

Prayer

O God of gracious, forgiving love, give us a heart of faith today, even if we face trials and dilemmas or situations we do not like or understand. Speak words of reassurance to us, so when we cannot find the answers to our problems, we do not fail to remain true to You and confident in Your wisdom. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Missions

Pray today for mission amongst older people. Many were brought up to know about God but have wandered away; now they may be willing to hear the Good News afresh.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for the hard work of those who police our streets
- Pray for those who are suffering because of world food shortages
- Pray for politicians in the news

Meditation

I worship the Lord with all my heart.

I do so because I wish to; I have decided to;

I set myself towards my God and will not be distracted.

My heart is fixed on Christ alone.

I worship the Lord with all my soul.

I yield all things to Him; I have made my offer;

I rejoice at heaven's touch and submit to His mandate.

All I am belongs to Christ alone.

I worship the Lord with all my mind.

I pay attention to His will; I wish to;

I listen to God's eternal Word and chase my inner quest.

My mind is known by Christ alone.

I worship the Lord with all my strength,

I love the Body of Christ; I am determined;

I strenuously pursue my call and love and care for others.

This faith will not cease in Christ alone.

Bible Study - Isaiah 24:14-23

¹⁴ They raise their voices,
they sing for joy;

Because of the majesty of the LORD
they shout from the west.

¹⁵ So glorify the LORD in the east;
and in the coastlands of the west
glorify the name of the LORD,
the God of Israel!

¹⁶ From the ends of the earth
we hear songs of praise,
'Glory to the Righteous One!'
But then I say,
I am nothing! I am nothing!
Woe is me!
For the traitors have betrayed us,

the traitors have betrayed us
repeatedly.

¹⁷ Terror, pit, and snare await you
O inhabitant of the earth!

¹⁸ It will happen that
whoever flees from the sound of the
terror
will fall into a pit;
and whoever climbs out of the pit
shall be caught in the snare.
For the windows of heaven are
opened,
and the foundations of the earth
tremble.

- ¹⁹ *The land is utterly broken,
the land is torn asunder,
the land is violently shaken.*
- ²⁰ *the land falls about like a
drunkard,
it sways like a hut;
its transgression weighs it down,
and it falls, never to rise again.*
- ²¹ *On that day the LORD will determine
the future
of the host of heaven in heaven,*
- and the kings of the earth on
earth.*
- ²² *They will be gathered together
like prisoners in a pit;
they will be shut up in a prison,
and after sufficient days they will
be punished.*
- ²³ *Then the moon will be disgraced,
and the sun ashamed;
for the LORD of hosts will reign
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
shown to His elders in glory!*

Review

As with many other prophecies of Isaiah, you would be entitled to wonder what this is all about! Our passage begins with the praise and glory of God Almighty, universally acclaimed for His power and majesty (24:14-16). Then Isaiah describes the terrors of God's judgement and wrath which follow on from yesterday's apocalyptic vision about the land (24:17-20, see 24:1-13). Finally, the passage ends with a decisive affirmation of the complete triumph of the Lord in all authority and splendour throughout the universe! We learned yesterday that these passages of Isaiah's prophecies are closer to what is called 'apocalyptic' literature, and these verses certainly fit this description. Israel is not mentioned and no earthly history is implied or described, so there can be little doubt that these words are intended to be 'universal'. This prophecy is about the 'End Times' when God will reign supreme and the victory over His enemies has been completed!

The connections with apocalyptic literature are greater than we might first imagine. This passage is a vision of God's victory, His triumph and the establishment of His Kingdom; and this is typical of all apocalypse. In addition, there are a number of places where words are used which are almost unknown, and they sound rather mysterious, certainly in the Hebrew. Verse 16 in particular contains words and expressions which are almost untranslatable (see notes in the main Bible study), and 'the Righteous One' is used as a name for God, though it does not appear in this form anywhere else in the Bible. It is probably a name for the Lord which confirms Him as the righteous judge of all the earth and celebrates the conclusion of His righteous judgements. Apocalyptic literature generally describes the final state of the universe, and here in this passage, the world as we know it is completely laid waste (24:19) to be replaced by Mount Zion, the dwelling place of God from where He will maintain His justice and reign supreme (24:21-23).

This is an amazing vision of the End Times, but we should not be surprised by its presence in Isaiah, the prophet whose prophecies started by commenting on the political intrigues of his day (see chs 1,7,8,13,14 etc.) In at least one other of his previous prophecies, Isaiah had a vision of God's complete and peaceful kingdom; 'the wolf will live with the lamb ... they will not hurt or destroy in all my Holy Mountain' (11:6-9). Isaiah's agonising over what was happening in his own day led him to think deeply not only about what would happen in the future, and the threat of Babylon to Jerusalem (see chs. 13,14,39), but his visions went further, to the ultimate future of God's perfect End Times.

What did Isaiah see in these End Times? He saw God being praised in glory by people from across the whole world (24:14,15), all praising Him because of His righteous judgement! Yet in comparison to Almighty God, Isaiah saw himself as a mere mortal, small in comparison to the greatness of God. He cried out; 'I am nothing, I am nothing!' (24:16), and expressed shock at the tragic end of the world order; 'the traitors have betrayed us ... (24:16). Isaiah also saw in his vision that the whole world was wrecked because of sin and treachery against God; it had devastated everything (24:17-20). Finally, Isaiah saw a day coming when God's righteousness would be evidently clear to all who remained. In the very last verse of our passage, Isaiah celebrates the reign of God by describing the

removal of the veil between God and His people, taking away their fear of the Lord. He prophesies that the Lord will be 'shown to His elders in glory' (24:23)

In this amazing passage we are freed from Isaiah's historical constraints to think of God's final victory in righteousness and justice. For most people this is something which fills them with either great fear or great joy. Some fear this final outcome to history because they fear God or are too in love with this world. For all who have placed their hope in Christ Jesus, however, there can only be joy at the hope of the Lord's coming again in justice and glory.

Going Deeper

The rest of our study today will look at each of the three sections of this passage in turn to see what we can learn from its details. A vision such as this is quite astonishing given that it was given to a Judean prophet whose cultural outlook on life went little further than his own land and the nations around. There was much that Isaiah did not know about the world in which he lived, but that did not stop him speaking God's Word which is as relevant today as it was when he first received it.

Notes on the text and translation

- V14 *In the last line, the Hebrew reads 'the shout from the sea' However, in Israel and Judah, the Mediterranean Sea was always to the west, and the word for 'sea' was often used to signify 'west'.*
- V15 *I have carried over the idea of using the 'sea' to mean 'west' because of the sense of the poem which is about the praises of the Lord being given throughout the world.*
- V16 *In the second line the Hebrew 'tsamir' means 'song', but could mean a song of praise to God, and in this setting this must be its fullest meaning*
- V16 *The phrase 'I am nothing! I am nothing!' is certainly strange. The Hebrew word has the meaning 'leanness, scantiness, wasting' as with the cows of Pharaoh's dream which ate up the fat ones! (Ex 41:2f.) It is the cry of one who has lost everything, but the word is barely used in Hebrew and remains something of a mystery to this day.*
- V16 *The last part of this verse is extraordinary in Hebrew. A literal translation would read something like this: 'the treacherous have been treacherous, and the treacherous have been treacherous treacherously!' The Hebrew word is clear enough, but there is no other use of such repetition in the Bible. We can only guess at its fullest meaning, as I have done in my translation.*
- V23 *'shown to His elders in glory' is not an easy translation. Nevertheless, the Lord is described as made 'manifest' or shown visibly to His elders.*

The universal praise of God (24:14-16)

As we read this passage of Isaiah, we are reminded of New Testament passages such as that found in Philippians; 'At the name of Jesus, every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father!' (Phil 2:10,11) There are so many echoes of this here in our passage of Isaiah that we might imagine Paul had Isaiah 24 in mind when this great 'hymn' was penned!

The words used in these verses to describe the praise of the Lord are significant. 'Majesty' (24:14) indicates the regal authority and kingly rule of God. 'Glorify' (24:15) is a call to give God His honour and due, and is a call given both to Israel and to all the nations across the world from the east to the west. 'Righteous' (24:16) is the name we give to God when we finally see that He alone is indeed 'right', and all the deceptions of this world have been set aside. It does not take too much thought to observe that people in their natural state shy away from God's authority, prefer to live according to their own needs rather than follow His ways, and question the judgements and laws of God in the belief that they know better. There may be many ways of describing the fallen nature of people in the world, but this is fairly comprehensive! When the world finally comes to an end, all such things will be seen for what they are; treachery and betrayal (24:16)!

The end of the world (24:17-20)

The message of this prophecy is that the End of Time and God's final judgement are inescapable. The effect of the Hebrew poetry simply cannot be read in English, but if I write out the Hebrew characters which make up the sentence 'terror, pit and snare await you' (24:17) as they might appear in an ancient Hebrew script, you will get the idea: 'pahadwapahatwapah!' The alliterative effect of this sequence is like a trap in itself, and it is like a 'tongue-twister' which forces those who try to say it to give up!

The desolation of the land which was a feature of yesterday's prophecy is found again here (24:19). In addition, however, Isaiah describes the writhing of the land; 'torn asunder ... violently shaken ...'. Paradoxically, in the midst of this disaster, the 'windows of heaven are opened' (24:18) which is a common Hebrew expression for rain. It is quite usual for visions of disaster in Hebrew literature to contain images which are reminiscent of drought, because drought was a common problem in that part of the world and one which could lead to death. Here, however, Isaiah describes the opposite! However, this reminds us of the first flood in which God brought judgement on the whole world (Genesis 6-9) in the time of Noah. But there will be no 'Noah' to restart the earth after the flood; this is the End. All the structures on the earth sway and fall down; they fall, 'never to rise again' (24:20).

The glorious rule of God (24:21-23)

On the Lord's day of victory, Isaiah describes Him as performing a judgement in heaven as well as on earth (24:21); heaven's armies are to be judged! It is easy to slip over this quite essential point. If we feel that Isaiah 14 does indeed give us a picture of some heavenly 'fall' from grace by the 'Day-Star' (or 'Lucifer' - see earlier studies) then it becomes obvious that Satan and all evil are to be judged in righteousness. All the heavenly powers are brought under God's judgement in the End, and Isaiah tells us that all authorities both in heaven and on earth will be as one before the Lord. Even the brightest lights in the sky, worshipped by many people in Isaiah's day as gods, that is the sun and the moon, will be brought under His judgement and control (24:23). This is a visionary picture which may be quite foreign to us, but if these celestial bodies represented other gods to ancient peoples, perhaps they now represent the false secular understanding of the world and the universe which dominates so many cultures today. These will be subject to the Lord our God!

The last part of Isaiah's vision is of the glory of the Lord in His dwelling on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. It was quite natural for Isaiah to perceive the Lord in this way, but his vision merely foreshadows John's famous apocalyptic prophecy; 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more ...' (Rev 21:1). People sometimes ask why John speaks of the heavens as passing away as well as the earth, and the answer is here in Isaiah. Isaiah 24 explains that at the End Times, heaven will be judged as well as the earth, and it therefore needs to be 'remade'. Like the earth, it has been polluted by evil, and once Satan (Lucifer) has been dealt with, the Lord will have to do a work of recreation on heaven!

Wondrously, people survive these end times, because Isaiah foresaw that all this would happen in the full view of 'His elders'; those who would survive the judgement of the Lord and remain in His presence. Isaiah does not say much about who such people might be, but we have to read the rest of the Bible for a fuller understanding of this!

Application

There are only a few places in scripture where we can say that there is a vision of God's future glory which is as full as this; God victory, the end of all things and His final judgement and glory! There are many allusions to this in the Old Testament, and the occasional picture of God's Kingdom such as in Isaiah 11:6-9, but the power of this text is considerable. We can at least say that it connects strongly with the anticipation of the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus and as prophesied by John in the New Testament and it enables us to see that God's plan for His world is indeed universal, from beginning to end. This impressive thought is far beyond our mere human minds. In physics, the complex mathematics used to try and understand the nature of the Universe is far beyond the scope of most people, yet people accept what is said, even though it only attempts to

go back and try to work out when the universe began. Without trying to start a debate about 'science and religion', what physicists fail to do and do not attempt, is to calculate the future on the basis of what is known about the present; the best scientific minds in the world can only look back, but not forward!

The glory of our faith is that our future is secured. In the time of Isaiah, a prophecy such as this was given in faith by a man of God who trusted the Lord. In our own day, we may have faith through Jesus Christ that what Isaiah said and what the rest of scripture says is indeed God's will and purpose. People have a deep need to look into the future and to know that their creation was not in vain, and they have a 'future' which gives meaning to life. People search for this meaning in many different ways; but in Christ we have found it, because through Him we may have confidence that we will be standing with the Lord at the End, ready to take part in His New Creation.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. The judgement of God is something people often avoid, saying that it shows God in a light they find difficult to come to terms with; why is this so?
2. Discuss what you feel about the destruction of all evil and satanic powers by the Lord at the End Times.
3. How can we best give glory to God for what we believe will happen in the future?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The idea that the Lord will have victory over all evil excites me personally, and I do not find it hard to anticipate the end of all things with joy. However, I have found that such a view is not universally shared amongst Christians, and I have been chastised in the past for preaching about the Lord's coming again in glory. I pray for God's people to be able to look forward to the great glory of His final triumph!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Put some time aside to reflect on the future which God has for you.
- Explore passages in scripture which speak of God's future, such as the book of the Revelation of John, or Matthew 24.
- Pray for God's people to recapture the vision of His glory

Final Prayer

My Lord; keep me purposeful in faith. Do not let me wander where the world would have me go, and so through roaming fail to meet You where I ought. Make me conscious of Your purposeful guidance and thankful for its direction; for I know I will never be lost, in You! AMEN