

Prayer

Lord God, You teach us that true wisdom is to be found amongst the humble. Lead us, we pray, into the wisdom of justice, integrity and honesty, and guide us in the humble pathways of gracious speech, loving concern and generosity. May we live by this guidance, and always be ready to receive the help of the Holy Spirit who inspires them; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

When you see other people distressed or upset, say a prayer for them, perhaps a brief prayer that commends them to the Lord

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who have little food.** *Pray for people throughout the world who are starved because of bad government and oppression, for example, those in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe, or eastern regions of the Indian sub-continent*
- *Give thanks to God for the ability we have to communicate. Pray that such gifts will be used wisely and that technological developments will be properly governed*
- *Pray for FIFA and the consequences of the presidential elections. Pray that football will be served by proceedings at the FIFA congress*

Meditation

(a prayer for God's just judgement)

In a world full of terrorists and gunmen, good Lord,
May justice fall on those who use the weapons of war.

In a world where money buys authority and power,
May godly people come to prominence in public life.

In a world using energy with no thought for tomorrow
May governments and industries accept their responsibilities.

In a world where countries show aggressive religious bias
May the people of God display the selfless love of Christ.

In a world in which the hunger of the poor condemns our greed,
May the injustices of our time be fully exposed to view.

In a world which excludes, ignores and rejects its Creator,
May God's judgement fall and may God's Kingdom come.

Bible passage - Isaiah 66:3-14

- ³ One slaughters an ox
another kills a man;
One sacrifices a lamb,
another breaks a dog's neck;
One presents a grain offering,
another, pig's blood;
One burns memorial incense,
another blesses an idol.

- As for them, they have chosen their ways,
and they enjoy their abominations;
- 4 As for me, I choose harsh treatment for them,
and bring their worst fears on them;
because, when I called, no one answered,
when I spoke, they did not listen;
but they did evil in my sight,
and chose what did not please me.
- 5 Hear the word of the LORD,
you who tremble at His Word:
Your brothers who hate you
and exclude you because of my name
Said, 'Let the LORD be glorified,
that we may see your joy!'
but it is they who will be shamed!
- 6 Listen! - an uproar in the city!
Listen! - from the temple!
Listen! - the LORD is fully repaying his enemies!
- 7 Before her labour she gives birth!
before her pain comes she delivers a son!
- 8 Who has heard of such a thing?
Who has seen such things?
Can a land be birthed in a day?
or a nation be born in a moment?
Yet as she went into labour
Zion had already given birth to her children!
- 9 Do I break the waters and not deliver a child,
says the LORD?
Do I who deliver then stop the birth?
says your God.
- 10 Rejoice with Jerusalem,
and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in great joy,
all you who were mourning over her,
- 11 so that you may feed and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
so you may drink deeply
and delight in her glorious abundance.
- 12 For this is what the LORD says:
Look! I will extend peace to her
like a river,
and the wealth of the nations
like an overflowing stream;
You will suckle
and be carried on the side,
and dandled on her knees.
- 13 Like one whose mother comforts him,
so I will comfort you myself;
and you will be comforted in Jerusalem.
- 14 You will see, and your heart will rejoice;
and your bones will flourish like the grass;
It will be known that the LORD'S hand
is with his servants,
And his indignation
Will be against His enemies.

Bible Study

Review

After the great vision of yesterday's passage which told us about the new heavens and the new earth (65:17f.), what more can be said? As you read this passage, you may think that it merely contains further repetitions of familiar themes found elsewhere in Isaiah, by way of summary. This passage is indeed a summary, coming just before Isaiah's final reflections at the close of the book (which we will read tomorrow - 66:15-24), but it is also a sharp and telling defence by Isaiah of his belief in God's power and authority to do things in His world, and especially to bring redemption and salvation. As we study the passage, we will discover a complete separation between those who accept God's ways, and those who have rejected them (66:3,4,5,14). Moreover, the centre of this prophecy stoutly defends God's judgement of right and wrong (66:3,4), God's desire and ability to act in the world (66:6,7f.) and God's power to recreate (66:7,8,9). Lastly, Isaiah presents a most lavish picture of the closeness of God to those who have chosen him (66:11,12f.).

The beginning of the prophecy emphasises choice in a dramatic way. In his prophecy, Isaiah placed a series of deeds alongside each other comparing worshipful sacrifice and offering with murder, callous inhumanity (breaking a dog's neck), disregard (pig's blood) and idolatry (66:3). His conclusion is that those who chose to do what they want rather than follow God's ways are blind, for their decisions will set the Lord God Almighty against them because of their sin and their refusal to accept His ways; moreover they are not expecting a punishment that will surely come (66:4). Isaiah retorts sharply to those who might say that God should not deal with people according to justice; 'they did not listen (to me); but they did evil in my sight, and chose what did not please me.' (66:4). People like to think today that choice is everything, and our individuality is liberated by our right to choose whatever we want; but Isaiah, in common with the rest of scripture, indicates that human choice is a serious matter. We live or die eternally by our choices and by whether we accept the morality and justice of the world and its Maker.

In the next part of this passage, Isaiah speaks again of those who have chosen God's ways as people who 'tremble before the Word' (66:5, and see also 66:2). The separation between these and others who have chosen their own way is stark, to the point of loathing, as Isaiah knew from his own experience. Isaiah was familiar with the hatred that could arise especially amongst God's people, when those who believed they had a right to do what they pleased refused to hear the voice of God through a prophet, for example. This is what happened when Isaiah and King Ahaz fell out (ch.7). The prophet mimicked the calls of those earthly realists who doubted that God could or would act in the world; 'let the Lord be glorified that we may see your joy!' These words were said in jest, and those who said them were entirely confident that God would do nothing, and those who 'trembled before the Word' would not be able to express their joy because their hopes were unfounded! The Lord, however, swore to turn such taunts back to those who gave them.

The rest of the passage is given over to the extraordinary examples of God's work; children born before mothers go into labour (66:7), the intimate connection between God and His own as, wondrously, they suckle 'from her consoling breast' (66:11)! And His people receiving peace like a flowing stream (66:12 - see also 59:19) in the comfort of the new Jerusalem, God's dwelling place with those who have chosen Him! Then, says Isaiah; 'it will be known that the Lord's hand is with His servants!' (66:14). They will be justified, and for Isaiah the justice and mercy of God were set in stone, and those who chose to reject both paid the consequences (66:14).

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The sharp division (66:3,4)
- God response to the challenge to 'do something' (66:5,6)
- Labour pains and birth (66:7-9)
- God's power at work in the world (66:10-14)

Notes on the text and translation

V3 The whole structure of this verse is strange. Isaiah simply places descriptions of people side by side in pairs (with one exception, see below). The Hebrew for the beginning reads; 'one who slaughters an ox, one who kills a man; etc.'. I have used the word 'another' when talking about the second of each pair because it makes better sense in English and it is not a misinterpretation of the Hebrew to do this. An explanation of this prophetic structure is in the study.

V3 *'another, pigs blood'*

This sentence is cut short, with no verb attached to the solitary words 'pig's blood', but the sense of what is meant is carried over from the previous couplets.

V3 'one burns memorial incense'

The Hebrew has 'one making a memorial offering of incense'. This is an offering that is burned, and the length of the expression in English upsets the balance of the phrase sequence in English, so I have pared back the English to express the bare minimum from the Hebrew words for the sake of its poetic feel. It's meaning is clear.

V4 'so I also chose their harsh treatment.'

This is difficult, because there is a degree of sarcasm in the Hebrew. Having spoken about the way in which people choose to go their own ways, the Lord says this (according to the literal Hebrew); 'I am also choosing from their wantonness'. The phrase implies that the Lord will mock such people with the nature of their punishment.

V6 'The sound of an uproar in the city!'

Some versions put a verb in this sentence, saying 'Listen to the uproar in the city ...' However, what I have written is close to the Hebrew and gives a sense of the drama unfolding as God comes to the city to repay his enemies in full.

V9 'Do I break the waters'

Most translations say 'do I bring to the point of birth ...' when the Hebrew clearly says 'do I rupture ...' in the manner of a midwife breaking the amniotic waters to help a woman deliver a child. We do not have to hide such details today.

V12 'be carried on the side'

We are not sure what this means, but it is probably a method of carrying a child by a mother on the hip (though this is not what is said). It is wrong to translate this differently ('carried on the arm' – see NIV) because we do not use this expression today.

Going Deeper

The pattern of the prophecy is straightforward. Isaiah identifies the sharp division between people about whether God acts in the world at all (66:3-4) and then develops this to show how God responds to the challenge presented by the taunts of those who do not believe (66:5-9). Lastly, he gives examples of God's power at work in the world, and the examples all have special meanings. If we are to understand them then we have to study them further.

The sharp division (66:3,4)

The whole of this passage at the very end of Isaiah is full of prophetic methods, repetitions, contrasts, summonses and challenges. Here, Isaiah contrasts the lawful with the sinful (sacrifice and murder), the lawful and the meaningless (sacrifice and killing a dog), the lawful and the unacceptable (Levitical offering and pig's blood), and proper worship with improper (incense and blessing an idol). The prophecy demonstrates on the one hand, consistent faithfulness, and the other, the recklessness of human activity when the only boundaries are human imagination and desire. Of course, the Bible is not the only piece of literature that explains the folly of allowing human desire to run loose in matters of morality, this has been a literary theme for centuries and this makes it all the more surprising that the world's general humanistic philosophy is 'do what you want but don't hurt others'. People have known for centuries that the unfettered human will is self destructive, but the Bible is the first literature to make the point, and identify our Creator God as the source of moral wisdom and true justice.

The consequence of unregulated self-centredness is always that people wallow in what they choose for themselves, ignorant of the consequences of those things they do that contravene natural justice and the moral laws of the created world. It is like those who choose to smoke or take drugs ignoring the fact that they may, and perhaps will, reduce their mental capacity, make themselves impotent and shorten their lives (at least). They like what they do, so they do it and become entrapped in it, unable even to face the possibility that their choices were wrong and living in denial of their stupidity to the point of death itself. These are the 'harsh judgements' and 'worst fears' described by Isaiah (66:4). It is possible to think of spiritual examples which mirror the one I have given, but the point is, I believe, clear.

The Lord is constantly calling people to this day (66:4), and the task of the church of God is to present this call to the world, constantly. People will always choose their own ways but some will not. Some will realise that God Almighty does speak through His Word, it is not mere literature to be studied as a religious relic or a text book. The Word of God impacts lives and has done so throughout a vast amount of world history, and those who choose to go their own way reap a reward at odds with their expectations! The alternative is to

become like one who 'trembles at God's Word' (66:5); in other words, one who stands in awe of God's revelation of Himself within His Holy Word

God response to the challenge to 'do something' (66:5,6)

The sharp division between those who accept God's ways and those who do not has always been focussed on the Bible. Some may give God's word great attention, studying it with such depth that the words themselves become more important than the true revelation, God's living and active 'Word' which changes people. Others believe that their own opinions about what is contained within it is identical to God's opinion and thereby place themselves above it like a god, challenging any who believe differently by telling them they are incorrect; these people have not bowed to God's Holy Word, but tried to take its power for themselves. The enemies of God's Word are all those who refuse to stand before it in humility and accept that God uses all of it according to His will to bring people to know Him and follow His ways. This is true of both Old and New Testament, for the Bible is one book. Those who tremble before God's revealed Word (66:5) find God in it, and let Him bring out its meaning for them and for the world in which they live.

The belief still persists, within the church of God and also outside it, that despite everything said in the Bible about Creation, history and the life and death of Jesus and its consequences, God does not actually 'do' anything in the world for anyone. Such people might advise that prayer is helpful for the one praying but does not affect God, or they might suggest, like Carl Marx, that religion is the 'opiate of the people'. Such attacks on true faith in a living God have been around since before the time of Isaiah, and he knew all about it. He painted a picture of those who taunted people of faith by seeking to see the evidence of their joy and celebration that God had actually done something; 'let the Lord be glorified, that we may see your joy!' Such a taunt demanded a swift and conclusive response from God, and this is what Isaiah reports next.

With great energy, the rhythmic rules of Hebrew poetry are all but set aside by Isaiah to convey God's response; 'Listen – an uproar in the city! Listen – in the Temple! Listen – the Lord is fully repaying His enemies! If you look, says the Lord, you will see the evidence of God's work in the lives of people in Jerusalem, in the Temple, and in the judgements of God meted out on those who reject Him!

Labour pains and birth (66:7-9)

Then in an astonishing twist, Isaiah speaks in the next three verses about birth. The one great mystery of human life is the physical birth of a baby, and perhaps even more mysterious is the creation of its individuality by the Spirit of God. At the very beginning of Genesis (chapter 3), God's Word describes the pain of childbirth as like an on-going curse upon womanhood (Gen 3:16). But the same God who made 'Adam and Eve' and defined their punishment for sin is capable of overturning His own judgments! These verses describe painless childbirth; for a baby is born before labour pains are experienced (66:7).

But these few verses (66:7-9) say much more. When Isaiah said 'as she went into labour Zion had already given birth to her children!' (66:8), something more is being said than merely a comment about ease of childbirth. In Isaiah's prophecies, God was 'birthing' the idea of redemption and salvation, an action of God that would one day become a physical reality in the life of a child named Jesus! If you read verses 7 and 8 carefully, they seem to speak not of childbirth as such, but the apparent impossibility of something happening before it is physically possible; 'a birth before labour?' asks Isaiah, 'impossible!' Yet this is how God teases those who do not believe in Isaiah's prophecies, which speak with clarity about the birth of Immanuel 'God with us' (7:14) long before it happens, and identify the work of the suffering Servant (ch53) long before Christ dies on the Cross. In other words, the very confidence of the prophet that God will redeem His people is a threat to those who cannot believe that God really will save His people.

God says; 'do I break the waters and not deliver a child? Do I deliver and then stop the birth?' This is a challenge; do people really think that God would prophesy redemption and salvation and not deliver it in the way described, through a child born to be Immanuel, our King and our Servant, Jesus Christ? This is the Lord's vigorous response to all human scepticism.

God's power at work in the world (66:10-14)

Rejoice, calls God (66:10), to those who 'tremble at His Word'. Those who have accepted the Lord's way will soon experience the extravagant closeness of an infant to a nursing mother; 'you may feed and be satisfied from her consoling breast ...' They will drink in consolation for the taunts of humanity and the anguish of earthly life. It is possible that this is the prophetic picture that inspired the New Testament writers Paul (1 Cor 3:2) and Peter (1 Peter 2:2) to extol the virtues and importance of the 'pure spiritual milk' of the Gospel of Christ. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews knew that one who has drunk of the pure spiritual milk needs to move on to solid food (Heb 5:12,13), but we should not downplay the importance of the milk. Today, infant formula is gradually being recognised as a poor substitute for the pure milk of the mother's breast, should we not recognise in the church that there is no substitute for the pure spiritual milk of the apostolic and Biblical Gospel, even within the life of God's people, the church?

Isaiah's vision then flows over with other pictures; the river of God bringing peace and comfort (see 59:19 and also Revelation 22:1,2), the distribution of the wealth of the nations to God's victorious people (66:12), the loved child carried by a mother, the hope of the presence of God in 'Jerusalem' (66:13), healing, health and peace (66:14). All of these hopes and dreams come from Isaiah's visions of peace and security, experienced in part here on earth but one day in heaven, as Isaiah previously explained so brilliantly (65:17f.). Each picture has its parallels with other texts in the Old and New Testaments; we think of John's great river of life (Rev 22) and Hosea's anguished cry of the parent who longed to play with a child (Hosea 11:1-4). In addition, Jesus' own acceptance of little children into the Kingdom of God without issue or hindrance (Matt 18:1f. 19:13f.), and the importance of the signs of healing which Jesus ministered to people both for their personal good and benefit but also as a reminder of God's love and His Kingdom (Matthew 8-9).

This great flood of prophetic material simply tells the reader; 'there is ample proof of God's work in the world!' Isaiah implores his readers to be people who 'tremble at the Word' rather than those who stand at the edge of real faith and snipe at it or mock it.

Application

In writing about the prophecies of Isaiah during the second half of 2008, I have been deeply challenged personally by the nature of these prophecies. I am particularly aware of the substantial connections between Isaiah and the Gospel, for Isaiah is quoted more frequently in them than any other Old Testament work. I therefore assume from the start that Christians from the earliest of times have found a close connection between Isaiah's prophecies and Christ Himself, and have sought to find those connections. In working with the text of Isaiah I have been very aware that most scholars today would say that the second half of Isaiah (chapters 40 -66) are a composite collection of prophecies by unknown prophets who were disciples of Isaiah, but written around 150 years after his death. As a consequence of this scholarly opinion, most translations available today reflect this opinion, because the same scholars who agree this consensus are the ones who work at providing us with the translations with which we are familiar.

I write about this now for one clear reason. This relatively recent development in the study of Isaiah (in the last 100 to 150 years) has taken place at the same time theologians have become less and less interested in the person and work of Christ. Today, one can find many who no longer believe that Jesus rose from the dead or died 'for our sins', and such sentiments are shared by people in high office in many churches. As I have studied, however, I have flown in the face of such opinions, preferring to accept Isaiah at face value and read it as God's intended Old Testament witness to the person and work of Christ.

It is only by taking this approach that I have been able to find all manner of spiritual gems within the text, including those identified in our study today. My own research is not exhaustive or expressive of more than my own opinions, but I do present them as a spiritual alternative to the dominant scholarship of today, which sees little in passages such as these except comfort for ancient exiles, and therefore some kind of secondary implication of comfort for us because God is surely the same. In my opinion, the truth about the life of Christ is the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies, and brings his summary passages such as this to life, indeed quite dramatically. The purpose of this scripture is to encourage us in our faith; no more, no less.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In the light of Isaiah 66:3, what are the differences between people of faith and people who do not believe in God today? Can people see the difference?
2. What are the signs today that God is at work in our midst in our own generation?
3. If Isaiah told us about salvation and redemption before it happened, what does God tell us now about what lies ahead?

Personal comments by author

Much of what I have said above is personal comment, but I believe that it is right for those of us who write about scripture to explain ourselves. When I first went to training College to prepare for ministry, I was unprepared for the forceful, unyielding theology I encountered (as explained above) which was unable to accept that someone like me might have faith in God's Word. I was shocked, but sought to learn what I could and take whatever value was to be found from within the disciplines of learning. I would not claim to

have the answers to the world's theological problems, but I will insist that there are good ways of understanding God's Word other than stripping it of its spiritual significance and treating it like any book.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- ***Something to think about:*** *Begin to reflect on what you believe to be the most important things you have learned from your study of Isaiah over recent weeks. What has God said to you and how does this change what you think and what you do?*
 - ***Something to do:*** *Approach your minister, priest or church leader and ask about what they think of the Old Testament and the place of Isaiah's prophecies in understanding the person and work of Christ. It may well help your studies.*
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Final Prayer

We offer to you with gratitude, Lord Jesus, the day we have lived and all it has contained. Where things have gone well, we thank you for your grace and favour; where things have gone badly, we ask for your forgiveness. This is our faith, Lord Jesus Christ, for we trust in Your unfailing love. AMEN
