

Prayer

I thank You, Living Lord, for giving me a life to live, a day to fill, a home to occupy, and a work to do. You have ordained my life to be what it is, with its content and surrounding, and although I sometimes wish that things different, You bless me each day through all You have given me. Thank You, good Lord. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Pray today about your own ability to maintain good relationships with others. Ask the Lord to help you be more discerning about who you spend time with (outside your family) and why.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for understanding between people of different backgrounds.** *Pray for the on-going problems of communication between young and old; pray for love and respect to count more than opinion or trend*
- *Pray for those affected by the food poisoning problems currently spreading around Europe, especially for farmers whose products are wasted in the rush to find its source*
- *Give thanks to God for the food you are able to grow and eat*

Meditation

Come, my friend, and worship the Lord:
For He will accept you just as you are.

Bring your life and confess all your sins:
For the Lord will hear your heart and forgive.

Bring your hopes and your precious dreams:
For the Lord will fulfil His purposes in You.

Bring your songs and be released in praise:
For the Lord will be glorified in His heaven.

Bring your ears to attend to His Word:
For the Lord will lead You into all truth.

Bring your prayers for yourself and for others:
For the Lord will give you His answers in love.

Bring your desire to follow in His ways:
For the Lord will bless each step you take.

Go, my friend, having worshipped the Lord:
For He will be with you wherever you go.

Bible passage - Isaiah 66:15-24

¹⁵ For the LORD will come in fire,
and his chariots like a whirlwind,
To return his anger in fury,
and his rebuke in flames of fire.

¹⁶ For the LORD executes judgment by fire,
and on all flesh by his sword;
and those slain by the LORD will be many.

- ¹⁷ Those who sanctify and purify themselves
to go into the gardens,
Following one of their number,
eating pig's flesh, vermin, and mice,
They will come to an end together,
says the LORD.
- ¹⁸ For I know their works and their thoughts,
I will come to gather all nations and tongues;
and they will come and see my glory,
- ¹⁹ I will set a sign within them.
I will send some of their survivors to the nations,
to Tarshish, Put, and Lud (the archers)
to Tubal and Javan, and coastlands far away
They that have not heard of my fame
or seen my glory;
They will declare my glory
to the nations!
- ²⁰ They will bring all your brothers from all nations
as an offering to the LORD,
on horses, and in wagons,
in litters, on mules and camels,
to my holy mountain Jerusalem,
says the LORD,
just as the Israelites bring a grain offering
to the house of the LORD in a clean vessel.
- ²¹ And I will also take some of them
as priests and as Levites, says the LORD.
- ²² For just as the new heavens
and the new earth which I will make,
will remain before me,
says the LORD;
so will your descendants
and your name will endure.
- ²³ So it will be from new moon to new moon,
and from Sabbath to Sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship me,
says the LORD.
- ²⁴ And they will go out and look
at the corpses of those who rebelled against me;
for their worm does not die,
their fire is not quenched;
They have become an abhorrence to all flesh.

Bible Study

Review

The last few verses of Isaiah's great prophecy are typical of the whole of his work. Throughout the book of Isaiah we have seen the prophet swing in mood between magnificent and glorious descriptions of the glory of God and His works, and stunning denunciations of God's people for rejecting their God. This is exactly what we find here. Verses 15 to 17 repeat the theme of Isaiah's deep angst and anger at the irreligious and deviant behaviour of all who flaunt God's laws, especially His own people. Then, at the very end of the book, the last verse describes with utter coldness God's challenge to look at those who have died having rejected their God, as if to say; 'look at the consequences of sin!' (66:24). This is a startling and dramatic conclusion to Isaiah's prophetic work! However, in between these prophecies are six verses of bright revelation, giving the clear promises of God for the future; the Lord will come into the world and 'set a sign' (66:19) to all

nations, and this will bring a fruitful response from them, and people will come flocking to the Lord (66:20,21). The final declaration (66:23) confirms God's intent to build a 'new heavens and a new earth' and a new inheritance for His people that will never cease!

The trouble is that we tend to look to the last words of a book in order to find some summary meaning, and here, the last verse is rather off-putting! We must accept that in the world of the prophets, literary structure was different, and there is a 'sandwich' structure to these prophecies, which means that the heart of Isaiah's final message is to be found within verses 18 to 23, and not verse 24!

We should not forget the meaning of Isaiah's outbursts against sin and rebellion, however, just as no Christian should forget that they have been saved from the eternal consequences of sin, which is death. Today, many people assume that everyone has a 'spirit' which lives on in some form after death, but the message of the Bible is that there is no existence after death without the mercy and grace of God through His Saviour and Redeemer, and outside of this there is no existence whatsoever. If we want to live in eternity, there is one way to secure it, and it is to respond to the Saviour and Redeemer about whom Isaiah spent His life prophesying; our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Later in the study we will look further at what Isaiah said in summary (66:15-17,24) about God's judgement on the wicked, but for now, we must accept this as a description of the world of sin and retribution from which we are saved by God's grace.

God knows and understand humanity, and His actions are tailor made to deal with our circumstances; 'for I know their works and their thoughts ...' (66:18). God's solution to the problem of human sin is to show the world His 'glory' (66:18), which is the revelation of the Servant, Jesus Christ, and set a 'sign' (66:19) in the world. This sign is, in my opinion, the establishment of a new people of God who will take the good news of God's covenant love and grace to the whole world (66:19). I do not think this merely because I want Christian history to be justified by this text, but because the whole of Isaiah's prophetic work since chapter 53 has spoken about the establishment of such a new people and the new covenant. In our passage, Isaiah speaks as he always does in graphic images with which he was familiar, people travelling on horses and mules, and gathering for the great festivals of praise to God (66:20), but as we read the words which surround these pictures, it is clear they describe a final vision of God's new Kingdom being set up on earth, just as we observe in the church. 'Your descendants will endure' (66:22) says Isaiah to the people who heard him in his day, and even if they did not fully understand how this could be, Isaiah was utterly convinced that God's plan for redemption was universal; 'all flesh shall come and worship me, says the Lord.' (66:23).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The wrath of God (66:15-17,24)
- The glory of God, a sign, and a clean vessel (66:18-210)
- The future (66:22,23)

Notes on the text and translation

V17 'following one of their number'

The Hebrew says 'following after on in their midst'. It seems to me that this is the equivalent to a group following one from their midst who will take the lead; hence my translation.

V18 'for I know their works and their thoughts'

In the Hebrew there is no verb in this sentence, so we have to do our best to make sense of what the Hebrew say ('and I ... their works and their thoughts'). I have taken the usual translation because it makes best sense.

V19 'and Lud (the archers)'

The Hebrew says 'and Lud which draw the bow' Here, the reference to drawing the bow is a sentence addition, and so it is correct to place this in brackets as a reference to the fame of the Ludites as archers.

Going Deeper

In order to go further, we will need to look at Isaiah's final warnings about the nature of His final justice and wrath (66:15-17,24), and then turn to the central message of these verses (66:18-23). We will explore the pictures and images Isaiah presents us with knowing that here, in essence, is Isaiah's hope for the future.

The wrath of God (66:15-17,24)

Here in this passage, we are entitled to suggest that Isaiah's words speak of the final justice of God against all sin and wrongdoing. This is the future from which those who are redeemed are saved, and we need to understand what it is. The fire of God's judgement is a symbol of consuming wrath, from which nothing distinguishable remains. On the one hand, this sounds almost too much to contemplate, that God should effectively undo some of His Creation because of people's choice to go their own way, not their Creator's. Some feel this smacks of vindictiveness; but only from the perspective of our sinful world. Surely, we have to consider that there must be an end to sin and evil, for unless there is, much of our endeavour against it in this world will seem futile. It is not hard to look at the world today and come to the conclusion that there is evidence of irredeemable evil all around us, and we need the assurance of our God that this will be consumed and removed from His 'new heavens and new earth'. Isaiah realised this by revelation many years before we did, and this conviction seems to lie behind much of work. It is part of the Gospel of Redemption that sin and evil are defeated, and for us who know how this has come about in Christ Jesus, it is easier to speak about with confidence.

In addition to the symbol of judgement by fire, Isaiah adds the picture of judgement by the 'sword' (66:16). It was in Isaiah 49 that we came across Isaiah's use of the symbol of the sword as like words, 'He made my mouth like a sharp sword ...' (49:2f.). This prophecy is a clear exposition of the work of the Servant bringing the truth about God's redeeming love to the world, and it begins a long connection in scripture between 'the word' and 'the sword' which finds its climax in Paul's great description of the 'whole armour of God' and the 'sword of the spirit which is the Word of God' (Ephesians 6:17). Because it was Isaiah who first made this connection, we are entitled to believe that what Isaiah said about God's judgements by the sword (66:16) mean the effective action of God's Word. God reveals His Word through scriptures, so much so that we call the Bible 'God's Word'; but the revealed Word of God comes in many guises, including preaching and by inspiration and prophecy. God has already decided that His main means of delivering His will to people is through speech, so we must expect that the preacher must declare God's judgement on the world, and the prophet will speak about it. The Gospel and God's judgement are communicated in this way, and Isaiah's prophecies are fulfilled in our own day.

In verse 17, Isaiah reiterates his condemnation of false religion, a concern of his which goes from the very first chapter of his prophecies to the last. In disgust, he speaks about those who make themselves ritually pure and perform all the proper rules to 'make themselves holy' (66:17), but only succeed in going against God's will (eating pig's flesh, vermin and mice). These are people who think they are 'doing' God's religion quite satisfactorily, but have lost touch with the truth to be found through listening to God's Word and taking it to heart; 'they will come to an end together' (66:17)

The glory of God, a sign, and a clean vessel (66:18-210)

The pictures found in the central section of this last prophecy are typically Jewish and eastern. Isaiah describes people of the world, all 'nations and tongues' (66:18) responding to the work of God, and 'gathered' by God to 'see His glory'. The names 'Tarshish, Put, and Lud, and also Tubal and Javan, are barely recognisable to us today, though some scholars feel that they can identify possible locations. This is not the point, however, or the lengthy description Isaiah gives of people of all nations coming to Jerusalem on horses, wagons, litters, mules, and camels (66:20); even though it conjures an impressive picture. The emphasis here in verses 18 and 19 are on the revelation of God's glory.

We can easily present a simple definition of God's glory as meaning what the word says; His favour and magnificence, expressed in wealth, generosity and openhearted lavish love towards all people. This is not enough, however, for what Isaiah says must mean more than this. It is surely a reference to the glory of God revealed in the greatest revelation found in Isaiah, the work of the 'suffering Servant' (52:13-53:12). Indeed, in the first few verses of this great revelation (52:13f.) Isaiah refers to the gathering of peoples and nations to witness what He is about to do. This revelation, of course, is also the sign mentioned in the next verse (66:19). From our perspective, Jesus is the one demonstration of God's glory in the world, the supreme 'sign' or 'wonder' to which all others point.

There is no doubt that the work of the Redeemer, the suffering Servant, who we know as Jesus Christ, lies at the heart of this final prophecy of Isaiah. It is as if Isaiah was saying to us, using all the tools of Old Testament prophecy; 'Look at Christ!' Moreover, He says this to all the nations (66:18). Then, remarkably, Isaiah foresaw something not really hinted at elsewhere in his prophecies; the taking up of the good news of God's 'glory' by the Gentiles, the 'other nations'. As Isaiah says, 'they that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory (in the flesh, as it were), will declare my glory ...' (66:19)! Isaiah foresaw the preaching of the Gospel to all the world, and the commission of Christ to the disciples (Matt 28:19).

At that point, Isaiah prophesied the gathering of all believers to 'Jerusalem' (66:20), but remarkable, called them a 'clean vessel'! One wonders how offensive this must have been to those Jewish people who first heard what Isaiah said. His words were from a Jewish point of view, revolutionary, but in a small but important phrase, Isaiah said 'I will also take some of them, as priests and Levites, says the Lord. In this

way, Isaiah made sure that his hearers knew God's intentions included His 'Old Testament' people, but sadly, not all.

The future (66:22,23)

If the previous prophecy was concise and spoke clearly about the glory of God found in Jesus Christ, then verses 22 and 23 reach out beyond the coming into the world of the Redeemer, and echo the last dramatic twist in Isaiah's prophecies, the great anticipation of a 'new heavens and a new earth' (65:17f.), a phrase repeated here, and here alone in the Old Testament. When Isaiah says that these will 'remain before me', he means that this is God's intent and purpose and it will not be changed. It is yet to come, but certain, and its certainty guides His actions in the present, whether the present of Isaiah's day, or the present of our own day. God's will to recreate heaven and earth to make a fit dwelling place for humanity and God together is not negotiable and does not change whatever happens in this life.

The one thing Isaiah says which stands out is the promise 'your name will endure'. Isaiah is speaking about, and to, those people who will make up the new people of God, the church as we know it. If we were to read the Revelation of John, which speaks in greater depth (and mystery) about the final judgement and God's new creation, we would find that the church is of course the Bride of Christ (Rev 19:17), and also the Bride is also named 'Jerusalem' (Rev 21:2f.). In John's vision, the people of God and the dwelling place of God are one, and called by the name Jerusalem; and this makes sense of Isaiah's prophecies here. He says that the nations will gather 'to Jerusalem' (66:20), and later speaks about the 'name' (66:22) of God's people. By itself in Isaiah, this seems to be less than clear, but when John sees Jerusalem 'coming down like a bride' (Rev 21:2), then the picture becomes clear. God's people and 'Jerusalem' become one in the spiritual unity of the new heavens and the new earth. There is still mystery here, for we are talking about things which lie beyond our understanding, but Isaiah was not afraid to reveal what He believed God had said to him, and we should not be afraid to try and put together what we can of an understanding of God's future work, as prophesied in the Bible.

Application

It is wonderful to have worked through the whole of Isaiah, and come to the end with a knowledge of the future promises of God. Isaiah was an old man by the time he died. Any reckoning of Isaiah's age must account for the different kings he knew according to the records of his prophecies. Yet as an old man his prophetic eye was not dimmed! Even in the last of his prophecies, he said things not clearly said before, and pointed forward to things of which people struggle to understand. He was not afraid to speak out what God had said to him, and as a consequence, the Lord told him more about His plans for the future than any other prophet.

We are privileged to be able to read his words. Some of the great texts of the Bible (such as Jeremiah) have a chequered history, and the original scrolls can only be guessed at and reconstructed with care. The most ancient of scrolls of Isaiah we possess are intact and complete, and there is no evidence of any breaks or splits in its composition. Scribal errors occur, as they do in all scriptural texts, and can largely be accounted for, but the unity of the book is one of the main reasons why in this series of studies I have ignored scholarly consensus and treated the whole book as one, rather than a compilation. In doing so, we have obtained a clear picture of God's will for the redemption of humanity, and in following our theme through into the last twelve chapters of the book, we have found some amazingly pertinent prophecies which speak about the time we now live in.

The conclusion of Isaiah reminds us that God is a just God, that sin and evil will be defeated, that God's glory has been shown in the world through the Redeemer (as prophesied by Isaiah) and also that the redeemed are God's new covenant people who will have a home, one day, with the Lord in His new heavens and new earth! It may seem simple when put like this, but this is astonishing. As with the Gospel we read in the New Testament, it is either pure fiction or utter and complete truth. I am one who has decided to accept this word, the revealed Word of God in Isaiah, as truth, and by living according to this truth I know I am blessed.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Summarise to each other in your group the judgement of God as described in this passage. What is judged and why?
2. How does this prophesy connect with the Gospel you know? Discuss what you find.

3. How does this prophecy help us picture the future God has planned for His people?

Personal comments by author

I have already expressed some of my feelings about concluding the work on Isaiah. I must add that I have learned far more than I imagined when I started, and feel that I should really need to start again if I am to do justice to this great text. However, each of us is on a journey of growth and we will learn something whenever we give time to study God's Word and take it in. So, we must commit our journey of faith through scripture into God's hands and pray that He will lead us. Every book we read or study will affect us in some way, and will hopefully enable us to make more informed judgements about God's revelation. I hope this is your experience.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- **Something to do:** *Take time to pray and offer to God the work you have done in studying Isaiah. Ask Him to reveal to you the truths of Isaiah's message if you are unsure, and to reveal how to apply what you have learned if you feel sure about the message.*
- **Something to pray about:** *Isaiah's message can be sharp at times, as with his message today but judgement. Pray for those who find it hard to come to terms with what judgement means, even though it is all about the defeat of evil.*

Final Prayer

All praise belongs to You, Jesus Christ; my Lord, Saviour, Master, Guide, Comforter, and Protector. For You are my Light of the World, Shepherd of the Sheep, Counsellor of the needy, Wisdom Incarnate, and Holy God. You constantly amaze us with who You really are! AMEN
