

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Dear Jesus come near with Your love;  
Come with Your support and Your power.  
Come with Your empathy and Your wisdom,  
Come with Your helpfulness and Your strength,  
Come with Your compassion and Your discernment,  
Dear Jesus, may Your presence bear fruit in my life today  
**Halleluiah!**

### Prayer Suggestions

*These suggestions are made to assist your prayers, and may be coloured by a general theme:*

Theme for the week: CULTURE

**1. For yourself**

*Pray in repentance, bring before the Lord those things you know you do wrong, and seek the Lord's forgiveness. Bring these things in honest of heart from day to day, and see what the Lord requires of you.*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Some of your family and friends get on well and some do not. Pray about this and about some of the reasons why this is so; differences of temperament and social culture, differences over religion and faith, beliefs etc.*

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

*Pray that the church will grow in its ability to speak the same message of God's gracious, saving love to each new generation. Pray that the church will understand how much it must change if it is to fulfil its mission.*

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

*Pray for your country and for the many different groups of people, racial and religious, who are a part of it.*

### Meditation

Simplify my life, O Lord;

Remove the jumbled messages of the evil all around me,  
And fill my heart with graciousness and loving-kindness.

Transform my life, O Lord;

Remove the guilt ridden memories of conflicts in the past,  
And wipe them out by patient help and divine counsel.

Focus my life, O Lord;

Remove the clumsy waywardness that entangles my soul,  
And settle my hands, my eyes, my heart, on being faithful.

Direct my life, O Lord;

Remove the cruel bondages, which addict my heart to me,  
And let me fall into Your arms of love, forever free to be.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Isaiah 9:8-21

- <sup>8</sup> The Lord has sent a message against Jacob;  
and it will fall on Israel,
- <sup>9</sup> and all the people will know it;  
Ephraim and those who live in Samaria,  
who say in pride and arrogance of heart:
- <sup>10</sup> 'Bricks have fallen,  
but we will build with cut stones;  
Sycamores have been felled,  
but we will replace them with cedars.'
- <sup>11</sup> But the LORD raises enemies against him,  
and gives protection to his foes;
- <sup>12</sup> The Syrians on the east and the Philistines on the west  
devour Israel with an open mouth.  
For all this His anger has not turned away,  
and His hand is stretched out still.
- <sup>13</sup> The people have not returned to Him who struck them,  
nor sought the LORD of hosts.
- <sup>14</sup> So the LORD will cut off Israel's head and tail,  
palm branch and reed in one day-
- <sup>15</sup> the elders and respected men are the head,  
and the prophets who teach lies are the tail;
- <sup>16</sup> Those who guide this people have misled them,  
and their followers left confused.
- <sup>17</sup> So, because of this,  
The Lord will not rejoice in their youth,  
nor comfort their orphans and widows;  
for all of them are ungodly and evil,  
and every mouth speaks folly.  
For all this His anger has not turned away,  
and His hand is stretched out still.
- <sup>18</sup> For wickedness burns like a fire;  
consuming briars and thorns;  
it sets the forest thickets ablaze,  
rolling up in a column of smoke.
- <sup>19</sup> At the wrath of the LORD of hosts  
the land will be scorched,  
and the people will be like fuel for fire;  
no one will spare another.
- <sup>20</sup> One will carve on the right, but still be hungry,  
Another will carve on the left, but not be satisfied;  
each will eat the flesh of his neighbour:
- <sup>21</sup> Manasseh against Ephraim;  
and Ephraim against Manasseh;  
And together, against Judah.  
For all this His anger has not turned away,  
And his hand is stretched out still.

### Review

***After the wonderful prophecy found in the first half of this chapter, we wonder why Isaiah returns so quickly to prophecies of doom. The key lies in the refrain repeated in this chapter; 'for all this His anger has not turned away, and His hand is stretched out still' (9:12,17,21). God promises deliverance, but will not compromise His justice.***

One thing we must learn from Scripture is the fact that truly inspirational passages such as the passage we read yesterday (9:1-7) do not go on forever! At first sight, our reading today appears to be considerably less inspiring, and it is therefore tempting to be less interested in what we read. True prophecy, however, always has meaning; and although this passage may appear daunting if not distinctly unpleasant at times, we will find that as with so much of the Old Testament, careful reading will yield interesting and helpful insights. We must not lose sight of the fact that these words are still the 'Word of the Lord'.

As I indicated yesterday, it may well be that yesterday's passage (Isaiah 9:1-7), was a mystery to those who first heard it. This is because it speaks about God in personal terms, and most Judeans would have found this very difficult; God was divine and not to be thought of as like a child (9:6). So today's reading would have been much more understandable. People of Isaiah's day would have known the turns of phrase and colloquial expressions used by Isaiah, and they would have recognised his damning prophecy and how it explains why God's anger was poured out on His own people. If we are willing to use all the skills available to us today from the study of languages, then we can find out how this prophecy goes to the heart of Isaiah's message, but in a radically different manner than yesterday's 'inspirational' passage.

To begin with, our passage contains three prophecies, each ending with the words; *'For all this His anger has not turned away, and His hand is stretched out still'* (9:12,17,21). This brief stanza is itself sufficient to explain the general theme, which is about God's wrath against His own people; and each prophecy gives different reasons for this wrath. Just as Moses stood over the battle at Rephidim (Ex 17:8-13) with his hands stretched out for victory, so God's own hand was now stretched out over His own people; His rule would prevail for the sake of future generations.

This message is important, for unless God shows Himself righteous and just against all evil, even amongst His own people, then His plan of salvation is compromised. We must be glad that God's anger is against all injustice and evil because ultimately, this shows that His love is indeed good, true, right, and consistent. If we compare this passage to the message of Paul in Romans, for example (see Isaiah 9:17 and Romans 3:10,11), then we must conclude that salvation depends on a clear understanding of God's moral 'compass'. Whether people are saved depends on their trust in God and whether they accepted or rejected it. In Isaiah's day, God's people rejected it, they were 'in the wrong', and God had the tragic duty to deal with it.

Here, the Isaiah's prophecy (9:8-12) paints a picture of Israel (called Ephraim and Samaria – 9:9) doing their best to cope by themselves with the political troubles of the day (9:10), not understanding that they had alienated their God because of their sins (9:8,9). They did not understand that God was using other nations to judge them (9:12). The second prophecy (9:13-17) describes the consequences of Israel's lack of repentance, the loss of good governance, wisdom and teaching (9:15,16) and the folly of ungodliness (9:17). The third prophecy (9:18-21) tells us what the Lord was about to do, which was to cleanse the land 'by fire' (9:18,19), and it also describes the antagonism between the different tribes of God's people (9:19,20,21) in a passage which needs further explanation ('going deeper') because it appears to speak of cannibalism!

When the Lord's people go their own way, they break His heart and bring His wrath on themselves; it has always been so, and remains true today. Isaiah's words reveal the heart of God that is just but yet longs to love, and this is an essential yet early part of the spiritual walk towards the message of the Gospel. It needs to be understood.

## Going Deeper

We will look at some of the details of the three prophecies in turn, after noting some of the strange features of the Hebrew text. It really does not help us if we gloss over the facts of the Hebrew and what it actually says. It may seem daunting to read about it, but I hope you will agree that it is rewarding, and without a little research in this particular text, many readers would have to put some of this scripture to one side as almost incomprehensible!

### **Notes on the text and translation**

9:8 *Some translations have 'it will fall on Israel', and some have 'it has fallen on Israel'. The reason none knows whether it is past or future is because in prophetic poetry, the Hebrew language is not clear. The future tense makes best sense here for Isaiah's prophecy.*

9:9 *Ephraim was one of the larger tribes of the Kingdom of Israel and its capital was Samaria.*

9:11 *This is a difficult verse describing Israel's enemies, with much dispute about what the original Hebrew really means. Some translations contain a reference to King Rezin, which seems unlikely because Rezin had an alliance with Israel (7:1-9) but the word used could also mean 'princes' in general, i.e. those who were Israel's enemies. Also, most translations have 'stirred up his enemies'.*

9:11 *In addition, the Hebrew word for 'stirred up' is virtually unfathomable, but is related to a word meaning 'covering', hence my translation of 'gave protection to his enemies'.*

9:20 *The last phrase in this verse 'eat the flesh of his neighbour' sounds cannibalistic! Actually, the phrase 'eat the flesh of' in the Old Testament was a colloquialism meaning 'be an enemy of'. I have left the expression in the translation because it follows on from the first part of the verse which is almost impossible to translate without reference to eating! See below for a fuller explanation of verse 20 and 21.*

9:21 *Because of confusion about the meaning of 'to eat flesh', many translators have added words to verse 21, and you will find that some of them read like this; 'Manasseh will feed on Ephraim, and Ephraim will feed on Manasseh.' My translation is very close to the Hebrew, and leaves out these words (for explanation, see below).*

### **First prophecy – impending doom! (9:8-12)**

Much of the general theme of this prophecy is the same as that found in chapter 5, where Isaiah revealed that the Lord was going to use other nations to discipline His own people (5:26-30). Here, Isaiah talks about the 'Syrians on the east' and the 'Philistines on the west' ready to devour Israel with an 'open mouth'. It is clear that we are talking about prophecies against the northern kingdom of Israel here because the name 'Ephraim' (9:9) was a relatively derogatory name for Israel used by people in Judea and Jerusalem for the northern kingdom of Israel because its largest tribe was Ephraim.

The interesting thing about this prophecy is the way Isaiah describes the people of Israel attempting to rebuild their own houses and organise the land themselves after some catastrophe (9:10), as if oblivious that the destructions wrought on them were from God! Their actions spoke of pride and arrogance. Repentance before God would have helped them more than their own efforts at reconstruction. It is possible to see that people behave like that even today. When God's people have experienced calamity, the first question should be, 'what is the Lord saying to us through this?' But instead, we often regroup, rebuild and reorganise ourselves before thinking about God's agenda.

### **Second prophecy – lack of repentance (9:13-17)**

The second prophecy begins by bemoaning the fact that God's people had not returned to Him after He has 'struck them'; words which remind us of the way that the plagues 'struck' the people of Egypt (Exodus 7-12). Clearly, they were supposed to see God at work in what had happened to them but did not. The prophecy has two points at which the consequences of this are outlined. Firstly, verses 14,15,16 describe the way that Israel became bereft of power and authority as indicated by the lack of elders and 'respected men', and also became bereft of true prophetic guidance (9:15). This resulted in a lack of leadership and confusion. The second consequence is that 'the Lord will not rejoice in their youth, nor comfort their orphans or widows.' This is a strange expression which we can only understand if we remember that Isaiah was pointing out what God would normally do within the life of His people, that is, to bless the young people and inspire the aid of orphans and widows (representing the poor). As the Lord had been rejected by His people, these things, shamefully, were not being done. All these things are the warning signs of godlessness

Isaiah's conclusion is stunning; *'all of them are ungodly and evil, and every mouth speaks folly'*. A number of psalms say something very similar (Ps. 14:1,2, 36:1, 140:3), but this is not a casual observation, it stands at the heart of the Old Testament revelation of the truth about God and all humanity. Here, many centuries before Jesus died on the Cross and equally long before Paul wrote about it in order to explain it (Romans 3:21-26f.), Isaiah reaches this conclusion about the sinfulness of humanity, and it is to this day the starting point for the Gospel of God's salvation. Because all fall short, whether Gentile or Jew, God must act through His Messiah to bring salvation, and His salvation is the same thing for all people. It is remarkable that Isaiah could perceive and receive this radical message, and deliver it;

### **Third prophecy – cleansing of fire after internal strife (9:18-21)**

The third prophecy is clearly about purity through fire, but disturbingly, appears to describe cannibalism (see notes above). When you understand that to 'eat the flesh' of someone means to set yourself against them as an enemy, then both verses 20 and 21 begin to make sense. They describe the antipathy and animosity which characterised the relationships between the different tribes of Israel. Ephraim and Manasseh were the two 'half-tribes' of Israel descended from Joseph, and in Isaiah's day, they dominated the northern Kingdom. This passage describes the internal strife amongst God's people in the north, and between the north and their brothers in the southern kingdom of Judah. When we read about Israel and Syria getting together to attack King Ahaz (7:1-9) you may have wondered why God's people were fighting each other, Israel against Judah. But if you read through the books of Kings and Chronicles, you will find that these two kingdoms were rarely at peace. As is true with the Christian church today, God's people fought each other, sometime viciously. It must have broken God's heart. No wonder that God had to do something about what was happening.

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# Discipleship

## Application

At every point in these terrible prophecies, we should ask ourselves whether we as God's people, have fallen back into the ways of God's people of old. Have we come under judgement by God and failed to see it, attempting to reconstruct our systems and structures without much more than a prayer or two to give a nod to the God we are supposed to serve with our whole beings? Have we failed to repent and turn back to God and therefore lost touch with the leaders, prophets, wise men and teachers who are the means God uses to lead His people, whatever the worldly structures we use to organise ourselves? Are we so busy fighting ourselves we cannot see what God is doing in our midst?

These are troublesome but pertinent questions. The glorious thing about this passage, however, is that it shows very clearly that if we are prepared to accept a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of what happens amongst God's people when things go wrong, then this places us on the firm 'New Testament' road to understanding the work of Christ and His salvation. One fear of mine has always been that because people do not read the Old Testament enough, God's people today do not take sin seriously enough, and church is presented to the world as a 'happy' religion doing 'fun' things. It is far more than that.

## Questions for groups

1. In what ways do we fail to hear God's Word to us in the church today? What are the sins of God's people even now?
2. Are teachers and prophets respected and honoured within our churches? How do we use them and encourage these gifts?
3. How may we best use the gift of prophecy within the church today, and how do we know when we hear prophecy?

## Discipleship challenges

- *Write down your own brief list of things God's people can learn from in this text. If you feel so inclined, pass on your suggestions, in a positive way to your church leadership. You will learn much from the reaction you get!*
- *Pray for those who are prophets today, and who bear a difficult word of God. They need our prayers and support throughout the coming days*

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## Final Prayer

Let me hear Your voice tonight, faithful God and Lord of all. Speak to me so that I may know Your will, whether it be hard or easy, comforting or challenging, exciting or mundane; and let me value each and every word, the instruction You give for Your servant's life. Thank You Lord; AMEN

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