

## Prayer

Dear Jesus, please understand the depth of feeling in our hearts today. We are truly sorry for all we have done wrong and seek your forgiveness; come amongst us with renewing power, to hear our prayer, forgive our sins, and cleanse our hearts. For we want to be a people who are worthy of Your name, and proud to be Your representatives in this world. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

*(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)*

### Prayer ideas

*Try to give time to some of the prayers you say regularly, and over a period of time, give each of your prayer concerns the special focus of some time priority*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for people in your local hospital.** *Pray for the nurses who work in a variety of general and specialist roles, and whose care is essential to the life of the hospital.*
- *Give thanks to God for the things He has done in your life over recent days.*
- *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.*

## Meditation

To meditate and pray gives the soul a break,  
A chance to stop, to think, to listen;  
To stand aside from what is done each day,  
To be refreshed in spirit, to be at peace ...

More than this, our God would speak to us,  
And break the daily cycle of life;  
He longs to reveal those things we fail to see  
And does so when He's given space ...

Far beyond all natural human consciousness,  
God's eternal plan unfolds with clarity;  
He guides His own by a hand of love  
To walk a path the eye can never see ...

Prayer and meditation do not stop  
The ebb and flow of natural feelings, rather,  
They unlock the soul to heaven's dynamite!  
God's power released in human life ...

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 63:7-19

<sup>7</sup> I will recall the faithful love of the LORD,  
and the praises of the LORD;  
Because of all that the LORD has done for us,  
and many good things for the house of Israel  
By which He has rewarded them in his mercy,  
and the greatness of His faithful love.

<sup>8</sup> Then He said, 'Surely they are my people,  
children who will not deal falsely';

- so He became their Saviour
- <sup>9</sup> In all their affliction He was not an enemy.  
They were saved by an angel of His presence;  
In His love and in His mercy He redeemed them;  
He lifted them up and carried them all as in the days of old.
- <sup>10</sup> But they rebelled  
and grieved his Holy Spirit;  
So He turned and treated them as an enemy;  
He fought against them himself.
- <sup>11</sup> Then He remembered the days of old:  
Moses and His people.  
Where are those who deliver from the sea -  
the shepherds of His flock?  
Where is the One  
who places His holy spirit within them
- <sup>12</sup> Who led by Moses' right hand,  
by His glorious strength,  
Who divided the waters before them  
to make for Himself an everlasting name,
- <sup>13</sup> Who led them through the deep  
like a horse in the desert,  
and they did not stumble.
- <sup>14</sup> Like cattle that go down into the valley,  
the spirit of the LORD gave him rest!  
This is how You led your people,  
to make for Yourself a glorious name!
- <sup>15</sup> Look down from heaven and see,  
from Your holy and glorious dwelling.  
Where is Your zeal and Your strength?  
the stirring of Your feelings and compassion?  
are they withheld from me?
- <sup>16</sup> For You are our father,  
though Abraham has not known us  
and Israel does not accept us;  
You are our father, O LORD;  
our Redeemer from of old is Your name.
- <sup>17</sup> Why do you make us stray from your ways, O LORD,  
and harden our heart from the fear of You?  
Turn back for the sake of Your servants,  
for the sake of the tribes of your inheritance.
- <sup>18</sup> Your holy people possessed it for a little while;  
but our foes have trodden down Your holy place.
- <sup>19</sup> We have long been like those whom You do not rule,  
Like those not called by Your name.

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## Bible Study

### Review

To read a passage of Isaiah like this can be confusing. On the one hand, we can understand each verse or sentence for what it says 'on the surface', but on the other hand, the more we read, the more we ask what the whole passage means. The text clearly begins with wonderful praises to God (63:7-9), but they are followed by thoughts about the people's relationship with God, how they rebelled (63:10,11) and how He led them in the past (63:11-14). Isaiah's prophecies continue with a call to God firstly to remember His people (63:15,16), and secondly to return His people to their inheritance (63:17-19).

It would be natural to think that this part of Isaiah returns to the thoughts and feelings of the ancient Israelites as they mused about what had happened to them over the years. If we approach the text in this way, however, we will fail to get to grips with the powerful nature of the prophecy. It has far more to say than merely reflect the feelings of someone of Isaiah's day about God. This passage is a reflective prayer which follows the Biblical model of prayer which is to begin with praising (63:7-9), deal with sin, repentance and confession (63:10-16), and then present the Lord with specific requests (63:15-19). The end of this chapter flows straight into the next (ch. 64, which we will study tomorrow), which contains a further five prayers of petition, which added to the two in our passage makes a full round of seven petitionary prayers. Chapters 63 and 64 of Isaiah are none other than a model prayer for God's people! In studying this pattern, it helps our study today to include the first two petitions (63:15-19) so that we can get a feel of the whole pattern of prayer without becoming too occupied with the details of the petitions (which we will study tomorrow).

Nowhere in this prophetic prayer do we hear God speak, we hear someone praying and talking about God. This is not something we might have expected in Isaiah, but this is indeed the nature of our passage, and the reason for it is straightforward. Isaiah has described the Servant's work of redemption, and then follows this with a series of prophecies about both God's and the people's reaction to this. The series ends with prophecies of God's might and glory, followed by warnings about God's pure and just nature (61:1 – 63:6). These classic prayers are Isaiah's way of ending his great work.

This passage therefore teaches us about prayer, and it is no coincidence that it follows the pattern of praise, confession, repentance/forgiveness and petition. This is typical of many Psalms with which Isaiah would have been familiar. The opening verses speak of God's 'faithful love', meaning His sure covenant love for all, and it honours Him as the 'Saviour' (63:8). Amongst many other great words and phrases praising the Lord such as 'not an enemy', 'love and mercy', (63:9), it speaks powerfully of His work by means of 'an angel of His presence'. It is unfortunate that Christian history has linked this angel with death, because Isaiah's angel is a powerful advocate of the loving work of God for His redeemed.

The verses outlining the sins of God's people are fascinating, in particular the phrase 'they grieved His Holy Spirit' and God's continued fight against evil amongst His people (63:10). The longer passage recalling Moses and the deeds of God at the time of the Exodus serves as means for the one praying to return to the truth of God's strength in deliverance. Then, once the one praying has been led to a place of 'rest' (63:14), the door is opened for further prayers of petition, asking the Lord to act for His people (63:15-19).

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- Praises (63:7-9)
- Confession (63:10,11)
- Repentance and forgiveness (63:11-14)
- Petition (63:15-19)

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V7 *'I will recall the faithful love of the Lord'***

The Hebrew word for 'recall' comes from the verb 'to remember', but using a special form meaning 'cause to remember'. I reckon the English verb 'recall' best fits this sentence.

### **V7 *'by which He has rewarded them in His mercy.'***

The Hebrew word for 'rewarded' comes from a word meaning 'to deal with fully', and so you will find a number of different words used in various Bibles such as 'grant' or 'give'; but because of the sense of completeness, I reckon that 'reward' is not too strong a word for a good translation.

### **V10 *'He fought against them Himself.'***

This is only a small point, but the Hebrew says 'He Himself fought against them', and many translations say this, but it is not the way we speak today, so I have transferred the 'Himself' to the end, where it makes perfect sense.

### **V11 *'where are those who deliver from the sea – the shepherds of the flock.'***

This reads awkwardly, but it is the only way to express what the Hebrew says, referring to people like Moses, the true shepherds (see study)

### **V11 *'where is the One who places His Holy Spirit within them.'***

This sentence after speaking about Moses, speaks about God, whose actions lie behind what Moses did (see study). The translation is difficult, but this translation keeps close to the text.

### **V12 *'who led by Moses' right hand, by His glorious strength.'***

I have assumed that 'Moses' right hand' and 'His glorious strength' are parallel phrases here. Other translations do not, and come out with quite different sentences.

**V13 'who led them through the deep'**

Some versions have this as a question, which is quite wrong. The sequence of sentences carries on as before, describing the leading of God through trials (the deep).

**V15 'the stirring of your feelings and your compassion.'**

The Hebrew words I have translated as 'stirring of your feelings' are literally 'rumbling of the inner organs', however, this is normal colloquial use for a reference to feelings and their stirring into action!

**V17 'and harden our hearts from the fear of you.'**

Some translations have 'harden our hearts so that we do not fear you'. However, there is no negative in the sentence, and the Hebrew simply talks about the fact that a hardened heart fails to fear God. My translation is closer to the text.

## Going Deeper

Once we have this 'model' or understanding of what is going on, then we are better placed to receive its teaching and find further treasures. As we go deeper we will look at each section of the prayer in turn and whilst accepting the origins of these prayers in the life and times of Isaiah, we will allow it to speak prophetically to us.

### **Praises (63:7-9)**

One of the first things we notice about praise is that it is often a matter of recalling what God has done for us in the past. Here, Isaiah says 'I will recall the faithful love of the Lord.' (63:7) and the very phrase indicates that the worshipper (Isaiah himself?), praises God by an act of will; that is, he has taken a positive decision to praise. Sometimes praise is wonderfully spontaneous, but that would be to limit praise unnecessarily. When we praise the Lord for 'what He has done for us', we actively look back and make the effort to remember.

Today, our memory is largely confined to our own lives, but there is a degree of tragedy in this, for many cultures and also past generations of people in western countries valued their past as nations and as regional peoples, not just as individuals. People felt themselves connected not just through present experience, but through people's shared memory, that is, through their history. For this reason, an Israelite would remember the crossing of the Red Sea as if it was their own experience. Personally, although I was born after the Second World War, my early years were spent in the shadow of that tragedy, and through hearing people's stories, I can almost imagine I was alive at the time, although I was not; I certainly feel that it is 'my history'.

The reason for this diversion is simply that when it comes to praising God, we are immeasurably enriched if we praise God for all He has done not just in our lives personally, but in the history of our nation or the life of our church (from whenever it was founded) and also for what God has done through Jesus. As soon as we get away from cultural obsessions with 'self', praise takes off, and the Spirit will lift us to higher places in praise! Isaiah was even more enriched in His praise, because He was able to praise God for the great things he knew God would do, for example, when he said 'He became their Saviour', talking about the work of the suffering Servant, Jesus Christ our Lord, long before He lived! Perhaps we can also praise God for what lies ahead because we are utterly confident that His faithful love will not change!

Lastly, Isaiah praises God for His work in the world through angelic presence (63:9). This is hard to define, but I suggest that what is meant is something like this. Many things happen to us in life, and some of them we do not understand; so when we are unexpectedly blessed in life and cannot explain how it has happened, then we are still able to praise God for it. We accept that God does work mysteriously in our lives, and sometimes in quite unknown ways through His angelic messengers and workers. They are God's presence with us when we may not be specifically aware of it, such as when we are fully concentrating on driving, for example! It is certainly my experience that many people testify to what they believe to be the Lord's angelic help whilst driving on the roads!

### **Confession (63:10,11)**

The six brief lines describing confession are interesting. Firstly, I am using the term 'confession' in its sense of agreeing with God that something is wrong (the other meaning of confession is agreeing with God about what you believe, such as in a 'confession of faith'). The one praying here is not making a personal confession, but is doing so on behalf of others; he says of his own people 'they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit.' (63:10). We normally think of praying in confession for personal sin, but there is great room for

expansion of our prayers of confession if we accept that we may be right to confess the sins of our nation, or our church, or place of work, for example.

It certainly seems that Isaiah confessed on behalf of his own people, the Israelites, but the nature of the confession is not the point. Isaiah recognised that in true confession the one praying has to accept that God is in the right and people are in the wrong, and this is dramatically expressed in the words 'so He turned and treated them as an enemy ...' (63:10). In this brief section, it is this acceptance that unlocks the door to God's mercy and grace; as Isaiah says; 'Then He remembered the days of old ...' This sounds rather underwhelming, but it is in fact dramatic. The Lord God's 'remembrance' is in scripture like His 'calling to mind'. It is not that the Lord has forgotten His people either as a nation or as individuals, but there are specific moments when earth and heaven combine to enable Him to respond to our direct need, and the Bible always uses the term 'remembrance' to indicate this. It might not be the word we would use, but that is what we have inherited from the Hebrew text!

The Hebrew text is abrupt, and virtually untranslatable at this point, but as if to make the point about God's 'remembrance', the Hebrew says quite suddenly 'Moses!' and then 'My people!'. The meaning of this is clear; the Lord remembers His people when they confess, and he also remembers the means He has provided for deliverance (the leadership of Moses – through the Red Sea!)

### ***Repentance and forgiveness (63:11-14)***

The verses which make up this section sound strange, being a series of questions; but the questions themselves reveal the mind of one working to find answers. Notice how the process of asking and asking eventually leads the one praying to the point where 'the spirit of the Lord gave him rest.' The point is this; when we have sinned and fallen short of the standards God requires of us, we often have many questions in our minds about how things have happened. 'Why am I like that?' or 'why was I around at such and such a time so that I have to deal with ...?' or 'how can I avoid that again?' As usual with the many questions we ask, few of them can be answered, but the Lord will answer what needs to be answered if we will let Him.

Isaiah (presumably the one praying) asks in this prayer about where Israel's 'shepherds' were, for they were the ones who should lead the people out of danger and away from sin (63:11). He then turns directly to God to enquire where the Holy Spirit has gone to (63:11)! Moses knew the power of God (63:12) and by the Spirit, the deliverance wrought for Israel brought God an 'everlasting name'; as one who redeems! Note that after this prayer, Isaiah's mind was gradually settled and led to peace (63:14). Was this because the recollection of God's redemption reminded Isaiah of his own prophecy about God's redemption through the suffering Servant (52:13-53:12), a promise of God running through history like a sure footed stallion galloping through the desert (63:13).

It does not read like 'repentance', from the point of view of our rather limited and sometimes liturgical view of it, but you can see how the one praying gradually turned from the turmoil of confession to the peace of the Lord's 'rest', and this turning was and is repentance. Repentance means 'turning', and the Lord is content with any method, providing we turn from sin and having to confess it, to receiving His forgiveness because we have turned towards Him, away from our sin or the sins of our nation or church (see above). He is our hope and our redemption.

### ***Petition (63:15-19)***

We will not spend too long on the two prayers of petition here today (63:15-15 and 17-19), because there are five more to follow in chapter 64 which we will study tomorrow, and some will connect to what is said here. The first prayer is a request for the Lord to act; 'where is Your zeal and Your strength, and the stirring of your feelings ... are they withheld from me?' (63:15) We must all confess that this is a common prayer and it is said in one form or another by many people today. However, the request continues with the remarkable comment that despite someone's recollection of their past and their heritage, Abraham cannot know them personally! When Isaiah continues 'and Israel does not accept us', the phrase reminds us sharply that these prophecies were not written just for the people of Israel (as so many scholars continue to insist), but they were written for us who are not part of the lineage of Jacob, but who still know that the Lord is our Redeemer! This is a real request for help, and we can empathise with it, but it is rooted in the belief that God will act to help because that is His nature.

The second petition is all about the inheritance of God's people. In times past, the people of Israel thought of their inheritance as the Promised Land, and those who had been evicted from Jerusalem at the time of the Babylonian exile must have felt that their tenure of God's Promised Land was all too brief. But even though the prayer says 'we have long been like those whom you do not rule' (63:19), the phrase itself expresses the desire for that rule and a longing to receive a godly inheritance from the Lord's hand. Tomorrow we will explore these questions and others as we explore further what it means to present our deepest desires to the Lord, questions and all!

## Application

The pattern of prayer here is important, and the very fact that we find this pattern in many places in the Bible (including the prayers of the New Testament such as the Lord's Prayer), means that we should accept this as a primary revelation of God about an appropriate way for us to pray. You will have noticed, however, that the way in which things like confession and repentance are expressed are quite different from what we may be used to today.

Many people do not like 'liturgies' or set forms of prayer or prayer structure, preferring prayer to be impromptu and spontaneous. There is certainly evidence of this in scripture, but it should not be said that the one excludes the other, because the Bible gives us both! Our spontaneous prayers are at their best when they are subconsciously fed, for example, by the richness of scripture in the use of special words; 'Redeemer' 'God of grace' and many, many more. A deep knowledge of God's Word will also enrich us by giving a structure to our thoughts, perhaps reminding us of elements of prayer we might otherwise forget. In addition, however, this passage reminds us that a structure of prayer need not be an inhibition; at the very least, it challenges our understanding of praise, confession and repentance. Surely we recognise that when we make rules about what we will or won't do, it is us who limit the Lord our God, even if we say 'let's be free' and ignore all scriptural advice!

Underneath this passage I believe is God's desire to bless His people. Unless that were true, people would not pray or continue to pray. Out of the depths of our human experience, people pray to God sometimes whether they believe in Him or not, and contrary to our beliefs, He nearly always responds; perhaps not as we would like, but certainly as we need.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Do you find it easy to pray using a pattern of prayer, or extempore? What can we learn from the early 'liturgy' found in this text?
2. What does this passage of Scripture teach us about prayer and about God?
3. When praying, why do people tend to go straight to 'petition', and make their requests known to God before they have offered Him praise? Is this true or not true of your own experience?

### **Personal comments by author**

*Prayer is for me the great opportunity to get things right; to set myself before God and let Him sort out my life. Without prayer, I would be lost; and without talking to my Lord, I would be a 'lost' person. I thank God that I have found many patterns of prayer within God's Word, and all of them are helpful. They have taught me that I need never fear prayer, whether in public or in private, whether quietly or out loud, and whether I feel that God is speaking to me or not. God uses the act of praying to alert my spirit to important spiritual realities of which I would be otherwise unaware, and for that I am grateful!*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- **Something to do:** Try using the pattern of prayer found in this passage for your own quiet times, and then assess whether the pattern has been helpful.
  - **Something to talk about:** When speaking to friends who are not Christians, try plucking up the courage to give them an overtly Christian response to those things you are talking about. See what happens when you allow God to be present within your conversations!
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## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, be the cornerstone of my life's work and the foundation of my endeavours, I pray. I place my trust in You, and ask that as I travel from day to day, everything I do may contribute to the building of Your eternal Kingdom. Through Jesus Christ I pray; AMEN

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