

Prayer

In Your Majesty, Lord God of awesome power and might, accept our prayers, and the glory and praise we bring. Our songs may say more about us than they do about You, our prayers may display ignorance compared to Your wisdom, our deeds may fall short of what You have called us to do, but we confess these our sins and trust in Your eternal forgiveness. Thank You, Majestic Heavenly Father. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Before you say your prayers today, kneel down and read a psalm. Let the psalm suggest to you prayers that you should say beyond those you normally say.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who have little food.** *Pray today for regions of the world suffering drought. Internet drought monitors suggest drought is currently affecting the USA, Mexico, Peru, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, China, Japan and Cambodia.*
- *Pray about the food markets of the world and international agreements on the production and distribution of food. Pray that these will reflect real need and not just profit.*
- *Praise God for the opportunities you have to enjoy life this day*

Meditation

Where is the mind of a servant of God?

Dwelling on the Word and searching for truth;
Observing the world and doing what is right.

Where is the heart of a servant of God?

Fighting for justice, for the poor of the land;
Following Christ's lead and conquering sin.

Where is the spirit of a servant of God?

Yearning for holiness and the things of God;
Searching for the truth and the life of Christ.

Where is the soul of a servant of God?

Committed to the Lord and the doing of His will;
Longing for the day when He will come again.

Where is the body of a servant of God?

Following Christ's example, with love and care,
Doing the Gospel, for the whole world to see.

Bible passage - Isaiah 64:1-12

- ¹ O that You had torn open the heavens and come down,
so the mountains might quake at Your presence
- ² As when fire kindles brushwood
or fire makes water to boil
To make Your name known to Your enemies,
and make nations tremble at Your presence!
- ³ When You did awesome deeds
we did not expect,

- You came down,
and the mountains quaked at your presence.
- ⁴ From of old, no one has heard,
no one has perceived,
No eye has seen any God except You,
who works for those who wait for Him.
- ⁵ You come to those who rejoice,
who do what is right,
and call Your ways to mind.
Look! You were angry
when we continued in sin for a long time,
so will we be saved?
- ⁶ All of us are like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds
are like a stained cloth.
All of us are shrivelled like a leaf,
and our iniquities carry us away, like the wind.
- ⁷ There is no one who calls on Your name,
or is keen enough to take hold of You;
for You have hidden Your face from us,
and have made us melt in the grip of our guilt.
- ⁸ But now, O LORD, You are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
- ⁹ Do not be so very angry, O LORD,
and do not remember guilt forever.
Now look, and consider
All of us are Your people.
- ¹⁰ Your holy cities have become a wilderness,
Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a ruin.
- ¹¹ Our holy and beautiful house,
where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned by fire,
and every precious thing has been ruined.
- ¹² After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD?
Will you hold back and afflict us severely?

Bible Study

Review

These five prayers of Isaiah continue from the pattern of prayer we found in yesterday's reading. Chapter 63 began with the praises of God and continued with confession and repentance, before Isaiah turned to reflecting on the things on His heart, the state of God's people and their inheritance (63:15-19). Nothing mattered so much to Isaiah, whose whole ministry was focused on following the Lord's revelation of the nature of salvation, and His solution to the dire state of God's sinful people. The early prophecies of Isaiah (chps.1-8) tell us much about the man, and the story of his call (ch.6) reveals the nature of his prophetic quest. Isaiah, uniquely understood that God had to do a new work through His own Servant if the history of God's people, so sorely abused by generations during the reigns of various kings of Israel and Judah, was to be redeemed for the blessing of the whole world.

These final chapters of Isaiah's prophetic work reveal something of his prayers, and they reveal something about Isaiah himself, something about the people of his day, something about Jews of later days who would discover (after the Exile) that what he said was true, and something of the future when God had sent His Servant and Redeemer into the world. History seems to wash away as we read, and we find echoes of different times within the prayers. Most remarkably, there is a strong connection between this passage and

the writing of Paul. He used this passage (64:4,6) along with passages in Psalm 36 and other Old Testament texts to create his great explanation of the Christian faith, see Romans 3:10-18.

The five stanzas of our reading today are Isaiah's prayerful reflection on the life of God's people from an Old Testament perspective, but anticipating the New in powerful ways. For this reason, I would call these verses 'prophetic prayer'. To begin with, Isaiah expressed his heartfelt wish that the terrible state of Israel he saw in his own lifetime might have been dealt with by God before the nation collapsed; 'Oh that you had torn open the heavens ...!' Isaiah longed for God to come and deal with the world and all its problems; we can almost hear the same frustration in Isaiah here as we saw, many chapters previously, in his great confrontation with King Ahaz (chapters 7 and 8); the king who tragically refused the help of God. Isaiah called out to the Lord, 'why did You not come down!'

All of us feel the same sometimes, asking why the Lord does not do this or that when it seems to us that He could do something. However, God is greater and His plans are beyond us; beyond us or our feelings. In the following prayers, Isaiah continued to express his own thoughts, even frustrations, but stubbornly kept close to the revealed message of salvation which God had given him, and what he said now inspires us, who seek answers to the anguish we feel at the state of God's people and world.

In verses 4 and 5, Isaiah reflected on the impenetrable mysteries of God's ways and his justice; how could a just God deal with relentless sin, it seemed impossible! From this, Isaiah thought about the fact that everyone sinned (64:6,7), despite their attempts to be good; so would God hide His face from all people forever (64:7)? Nevertheless, in the image of the 'potter and the clay' (64:8), Isaiah saw the possibility of the reworking of the human spirit, and appealed to the Lord; 'consider, all of us are Your people!' (64:9). Lastly, Isaiah appealed to God to have mercy after the destruction of Israel, Zion and Jerusalem.

You might ask whether there is anything of salvation in this prayer, as Isaiah does not seem to mention it. Remember, Isaiah had already prophesied salvation and the work of redemption, but he did not see this come true in his day. So this is the prayer of one who fully understood both sin and salvation, and prayer his reflects this. But whilst waiting for redemption, Isaiah prayed for the people he knew.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- Come down O Lord! (64:1-3)
- The mysteries of God (64:4,5)
- All are sinful (64:6,7)
- Redemption - the potter and the clay (64:8,9)
- Will God's wrath end? (64:10-12)

Notes on the text and translation

V1 'O that you had ...'

Here, most translators give this the present tense, but the one praying is reflecting on the past, and the tense of the verb here is clearly past tense.

V2 'and make nations tremble at your presence.'

Strictly speaking, the words 'and make' are not present in the Hebrew, but the meter of the verse makes this line follow exactly what goes before, so 'and make ...' flows over from the previous line.

V5 'Look! You were angry, and we continued in sin for a long time, so will we be saved!'

This is an essential verse of Isaiah's prophecy, and unfortunately it is much debated, with wildly differing opinions about how it should be translated; 'we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?' (NIV) and 'But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.' (NRSV). However, my literal reading of the Hebrew says this 'Look, you were angry, and we sinned in them for a long time, and are we saved?' I have assumed that 'in them' simply refers to the sins committed, and added a minimum number of English particles to make the phrase make sense. The result is a line that makes perfect sense in the context of the prophecy.

V6 'like a stained cloth'

In Hebrew this is literally 'the cloth of menstruation'. It makes better sense to express this with a more general term because of the generalised nature of the passage.

V7 'or is keen enough to take hold of You'

The Hebrew word I have translated as one who is 'keen enough' comes from a word meaning 'rouse oneself'. This gives the sense of being interested enough to awaken from sleep!

V7 'and have made us melt in the grip of our guilt.'

This sounds a little strange, but it is what the Hebrew says. Some translations avoid this and put in some other word which indicates something like being 'consumed by guilt', but being 'melted' in the grasp of guilt is, I reckon, quite an interesting expression and well worth keeping.

V8 'You are our potter'

The Hebrew word here translated 'potter' is not the usual word which is associated with that craft. The original word is 'maker' or 'craftsman', which in the context, must be a potter because of the clay mentioned in the previous line.

Going Deeper

In studying this passage further, we will look briefly at each stanza in turn. We will find that the contribution of this prayer to our understanding of God's salvation is considerable, and it has helped and blessed many people for centuries. Isaiah's prayer is also very 'modern' in that it reflects many of the frustrations and questions people have with faith today. The reason for this is because Isaiah's words were prophetic, and have transcended time.

Come down O Lord! (64:1-3)

We all know what it is like to want God to come down and act in sovereign power. We think we can see a justice in the world that requires God's action, and we pray for it; indeed, many prayers of intercession express similar feelings. The truth is that God does indeed work in sovereign power in the world to save souls and establish His Kingdom, and sometimes in special works of power. However, His desire is to work through us who are His people, for we are His commissioned witnesses and workers in the world.

Isaiah longed for the Lord to come in majesty, with mountains quaking and fire kindled (64:1,2) just as described in the great coming of God on mount Sinai before the giving of the Law (Exodus 19). Elijah longed for the same when he went to Horeb (1 King 19), but was first met by a silence in the cave, and then a firm command by the Lord to proceed with the prophetic work lined up for him (1 Kings 19:12-17). It is just possible that Isaiah had the scriptural and historic example of Elijah in mind as he prayed, because some of the later prayers mention God's apparent hiding, silence or restraint (64:7,12). Despite this prayer of Isaiah's, the record of his book is that whatever his feelings, he faithfully prophesied God's word for decades, creating a body of work that has blessed millions and contributes immeasurably to God's Word.

The mysteries of God (64:4,5)

As Isaiah continued to pray, he made the observation, perhaps through a knowledge of Psalm 14 (also 53); 'Fools say in their hearts, "there is no God," they are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is no one who does good ...'. From the thought 'no one does good', Isaiah created the poetic lines; 'no one has heard, no one has perceived, no eye has seen ...' using the same collection of words describing the lack of understanding found in the prophetic words of his call (6:10; 'keep listening, but not perceiving, keep seeing but not understanding ...'). It is not easy to spot this in English, and far easier in Hebrew.

If we read carefully, however, we can also see that Isaiah inserts into this prayer a brief hint of the work of salvation and redemption. He says; 'no eye has seen any God except You, who works for those who wait for Him.' The language seems strange, but this is indeed what Isaiah says, and it is possible that when Isaiah said 'except You' he was talking about the Servant, the one who really did do God's work 'for those who wait for Him'! If we accept this understanding of the stanza, then it follows that Isaiah saw himself addressing the Servant in verse 5; 'You come to those who rejoice'!

After this, Isaiah then asked the most pressing question; would God indeed save people who continued to sin over and over again (64:5)? We know that Jesus answered this question by telling Peter that forgiveness should be offered 'seventy times seven', meaning 'infinitely' (Matt 18:21,22), but Isaiah lived centuries before the question was ever asked by Peter and answered by Jesus. For him, it was still a question; would God go on saving whatever the cost? He did not know that the Redeemer he prophesied would say what Jesus said; but he appears from the rest of his prophecies to have had amazing confidence in the Lord's power to save, for anyone of his day.

All are sinful (64:6,7)

In this stanza of his prayer, Isaiah continued to use Psalm 14, but a later verse; 'they have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse (unclean), there is no one who does good, no, not one.' (14:3). He also seems to use a hint of Psalm 5:9 'for there is no truth in their mouths, their hearts are destruction ...'. If you read these

psalms, then Isaiah's words in verses 6 and 7, and then track forward to Romans 3:10-13,18, you will find that Paul's writing, and that of Isaiah and the psalms seems to overlap so much it is difficult to tell where the origin of any these words might be!

The heart of the stanza is that all people are stained by sin, and as a consequence are as nothing before God. It is easy for us to say that we understand this, because this has been a part of Christian theology for two thousand years. However, although the Old Testament even as far back as Deuteronomy is pessimistic about the ability of God's people to maintain the covenant (see the covenant renewal in Deuteronomy 29), Isaiah was the first to state this clearly. His concluding lines are both poetic and dramatic; 'You have hidden Your face from us, and have made us melt in the grip of our guilt.' Isaiah's analysis of the human condition undergirds our theology of salvation (through the writing of Paul in the New Testament) even to this day.

Redemption - the potter and the clay (64:8,9)

Instead of turning again to the figure of the Servant (Isaiah 52:13-53:12) or Immanuel (7:14) or the figure of the child King (9:6; 11:2), Isaiah prayed next, submitting a simple picture as his own understanding of the nature of salvation; 'we are the clay and you are the potter' (64:8). This is a well known image of God as the one who remakes His people even to this day, and Isaiah saw this reworking of salvation and redemption simply as the prerogative of God. It is interesting to note that this picture is not unique to Isaiah. About 120 years after Isaiah, Jeremiah was asked by the Lord to 'go down to the potter' (Jer 18:1f.) but the result of Jeremiah's expedition was his shattering of pots in the Hinnom valley (Jer. 19:1f.) to show God's disgust at the sins of Judah and Jerusalem. Only here in Isaiah do we find a use of this picture fitting the Christian idea of God's power to reshape the human soul and spirit.

The stanza is completed with this plea by Isaiah; 'do not be so very angry, O Lord ... all of us are your people'. We might ask who Isaiah means by 'all of us'? It is very tempting for the reader to think that Isaiah was simply referring to the people of Jerusalem, where he lived, or perhaps prophesying about those who came back from the exile. However, due to the other evidence of the broad nature of Isaiah's thoughts here in these prayers, it is possible that he does in fact mean all people. This fits with the meaning of the previous stanza.

Will God's wrath end? (64:10-12)

After the extraordinary and in places quite wonderful nature of Isaiah's prayers, the final one appears a little gloomy; 'Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem is a ruin!' (64:10). Isaiah even speaks about the destruction of the Temple (64:11), but note the reference to fire, an image he used earlier to refer to the coming of the Lord (64:2), so there is here a hint of divine judgement. Isaiah seems to have seen that God's judgement would result in the destruction of all earthly properties and things of value, but what was left? Will God restrain his anger?

If we have read through the prayers fully, then we will notice that Isaiah has in fact already said sufficient to answer this question. God is able to remake His people (64:8), and all Isaiah's previous prophecies are testimony to this revelation, especially his revelation of the work of the suffering Servant (52:13-52:12). It is at this point that we meet Isaiah primarily as a man and not as the prophet. For he, like us, lived in a sinful world, and he, as we would have done, must have wondered about how and when the Lord would fulfil the many great prophecies He had been privileged to receive. On the one hand, Isaiah had already prophesied that God's character of love would triumph over His wrath through the work of the suffering Servant, but Isaiah the man never saw this come true. It was in his own humanity that he asked the question about whether God would indeed 'restrain' Himself. We still ask the same today, when we see the terrible nature of sin all around us.

Application

This powerful prayer of Isaiah's is a petition, asking the Lord to save and bless the people, but in the process revealing Isaiah's deeper thoughts. The prayer also has space for God to break through and firstly, give Isaiah passages of scripture from the psalms with which to anchor his thoughts. Isaiah's prayer was also responsive enough for the Lord to give him a picture of the clay and the potter (64:8), which is the highlight of the prayer.

This is a marvellous model of prayer. The whole structure of Isaiah's petition and request is simplicity itself, with one thought logically following another, and expressed simply and succinctly within a tight poetic structure (something like English rhyming couplets). Yet this simple structure had great freedom, for within it, Isaiah was able both to speak himself and also to hear God's voice; hearing an echo of scriptural psalms, and receiving the vision of the potter. The prayer also demonstrates the value of honest prayer, for Isaiah asked the Lord the deepest of questions, even whether God was going to act justly (64:5), and whether He was capable of restraining Himself (64:12)!

There is great theological value in this text, perhaps the reflections on the human condition being the most influential. It is also a great example of prayer, and we must go back to the beginning of chapter 63 to appreciate the full extent of this. The whole prayer reveals something of Isaiah the man and his concern for Israel and the whole of creation. His prophecies are nearly at an end, and this passage has helpfully introduced us again to the real Isaiah, who we first saw receiving the call to prophesy (chapter 6) and in angry confrontation with King Ahaz (chapters 7 and 8). He was an extraordinary character.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What patterns of prayer do you find helpful? If you pray extempore, do you find yourself following patterns, or not? Discuss the value of patterns of prayer.
2. Discuss the theological value of knowing that all people are sinners. Why is this necessary for our understanding of the salvation of the world?
3. What does the picture of the potter and the clay say to you? Share this with others.

Personal comments by author

I am fascinated by how this prayer seems to reflect Isaiah, the real man, perhaps more so than many of Isaiah's other prophecies. You find here anguish and concern, thoughtfulness and apprehension, and other complex emotions surrounding Isaiah's concern at the human condition. Isaiah also seems to be unafraid of speaking his mind to God, who graciously supplies him with scripture texts and visions. The prayer is prophetic of salvation and redemption, and perhaps a parable of real life. This is why we can find here a model of prayer we can use in our different, but often similar circumstances.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to do:** *Re-write this prayer of Isaiah's as if praying about the world and the church today. If you use it in public, point out that it is taken from ideas in Isaiah.*
 - **Something to pray:** *Use this model of prayer yourself, and do your best to ensure you both keep to the structure but also remain free to hear the Lord's voice. It is possible, though many think that structure and freedom cannot co-exist. So why not discover that they can, and benefit accordingly!*
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Final Prayer

Keep me in Your presence, Lord Jesus; keep me close to Your side as I walk the path before me. Then, when difficulty comes, may I have confidence, through You, to deal with everything in the way You would wish me to. Thank You for Your help, Lord Jesus; AMEN
