

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You have revealed the truth about what God expects of us, and You have taught us His commands and what they mean. May we therefore learn to love Your ways and walk in them, and may we rejoice in Your teaching and accept its discipline without reserve. Make us humble before the most challenging of calls and worthy of the faith we profess, so that we may walk with You, Lord Jesus, into the joys of eternal life. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Think carefully about whether your words have been wise today. Where you have spoken in a way that could be misunderstood or might have caused offense, pray about this, and if possible, make an appropriate apology

On-going prayers

- **Pray for your family.** *Pray today for the youngest within your extended family. If you do not know them well because they are indeed very distant, make some efforts to find out more about them, perhaps communicate with them. Pray to bless them and encourage them.*
- *Give thanks to God for the glories He has revealed to you and the salvation He has won for you*
- *Pray for engineers who are searching for alternative fuels for the future. Pray that such research will be done to the glory of God*

Meditation

We have been created for a reason
So let us live with direction and purpose

We have been created to be passionate
So let us live our lives to the full

We have been created for fellowship
So let us value each other's company

We have been created to be fruitful
So let us use all the gifts God has given

We have been created to be productive
So let us be dynamic and fully employed

We have been created for success
So let us aspire to Christ-like perfection

We have been created to be spiritual
So let us fulfil the eternal purposes of God.

Bible passage - Isaiah 60:6-16

- ⁶ A multitude of camels will cover you,
young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba will come.
They will bring gold and frankincense,
and proclaim the praise of the LORD.
- ⁷ All the flocks of Kedar will be gathered to you,

the rams of Nebaioth will serve you;
they will offer what is acceptable on my altar,
and I will bring glory to my glorious house.

- ⁸ Who are these who fly like a cloud,
like doves to their windows?
- ⁹ For the coastlands wait for me;
the ships of Tarshish are first,
to bring your children from far away,
their silver and gold is with them,
for the name of the LORD your God,
and for the Holy One of Israel,
for he has made you beautiful!
- ¹⁰ Foreigners will build up your walls,
and their kings will serve you.
for in my wrath I struck you down,
but in my favour I have shown you mercy.
- ¹¹ Your gates will always stand open;
they will not be shut, day or night,
so that the wealth of the nations will be brought to you,
with their kings led in procession.
- ¹² For the nation and kingdom
that will not serve you will perish;
those nations will be completely ruined.
- ¹³ The glory of Lebanon will come to you,
the cypress, the plane, and the pine,
to beautify the place of my sanctuary;
and I will give glory to where my feet stand.
- ¹⁴ The sons of those who oppressed you
will come bending low to you,
and all who despised you
will bow down at your feet;
they will call you the City of the LORD,
Zion of the Holy One of Israel.
- ¹⁵ Instead of being forsaken and hated,
with no one passing through,
I will make you majestic forever,
a joy from age to age.
- ¹⁶ You will suckle the milk of nations,
you will suck the breasts of kings;
and you will know that I am the LORD,
your Saviour and your Redeemer,
the mighty One of Jacob.

Bible Study

Review

Yesterday we began to read this great chapter of Isaiah (60) in which the prophet records a vision of the coming of God's glory in splendour. He describes this event in terms of light and the gathering together of the nations to God's dwelling place of Zion, and the whole passage expresses excitement at the coming fulfilment of God's Word. The first few verses of this chapter (60:1-5) make wonderful reading for us today because they contain word pictures and ideas that can easily be understood. Today's passage, however, contains a variety of word pictures that are completely unfamiliar to us, camels and flocks in the desert (60:6), fortified city walls (60:10,11), and breast feeding (60:15,16)! As a consequence, the passage can seem rather daunting, even though its general subject has already been clearly set out (60:1-5).

One of the main problems with this passage is the fact that Christians gloss over this passage because it does not seem to offer any great insights into the coming Kingdom of God. Moreover, its many references to Old Testament names reinforces the idea that it has little to say to us. This is an unfortunate misapprehension, for it does not take much to spot some fascinating connections with the New Testament; this prophecy is not just limited to Old Testament times, it points forward to God's ultimate and triumphant glory.

To begin with, we should note that Isaiah speaks of the bringing of gold and frankincense for the praise of God (60:6). Together with the offering of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:11), this prophecy speaks of the offering of all that is best from the natural world to the God of all. Ancient people may have also brought camels and flocks, but it should be obvious now that our passage envisions the offering of all that is best from every culture and generation in praise of God.

Another clue may be found in the names of the nations gathering to praise God in verses 6 and 7 (Midian, Ephah, Kedar and Nebaioth). To us they sound merely like a list of other nations of the region, but they are in fact identified in Scripture as some of the other nations founded by Abraham. They derive from the sons of Abraham's wife of later years, Keturah. We must therefore consider that Isaiah envisions a gathering of nations connected to God through Abraham, and certainly, the early church regarded all who had faith as 'children of Abraham' (Acts 13:26f. Galatians 3:7). This all makes sense of our wider picture of the vision.

The vision then speaks of the gathering of the wealth of the nations to the 'altar' (60:7) of the Temple (60:11); even the gates of the Temple remain open indefinitely for this great in-gathering (60:11). The prophecy contains a number of comments that would have reminded an Israelite about the building of the Temple, for example, the material brought from Lebanon is the same as that purchased by Solomon for the original Temple (1 Kings 5:6,9,14 etc.). After this, the prophecy gradually picks up the appropriate themes of worship; '*the sons ... will come bending low ... they will bow down at your feet, city of the Lord.*' (60:14), and lastly, Zion is described as being like a suckling child feeding richly from the '*breasts of kings*' (60:16).

It does not take much for us to make some connections here to God's work amongst His people after the coming of Christ. As Paul says, God is building a new Temple, which is the body of Christ (1 Cor 3:16f., 6:19), and He remains patient for all to respond (2 Peter 3:9, Rev 13:10). Moreover, the New Testament teaches that the purpose of God's people is to worship the Lord (Luke 4:8, John 4:20-24), and eventually to inherit the wealth of the nations and rule over them (Romans 15:12)!

Again, we find that this passage makes sense if we think of Zion as now referring to God's church, His gathered people who await His coming in glory! Isaiah's prophecies will be fulfilled, and all we can see of God's glories today is but a fraction of what will one day be revealed.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The nations of Abraham (60:6,7)
- The farthest nations, foreigners (60:8-10)
- The open Temple (60:11-15)
- The satisfied child (60:16)

Notes on the text and translation

V6 'Midian and Ephah'

These two are the generation of the sons of Abraham by Keturah, his wife after the death of Sarah. They represent therefore nations other than Israel and Judah.

V7 'Kedar ... Nebaioth'

These two are sons of Ishmael, also representing nations born from Abraham who are not part of the covenant promise.

V7 'they will offer what is acceptable on my altar'

Some versions of the Bible have 'they will be acceptable on my altar' (NRSV) but this misses out the full meaning of the verb to 'rise up' which is found in this sentence, and here means the 'elevation' or raising of an offering to the Lord. I prefer to translate this as 'I will offer ...'

V10 'but in my favour I have shown you mercy.'

Only two Hebrew words make up this comment, and the second is a form of the verb 'to have compassion', frequently translated 'mercy'. In the Old Testament, compassion and mercy go hand in hand.

V11 'with their kings led in procession'

The idea here is that the kings are 'driven' in, with the verb normally being used to describe the driving of sheep and cattle. Most translators imply that the kings are driven in some kind of victory procession.

V12 'those nations will be completely ruined'

The Hebrew expression reads something like 'those nations will be dried up for drying!' This is a colloquial expression emphasising devastation.

V15 'a joy from age to age'

This, yet again, translates a Hebrew idiom, literally, 'a joy from day to day', meaning continually.

Going Deeper

In studying the passage further, we will take some of the themes mentioned above and see what they have to say to us; the ingathering of the nations of Abraham (60:6,7), the ingathering of the farthest foreigners (60:8-10); the open Temple (60:11-15); and the satisfied child (60:16).

The nations of Abraham (60:6,7)

Even as we begin to read this passage, the description of camels makes us think of deserts and nomads, making their way through the deserts of east. The ancient trade routes of the Middle East all ran through the land we know as the Biblical 'Promised Land', and throughout the turbulent history recorded by the Bible, camel trains continued passing through the land, whoever was in power and whatever the state of the nation of Israel. This continued from before the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus and to not far short of the present day. To many people, the ancient trades in gold and frankincense and other food stuffs, perfumes and spices was as ancient as history itself, alongside the traditional nomadic herdsman of the region with their sheep and goats.

In this great vision, Isaiah says these ways of the world turned from their ancient and traditional commercial ways to the single purpose of serving the Lord. Gold and frankincense is brought to 'praise the Lord' (60:6), and the nomadic herdsman bring 'flocks' and 'rams' to present to God on His altar (60:7). We have already seen that the names mentioned in these texts are children of Abraham representing the nations and peoples of the Middle East, but there is another hint here that is even more startling. If we look to the time of Jesus which is part of the fulfilment of this prophecy (see yesterday's study), is it not remarkable that the two offerings to God mentioned here describe quite well the two different visitations of Jesus as a child recorded in Matthew's Gospel (ch2) and in Luke's Gospel (ch2)?

There is so much in Isaiah which is fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus, and Isaiah also prophesies the birth of 'Immanuel' as a child (7:14), does he hint in this passage about the manner in which the Redeemer will be greeted? It does seem to be very suggestive of what happened with the wise men and the shepherds. I would go as far as to suggest that if you wish to gain some understanding of the significance of these two visitations, even though they are in different Gospels, it is certainly worth coming back to Isaiah 60! Here, all the goods of the ancient Eastern world are offered appropriately to worship the living God who has become real, and gloriously 'incarnate' within His world.

The farthest nations, foreigners (60:8-10)

The vision now goes out farther than the eastern world, dominated by peoples who were believed to have been descendants of Abraham. Isaiah was able to understand that the world was far bigger, and he mentions 'ships from Tarshish' (60:9). The word 'Tarshish' is something of an enigma because it is strongly related to an ancient Semitic word for 'ruin', and this word play is used heavily in the prophetic story of Jonah (who fled from the Lord to go to 'Tarshish'). Some believe that there was a port in Spain called Tarshish at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea, but this location can only be verified from just before the time of Christ. Others believe that it refers to a now unknown port on the North African coast. However, the best thing we can do is to accept that this name is enigmatically used in the Old Testament for the farthest place known to have been visited by people!

Isaiah's vision declares that even people from as far away as this are included in the call to gather in Zion, and God's children are to be found as far away as this! This message was a powerful one for the people of ancient times who tended to think of the Lord God as far more of a regional God, whose claims for ownership of the rest of the world were far beyond their thinking. How amazing therefore it was for Isaiah to declare that such foreigners were responsible for bringing beauty to Zion in gold and silver, and for 'building up walls

(60:10). Indeed, the Lord God was known far more widely across the world than His people had ever perceived. After the terrible consequences of Israel's sin and the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, Isaiah saw an incredible redemption of a Zion made rich again by the gifts and effort of people throughout the world. Incidentally, we know that this prophecy cannot possibly be regarded as having been fulfilled after the Exile at the time of Nehemiah and Ezra. Those two books of the Bible are two of the most exclusive in the Bible, rejecting any non-Israelite participation in the rebuilding of Jerusalem. No, this prophecy points further forward to today, and beyond.

The open Temple (60:11-15)

This part of Isaiah's vision of God's glory begins with the marvellous acclamation 'Your gates will always stand open!' (60:11) What an amazing picture! There is so much traffic bringing good things to Zion, both in order to make her beautiful and also to give glory to God in worship, the gates 'will not be shut, day or night' (60:11). The fact that Zion is the spiritual centre of the world is emphasised by the comment by Isaiah that 'the nation and kingdom that will not serve you will perish.' (60:12). It is a brief but pertinent reminder that the price of glory is God's judgement, and it is all too easy to become enraptured in the wonders of God's work and forget the price paid. Just as Christians today can forget the price of the death of Christ, and a nation today can too quickly forget that its peace was won at the price of people's lives in war, so we can forget that the glory of God is a consequence of His eternal judgement. No one gloats over the nations 'ruined' (60:12), but if we try to hide our faces from reality, we will find that we also lose our focus on the things of God!

The Temple in this glorious vision of Isaiah is open in order to be built up and so that worship may continue. In the vision, Isaiah saw the same materials used for the building of the first Temple being transported into the city; 'the cypress, the plane and the pine ...' (60:13), principally to make the place beautiful and to 'give glory to where my feet stand'. This is a strange expression, but it encapsulates the essential dilemma of our understanding of God within the world. Our God is omnipotent and all powerful, and also present throughout His world, and yet in order for us to appreciate Him and worship Him, we need specific 'places' that God Himself has made holy so that we focus our prayers and our worship. There is no doubt that Isaiah's vision anticipates that such places are beautiful, and made beautiful by our craftsmanship in every way. Such is the duty and delight of God's people for their Lord.

Even today, when we see churches and chapels abandoned at the side of the road in many countries and many a magnificent place of worship falling into disrepair, it may be right to picture their rebuilding and beautification. The spiritual truth behind the message is clear, the things of God are beautiful beyond compare, but the representation of that on earth by God's people is something we should not dismiss as insignificant.

The satisfied child (60:16)

The image of Zion receiving love in the form of breast milk from the nations of this world is extraordinary. At first, it would not be surprising if it seemed odd. However, throughout Isaiah we have seen the frequent use of other nations by God to discipline His people and make them do His bidding. In this capacity Assyria invaded Israel and dispersed her tribes; and in this capacity, Babylon invaded Jerusalem and Judah to take her king and people into exile. These, of course, are terrifying pictures of real war, death, pain and anguish and they deeply affected all who were involved. Now, if such terrors at the hands of the nations of the world is something God can use to do His judgement, how much more can the Lord God use the best things available to the nations to give suckle to His own people! This picture is nothing less than a complete reversal of what Isaiah prophesied and did indeed take place (some in his lifetime, and some after his lifetime).

Some Christian sects have arisen over the centuries which emphasise the complete division of church and state, to the point of communities being established virtually outside of the rule of law in some countries. Most of these communities (with a few notable exceptions) have been complete failures, and this is because the Bible indicates that God's people and His city of Zion are not extracted from the world until the final end, when the world comes to an end in spiritual rebirth (Rev 21). IN the mean time, it is God's intention that His people enjoy the best of what the world has to offer!

Application

There are some beautiful reminders in this text of the nature of worship, and they are ones we often forget or leave to one side. Firstly, every part of the world order, from trade and commerce to the traditional herding of cattle and sheep may become a proper sacrifice of praise to God (60:6,7), indeed the more we give to the Lord from all that we do and do so in a manner that reflects all of our lives, the more we please Him. Doing this means that we are truly seeing the connections between God and every part of our lives.

Secondly, worship involves making things beautiful for God. In some parts of the world, one can visit churches of extraordinary ornate magnificence, and some will quickly say that such expense is simply unnecessary. I recently visited a newly built church on the island of Gozo (near Malta), and it was built with extraordinary vision out of solid stone to last thousands of years. Yet as I walked around the building with its undoubtedly highly expensive stone and architecture, there was the clear evidence of the local community of people at work and worship, supporting missionaries and doing things to give glory to God in their own community. I am almost certain that the money to raise this Cathedral like edifice was raised locally. How churlish it would be to criticise people for wanting their church to say something beautiful about God, in a world where most churches (including those in England or the USA) have a life of less than a century. The fact is that the architectural parameters used in such countries are the same as those for schools and halls. Scripture suggests we aim higher.

The end will come and what we make now will be consumed in God's final destruction and re-creation. In the mean time, our worship must surely offer the best to God, not relative to everyone else in the world, but the best that we can do relative to the gift He has given to us. Then, when we bow down before the Lord together, the country chapel and the Cathedral offers what is beautiful and best because the people who are there are giving their all to God. What glorious worship!

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What nations give praise and honour to God in their deeds, if any? Why does the Bible speak of nations giving praise to God?
2. What does this passage tell us about the worship of God, and what can we learn about how to open out the life of God's people, the church?
3. How do God's people best express the glory of God today, whether as individuals or together as His people?

Personal comments by author

God's people are to show His glory in their lives, principally, within their worship. I have found it helpful to remember this when I am in a service of worship that is not very helpful to me, when, for example, the musicians are out of tune, or the preacher is rather off the point. I remind myself that I am there to offer my best to God, and this includes my best singing, my best attitudes, my best attention, and my best presentation of myself to others. I find that when I allow myself to be consumed in offering myself to God rather than forming opinions about what is happening around me, then I truly engage in worship! What other people do certainly matters, especially those leading the worship and preaching, but the best can only be done for God in worship when I who take part in it give it my best.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to do:** *Read through this passage a few times, and see what the Lord says to you about proclaiming His glory. Ask yourself what it tells you about the worship you offer God both now and in the future.*
- **Something to pray about:** *Pray for the ingathering of all God's people, and the eventual unity of the church, the Bride of Christ, in God's good time. Pray earnestly for God's will to be done, and for people to catch a vision of His glory, and be excited by it!*

Final Prayer

Jesus, Saviour of the world, You were lifted up on a Cross to draw people of all races and nations to Yourself. Bless the witness of Your church in every place, and help Your people finish the work You have given them to do. We ask this in Your victorious name: AMEN