

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

We praise You, O God, for Your gift of the Holy Spirit, who bursts into life within us like a fire, and alights on us like a dove. Make us worthy of His presence within us, creating, sustaining, encouraging, uplifting and healing our souls in the midst of everything we experience. May we always recognise what the Holy Spirit is doing in our lives, and accept His guidance in all we do and say. O God, send Your Spirit on us today!  
AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: FARMING

**1. For yourself**

*As you go about your daily life, pay attention to the countryside around you, and think about what it means for the land to be farmed. Pray for those who farm the land and the food they produce*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Pray for any within your extended family and friends who work on the land or in the food supply industry. Pray that standards and hygiene will always be maintained despite the need to make profits*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Some churches are significant purchasers of food for the works they do, charitable and education, and much more. Pray that the church will use its power as a purchaser of food wisely, to encourage good practice in farming and food distribution*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Pray for farmers who struggle to make a living from the ground because a good price cannot be obtained for their crops. Pray for a proper balance to be maintained in food markets, for the good of all*

### Meditation

When life is quiet, Lord,  
Fill my mind with what is good;  
And keep the enemy away from my thoughts and feelings.

When life is routine, Lord,  
Give me the concentration I need  
To attend to the detail of what I do, and honour You in my work.

When life becomes difficult, Lord,  
Save me from a tendency to panic;  
Help me to focus on You, and trust Your spiritual guidance.

When life is horrendous, Lord,  
Draw me ever closer to Your side;  
To gain the spiritual energy I need to find my way through trouble.

When life is easier, Lord,  
May I not forget You or Your love;  
But remember Your faithfulness through good times and bad.

When life is quiet, Lord,  
Fill my mind with all that is good;  
Keep me alert, and prepare me for all that is yet to come.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Isaiah 8:16-22

<sup>16</sup> Bind up the testimony; seal the instruction among my disciples. <sup>17</sup> I will wait for the LORD who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob, I will hope in Him. <sup>18</sup> Look at me and the children the LORD has given me: we are signs and warnings for Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

<sup>19</sup> People may say to you, 'Consult the mediums and the familiar spirits, who whisper and mutter; should a people not inquire of their gods and inquire of the dead on behalf of the living <sup>20</sup> about instruction and testimony?' Surely, those who speak in this way will have no hope of dawn. <sup>21</sup> Hard pressed and hungry, they will press on with this, but when they become hungry, they will become enraged. They will look upwards and find themselves cursed by their king and their gods; <sup>22</sup> or they will look down at the earth but see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. They will be driven into thick darkness.

### Review

A passage of scripture such as this can seem impenetrable. However, we must be patient with ourselves and with Scripture, and piece together what can be known about such texts. Now, if you read this passage from other versions of the Bible, you will find them very different. At this point in Scripture, the Hebrew contains words that are so unique, it is almost impossible to verify their true meaning (from a literary point of view). It is therefore wise to trust traditional interpretations of the text, and not, as some do, to abandon such a difficult task and move on to other more readily understandable parts of Isaiah. We can learn much by exploring what can be known about such passages, and by being willing to work at them, we allow the Holy Spirit the space to interpret these Scriptures to us.

The whole passage appears to be part of a conversation between Isaiah and some of his followers. Firstly, he gives some instructions, which are full of hope for the future; he speaks of '*binding up*' his prophetic work so that it can be accessed later, and talks of his '*hope*' in God (8:16-18). But he then goes on to warn his followers about those who oppose his prophetic message (8:19f.), and he is appalled that they consult with mediums and spirits, and practice necromancy by consulting the dead (8:19)! This was what happened when God's people became lost and confused (8:20-22). This much is understandable, but how do these messages fit into Isaiah's prophecies, and what can they mean for us who read them, generations later?

In the full study (going deeper), I will discuss some of these complexities of the passage and show how to interpret them helpfully, but we do not have to dig deep to appreciate some of its interesting features. Now the background to what Isaiah says here is this; since his confrontation with King Ahaz, Isaiah himself had become very angry (7:10f.), but he was convinced of the importance of his prophecy that God would soon act to bring judgement on the wickedness of the king and the people. He was also convinced that God had promised to 'be with' His people (7:14 – the prophecy of 'Immanuel') and he would defeat the evil and sin they faced. He believed that God would one day 'restore Zion' (see 2:1-4).

In this passage, Isaiah appears to reflect on all that has happened, and his words here are divided into two halves, 8:16-18, and 8:19-22; the first is optimistic, but the second is somewhat downbeat. The first paragraph is a remarkable reflection in which Isaiah seems to look ahead to a future generation, when people would be ready to hear his message. He called his followers to, '*Bind up the testimony; seal the instruction among my disciples*' (8:16). Isaiah knew the value of this prophecy in his spirit even if he did not know that it would be eight hundred years before it would be completely fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He also believed that if the Assyrians invaded Jerusalem, then his prophecy needed to be hidden to avoid destruction. It could then be found by a future generation. Isaiah himself was confident that the Lord would find a way to bless His people once again, hence his prophecy, '*wait for the Lord ...*' (8:17).

But then, Isaiah changed tack completely to paint a picture of what others in Judah and Jerusalem were doing in those days of instability, international threat and uncertainty. We often think of the people of Israel and Judah as being god-fearing Israelites who were always obedient to their God, but sometimes the prophets give us a very different picture, as Isaiah does here. Though there were doubtless many godly people such as his followers, Isaiah saw that many of his compatriots lived with no hope in God at all, a state mirrored in their king, King Ahaz (7:12f.). All these tensions came to the fore when the nation was under threat, as it was now. Isaiah tells us that the people were hooked on mysticism, and they also called up the

spirits of the dead. Dramatically, he said that they did not know whether to look 'up' (8:21) or 'down' (8:22)! The people were lost in their sinful ways as if in impenetrable, thick darkness.

The contrast between Isaiah's hope and the waywardness of the people is stark, and we can see something similar even today. Some of God's people are content in Him and confident in the future come what may, whilst others who profess faith nevertheless feel lost in the midst of the woes of our day, whether they be financial, social or moral woes. Most of us are well able to list these problems of our day! But Isaiah reminds us that real people of faith are able to rest content in God's love and remain confident that His plans are secure. They can, like Isaiah, do things that demonstrate their confidence in God's will for the future, but at this point we must part ways with Isaiah. We must listen to God's voice and hear what He would say to us about how we should behave in troubled times, and we must also hear His word of condemnation against the sins of our day. They are different from Isaiah's day, but we must not be fooled; they exist!

## Going Deeper

All of this is not what we might expect of the Old Testament people of God; but it is very close to the Gospel message! That is why we must explore it further. There is more in the first section about Isaiah and his family which is quite revealing, and a full understanding of what Isaiah said about the people of Israel in verses 19 to 22 requires some detailed, but fruitful exploration.

### ***The testimony of Isaiah***

We have already noted the fascinating reference to the recording of Isaiah's words in verse 16. Certainly, Isaiah appears to have had a number of people who might be called followers and his prophecies were valued and written down by them at an early stage. Now there is one feature of the book of Isaiah which I have not as yet commented upon, and it is central to our understanding of his prophecies. Isaiah wrote around the eighth century BC at the time of the Assyrian invasion of northern Israel and the siege of Jerusalem by King Sennacherib (see Isaiah 36-39). However, as the book progresses, these prophecies become increasingly intermingled with prophecies about Babylon, the eventual captor of Jerusalem, in 597 BC, a century and a half later. It is almost certain that Isaiah's prophecies were written down in his lifetime, and when Jerusalem was finally invaded a century or more after his death, people discovered that what he said previously was relevant to them, at this later critical period of Judah's history. This is why the second half of the book of Isaiah seems to apply to events which happened long after his death. His prophecies were so powerful that dedicated and godly people kept them, studied them, copied them out and used them. Our passage today is the first indication of this process.

The truly inspirational verse in our passage today is undoubtedly verse 17, in which Isaiah boldly declared his trust in God despite everything happening around him; in particular the evidence of corruption in high places and the possibility of invasion by the Assyrians. He used a phrase to describe what it felt like which could well have come from the Psalms; 'the Lord who is hiding His face ...' (8:17 see Ps 13:1, 27:9, 51:9, etc.). Yet Isaiah was full of confidence and peace, and the two phrases 'I will wait ... I will hope' combine two Hebrew words which express patience and confidence to show a quality of certain hope which is normally found only in the New Testament.

### ***Isaiah's family***

Verse 19 is fascinating; 'Look at me and the children the Lord has given me: we are signs and warnings ...' (8:19). Because of this verse, some believe that all the children mentioned in the previous chapters of Isaiah belonged to Isaiah; the first was 'Shear-jashub' (7:3f.), the second was 'Immanuel' which implies that the 'young woman' of 7:14 was Isaiah's already pregnant wife, and the third was 'Maher-shalal-hash-baz' (8:3), implying here that the 'prophetess' mentioned in 8:3 was Isaiah's wife. This is a rather controversial interpretation because of the feelings many people have about the issue of the 'virgin birth' and Immanuel. Personally, I am not convinced that we have a full picture of Isaiah's family, and I also believe that the 'virgin birth' is dealt with fully in the New Testament, and I am perfectly comfortable with the traditional view of it.

We are certain that Shear-jashub and Maher-shalal-hash-baz were Isaiah's sons, and their names were 'signs' which pointed to Isaiah's prophecies. Isaiah was not the only prophet who named his children as a way of making his prophecies known; Hosea did this (Hosea 1-3) as well. The practice sounds strange to us, but in ancient times, names were often given which related to events or circumstances of birth. As a prophet, Isaiah's whole life, including his family were integrated into his message.

### ***The life of godlessness***

It seems clear that the remaining verses of this passage are about the gloomy state of God's people without God. However, this is because I have translated this passage in this way, reading the somewhat complex Hebrew words from this point of view. People like it when scripture is 'exact' in meaning, and the process of translating the Hebrew nearly always makes this appear so. But this passage is quite enigmatic, and to

illustrate this, I have written the text below side by side with another version, the New American Standard Version, so that you can see the problems we are faced with in this text:

My Translation: <sup>19</sup> *People may say to you, 'Consult the mediums and the familiar spirits, who whisper and mutter; should a people not inquire of their gods and inquire of the dead on behalf of the living<sup>20</sup> about instruction and testimony?' Surely, those who speak in this way will have no hope of dawn.<sup>21</sup> Hard pressed and hungry, they will press on with this, but when they become hungry, they will become enraged. They will look upwards and find themselves cursed by their king and their gods;<sup>22</sup> or they will look down at the earth but see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. They will be driven into thick darkness.*

NAB Translation: <sup>19</sup> *And when they say to you, "Inquire of mediums and fortune-tellers (who chirp and mutter!); should not a people inquire of their gods, apply to the dead on behalf of the living?"<sup>20</sup> then this document will furnish its instruction. That kind of thing they will surely say.<sup>21</sup> He shall pass through it hard-pressed and hungry, and in his hunger he shall become enraged, and curse his king and his gods. He shall look upward, but there shall be strict darkness without any dawn;<sup>22</sup> He shall gaze at the earth, but there shall be distress and darkness, with the light blacked out by its clouds.*

I could write a long piece about why I have translated the passage like this, but I believe that what Isaiah was attempting to say was that people who had abandoned the God they were brought up to believe in and chose spiritism and necromancy (contacting the dead), then they had by their own choice abandoned all hope. Such things were not of God, as it clearly says in Leviticus 19:31, and 20:6,27. People in such a state end up in rebellion against not just their own gods but their earthly authorities (kings) as well (8:21) because little will make sense. They are reduced to spiritual gloom of the deepest kind (8:22).

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## Discipleship

### Application

When explained like this, the last part of this passage does make sense, and we can see the truth of this around us even today. All manner of mysticism, and spirit worship are practiced today by people who have given up on what they perceive to be the church. That may be a form of condemnation of the church, but it is certainly condemnation for those who prefer to be bound by myths and legends rather than the truths of the God who has made the world and all things. All manner of cults and belief systems parade themselves for our interest today, and many Christians feel content to dabble; even in alternative therapies which have no intrinsic value by any scientific standard and are strongly linked to non-Christian belief systems about good and evil 'body forces', such as reflexology and acupuncture, for example. Playing about with spiritual things outside of the power and authority of the Holy Spirit will never help us, and may well entrap us in ungodliness, as Isaiah clearly perceived of the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

Against that backdrop, Isaiah stood firm. He both spoke out the truth of God's Word to the world and personally stood with his family for the truth of the ever living God. Even though he was one of only a few who continued to hold fast to the faith of his fathers, he stood firm.

### Questions for groups

1. What does this passage tell us about our world today, and what does it tell us about the life of God's people?
2. What should we do when it is difficult for us to understand the meaning of the Old Testament, and we have no real way of knowing the truth about it?
3. Discuss the hope shown by Isaiah. What reasons did Isaiah have to be hopeful, and what reasons do we have to be hopeful?

### Discipleship challenges

- *Do you know of people today who have been tempted to involve themselves with spiritual cults or beliefs which are very different from Christian faith. Why do people follow such paths*
- *Pray for people you know who have become consumed by negativity, and create difficulty within the life of the church as a consequence.*

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## Final Prayer

Glory be to You, O Lord, for You have sustained us throughout our lives and will continue to guide us into the future if we will stay walking in Your paths. Save us from the distractions of this world which draw us away from You, and stay close to us. We pray this in Jesus' name: AMEN

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