

Prayer

Your strength and energy, Lord God, breaks into my life each day. It provides me with courage to face new things, love to embrace all kinds of people, hope to believe in what I do and pursue it, patience to handle difficult circumstances, and the desire to complete my days' work well. I praise You for Your strength and energy, which invigorates my life. Thank You, Lord God. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

When talking to people today, try to see things from their point of view, and when you pray for people, take the same attitude. It will help.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who have little food.** *Pray today for relief agencies trying to supply food to areas of drought, especially Christian agencies who have to work with other organisations and governments to do their work.*
- *Give thanks to God for the provision of the land and its ability to supply us with food*
- *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.*

Meditation

For those with open eyes to see the Father,
for those who seek to find the truth in Christ;
Salvation comes to all who own His name,
and judgment falls on those who oppress the poor,
Blessings fall on people who strive for good,
and curses fall on all who choose the path of evil,
Deliverance comes to all who trust in Jesus,
and bondage holds those who love their own ways,
The Kingdom grows where people do His will,
And justice comes when captives are set free;
May all hearts be opened to the Word of God,
His love, His works, and His plan for all humanity.

Bible passage - Isaiah 65:1-16

- ¹ I was sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, 'Here I am, here I am,'
to a nation that has not called on my name.
- ² I spread out my hands all day
to a rebellious people,
Who walk in a way that is not right,
following their own inclinations;
- ³ A people who provoke me
to my face continually,

- Sacrificing in gardens
and offering incense on bricks;
- 4 Sitting inside tombs,
and passing the night keeping vigil;
Eating swine's flesh,
with unclean broth in their vessels;
- 5 Saying, 'Keep to yourself,
do not come near me,
I am set apart from you.'
These people are a smoke in my nostrils,
a fire burning all day long.
- 6 See, it is written in front of me:
I will not keep silent,
Rather, I will repay;
I will surely repay into their laps:
- 7 Both their sins and their ancestors' sins together,
says the LORD,
In offering incense on the mountains
and reviling me on the hills,
I will measure into their laps
payment for their previous deeds.
- 8 Thus says the LORD:
As the juice is found in the grape-cluster,
and they say, 'Don't let it be ruined,
for there is a blessing in it,'
so I will do for my servants' sake,
and not destroy all of them.
- 9 I will bring out of Jacob a seed,
and from Judah who possesses my mountain;
My Chosen will inherit it,
and my servants will settle there.
- 10 Sharon will become a sheep-pasture
and the Valley of Achor, a cattle-stall
for my people who seek me out.
- 11 But as for you who forsake the LORD,
who forget my holy mountain,
who set a table for Fortune
and pour out a libation for Fate;
- 12 I will destine you to the sword,
and all of you will bow for the slaughter;
because I called, but you did not answer,
when I spoke, you did not listen;
You did evil in my sight,
and chose what I could not delight in.
- 13 So this is what the Lord God says;
Now, my servants will eat,
but you will be hungry;
Now, my servants will drink,
but you will be thirsty;
Now, my servants will rejoice,
but you will be put to shame;
- 14 Now, my servants will sing,
from a gladdened heart;
But you will cry with an anguished heart,
and wail with a broken spirit.
- 15 You will leave your name
as a curse for my chosen;

For the Lord God will slay you,
And give his servants another name.
¹⁶ So whoever blesses himself in the land
will bless himself by the God of truth,
And whoever swears in the land
will swear by the God of truth;
Because the former troubles will be forgotten
And hidden from my eyes.

Bible Study

Review

These sixteen verses are a considerable body of text even for our study, but these verses stand together in important ways. The last two chapters of Isaiah contain a sequence of visionary prophecies jumping ahead of the coming of the Redeemer (as with all the prophecies after Isaiah 53), but these are designed to lead up to an incredible vision of God's new Creation (65:17-25), which forms the conclusion of this great book. Many of the themes in our reading today repeat the teachings of previous prophecies, but summarise them and add a little more to our understanding of people's response to the work of the Redeemer, God's Servant. In some cases the prophecies also contain startling and unmistakable connections with the ministry of Jesus, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that this prophecy was regarded by the Jewish people as 'Messianic'. So when the early Christians looked back at Jesus' teaching, preaching and healing ministry, then either consciously or unconsciously, they made connections with this passage. You may not have noticed these connections, but as we summarise the text, all will become clear.

The passage begins with a theme that has been strongly present throughout the second half of Isaiah; God's call to all people, here described as a 'nation that has not called on my name'; that is, the Gentiles. Most modern commentators reckon that this phrase is like a mocking chastisement of the people of Israel, but a plain reading of the text forces us to see things differently. The passage describes God's relationship with the whole world, which the Lord God has suffered to redeem (65:9,10; 52:13-53:12 etc.) but is still full of sin (65:2-5,11,12 etc) and will one day be re-created (65:17).

Verses 2 to 5 describe the general sins of people in the world; rebellion, dominated by selfishness, religiously extravagant, disregarding of God's purity and holiness, and willing to appoint its own priests. It is a situation that is like a bad smell in God's face (65:5), and God's response is like a message written in front of his eyes and constantly visible (65:6). He needs no reminding to repay sins and to establish the moral justice inherent in the world He has made (65:6,7). The action by God to bring such justice has been previously described by Isaiah as like one who comes and treads grapes in a wine-press and stains his clothes red (63:3f.). But here, a dramatic picture emerges of the grape juice oozing from the gathered grapes before its trampling, the precious first juices of the harvest taken by wine makers for the finest of wines (65:8). This is like the 'seed' taken from Israel and Judah (65:9), the inheritance of a new 'chosen people' who will establish a new Kingdom of God's peace (65:10).

In a last and violent threat against those who would rebel against the clear evidence of the Lord God and His Redeemer, Isaiah prophesies a final slaughter, a separation like death between God and those of His own creation who insist that they will not acknowledge Him to His face. In awful anguish, the Lord God says; 'I called, but you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not listen; you did evil in my sight ...' (65:12).

In the last part of this sequence of prophecies, Isaiah presents an awful vision of separation between the new people of God and those who reject their Creator. The new people of God are now called 'my servants', taking on the name of their redeemer, the one Isaiah earlier called the 'Servant' (42:1f., 53); but those who rebelled lose food drink, happiness and faith. They leave only a curse for God to deal with. This, of course, is not a theory or some religious fantasy. Isaiah makes it clear that as far as he is concerned, this is a matter of accepting the absolute truth of all things, and he twice emphasises this by talking about the 'God of truth' (65:16). He alone is the one who can take away the 'former troubles' and enable his own servants to 'sing from a gladdened heart!'

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- Those who 'did not seek me' (65:1-5)
- Repayment into the lap? (65:6,7)

- The juice, the seed, and the chosen (65:8-10)
- Final rejection (65:11,12)
- Final separation (65:13-16)

Notes on the text and translation

V2 'who walk in a way that is not right ...'

Most other Bible translations say 'walk in a way that is not good' but the Hebrew word for good ('tov') means 'agreeable to the senses, and can properly mean what is 'right', as we use that word in English, hence my translation.

V4 'Sitting inside tombs and passing the night keeping vigil'

There is some difficulty in our understanding of what is meant here, the second half of the phrase appears to mean 'passing the night in guarding ...' I have taken this to refer to the first half of the verse, therefore meaning keeping vigil over the dead.

V4 'with unclean broth in their vessels.'

In this strange verse, the word for 'unclean' refers to strips of meat of unclean animals such as pigs; so the broth has been made from meat which is not ritually clean.

V5 'I am set apart from you.'

The verb here is the Hebrew for 'to be holy' or 'to be set apart'. The one speaking is claiming to be set apart, like a priest, from others. This means that they claim a holiness for themselves that only God can give.

V5 'smoke in my nostrils'

There are times when the Lord is described as liking the smell of burnt offerings (in Leviticus), but here the word for smoke means the smell of destruction, as when a city is burned to the ground.

V6 'I will surely repay into their laps.'

The word for 'laps' is the Hebrew word for 'bosom', colloquially used by ancient peoples for the fold of a cloak falling over the arm, in which someone could carry or hide items. See study for the significance of this.

V7 'In offering incense on the mountains ...'

This part of the verse follows directly from the first line, and describes the sins committed by the people and their 'fathers'.

V8 'as the juice is found in the grape cluster.'

The juice referred to is the fresh grape juice that drips from clusters of ripe grapes thrown together before they are trod in the wine press. This juice or 'must' was regarded as particularly pure and valuable in wine making.

V9 'I will bring out of Jacob a seed.'

Here, the whole of verse 9 is in the singular, and although most translations assume that the singular refers to the nation of Israel, in the context, it could refer to the Lord's Redeemer. It is very unfortunate that although it is a fair assumption elsewhere in scripture to say that the 'seed' refers to Israel, it prevents people discovering that this and the whole verse could mean something else very important – see study.

V11 'Who set a table for "Fortune" and pour out a libation for "Fate".'

The word for 'Fortune' is the same as the name 'Gad', one of the tribes of Israel, and the word 'Fate' is a Hebrew word 'Meni', which is largely unknown in the rest of the Old Testament as a name or a place. We have to guess that it is the name either of a place or some 'god'; nothing about this can be certain.

Going Deeper

It is only possible to deal with this passage from the broadest of perspectives, but if we can gain a general understanding of what is happening in this prophesy, then we can begin to gain spiritually from reading it. As we go deeper, we will find that the talk about 'seeking', 'asking' and 'finding' (65:1,12) reminds us of Jesus,

as does the last stanza which reminds us of the Lord's description of the 'sheep and the goats' (Matt 25:31f.) when talking about those who are 'hungry ... and thirsty ...' (65:13). There are also many more connections to be found between this passage and Jesus Christ.

Those who 'did not seek me' (65:1-5)

The picture painted by Isaiah in these verses is one of a God who loves, and appeals to his beloved people to understand and accept Him. He calls out 'Here I am, here I am!' (65:1), and stands with hands outstretched, the classic stance for an Israelite in prayer (65:2). Yet Isaiah sees the Lord standing in this attitude of love and prayer, but with people rejecting His advances and doing what they want. It is a vision of the world, going about doing its own thing; a picture of humanity not unlike that found in Paul's letter to the Romans (1:19f.). The specific horrors mentioned here are religious deviance which ignores God as the Creator of the world, using the garden, but not accepting the Lord who made its wonders, for example (65:3). Isaiah also mentioned necromancy, that is communication with the dead by sitting with corpses through the night (65:4), and the consumption of unclean food, something God forbade in Old Testament times (but which he relaxed after the time of Christ – see Acts 10 and 1 Cor 8:1f.). The final sin was that of people setting themselves up as 'holy', and giving themselves the status of gods. This was often done by Kings of ancient times, and was also true of the Emperors of Rome in Jesus' day.

Much of this is readily understandable, and the images of what angers God go far beyond the usual objections to injustice and false religion levelled at Israel by the prophets. This is because we are now talking about the state of the world in God's eyes. One feature of this passage is of interest to us, however, as we look for connections with the life of Christ. The opening verse speaks of seeking, asking and finding, in respect of God. Surely this combination of verbs is no coincidence! There are a number of places in Isaiah where some of these three words come together, but none in such direct proximity, and it reminds us that Jesus taught 'Ask, and it will be given to you, search, and you will find ...' (Matt 7:7). Indeed, when we try to deal with what Jesus said here, some people want it to say that Christ gave us permission to ask what we want from God, but the heart of faith knows that this cannot be the case! If we make the connection with Isaiah 65, then it is absolutely clear that Jesus' words refer to seeking and find a relationship with the living God! Nothing else is meant at all!

Repayment into the lap? (65:6,7)

The truth about what is happening in the world is in front of Jesus all the time (65:6), and God says; 'I will repay, I will surely repay into their laps!' What are we to make out of this? Does this saying point us relentlessly to the notion of a God of vengeance, who will deal out the consequences of His wrath on everyone, forever? We are tempted to think so when we read on and find that Isaiah's vision repeats the picture in verse 7 with an added explanation, God's intent is to deal out the consequences of people's sins, both theirs and their father's. This is in fulfilment of the Ten Commandments; 'I am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me.' (Exodus 20:5). But is there nothing redeeming about God's love?

It may be this very question which led Jesus to speak of the mercy of God in this way; 'be merciful, just as your Father is merciful ... give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back!' (Luke 6:38). Jesus knew that the Father's prayer (65:2f.) was to be able to be generous to people and bless them, giving blessings to them and not curses. Isaiah's prophecy certainly speaks later on about the redeeming work of God through His Servant, and although God must meet out a righteous judgement on sin, His desire is to find a way to make Himself acceptable to people so that they will turn to Him and they will be blessed (see also Isaiah 6:10). This is what Jesus sought to prove in His own life and death.

The juice, the seed, and the chosen (65:8-10)

The picture of God's people as choice 'new' wine has its origins here in Isaiah! In verse 8, the prophet describes the pleading of the winemaker to the harvesters to let the gathered grapes sit and ooze what is technically called the 'must', the first fresh juices of the harvest dripping from the grapes before they are trampled or pressed. This juice is pure and untouched by the added tastes of the skin of the fruit; bruised by pressing, but adding different flavours to the wine. What a wonderful picture for the Lord's people, now called 'my servants' (65:8), taking their name after the one who has redeemed them (the 'Servant' of 42:1f.). The Lord adds here the essential words of mercy to be added to the justice of verses 6 and 7; 'I will not destroy all of them' (65:8). It cannot happen, because God has decided to act to save people, through His Servant and Redeemer!

The wonderful thing for all Christians is that they can easily spot the connection with Christ. Jesus talked about 'new wine' being placed into 'new wineskins' (Matt 9:17f.). He also told parables about vineyards and pressing grapes (Matt 21:33). The connection between Jesus and 'wine' was so strong that when the early Christians celebrated the 'last supper' in memory of Jesus, they drank the 'new wine' of His blood,

symbolising the new covenant of God's grace by which people were being saved! God certainly had a purpose for the picture of 'new wine'!

But this new wine was to be God's new people, the product of a 'seed'. This word has a long history in the Old Testament, indicating the inheritance of God from the time of Abraham onwards. However, verse 9 is written remarkably in the singular, not in the plural, so it no longer applies to the people of Israel. Here in Isaiah's vision it is one person, 'My Chosen', who will enable the new servants of the Lord to settle into the new Kingdom of God's peace. This Kingdom is described as the land from 'Sharon' to 'Achor', that is, the entire region of the Promised Land from the Mediterranean seashore to the heartland of the river Jordan, a visionary perfect land of God's choosing, and a spiritual inheritance 'for my people who seek me out' (65:10).

Final rejection (65:11,12)

After these inspiring pictures, the last two parts of our passage today speak about the awfulness of the rejection and separation of those who reject the Lord and His Chosen (who we know to be the Messiah, God's Servant). Isaiah firstly uses an illustration of complete rejection of God Almighty, citing those who worship 'fortune' and other gods (65:11), and 'forget my holy mountain'. In the end, there is nowhere for people to go. God cannot turn back those who will not respond to His offers and His advances. Those who do not answer when called, refuse to listen and continue in evil (65:12) chose separation from God; and Isaiah describes this, tragically, as death. Those who go their own way are 'destined for the sword' (65:12).

In trying to come to terms with such things, we are reminded of Jesus' words about those who reject God's ways, and who end up 'weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth'; a phrase He often uses at the end of His parables or sayings (Matt 8:12, 13:42, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30). It is not easy for us to talk about, but the truth of 'hell' instead of 'heaven' is something the Bible speaks about in both Old and New Testaments. The fact is that we need to come to terms with this part of our Gospel today; we have left it to one side for too long, and its difficulties are no excuse.

Final separation (65:13-16)

The last part of this passage is astonishingly similar to Jesus words to the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31f.), and it seems as if Jesus must have known this passage in Isaiah, and others (58:7,10; 44:12). Note, however, the positive tone of these sayings, which enable us to talk about the satisfaction of servants who will eat, drink, rejoice, and sing because they have a Saviour and a Redeemer! This is the contrast Jesus wanted us to see and take delight in, instead of the reaction of so many to Jesus' parable in Matthew, which is caution about whether they have actually done what is right! It is those who are not God's servants who need to fear, who have no food or drink, and are full of shame (65:13).

The Lord addresses those who have turned away from Him in verse 14 onwards because His concern and His love are for them. Surely they know that they have chosen their own way and that it leads nowhere (65:14)? Surely they know that if they reject the God who has made the world, they have no hope except themselves? Truth is the final hallmark of God here in this great passage from Isaiah. We can all debate God as much as we like, but all truth rests with the one who made the world and seeks to redeem it through His Chosen One, calling through Him a new people who will be His.

Application

In many ways, this passage is like a great conclusion to all Isaiah's negativity throughout His prophecies. Isaiah has spoken sharply in many situations, and prophesied many hard things about God's people and about the world in which he lived, but although the negative aspects of this passage are severe, they are spoken about with a heavy heart. The prophecy mixes great optimism for the Lord's saved people, named His 'servants' here after their Redeemer, with a sense of great tragedy at the consequences for those who reject God. The words about the coming end of those who reject God are not in any way triumphalist, and they do not dwell on the pain of death and separation. It is as if the mature Isaiah has come to realise that the great victory of God's redemption through the Servant would come at the price of the loss of souls. It is a sad conclusion, but one that is inescapable for God's people.

It is a long time, in many cultures, since it was regarded as acceptable for people to preach 'hell fire and damnation'. Perhaps there is a way that we can explain to people today that their choices in this life have eternal consequences, and that the ultimate consequence of choosing self over God is the true death of separation from the Creator, what modern humanists call 'annihilation'. The humanist expects this at the end of life, but too many people who remain undecided about God and wish to live according to their own desires, live in the illusion that somehow God will forgive them everything, even if they reject Him totally all the way through life. It is a dangerous assumption to make.

If an evangelist today was led by the Lord God to explain this truth with clarity, vision and precision to people, then there would surely be a harvest for the Kingdom, the like of which we have not seen in many Western

countries for many years. However, I suggest that we need to learn the mature humility of Isaiah before the truths of God's Word before the Lord can trust us with this powerful message.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Read through this passage again, and in your group, discuss its general shape and whether it makes sense to you.
2. The study identifies connections between this passage and Jesus. What do these connections teach us?
3. How can God's people realistically warn people about the spiritual and eternal consequences of their earthly choices?

Personal comments by author

This is a lengthy passage, but it stands together as a summary of Isaiah's prophecies. There is more to come in chapter 66, but the power of this summary is extraordinary, and I doubt that I have plumbed its depths. Some of the commentaries I have read wander right past the obvious interconnections to be found within scripture, as if they did not exist, stagger me. One or two major commentaries I have read simply say that this is a virtually random collection of texts, and offer no real commentary apart from casual observations about little bits of phrases. I thank God that scripture says more to me than that, whether or not my understanding of it is reasonable to other scholars!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to pray about:** *Pray, and ask God to help you summarise in your own mind what you believe happens to those who reject God. It is not easy to do this, but ask the Lord to help you understand this difficult issue.*
- **Something to do:** *Talk to any who come to your church but express uncertainty about faith. Some may be happy to discuss the issues raised in this passage about the consequences of turning away from God's offers of love. Tread carefully, but be bold enough to try.*

Final Prayer

We bless You, Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Come again and make all things good, cure our sicknesses and heal our strife; and then unite Your people so that we may live with You in glory. Thank You, Jesus, for this great vision of Your future. AMEN
