaiah's prophecies may seem to point further, and this may simply be the result of our inadequacy when faced with the power of such texts. Our best response to this vision is to see it fulfilled in the life of Christ and our own times.

Application

There is so much here for us to rejoice in! Firstly, the confidence of Isaiah's vision is profoundly real, and it is of the church of God as we now experience it. It speaks not only about the higher standards we can and should apply to the work of the church (see yesterday's study) but also the joy of having Peace and Righteousness as our spiritual guides and mentors. I am tempted to suggest that when, in the life of the church, we find that the things we do become a chore and we are consumed by the difficulties and the stresses of what is required of us, then something has gone wrong. We have either succumbed to the temptations of the evil one, or we have allowed our own prejudices, opinions and limitations to dictate what should be a work of the Lord. Yes, I do believe that when we are operating in the Lord's will, then peace and righteousness will be our partners and guides, and the outward results of our work will be 'salvation' and the praises of our God (60:18). If our hearts sink when faced with the work of the church, something is wrong, because it is all for God's glory, and the Lord wants us to enjoy being His people and doing His work. Perhaps we are trying to do what God has not called us to do, or to work in our own strength.

Secondly, the reality of the Lord's redeeming presence with His people in Christ should be our confidence in the Kingdom and the things of God (60:21f.). It is with joy that we expect great things to come from small beginnings, and the 'shoot' planted by the Lord '... will become a thousand'! I am aware that in saying this I have jumped across two verses of Isaiah, but I believe that the prophecies are all intertwined and interconnecting, as our lives as God's people should be. The work begun by one person should be the fruit reaped by another, and the smallest of efforts by a child should bear fruit in the church of God's Kingdom.

I remember as a child inviting a friend to come to church. I think I must have been only 8 or 9 at the time, and when I talked about it with my father, he commended me for my action. This made me think about what it meant to be someone who was responsible for the message of faith that, even at that time, had begun to have great meaning for me. It laid the seeds of evangelism in my soul. It was only the actions of a child, and I do not know what happened to the individual concerned, but God has used this incident gloriously in His Kingdom through the ministry He has given me. The reason why He does these kinds of things for us all is to help us see that the future Kingdom of His glory, when the heavens and the earth are rebuilt in splendour, will be happy, joyful, and a good place to be. He wants us to look forward to His future!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. List all the good things promised by God in this part of Isaiah's vision of God's glory. Do we deserve these things?
2. What does the phrase 'Jesus, the Light of the World' mean to you? Read John 8 and 9 to assist your answer to this question.

3. How can we help the smallest children, and the least significant people in the life of the church, become its most potent evangelists and ministers of grace?

Personal comments by author

I spent some time agonising over whether I had understood this passage properly. I initially felt that the vision was intended to project an image of the eternal kingdom of God's re-created world. But it did not, and it did not fit with the other passages of Isaiah which speak of the eternal kingdom. The arguments for interpreting this passage as a prophecy of the life of the church now may seem awkward and a little dry, but this is what I have ended up with. Working with Scripture is not a matter of getting what you want but getting what God knows you need.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to do:** *Over a period of time, watch out to see if any of the prophecies mentioned here are fulfilled in the life of your own church. How can your church best grow in grace and faith so that it fulfils its call?*
- **Something to pray about:** *Pray for all those who need to hear a message of peace and justice, whether in the church or in the world, and pray that the church will reach those it is commissioned to bless, by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Final Prayer

We give You eternal thanks, heavenly Father, for revealing to us the truth about Jesus Christ. We seek to live according to this truth once we have found it, and we do our best to work hard so that its glory and light may be shown in the world. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit so that we may always do what is right according to the light of Your love. AMEN
