

Prayer

Rescue us, O Lord, from the frustrations and upsets which occur because of the difficult things which happen to us. Save us from being controlled by them, and turn our eyes away from them towards You. Create in us a desire to worship You through everything we do and say, and thereby live a life which is victorious over all fear and distress. Thank You, Lord God; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme:

Pray for marriage, especially the importance of marriage as a foundation for the societies in which we live. Marriage is increasingly rejected by many young people. Pray for them.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for the country of Zimbabwe*
- *Praise the Lord for those who have been healed of deadly diseases*
- *Pray for those suffering because of international food shortages*

Meditation

When You look into our eyes, O Lord, what do you see?

Loving compassion and concern for others?

Or suppressed emotions because of past troubles?

A deep desire to do what is right without exception?

Or only the will to do what it suits us to do, and little else?

Genuine interest in all the other people we meet?

Or a harmful desire to impose ourselves on others?

A heart for what is right, just and true, without compromise?

Or an inner urge to twist all to our own advantage?

The will, drive and purpose of one who lives for You?

Or only the singular intent to do whatever we want?

Challenge us and cleanse us according to Your will, O Lord.

Bible Study - Isaiah 26:1-11

¹ *On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:*

*We have a strong city;
He (God) makes salvation
like walls and fortifications.*

² *Open the gates,
so that a righteous nation may
enter
which maintains faithfulness.*

³ *You will keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is set on You;
for he trusts You.*

⁴ *Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD GOD is an eternal rock.*

⁵ *For He humbles those living in high
places.*

*He humiliates the lofty city;
He brings it down to the ground,
and casts it into the dust.*

⁶ *Feet trample it down,
the feet of the poor,
the steps of the needy.*

⁷ *The way of the righteous is straight
and level;*

you even out the path of the righteous.

⁸ In the path of your judgments,
Yes, LORD, we wait for you;
your name and remembrance
are our soul's desire.

⁹ My soul yearns for You in the night,
my spirit within me longs for You.
For when Your judgments come on
the earth,
Those who live in the world learn
righteousness.

¹⁰ If wicked people are shown favour,
they do not learn righteousness;
in the land of honest people they act
perversely
and do not see the majesty of the
LORD.

¹¹ O LORD, Your hand is raised up,
but they do not see it.
Let them be ashamed to see
Your zeal for Your people.
Let the fire of Your enemies
consume them.

Review

In these chapters of Isaiah (24-27), we have read about a vision of God's Final Judgement (ch 24) and His great victory in the End Times. We have also been told about how God will finally destroy death and will remove the 'disgrace' of His people (25:7,8). These are amazing visions describing God's plan for His world and they are vigorous and confident prophecies given to Isaiah, a man who lived through troubled and difficult years in the life of the people of Judah. Our passage today continues not with any further prophecies about the End Times, but with a prophetic description of the patient waiting which must take place beforehand. Isaiah prophesied in the eighth century BC and saw some of his prophecies come true in his own lifetime, but he did not see the outcome of these apocalyptic prophecies and had to wait for them to be fulfilled, just as we do today.

Isaiah, of course, spoke knowing the people and circumstances of his own day, but it is not hard to see how these words also apply to us who live in New Testament times. We, too, live in the 'strong city' (26:1) of salvation, but a salvation won for us by Jesus Christ which is open to all peoples just as Isaiah foresaw (26:2). A real pearl of scripture is exposed in verse 3; 'You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is set on You; for he trusts You.' This is a classic description of patient waiting on the Lord for His timing. It is a prophecy which encourages us to fill our minds with the things of God and trust Him, and it is echoed in some of Paul's letters, for example 'Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth ...' (Col 3:2).

The theme of trust continues through into the second part of our reading, suggesting that what is required is an active trust. This is what is meant by the 'way of the righteous' which is 'straight and level' (26:7,8). In ancient times much work was required to keep a pathway cleared of stones and level, and a neglected pathway was both difficult to follow and hard to walk. Isaiah's picture is of a pathway of life which was level and morally upright (see notes later in Bible study) which is well used. Waiting for the Lord was not a matter of doing nothing! Isaiah demonstrated a great passion for the Lord; 'My soul yearns for You in the night, my spirit within me longs for You.' (26:9). Such commitment and passion is required by any of us as we wait on the Lord, and while the world all around us appears to abandon God and regard our faith as irrelevant. Doubtless Isaiah felt the same.

Towards the end of the passage, Isaiah contrasts the faithful yearning of one who waits on the Lord with the perversity of those who are shown 'favour' by God, but fail to 'learn righteousness' (26:10). As he said this, Isaiah may have had in mind King Ahaz; a man who was the recipient of God's favour and anointing as King in Jerusalem in the line of King David, but also a man who had acted perversely and according to his own judgement when rejecting the Lord and His authority (see Isaiah 7). We may have other examples in mind as we read verse 10; perhaps of those people who are blessed with honour, position or gifts within the Body of Christ, but who for reasons we never really know fail to allow the

Spirit of God to use them fully in the service of the Kingdom. The Lord requires His people to show a true spirit of active and earnest waiting in the days before the End Times. His hand is 'raised up' in judgement, even though people do not see it (see 26:11), but if we trust in Him, we will have no fear either of Him or of the future.

Going Deeper

The first part of our passage appears to use the idea of a 'city' to construct the theme of patient waiting, and along with this theme, it also tells us what happens to the proud in God's judgement, even while we are waiting for the End Times. In the second half of the passage the prophecy is about a pathway which people travel rather than nations and cities, and it also describes what happens when people do not trust in their Lord. We will now look at what all this means.

Notes on the text and translation

- V1 *'We have a strong city'; literally, this reads, 'we have a city strong for us'.*
- V1 *God is the subject of the last two lines, even though His name is not written in the text. 'He makes salvation ...' is literally 'He sets up salvation', but in the whole sentence, it makes more sense to think of God 'making' salvation like the strong defences mentioned; walls and fortifications.*
- V3 *The famous verse contains a double word; 'peace, peace'. This is usually translated 'perfect peace' because the doubling of a word emphasises it, and this seems the best way to express what Isaiah was saying. The Hebrew lacks a subject, so in translation we put in 'he' and 'him' so that it makes sense in English.*
- V4 *Translation of this verse is difficult. Literally, it reads; 'Trust in the Lord forever, in Yah, the Lord is an eternal rock.' Here, the word 'Yah' is an ancient variant on the holy name of God which is quite rare in the Old Testament.*
- V6 *The first line of this verse is actually in the singular 'the foot tramples it down'. However the sentence is grammatically connected to the next two lines which describe the 'feet' of those who do the trampling; so it is translated as plural 'feet'.*
- V7 *In some translations you will find reference to 'O upright One' (or some similar phrase) in the middle of the verse. The Hebrew word here is simply an adjective which means morally upright or straight, and I have attached it to the previous clause, where it makes more sense.*
- V9/10 *In these two verses the verbs are sometimes singular and sometimes plural with no apparent grammatical reason. The text makes sense if it is all one or the other, so by using the plural, the prophecy makes a good general point.*

A city for the righteous nation (26:2-6)

The first picture in this prophecy is of a city which is made by God. Isaiah had already prophesied about the downfall of Israel and Judah and even Jerusalem itself (9:8f., 10:1f.). He knew that Jerusalem would fall one day and yet he still held on to the vision of Zion as the dwelling-place of God (12:1-6). It is almost certain that in Isaiah's mind, the 'strong city' in our passage was Zion, God's dwelling place with His people; but for us today, the city is Zion, the Church of God waiting the Lord's return in triumph. Isaiah spoke about the city as having walls and fortifications which made it completely secure (26:1) and he compared this to salvation. This is a remarkable prophecy of the work of God, because in New Testament times Jesus brought salvation to all people (the 'righteous nation' of verse 1) who would have faith in Him through His death and resurrection, and this is a sure and certain hope of the heaven which is to come. A city which cannot be overcome by the enemy because it is strong is a powerful picture of the Church of God in our own times.

Verses 3 and 4 describe in compelling terms the absolute focus which is required for the peace of this city. It combines the powerful idea of peace which cannot be disturbed, that is, perfect peace, which is found in having complete trust in God and the absolute mind-set which enables us to experience this peace. It sounds almost too simple to say that if we are focussed on Christ then we can experience something of this perfect peace, but there are many who will testify that they have found such peace and we cannot ignore this testimony.

The alternative for each of us is to live not in the spiritual city of God but firmly rooted in the things of this world. Isaiah characterises such places as 'high places' (26:5) which will be brought down, trampled underfoot by the poor and the needy (26:6). We see something of the fulfilment of these prophecies today in the rapid rise of vast slums of poor people who live around the cities of the world, and the international problems being generated by our inability to feed everyone on the planet properly despite the immense riches our world still holds. Spiritually, if we choose to live outside the city of God, we choose to live and die with this world and apart from the salvation of God.

The straight and level path (26:7-11)

From verse 7 to 11, the Hebrew text (see above) demonstrates that the picture of a straight and level pathway is a moral picture, although when translated into English this does not necessarily appear to be so. We are told about the 'righteous' who walk on a path which is 'straight', which means 'upright' or perhaps even 'honest'. The Old Testament often talks about those who are upright or honest in the Psalms, and sometimes Christians avoid such passages because the impression can be gained that people can claim favour from God with such attributes; for example, 'May my integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait on You' (Psalm 25:21). We should not be too quick to dismiss such passages, for the Old Testament teaches us, as it does here, that one whose heart is set on the Lord is someone who should aspire to the highest standards of morality and judgement, and as both the Psalm (25) and our passage today teach us. They are people whose maturity and integrity is found through 'waiting' on the Lord in order to follow the right pathway, and it is right for Christians to aspire to such standards of personal integrity. They do not claim righteousness of themselves, only that which is granted them by God through Jesus, as consistent with the Gospel of salvation by Faith. Such an attitude towards the Lord is one of yearning and purposeful intent to do God's will (26:9).

Isaiah himself must have yearned to see the Lord worshipped and honoured within the community of the Lord's people, and like us, he knew he would have to wait to see the day when this would happen, whether in this world or the next. His work was to prophesy what the Lord said to him, and here in this passage, his own patience and yearning contrasted strongly with the lives and actions of the people around him. He saw people who did not 'learn righteousness', who acted 'perversely' (26:9,10) and failed to worship the Lord in His majesty (26:10). It hurt him to see people around him who did not see that the Lord's hand was raised in judgement.

The very last part of the prophecy is fascinating, because in verse 11, Isaiah calls on the Lord to show 'zeal' for His people, so much so that the people are ashamed at their own lack of zeal for the Lord. The phrase 'let the fire of your enemies consume them' seems like a hard response because it sounds as if Isaiah is asking the Lord to 'consume' his people. However, what Isaiah meant may have been different. The phrase may reflect a wistful longing for the day when the people of God would be as consumed with zeal for their own God, as much as their enemies were consumed with zeal for their own causes. Today, we look at the evangelistic zeal of new cults from America such as Kabbalah, or the zeal of many Muslims, and long to see Christians stand up and be counted for their God and who He is; the One True God.

Application

We all live at a time of waiting, and we do not know when the Lord will bring His world to an end. In that time of waiting, the spiritual value of Isaiah's words is immense. We have a strong city in the Church of God which despite its earthly frailties is spiritually strong because its 'walls and fortifications' are salvation. Whatever happens to the church structurally and however the Lord has to judge some of His people who are not faithful to Him, there are millions of Christian people around the world who are determined to have a mindset on Christ, and this is so because they know their salvation is from Him. Those of us who count ourselves as part of that Church, the Great City of our God, the New Testament 'Zion', must always remember that whatever trials we experience in this life and even within the structures of our churches, Isaiah's words remain true. God will keep us in perfect peace when our minds are fixed on the Lord; and notice that Isaiah says 'minds', meaning that our thoughts are filled with Christ and Him alone. This is not some kind of brainwashing, but a matter of spiritual direction and intent, and in our hearts we know where we are headed, and the path on which we are set.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you agree that the city mentioned in this passage of Isaiah is Zion? Do you accept that the 'Zion' of the Old Testament is the Church (universal) of today?
2. Do you know what it is to experience 'perfect peace'. How would you describe it?
3. What words would you use to describe the spiritual pathway set before you? Is it straight and smooth?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I have found the verse in this passage which speaks of God's peace which may be found in waiting to be a great comfort. It is something I want to keep in mind in the coming days. As I dwell on this passage I will ask the Lord to help me deal with those things in my life which do not feel very peaceful at the moment. He will have a way!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Look up some other references to 'peace' in the Old Testament, such as Psalm 4:8, Psalm 85, or Ecclesiastes 3:8, and reflect on the meaning of God's peace.
- Do you find it easy to be peaceful yourself? Use this passage to help you search for that peace which God alone can give you.
- Ask yourself whether the path on which you are set is one of integrity and honesty before God. Is it spiritually 'smooth'?

Final Prayer

Dear Lord, bring us joy we pray. Lead our hearts to sing to You, to be free, to laugh and cry out loud and be unashamed of our emotions. Then, when we are at liberty in Your presence, speak to us, we pray, through the joy of Your presence. Thank You Lord: AMEN