

Prayer

Cast Your gaze over the life I live, Jesus Christ, Lord of all holiness. May I not be afraid of Your presence, Your look, Your Word, or Your judgement. For You do not condemn, as I so often fear, you remember me in Your mercy. Not only do You forgive, but You also love me with a passion I scarcely understand or believe. Praise Your Name, Lord Jesus Christ; Alleluia!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Missions

Pray today for God to send His Holy Spirit. Pray that the Lord will give His church the vision and the power to do His work boldly, and extend the Kingdom of God in our own day.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who are suffering because of world food shortages*
- *Pray for politicians in the news*
- *Praise God for the remarkable way our bodies are made*

Meditation

Have you fallen? It hurts.

Some fall quietly, tumbling to the ground
With little noise, just the sickening feeling
Of loss of control; for we do not yet know

What the consequences will be, for now or later.

Some shout and scream, telling everyone
that we are falling, so that any passing soul

Just anyone may help us; for we need assistance
And we need it now, whatever happens later.

What happens when you fall; I mean in faith?

What happens when you sin and fall from grace?

Do you shout or scream for help, or just keep quiet,
Knowing truth and justice awaits; but hush, don't tell!

The enemy has the victory when we fall silently.

For we will rarely deal with what is locked inside.

But all around us, those we love and know so well,
God's people want so much to help and love us ...

Will we take Christ's healing from a friend?

Bible Study - Isaiah 24:1-13

¹ *Look, the LORD is wasting the land
and destroying it;*

He twists its surface

and scatters its inhabitants.

² *And it is the same*

with people and priest alike;

with slave and master alike;

with maid and mistress alike;

with buyer and seller alike;

with lender and borrower alike;

with creditor and debtor alike.

³ *The land is utterly laid waste*

and totally plundered;

for the LORD has spoken this word.

⁴ *The land dries up and withers*

the world languishes and withers;

the proud people of the land

languish.

⁵ *The land lies defiled beneath its*

inhabitants;

for they ignore laws,

disregard statutes,

and break the everlasting covenant.

⁶ *Therefore a curse consumes the land,*

*its inhabitants pay for their guilt;
so those who live in the land dwindle,
and few people are left.*

⁷ *The new wine dries up,
the vine languishes,
all the merry-hearted sigh.*

⁸ *Rejoicing with tambourines ceases,
the tumult of revellers is ended,
the joy of the lyre is stilled.*

⁹ *No one drinks wine with a song;
strong drink is bitter to its drinkers.*

¹⁰ *The chaotic city is broken,*

*every house is boarded up.
¹¹ They cry out in the streets for lack of
wine;
all festivity comes to an end;
revelry is ended in the land.*

¹² *Only horror is left in the city,
the gates are battered ruins.*

¹³ *For this is how it is in the land
among the peoples;
like an olive tree when it is beaten,
like gleaning after the end of the
grape harvest.*

Review

Yesterday we concluded a discussion of Isaiah 14 and the prophecies against Babylon. This has given us a glimpse of the way Isaiah's prophecies have come to mean so much more than they probably did to those who first heard them, because the description of Babylon is linked to what later generations have called the 'fall' of Satan. After this, there is a series of other prophecies leading up to chapter 23 which are all addressed to different nations. All of them have some interest, but they do not add much to our general understanding of Isaiah and his prophecies. So for the purpose of this series, we have jumped forward to chapter 24, and the intervening chapters will be included in the studies on this web site at a later date.

We pick up our study of Isaiah in chapter 24 because chapters 24 to 27 are different from the rest of Isaiah and have a unique part to play in our understanding of Isaiah's message. So far we have been steeped in prophecies which refer to historical events, but if you look again at our passage you will find that here, there are none. We can imagine that the passage could be about the devastation of the Promised Land after the Assyrians invasion (721BC), or even the consequences of Isaiah's daring prophecy about Babylonian (Isaiah 13). However, this can only be conjecture, because this passage simply describes a destruction of 'the land' without reference to time or place!

For this reason, it is generally accepted that Isaiah 24-27 is different from the rest of Isaiah and is closer to what we call 'apocalyptic' literature such as is found in Daniel 7-12 and Zechariah 9-14, and also in later chapters of Isaiah, 56-66. What do we mean by this? Apocalyptic writing tends to project forward to a time when the present evils of the day will be dealt with by God and He brings the 'present age' to a conclusion and begins a 'new age'. Although Isaiah does not prophesy using the mystical imagery of someone like Daniel in later years, many feel that in these chapters, Isaiah influenced the later development of such apocalyptic literature which carries over to the New Testament in the Book of Revelation.

Isaiah began by prophesying about the events of his day (chapters 1-5) but when God called him (6:10-13) he was led by God's Spirit to think about the future in a new way and began by prophesying about a new King with authority to lead His people (7:14, 9:1-7, 11:1-9). Recently, it has been obvious that Isaiah has had one foot in the events of his own day, and another in a future which lay beyond his own time. In these prophecies, however, he is free from these constraints. This is a general prophecy about God's destruction of the land because of sin, and it will be complemented by later prophecies in this 'apocalyptic' series (24 - 27) which praise God for His salvation and victory (e.g. 26:1f.).

In general, this passage describes the tragedy of the ruination of 'the land' because of the sins of the people who live in it and have profaned it (24:5,6), and the consequence of this for the people who live in it; loss of worship, merriment and festivity, chaos in the city (Jerusalem?); loss of people and general social collapse (24:7-13). What happens is described as a 'curse' (24:6), and this reminds us that Moses pronounced that a curse would come on the Promised Land if the people rejected their God (Deuteronomy 28:15f.). More than that, Genesis twice indicates that the shedding of blood would bring a curse on

the land (4:10f. and 9:6), and also, the land is 'cursed' after Adam and Eve's fall from grace (Gen 3). All of this is important, but if we put it all together, we have a classic description of what happens when God's laws are abandoned and people live according to their own inclinations. We will certainly be able to learn from this passage!

Going Deeper

The first thing we will have to do is be clear about what this passage means by 'the land', but then we will look at why the curse of the land happens and what its consequences are for the people who live there. Then in future studies, we will see more of this picture emerge. We start with the negative, but move towards the positive!

Notes on the text and translation

- V1 *In the first verse and following, the word for what I have described as 'land' also means 'earth' (Hebrew 'eret'), but I have preferred the word 'land' for theological reasons – see Bible study.*
- V4 *The last line of this verse is often translated 'the heavens languish together with the land' (RSV). However, the Hebrew reads literally 'the height of the people of the land languish'. I have interpreted this as referring to the pride of the people in their own land – which has now been destroyed.*
- V5 *The word 'defiled' also means 'profane', which is the opposite of holy.*
- V8 *The Hebrew reads 'the mirth of tambourines is stilled' but this is poetic for the cessation of festivity and song.*
- V10 *The expression 'chaotic city sounds strange, but the word for 'chaos' is the same one used in the first few verses of Genesis to describe the state of the universe before God brought it into order for the purposes of creation.*
- V10 *The boarding up of the houses; we have a word for this in English which the Hebrews did not have! The Hebrew says literally 'every house is shut up so that no-one can enter' which is what we mean by boarding up a house!*
- V11 *Many translations of the Bible have in the middle line 'all joy has reached its eventide'. However, my rendering 'all festivity comes to an end' is just as true to the Hebrew, because the evening was regarded as the 'end' of the day, and 'joy' really means 'joyous occasion'.*

The land

The Hebrew word for 'land' here is 'eret' which is also used for the term 'earth'. However, it tends to be used to describe specific places where people dwell, as in the phrase 'the Promised Land', so I have used the word 'land'. This prophecy is clearly about people living on the land and what happens to this land when they disobey God's laws, and it is fascinating to see that there is no reference to the people of Israel or Judah. The passage positively invites us to use it generally. Perhaps Isaiah was aware that having prophesied about Israel and Judah and the nations all around and also prophesied about the present and the future, a general prophecy such as this would serve a universal purpose which was not limited to a time or place. This in itself was a visionary concept for the time!

The 'wasting of the land'

Isaiah warns us, as the Bible does elsewhere, that sin within humanity reaps a reward on the land on which we live. We can hardly object to such an idea today, as it is generally accepted that the whole of our planet has become polluted by the waste we produce. This, for us, adds meaning to Isaiah's words; 'the Lord is wasting the land ...' (24:1). The first consequence of this wasting is that people have to move, and people are 'scattered'. In ancient times, when a land was no longer able to bear its population because of drought or lack of fertility in the soil, for example, people had to move on and find somewhere else to live. In Isaiah's prophecy, the general plight of the land leaves people wandering and looking for somewhere to settle; even the cities become deserted (24:10).

No-one is exempt from this primal need to move around, settle, grow food to eat, and live. Verse 2 goes over the point in graphic detail; 'people and priest alike, slave and master alike ...' All are subject to God's laws and the way His world works, whether they like it or not; 'the Lord has spoken this word.' (24:3). Today, of course, national boundaries regulate movement of people, and even in our own day, we see many displaced by the injustices, evils and problems of our world, who seek to find a new place to settle. Our immigration systems are hard pressed and our courts are full of pleas and appeals for those attempting to do what has always come natural to people; seeking to find a new 'place' to start again after trouble or failure elsewhere. It is a hard world.

Verse 5 begins to outline the reasons for the wasting of the land, and puts it down to a general rejection of God and His laws. For Jewish people, we could say that the plight they endured in Israel and Judah was a result of their disobedience to the covenantal laws they had been given by God through Moses, in fulfilment of Moses' words in Deuteronomy 27 and 28. Although we have already seen how this passage can be generalised to give us a message about how we treat the world in which we live, the message is also one which Christians need to hear. We too will lose our heritage if we ignore it, and the land will reject us as well if we are not obedient to God's truth revealed to us. We tend to think that if we believe in Jesus, then everything will be fine, but this passage is an important warning against complacency in such a belief, given the power of Satan and sin to tempt us.

The consequences of the wasting of the land

In the second half of this passage, Isaiah moves towards describing what happens when God's judgement comes on a people and their land. The general picture is of social breakdown and a loss of what we might call cultural identity. Festivities in this passage do not mean parties in the sense we might have them today. We might 'eat, drink and be merry' in order to have fun, but ancient peoples socialised in festive religious events which are described here as coming to an end. We should not think of the description of drinking wine in this passage as a condemnation of alcohol (there are other places in scripture which warn against the excesses of drinking, e.g. Proverbs 20:1), but the lack of wine in a dry land meant a lack of fluids for drinking; clean water was not always available, and many people drank mild wines as a necessity.

Less and less people can be sustained by a land that is polluted and wasted, and Isaiah describes homes abandoned in cities (24:10), and the general structure of the cities falling into disrepair. As before, we could see in this passage Isaiah's reflections on what he saw happening in his own day, but the way in which it is presented suggests a far wider meaning to the ruin and decay of civilisations which abandon the moral laws of God.

Application

Isaiah sounds a warning in this passage to all who ignore God's laws, whether the moral and physical laws of the world He has made, or the spiritual truths He has revealed to us through His Covenant and through Jesus Christ. It is undoubtedly true that we live at a time when people are very concerned about the viability of our planet, and Isaiah's passage acts as a clarion call to God's people firstly to return to Him in order to get their priorities right and maintain their witness, but it is also a message which we should not be afraid to declare to the world. Our planet has been made by a Creator who loves it and loves us, and the appalling pollution and rape of the land which is happening all around us due to the greed of humanity needs to be identified. Isaiah realised things were critical in his own day, but foresaw a time when God would have to do a new work in order to save His people. Are we moving to the time when things are so critical that God will have to come again and re-create the world if He is going to be able to save those He loves? Our planet appears to have a rather limited life!

It is when we are faced with issues like this that we begin to think about the treasure of life on this planet, and the land we enjoy. Perhaps we need a generation of young Christians to enter politics and by the work of God's Spirit confront some of the obscenities which deface our lands today. All things are possible for God.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, summarise what you find in this text about the reasons for the 'wasting' of the land.
2. Discuss whether this prophecy bears any parallels with the apocalyptic literature identified in the study. Should this work be called 'apocalypse' or 'prophecy'?
3. Do you believe that the future of the world is at stake today? How much longer do you believe it will last? How long is this in relationship to world history?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find it hard not to be deeply concerned about the state of our world today. I am not sure whether the Lord will be able to inspire scientists, people of faith, politicians, industrialists and bankers to find new ways to make the world work which does not denude it of its resources and destroy it in the process. I pray that people will use their God-given skills to work for the best, but continue to live expecting the Lord to come again at any time.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Discuss with others in your church whether the world in which we live has a future.
- If you feel strongly about these issues, then write a letter to your political representatives which express your feelings.
- Wait on the Lord with these things in mind and ask Him to show you His will.

Final Prayer

Clear my mind, Lord Jesus: open me up to the inspiration of Your Spirit and lead me to 'see visions and dream dreams' which come from You alone. Transport my soul to see the heavenly glory I pray, and in that glorious light find new meaning for all I do today. AMEN