

Prayer

Soothe my heart when it is aroused, Lord Jesus;
 Calm my fears when dangers appear to surround me,
 Give peace to my family when troubles appear to overwhelm us,
 Place Your hand on our lips so that we do not speak wrongly,
 And give us true rest from all the upsets of life.
 Thank You, Lord Jesus, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Family

Pray today for relationships between the elder and younger members of families. Social pressures draw people apart very easily, so pray for God's grace to draw them together.

On-going prayers

- *Pray against the abuse of power wherever it is to be found*
- *Pray for the country of Zimbabwe*
- *Praise the Lord for those who have been healed of deadly diseases*

Meditation

Lord Jesus, lead me on the path I have not known:
 Take me away from those treasured habits of life
 I use to feed my shameful selfish style of life,
 and use to excuse my denial of Your call.

Take away from me the 'time' I think I have;
 Time I spend on pandering to this ego,
 Instead of yearning for You, thinking I know better.
 Eliminate my selfish heart and slay my will!

Lord Jesus, fill me with a spiritual joy reborn;
 Open up my squandered life to live again,
 Chasing wisdom and love's dreams in bold resolve,
 At peace with myself, and unashamed of You.

Occupy me now, however, whatever, forever;
 And fill me with desire to grasp salvation's truths;
 So, when touching that pearl of precious price,
 The Word, in truth, holds me and will not let me go!

Bible Study - Isaiah 26:12-21

¹² O LORD, You provide peace for us;
 for it is You who has done for us,
 everything we have attempted.

¹³ O LORD our God,
 lords other than You have ruled
 over us,
 but even when parted from You,
 we remembered You.

¹⁴ The dead do not live!
 Ghosts do not stand up!

You have punished and destroyed
 them,
 and wiped out all memory of them.

¹⁵ But you have enlarged the nation, O
 LORD,
 You have enlarged the nation;
 You are glorified;
 You have enlarged all the borders
 of the land.

- ¹⁶ O LORD, in distress they sought you,
they poured out a whispered
prayer,
and Your discipline was on them.
- ¹⁷ As a pregnant woman writhes
when near the time of birth;
She cries out in her pain -
so were we before You, O LORD;
- ¹⁸ We were pregnant and writhed,
giving birth to wind.
We have not brought salvation to the
land,
nor have those who live on earth
fallen.
- ¹⁹ Your dead will live!
their bodies will rise!
You who live in the dust,
- Wake up and sing for joy!
For your dew is a dew of happiness,
and the earth will cast out the
dead.
- ²⁰ Come, my people,
enter your chambers,
shut your doors after you;
hide yourselves for a little while
until the wrath has past.
- ²¹ For look! the LORD is coming out of
His dwelling
to pronounce the guilt of those
who live on earth;
the earth will expose the blood spilt
on her,
and will no longer conceal its slain.

Review

The second half of Isaiah 26 continues the wistful tone of the first half, which speaks about waiting on the Lord with memorable texts about 'trusting in the Lord' and 'peace'. The whole chapter contains the prophetic reflections of Isaiah about what it meant to wait on the Lord for the fulfilment of His Word. Isaiah had prophesied much about the Lord's plans for His people and the world, even as far as the End Times when the world would be destroyed and recreated (chapters 24 and 25). During the many years of Isaiah's long life, he must have mused often on what the Lord had told him, and waited in anticipation for history to unfold as he had prophesied. He was well aware that if what a prophet said came true, then people accepted that it was 'of the Lord' (Deut 18:22).

The musings of Isaiah in this passage however are quite remarkable, and they bring together some of the powerful themes of Isaiah's prophecies to create some stunning pictures which strongly connect with Christian faith today. It is doubtful that Isaiah would have known that we would find these connections, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit to take words spoken in His name and interpret them into the lives of those who listen.

Isaiah begins this passage with an air of resigned submission, confessing for all God's people that everything they had enjoyed was because of the Lord, and because of His care and protection. It was God who provided the peace they enjoyed in the centuries before invasion, and all the good they achieved was His work rather than theirs (26:12). At times they had been forced into submission to others, but had not completely forgotten their Lord; some had remembered and kept alive the hope of Israel (26:13). He also confessed that any enlargement of the nation that had taken place (and God's people had certainly grown over the years) was all down to God's mercy and provision (26:15). We, too, must make the same confession; the Lord has looked after us, given us what peace we have enjoyed and enabled His church to grow; we cannot claim any glory for what God has done!

There are two themes in this prophecy however which stand out because they are really quite extraordinary. The first is Isaiah's description of death in verses 14 and 19, and the second is his description of life, given through the picture of a woman giving birth in verses 17 and 18, sandwiched between the descriptions of death! Certainly, Isaiah's prophetic themes were all about life and death, ultimately the spiritual life and death not only of God's people but of all people. In verse 14, Isaiah describes the fate of all who die; 'The dead do not live! Ghosts do not stand up!' However after musing on the fact the Israel herself has not given birth to the salvation which God longed to bring through His people (26:17,18), verse 19 proclaims a dramatic turn around. 'Your dead will live! Their bodies will rise!'

Look carefully at what these sentences say, for Isaiah recognised that the work of salvation was a salvation from death and that it all happened because of God's work alone!

Isaiah's prophecies are very close to the heart of the Gospel, and since time has gone by and we are in a position to know that Jesus has saved us from our sins and granted us access to God the Father, we can see the Isaiah was entirely right. In his own day, of course, his wise advice was for those who trusted the Lord to act like the people of Israel in Egypt when the angel of death passed over (Ex 12:11f.); go inside, sit tight, and wait for your salvation (26:20)! We, however, have a different commission from the Lord Himself (Matt 28:19)!

Going Deeper

Isaiah had spoken about death previously in his prophecies, and he had also spoken about giving birth; famously in his words 'a young woman will conceive and bear a child ...' (7:14f.). This is why I suggest that this chapter is like Isaiah's 'musings' on what the Lord had said to him. There is still more for us to find in these verses, especially about the right attitude of God's people to the Lord's work which He does through them.

Notes on the text and translation

- V12 *The second and third lines of this verse read literally; 'moreover all our deeds You have done for us.' My translation changes the phrases round so that the meaning of this becomes clearer.*
- V13 *Most common translations read 'other lords besides You ruled over us, but Your name alone we bring to remembrance'. This rendering assumes the word for 'name' is there in the Hebrew but this is not clear, and it is closer to the text to say 'even when parted from You we remembered You'. This makes sense in the prophecy.*
- V14 *I have translated 'Ghosts do not stand up' where most translations have 'ghosts do not rise' because the verb also means 'stand up', and by translating it this way, we get a feel of the mocking tone of Isaiah's words in the second half of this verse.*
- V16 *This verse contains a word which is almost unknown; the one for 'whispered prayer'. It appears to be a form of muttering to oneself at a time of distress.*
- V18 *The end of the verse has been translated literally; 'nor have those who live on earth fallen.' Some translators think this does not make sense and so make an amendment to the Hebrew to read 'no-one is born to live in the world'. I prefer to keep close to the original since it means simply that the work of Israel had failed.*
- V19 *'The earth will cast out the dead' This phrase has been translated and interpreted in many different ways, and many translations say 'the earth will give birth to the dead'. However, the verb used is out which means 'to fall', but here it is used grammatically with a sense of purpose, hence 'cast out'. See Bible study.*
- V21 *The third line reads as follows in Hebrew 'the earth will expose her blood', but this is a shorthand for talking about the murders committed on the land, so I have preferred to translate the passage 'the earth will expose the blood spilt on her.'*

The Lord's provision in the past

Often, when times are hard, we need to remember how much the Lord has done for us, and Isaiah reflects on this at the beginning of our passage. He suggests two sources of encouragement; firstly that the Lord has given us the peace we have enjoyed, and secondly that our past achievements have been with God's help. Our memories can play tricks on us, but in general, they do seem to focus on the good things of the past. It is common for people to look back wistfully to previous years when things seemed so much better than the present. Whether this is true or not is perhaps debatable, but it is a great blessing if we can look back and give thanks to God for His provision, as Isaiah looks back with appreciation to the Lord's provision of peace in past times (26:12). In addition, it is

natural for us to look back on our past achievements with a certain sense of pride, but following Isaiah's words in the same verse, how much better to look back with the knowledge that we could not have done what we did without the Lord's help and guidance.

It is clear that Isaiah was looking back in time from verse 13, as he recalled the times when Israel and Judah had been occupied or badly led; when 'lords other than You have ruled over us' (26:13). Isaiah spoke in this verse as if offering a confession for the past sins of his people, and knowing that those who had been faithful to the Lord in the difficult times were those who 'remembered' the Lord and ultimately kept Israel and Judah on track. It is difficult to follow the logic of Isaiah's thought at this point as he went on to speak in the next verse about 'the dead' (26:14). However, it may be that Isaiah was contrasting the life-giving memory of God's work amongst His people with the fate of those who had turned away from the Lord, who by their own choice have gone their own way and deserve the Lord's punishment. The Lord's memory is retained (v13) but those who rebel against the Lord are themselves forgotten (v14). It is a stark contrast but one which was clear to Isaiah, and is unfortunately clear to us even today.

Despite the problems, however, the Lord has been at work 'enlarging' His nation (26:15). Isaiah gave the glory to God for this because the sins of the people would have appeared to make it impossible for growth to take place, but the Lord's work of salvation was far more important in the eternal scheme of things than what was happening in his own day. Isaiah was waiting in the sure hope of the Lord's eventual glory and one day the 'borders of the land' would be re-created to include all the earth (see 24:14,15)

The Lord's provision for the future

Building up to speak about the Lord's provision for the future, Isaiah reflected on the efforts made by God's people in the past to bring to birth the salvation which God intended them to bring into the world. From the early days of God's Covenant with Abraham, it was the Lord's will to 'bless the nations' through His people, Abraham's descendants, but this had not been achieved and both Israel and Judah had become introverted and concerned for their own safety and survival rather than the pursuit of their call to bless the nations. The only glimpse we get of Israel and Judah living in harmonious peace with the nations around them and consequently being a blessing to them, is during the reigns of David and Solomon (e.g. 1 Kings 5:7f.).

Now Isaiah had already prophesied that one day a child would be born to a young woman who would be 'God with us' (7:14), a great new King of Israel (9:6f.) and the presence of the Lord in anointed power (11:1-3). It is tempting to wonder whether it was through reflecting on this great hope that Isaiah concluded that although Israel and Judah had laboured to produce 'salvation', they had produced only 'wind' (26:18). This is an awful picture, for labour-pains for women have always been very real and difficult, but Isaiah saw this picture prophetically and it was all connected and came from God. He knew that a child had to be born who would be 'God with us', and he longed to see this prophecy fulfilled!

It was at this moment in Isaiah's musing that he was given the vision of salvation which transcends death, and it bursts out in his prophecy in verse 19. Passages of the Old Testament which speak of life beyond death are rare and need to be treasured when they are found, because they speak to us of the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross in a quite unique way. Nevertheless, it was quite logical for Isaiah to realise that God would make 'the dead live' (26:19). He had already had visions of an eternal new creation of God in which there was perfect peace (9:7f.) and spoken about a heavenly banquet where God would bless the faithful (25:6). He had even pronounced that death would be 'destroyed' (25:7). Still, nothing is quite as dramatic as the actual announcement of resurrection itself, even if we might presume it from what was previously said; 'Your dead will live!' said Isaiah 'wake up and sing for joy!' (26:19). In an additional clause which is a touching picture of hope, Isaiah spoke of this resurrection as like a 'dew of happiness'; the light refreshing moisture of God's provision in the midst of a drought.

With such a magnificent future in store, all Isaiah could see around him was the pain and anguish of the events of his own day. It was only natural that he should give the advice to God's people to go inside and lock themselves into their houses (26:20) an instruction remarkably similar to Moses' call to the people of Israel in Egypt just before they were finally delivered and saved from the hand of Egypt. Keep safe, says Isaiah, whilst the Lord goes about His work of judgement in the world (26:21).

Application

Isaiah's final advice to the people of Israel and Judah to hide themselves is not something we can easily identify with. This part of Isaiah's prophecy is rooted in the insecurities of the Old Testament which were changed dramatically when God Himself provided a child born to a woman who was 'Immanuel' (Matt 1:23), in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies both in chapter 7 and here. It remains the biggest and most important feature of our faith that there is only One God, that He has sent His Son Jesus into the world in order to save us from death because of our sin, and by faith in Him we may know that we have access not just to fulfilment in this life, but to the eternal life as well! This is our 'song for joy', our 'dew of happiness' and the fulfilment of our hope for peace with God our Saviour!

Yet again, there is little difficulty in finding a great deal of the Gospel message in what may appear to be an obscure back corner of Isaiah's prophecies. Isaiah put this together by musing on the prophecies he had previously been given, some of which came in moments of great stress (such as 7:14). The whole passage speaks to us of the merits of spending time to reflect upon what the Lord says and does for us, what he has said and done in the past and what He will say and do for us in the future. If we join with Isaiah in his faith as well as his musings, we will not be disappointed.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. When you look back on what the Lord has done, what can you give thanks for?
2. Does the church labour in vain today, or is it fruitful in giving birth to 'salvation'?
3. What is happening in the world today which is an affront to the justice and mercy of God, and how will He judge and deal with these things?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This is a passage of great hope and one which I must confess I did not know as well as I should before I studied it in preparation for writing this study. I am certainly tempted to look at the whole of Isaiah 26 when searching for texts upon which to preach in the coming months! Scripture will always throw up surprises if we stick with it faithfully!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- In what ways do you rejoice in your salvation and the hope of eternal life? Try thinking of new ways to rejoice in your heritage of faith.
- Write down a list of the ways that God has blessed you in the past, and keep it as a reminder of good things!
- Discuss with someone else how you might be able to encourage people to be open and confident in their faith.

Final Prayer

Praise You, Lord God, for the wisdom of Your Word. May it lead our steps, govern our behaviour, enlighten our lives and teach us the truth. Then, enriched by Your engaging Word, may we demonstrably show evidence of the truth of our salvation, found through Jesus Christ our Lord: AMEN