

Prayer

We thank You gracious Lord, for the amazing truths we discover by reading Your Word. May all Your people value it and learn to use it in the way it was always intended to be used; as a spiritual reference point and guide to the purposes and will of Almighty God. Let us not be carried away with our own ideas about God and the world, but inspired by the truth which has already been revealed through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Family

Pray for any members of your extended family who may be having a difficult time just now, and give thanks to God for His love and care for all the members of your family.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for the joy of close friendship in Christ
- Pray against the abuse of power wherever it is found
- Pray for the country of Zimbabwe

Meditation

The ways of the Lord are compassionate and His love is incomparable

He focuses the minds of those who cannot face their debt;

He helps a man or woman face impossible work decisions;

He re-ignites a wounded marriage by nurturing true love;

He liberates those entrapped by life who have no sense of purpose;

He heals the heart of parent and child, broken by separation;

He re-envisions those who need some hope to face the future;

He eases the pain of the aged and infirm when gripped by chronic illness.

He purifies the spirit of those who know the hell of abuse.

He knows the pain of life's toughest paths, for He has faced the Cross.

Bible Study - Isaiah 27:1-13

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| <p>¹ On that day the LORD will decide the fate of Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, with his fierce, great and strong sword; and he will kill the dragon in the sea.</p> | <p>let them make peace with me, let them make peace with me.</p> |
| <p>² On that day there will be a delightful vineyard, sing about it!</p> | <p>⁶ In days to come, Jacob will take root, he will blossom, and Israel will sprout, and fill the whole world with fruit.</p> |
| <p>³ I, the LORD, am her keeper; I water her every moment. I guard her night and day lest harm comes to her;</p> | <p>⁷ Has He struck him down as He struck down those who struck him? Has he been killed like the killing of those who were slaughtered?</p> |
| <p>⁴ Wrath? I have none! Who has set thorns and briers so that I marched in battle against her?</p> | <p>⁸ Or by driving him away into exile have you struggled against him? Have you removed his hard spirit on the day of the east wind?</p> |
| <p>⁵ I will burn them up together! Or else let them cling to me for protection,</p> | <p>⁹ So will the guilt of Jacob be expiated by this? and will this be the full fruit</p> |

*of removing his sin?
For He has made all the altar stones
to crush like stones of chalk,
no sacred poles or incense altars
will remain upright.*

*so will their Maker will show them
no mercy?
and will He who formed them show
no favour?*

¹⁰ *For the fortified city will be isolated,
a deserted dwelling place
abandoned to the desert;
Calves will graze there,
they will lie down,
they will strip its branches.*

¹² *On that day the LORD will thresh
grain from the river Euphrates to the
brooks of Egypt, and you will be
gathered one by one, O people of
Israel. ¹³ And on that day a great
trumpet will be blown, and those who
were lost in the land of Assyria and
those who were driven out to the land
of Egypt will come and worship the
LORD on the holy mountain at
Jerusalem.*

¹¹ *Its boughs will wither and break;
women will come and make a fire
of them.
For this is a people with no
discernment;*

Review

This is the last of the great apocalyptic visions of Isaiah which have occupied chapters 24 to 27. In these prophetic visions we have travelled with Isaiah through the final judgement of God (ch24) and the victory won for His people (25) and in chapter 26 we read the musings of Isaiah as he pondered on everything he saw happening around him as he waited for his prophecies to come true. It can be no surprise therefore that the last of these apocalyptic visions speaks of these same themes, repeating them in different ways.

In this passage we read of the victory of God at the End Times (27:1) which heralds the dawn of a new day when God's people, like a new vineyard, will be a delight to the Lord (27:2f.). Unlike the fruitless vineyard Isaiah bewailed earlier in his prophecies (5:1f.), this vineyard will bear good fruit as its Creator intended (27:6), and the people of God will 'fill the whole world' with fruit, thus fulfilling the great Covenant promise to Abraham that his ancestors would be a blessing to the whole world. God's wrath will be no more against his own people (27:4) but the evidence of His righteousness will there for all to see, and God's cry will be 'let them make peace with me, let them make peace with me!' (27:5)!

This stunning picture is of course not about the triumph of God's people, but of the triumph of God shown through the salvation of His people, and that is the point. God's justice comes at a cost, and the central verses of Isaiah 27 contain the very human questions which Isaiah asks about everything he has seen and prophesied. These questions reflect the big questions people ask about how and why God does what he does. Has God turned in judgement against His own people, and if so why (27:7)? Why was it necessary for the Lord to struggle with the very people he chose to be his servants in the world (27:8)? Have God's people been purified and made clean by what God has done in judgement, and has their sin been removed (27:8,9)? Like us, Isaiah has no firm answers to such questions except to observe the cost of God's work borne by a people 'without discernment' (27:11). The land has been laid waste to the point where cities are abandoned to the desert, cattle graze at will and women gather sticks from the remains of cultivated trees for brushwood fires (27:10,11). The Promised Land lies desolate, even though a vineyard of God's new creation has begun to be fruitful (27:2-6)! Of one thing, Isaiah was sure, and this was that God would summon His people from around the whole world to unify them in worship (27:12,13), and he expresses this with great conviction and power.

How does all this relate to us? To a certain extent, the fruitful vineyard is indeed a picture of the Church of God, and the appeal of verse 5 may even be considered as evangelistic. However, Isaiah saw a time coming when God would send His new King as a child (7:14, 9:1-5, 11:1,2) to establish a New Kingdom, but he did not prophesy about the imperfect times in which we live now, between the coming of the Messiah and the final establishment of God's perfect Kingdom (the End Times). We know the power of God's salvation now through Christ and have the evidence of His power in the Holy Spirit, but the glory of the

New Testament times has not yet been completed. So just as all apocalyptic literature does, it speaks to us in part about our own circumstances, but points us on towards a greater vision. Certainly we still long for the day when all evil will be defeated and all 'Leviathans' slain (27:1) and all God's people, both New and Old Testament, be unified in praise of Almighty God (27:12,13)!

Going Deeper

This passage of scripture contains some very obscure Hebrew and you will find that most of the translations of the Bible you can buy today disagree quite substantially in their translation. This is one occasion where it may be helpful for you to read some of the specific notes I have made on the text of the passage, before going on to look at some of the other details in the text.

Notes on the text and translation

Many of the phrases and expressions in this passage of scripture are strange and very awkward to translate, because when presented literally they do not make sense to us. Translators have to make judgements about the flow of the passage as well as likely amendments to the text in order to try and create a translation which makes sense. To say this is not to question the nature of God's Word, but to say that there are many things about it which we do not as yet understand and our knowledge of the text is incomplete. Where the original Hebrew is as obscure as this and difficult to translate, it is best if we try to keep our eyes on the overall themes of the passage so that we do not become bogged down in the meaning of some of the clauses, several of which in this passage, are very hard to understand.

- V1 *Leviathan is a mythical creature which has symbolic meaning. Like the serpent in Genesis 3 it is a representation of the forces of evil and Satan, but this 'serpent' is a serpent of the sea, not of land.*
- V4 *This verse is difficult to translate, and in some versions of the Bible, it reads as if God marches in battle against the vineyard He has just said he would protect! My translation makes full use of the 'who' in the second clause which means that the prophecy asks a question – who is it who has caused 'thorns and briars' to kindle God's action against His vineyard? The Lord will burn them! (not the vineyard!)*
- V7 *You will find almost every version of the Bible is different here. My translation keeps to the idea of a question asked in Hebrew for which an answer will be, 'No'. I have also attempted to make sense of who is being spoken of, which is Israel. Israel is addressed in the feminine in verses 2 and 3 and 7, as if speaking of the 'vineyard' (feminine in Hebrew), but in verse 6 Jacob and Israel are addressed in the masculine. To avoid confusion in English, I have used the masculine in verse 7 because this makes sense following verse 6.*
- V8 *Again, you will not find any translations agree with each other in this verse, and mine is different. I have continued the use of the question, but this time it has the answer 'Yes'*
- V9 *The words used to describe the stone altars are uncommon and difficult to translate, but the sense is clear, God has not made stone so hard that it will last forever, even religious stone structures crumble with time!*
- V11 *The Hebrew words in this verse remind us of the prophecy given to Isaiah after his 'call' in Isaiah 6; 'the minds of these people are dull, they do not understand' (6:10). This connection with Isaiah's call is probably quite deliberate. Remember as well that this is a part of Isaiah quoted by Jesus (Matt 13:14,15)*

The time of the delightful vineyard!

It is no surprise that Isaiah was able to see a time coming when the terrible prophecy he had given in chapter 5 would be reversed, and a song would be sung about a new vineyard (27:2f.). In this new song, the Lord is clearly in love with His vineyard because it bears fruit and He cares for it intimately; the Hebrew expression for 'every moment' could also mean 'all the time' (27:3); and in addition, the Hebrew word for 'vineyard' is grammatically

feminine, so the text refers to 'her'. This reminds us of the New Testament in which we are given the picture of the church of God as the Lord's bride (Rev 19:7, 21:2f.) whom He loves and protects (as in 27:3). All these different pictures of God's people come together at the End Times when all things will be brought together and made complete in God the Father.

Remember, in that earlier song, Isaiah reported what God said about the vineyard 'I will remove its hedge ... it will be overgrown with briars and thorns ...' (5:5,6). Here, in this prophetic vision, Isaiah reports the wonderful words of the Lord; 'Wrath? I have none! Some translations of the Bible strangely interpret the next few lines of the prophecy as a judgement against Israel for the thorns and briars which she has placed in the way of God's will, but I do not believe this makes sense. After looking closely at the text, I feel justified in presenting what comes next as a question; 'who has set thorns and briars ...' In other words, where have all the problems come from which meant that the Lord has had to discipline His beloved people before He can finally redeem them?

Part of the answer to Isaiah's question has already been provided, for the whole passage begins with a description of the Lord's defeat of Leviathan, the 'sea-monster' which represents evil in the same way that the serpent in Genesis 3 represents the 'tempter'. Both are more than symbolic of Satan and evil, and it is the removal of this enemy which has enabled the Lord to find his vineyard is now productive and not growing thorns and briars as it did in the past. Our interpretation of this passage today is relatively simple; Christ has defeated the powers of evil on the Cross in fulfilment of Isaiah 27:1, and this means that the Church of God is able to be fruitful in God's work in this world in a way which the Old Testament people of God were not.

The effects of judgement

Whilst Isaiah's prophetic vision in chapter 27 begins and ends with a picture of the End Times and includes the vision of God's people as united, fruitful and loved, a larger portion of the prophecy (27:7-11) reminds us of the terrible path that has been followed in order to reach this happy conclusion.

The way Isaiah reflects on this journey is to ask questions, but in so doing he says some powerful things. The grammar of verse 7 is almost impenetrable, but the general sense of Isaiah's words is a question about equality and fairness (27:7). Isaiah appears to have asked the natural question about whether what has happened to God's people was fair; Israel had been 'judged' by God through the invasion of their territory by other countries, but had God acted against Israel fairly? This is a reasonable question to ask, for many a Judean would have felt that annihilation and exile was surely not fair, given that they were supposed to be 'a light to the Gentiles' (49:6). Fairness was never part of God's plan, however; it was only ever about faithfulness and obedience. Isaiah would one day prophesy (in chapter 53) that God's servant would have to endure the worst unfairness and injustice imaginable in order to overcome the evils of the world, suffering far more than even Israel and Judah had done in order to do God's will. Perhaps it was through musing about these injustices that Isaiah perceived this dramatic conclusion to the second half of his work (from chapter 40 onwards). God's purposes would be achieved both in spite of and through the injustices, unfairness and suffering of His people in the world.

There are all manner of interesting words and phrases in the remaining text. In verse 8, Isaiah reflected on how God had struggled with His people over the years; an interesting observation given that one way of translating the Hebrew word for 'Israel', is 'he struggles' (see Gen 32:22f.). After this, Isaiah thought about whether the sins of Israel and Judah would indeed be taken away by God and dealt with completely; 'will the guilt of Judah be expiated by this,' he asks? (27:9) Again, such thoughts are intriguing, for although Isaiah may not have realised this, God was planning an exact answer to this very question; His plan was to provide a Messiah whose work would remove the sins of people completely. The rest of verse 9 and verse 10 are a description of the abandonment of the land, again something of great puzzlement to Isaiah, for how could God's people live and how could a vineyard exist unless it was on some land? Yet all Isaiah saw in his vision was abandonment and the desert (27:10). Hence his final question; 'will their Maker show them no mercy?' (27:11).

Yet regardless of these questions which at other times Isaiah answered with great faith and hope, his prophetic vision remained clear and confident, God would complete His work and bring everything to its just conclusion, bringing all His people together (27:12,13).

Application

So much of what Isaiah perceived must have been a mystery to him. Even when he was called, the prophecy given him by the Lord was mysterious and full of uncertainties (6:10-13). The fact that Isaiah was not afraid to reveal his questions in the context of this vision of the End Times is remarkable, because unbeknown to Isaiah, it gives us a glimpse of the work of God through Jesus; of His death and resurrection and His power to deal with sin.

Even though we do not yet live in a world in which Satan is destroyed, through Christ we have authority over that which is evil and wrong in our world, and we can exercise that authority to great effect if we are prepared to use the moral judgement God has given us and fight for what is right and just. Isaiah saw a victory over Leviathan, and it is a victory which Jesus will complete one day when He comes again in glory. In the meantime, we live in the knowledge that the enemy can be overcome.

The last lesson we can learn from this apocalyptic vision of Isaiah is that God will glorify His people at the end and He will gather them together. In an age in which we remain puzzled about the terrible divisions between God's people, it is right to lift up our heads in confidence that God will overcome all obstacles to unite His people, in His own time. For that, we must give thanks!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What can the picture of the vineyard teach us about the nature of the church?
2. In what ways does the judgement of God fall upon His people today?
3. There are Christians today who are isolated from the church because of world politics or oppression. How may they be made to feel included in the Body of Christ?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Many of my conclusions about this passage are unconventional, because the way I have translated the passage is very individual. The text for this passage is very difficult to work with and it presents a real challenge to all commentators. It reminds me not to take God's Word for granted, and it also reminds me that we cannot know everything about scriptures!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- You may have questions about some aspects of your faith. Do you try to resolve these things or do you leave them alone? Ask the Lord to help you resolve them.
- Read through John 15 where Jesus talks about 'the vine'
- Find some time when your mind is not otherwise occupied to dwell on the thought of God's coming again in glory. Let Him speak to you about what He intends.

Final Prayer

We worship you, Lord God Almighty! We worship you in our words, our deeds, our thinking and our feelings; each of us with all our 'heart, soul, mind and strength'. We give ourselves to You so that Your will might be done on earth, both now and forever: Alleluia! AMEN