

Prayer

Break the powers of evil from over us, Lord God, Maker of heaven and earth. Shine a light on our lives that is brighter than the sun, Lord Jesus, who has lived on earth and has died for us. Liberate us from ourselves, from our sins and our wickedness, Holy Spirit, wind of God, divine comforter of souls and friend of sinners. Holy Father, become real in our lives this day: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Take several opportunities today to be silent, and listen. Expect the Lord to speak to you and you will not be disappointed

On-going prayers

- **Pray for people in your local hospital.** Pray for those who work in the accident and emergency department of your local hospital, and have to be ready for any situation that may confront them. Pray for courage and wisdom.
- Pray for charitable agencies working with disadvantaged children, in every country of the world. Pray that they will be given the resources they need to do their humanitarian work.
- Give thanks to God for His glory and the privilege of being one of His servants.

Meditation

What is true worship? To search for God,
Or to surrender in praise to Christ our Saviour?

To satisfy some personal spiritual needs,
Or to let Him deal with us according to His will?

To be carried away by music we like,
Or to listen to the music of a heavenly choir?

To be told what to do and when we can do it,
Or to be invited to enter into the things of God?

To hear a preacher speak about life and faith,
Or to hear God's Word preached with conviction?

To bring some change for the offertory plate,
Or to give all we possess to the one we love?

To listen to someone say prayers on our behalf,
Or to join in with the prayers of all Christ's servants?

What is true worship? A personal quest?
It is the yielding of self to the mighty love of God!

Bible passage - Isaiah 62:10-63:6

¹⁰ Pass through, pass through the gates,
clear the way for the people;
build up, build up the highway,
remove the stones,
raise a flag for the peoples.

- ¹¹ Look! the LORD has let it be heard
to the ends of the earth:
Say to daughter Zion,
'Look! Your Saviour has come;
His reward is with Him,
and His recompense before Him.'
- ¹² They will name them, 'People of the Holy One,
The Redeemed of the LORD';
and you shall be called,
'Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.'
- ^{63:1} 'Who is this? He comes from Edom,
from Bozrah in vibrant red clothing?
This is one who is splendidly robed,
Leaning forward in his great strength!'

'It is I, speaking in righteousness,
mighty to save.'
- ² 'Why are your robes red,
and your clothing like one who treads the wine press?'
- ³ 'I have trodden the wine press alone,
and from the peoples no one was with me;
I trod them in my anger
and trampled them in my wrath;
their fame spattered on my clothes,
and I have stained all my robes.'
- ⁴ For the day of vengeance was in my heart,
and the year for my redemption had come.
- ⁵ When I looked, there was no helper;
I was appalled, but no one gave support;
so my own arm brought salvation for me,
and my wrath, it sustained me.
- ⁶ I trod down peoples in my anger,
I made them drunk in my wrath,
And I poured out their fame on the earth.'

Bible Study

Review

In recent passages of Isaiah we have read the glorious news of the saving work of the Servant, and been led to rejoice with those who receive the blessings of salvation (61,62). The great promises of God for the redeemed have been set out and Isaiah's prophecy helps us appreciate that the work of salvation begins in the life of this world (61:5-9) long before it reaches its completion in heaven. In this passage today, we are faced with some powerful additional prophecies beginning with further wonderful announcements of the coming of the Saviour (62:10-63:1); but when He comes, the sight of the Lord is perplexing (63:2), and moreover, what the Lord says about His work is not easy or comforting; far from it, it sounds terrible (63:3-6).

What is this about our Lord trampling the 'grapes of wrath' and getting his clothes stained in the process? This picture has captivated artists for centuries, and even the phrase 'the grapes of wrath' has become associated with extreme forms of anger and desolation. However, we must not let ourselves be swayed by the imagination of writers and painters over the centuries; rather, our task is to try and understand the text. You will spot that at one place, I have translated the Hebrew with a more ancient but uncommon version of the text; 'their fame spattered on my clothes' (verse 3, and for another use of the word 'fame' see verse 6) instead of the usual 'their blood spattered on my clothes'. There is an explanation of this in the translation notes and the later study, but I have done this to remind us that in order to understand God's Word we must give it our careful attention and not be slaves to our instant reactions.

Salvation has been completed; this is the message of the early verses of our passage as the people of God await their Saviour. The picture of the first four verses (62:10-63:1) fits closely with previous prophecies, with the renaming of Zion as the 'people of the Holy One' and 'the Redeemed of the Lord' (62:11,12), and the building up highways (62:10), the report of lookouts (63:1) and the rallying of people to a flag (62:10). These verses do have a few things to add to the picture already given of the Lord's coming to His people, but in their conclusion, the watchman is caught unawares; the Saviour comes not in the expected glistening white of high officials and kings, but in garments of striking red (63:1,2)!

Isaiah then records a conversation. The Lord calls out that it is indeed Him, come to save, and the watchman calls out 'why are your clothes red?' (63:1,2) and the Lord replies with a description of the battle he has fought against evil in order to achieve the salvation he has brought (63:3-6)! You may find the description of peoples being trodden in a winepress too graphic, but this was the language of ancient Israel, using the picture of a wine-maker trampling grapes to produce wine as a description of the redeeming work of God. There is a price for the salvation of humanity, and the Lord has born this alone (63:3,4) because there was no one on earth willing to stand for righteousness (63:5). The Lord God has borne the agony of destroying (some of) His own creation so others may be saved.

People today may not like the idea that anyone might be 'trampled' by the Lord, or that God has a side of Him labelled 'wrath'. However, the purpose of this prophecy is to warn God's people that salvation is not a free ride, and salvation comes at a price. Some prefer to suggest that this passage describes the Last Judgement when final decisions have been made and the Lord is justified in dealing with His enemies, but there is nowhere in this prophecy to indicate this. It is a description of our present, for the Lord our God loves us as a husband loves a bride (62:4f.) but the price for our salvation is His wrath against all evil, even in people. If we fail to understand this, we fail to understand our salvation.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The anticipation of the Saviour (62:10-12)
- The sight of the Saviour's clothes (63:1,2)
- The price of Salvation paid by the Saviour (63:3-6)

Notes on the text and translation

V10 'raise a flag for the peoples'

The flag here is a rallying point and a place for people to turn to in order to find their way. It is sometimes translated as 'banner' or 'ensign'.

V11 'His reward is with Him, His recompense is before Him.'

It is difficult to translate the words 'reward' and 'recompense' because both words mean essentially the same thing, which is 'money paid for work done'. It is a dramatic way of saying that His work is done, and the evidence of this is that He has been paid!

V12' 'they will be named "People of the Holy One"'

This is most often translated 'The Holy People'. There is little difference, but I have kept closer to the Hebrew text so that we can more fully see the parallel with the next phrase; 'the Redeemed of the Lord'.

V1 'in vibrant red clothing'

The Hebrew has some obscure words probably meaning 'in reddened clothing', but the word for 'reddened' could well mean simply 'highlighted' or 'sharpened' (in colour). All this means that some translators describe this as 'stained'. However, this is all part of a word-play in the whole text to do with Edom (which means red) and the colour of grape juice (see v3f.). See study.

V1 'leaning forward in his great strength.'

This is not something that is immediately understandable, and because of that, later versions of the Hebrew text and the Latin versions of the fourth century AD onwards replace 'leaning' with a similar word which means 'walking', hence the translation most commonly given of 'marching in great might'. However, the Hebrew word 'leaning forward' indicates the action of carrying a heavy weight with great strength. I have retained the original to make us stop and think about what this phrase actually means.

V3 'their fame spattered on my clothes'

This translation is contentious. Most Bibles will have 'their blood spattered on my clothes', and it is clear that later versions of the Bible text support this. However, there is some evidence that the Hebrew word here has an older meaning of 'eminence' or 'fame', so I have used this translation both here and in verse 6. It helps us discover more in this rather difficult passage of scripture than we might otherwise find.

Going Deeper

The purpose of this study will be to look further at the anticipation of the Saviour (62:10-12), then the discovery of Saviours 'clothes' (63:1,2), and lastly, the meaning of the Lord's words about wrath (63:3-6). It is not easy to read about salvation and discover that there are some things about it that are uncomfortable, but Christian faith is not about some unreal world in which everything is 'nice' because God says so. Salvation is wrought in the real world of flesh and blood, and good and evil, and we forget this at our peril. I suggest that was the reason for this prophetic vision.

The anticipation of the Saviour (62:10-12)

The themes of Isaiah pile up in this brief prophecy as if all Isaiah's predictions of the coming salvation of our God was grinding to a halt! The call to clear the pathways so that the Lord might return was first made at the beginning of this great section of prophecies and has been repeated frequently (40:4, 42:16, 45:2, 57:14 etc.). Now, however, the prophecy speaks about a finished work; the stones have been cleared, the pathway is clear for the Lord to come, and a flag has been set up ('a flag for the people' – 62:10) to enable all who await the Saviour to assemble for His coming! It is at this point that some say this must surely be a preparation for the second coming of Christ, but there is no other scripture that speaks about preparing a highway for the Lord's second coming, only His first. If such an idea were rooted in the rest of scripture, then we would hear about this in the many theories people discuss about the Lord's return. No, this passage speaks about what happens again and again as the Lord reveals Himself in saving power to individuals and communities throughout the world, sustaining His people and making them fruitful in His Kingdom.

The work of God as proclaimed in His Gospel is constantly being brought across ground that has been prepared, and there are few places a missionary can now go that have not been explored before! God's people have raised 'flags' across the world to make themselves known and to gather the faithful together; they exist as churches and societies, and every manner of Christian organisation designed to serve the purposes of God. When our passage says 'His reward is with Him and His recompense before him', scripture tells us that the Lord will provide all we need to do His work. His coming and His presence is all that is required for God's people to do their work effectively and demonstrate the holiness of God in the world. This is why the people are called 'people of the Holy One' and the 'Redeemed of the Lord'. With these two names, God's people are publicly identified with God (the Holy One) and with the work He does on earth (redemption).

The last two names are ones we should perhaps place outside our churches today, particularly in the West where people are concerned that the church appears to be on the retreat from a secular world which is continually challenging the church and drawing people away. 'Sought Out, a City Not Forsaken' is something of a mouthful to say, and it is hardly something publicists might accept as a message for the church! However, it is a title bold enough to make people stop and ask what it means, particularly if they were to see it above a small chapel they believed to be lacking in life!

When Isaiah said these words about Zion, he was picking up the theme of the Lord's marriage with His people, a faithful and loving covenant (62:4f.) to replace the awful religious adultery of people in times past (57:1-10). This is what the people of the Lord rightly expect of their redeemer.

The sight of the Saviour's clothes (63:1,2)

Suddenly, the prophecy changes, and we hear the announcement of the Saviour coming from an unexpected direction, from Edom and from Bozrah! More than this, His distinctive clothing is red, not white, and He comes in great power and strength, leaning forward as if bearing or pulling a great burden (see translation notes). The Lord calls out in reassurance that it is indeed He; 'It is I speaking in righteousness, mighty to save!' (63:1), and the watchman calls out again in concern; 'why are your robes red, and your clothing like one who treads the wine press?'

In order to understand this exchange, we need to take a small trip into the world of Hebrew and appreciate that much of this is a play on words and biblical imagery, which because of our general ignorance of scripture today, many people simply do not notice. Firstly, Edom was the nation formed from Esau, Jacob's brother who was cheated out of his birthright, and the nation of Edom was a constant enemy of God's people throughout Old Testament times. Secondly, the name 'Edom' means 'red', like the earth to the south east of the Dead Sea where the Edomites lived. Clearly, there is a word-play between 'edom' and the 'red'

colouration of clothes observed. In addition, the capital of Edom was a city named 'Bozrah' (see Isaiah 34:5,6), and the name 'Bozrah' meant 'vintage' in the sense of matured wine! As soon as we realise this, then the picture begins to emerge of a complex connection between Edom, the red clothes of the redeemer and the making of wine, and this is before we have even read verse 3 (where the connection is specifically made!).

Put simply, the passage describes the people's unexpected sight of the Saviour / Redeemer coming from enemy territory with his garments suggestively stained red! In ancient days, anyone coming from a distance with red stained clothing would be regarded as someone coming after a battle, stained either with the blood of others in battle or with his own blood. It is also possible that the term 'treading the wine press' was an analogy for battle, which completes the 'picture language' of this passage. We may not think like this today, because battles and news about them do not either happen or get reported in this manner today, so the drama of the prophecy here is somewhat lost on us. Certainly, those awaiting the saviour's coming would be shocked. What did it all mean?

The price of Salvation paid by the Saviour (63:3-6)

To understand the whole prophetic message, we must now turn to what is said in verses 3 to 6. The imagery described previously helps us enormously, because it gives us a general picture of what was in the prophet's mind. But why is this prophecy necessary? Why have we been given a prophecy about the awful battles fought on our behalf by the Redeemer so that we can be saved? The answer may well be that as we commonly observe, when people accept faith and receive the salvation of their souls, they frequently find that their lives can become difficult for a while. They face both the problems of living a new style of life as a Christian, and they face the attacks of an enemy who seeks to draw them back into the life of sin from which they have been saved. Unless God's people have a realistic understanding of the nature of evil and the enemies they face as God's people, then the message they live and preach can lack real power, and will let people down. We have to learn to accept the nature of evil and sin in the world around us, and how the Lord has fought to overcome it on our benefit.

In verse 3 to 6, we read a prophetic description of God's wrath poured out on all sin and wickedness. The image of the vineyard wine press is dramatic; no one could trample grapes without getting their clothes stained red by the juice of the grapes, and the prophecy links this with the staining of the Redeemer's garments. Instead of allowing our minds to dwell on the image of the Lord's judgement by treading on people, for this is neither more nor less horrifying than His judgements by war and siege (see Isaiah 36-39), the image stresses that the one who redeems us is the same one who has acted in judgement against sin, evil and rebellion. Put another way, the Saviour who redeems us is the same Saviour who has fought the powers of evil in this world to set us free!

This is all part of Isaiah's explanation of how salvation works, for throughout this section of scripture, an essential theme keeps cropping up. It is found in verse 3 where the Redeemer says 'no one was with me' and then in verse 5 where he says; 'when I looked, there was no helper, I was appalled, but no one gave support, so my own arm brought salvation for me.' Who are we to comment on what God has had to do for our salvation, when we had no hand in it? It sounds terrible that the Lord God had to fight against even His own people of Old Testament times, as Isaiah so frequently points out (Isaiah 6:13, 8:1f., 12:10f., etc.), but the reality is that the Redeemer has paid a terrible personal price for our salvation and for doing it alone. In verse 6, the Lord says of the evil objects of his wrath that He 'poured out their fame on the earth' (see notes above), and this means that the result of the Redeemer's work is that the pretentious power of ungodliness has been defeated, but by Him alone, not by us.

For this reason we rely on our Redeemer, Jesus Christ, for our salvation; Him and none other, and there is no other Saviour because He alone is victorious over evil.

Application

This passage is difficult for us to read because we do not like reading about God's wrath, but when we can see past our own problems, the passage reveals that we can trust our God to help us overcome sin and evil both personally and in the world. When God's people share with each other their journeys of faith, they can pray with each other and minister God's love to each other so that sin is forgiven, sickness may be healed and evil overcome (as James so clearly says – James 5:13f.). God is constantly making His redeeming and saving love real within the world for real people, and it is the privilege of God's people to recognise that the Lord in whom they believe fights on their behalf and comes to set them free. The wise Christian knows that whilst trouble and strife are our ever constant companions in this world, the same Jesus who saved us is constantly at work to help us live in a world of sin.

There is so much in Isaiah's latter prophecies of wonder and awe, it is quite hard to come down to earth with this straightforward but important message. However, you will see that now it is explained, the idea that this

prophecy is about the second coming of Christ is wide of the mark. John tells us that when Christ comes in glory, robes stained red will become white again (Rev 7:14, 19:11f.) through His blood (that is, His death); but the completion of that vision is still in the future, and the red staining of our Redeemer's robes indicates the sacrifices He has made and the battles He has won for us.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. The Lord constantly surprises His people. When and how have you been surprised by the Lord, and what has been the result?
2. Our passage describes the Lord as vengeful against evil and sin? Why do Christians find this idea so difficult?
3. Whether He comes to help us in this life, or comes at the end of time in glory, how can we maintain watchfulness and be ready for the Lord's coming?

Personal comments by author

In reading this passage, I feel that I must ask myself whether I am truly watching out for the Lord to do new things in my life. It is far too easy to assume that God will do what He does while I just get on with life. The central part of this passage challenges me to be on the look out, so that I do not miss what He wants to do with me. I need to be watchful, have an expectant heart and look actively for evidence of what the Lord is doing at times when I least expect Him.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to think about:** *What does your salvation really mean to you? Ask yourself, how does it affect your daily life? This seems a straightforward question, but the answer may be complex. Pray and ask the Lord to help you understand more fully what He is doing in your life.*
- **Something to do:** *Discuss what you think about the wrath of God with others. Do they share your feelings? Explore this subject with a few people and try to assess the responses you get. What does this say about people's beliefs in general?*

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, place into my heart the very truth of Your Gospel. May it guide my every thought and inspire my every deed. May I therefore make choices that are centred around Your will, and be drawn by the power of Your love into the eternal purposes of God. AMEN
