

Prayer

We cannot help but praise You, great and mighty God! You have touched our lives in a thousand different ways, and we are eternally grateful for this blessing. Your touch changes everything! It makes sense of the past, it empowers us for the present, and it gives us a certain hope for the future. This is the truth, and we know it! All praise be to You, great and mighty God, AMEN!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Life at Home

It is very hard when your home comes under threat for some reason, perhaps because of financial troubles or through family difficulties. Pray for those in need of help.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the inventions of scientists and engineers
- Pray for those who suffer because of extremes of weather
- Pray for people who struggle with incapacity

Meditation

Be careful, brothers and sisters ...

With the best of intentions, we so easily lose our way
For the world in which we live is full of tempting evils

Be wise, brothers and sisters ...

For there is always more for us to learn about our faith
And the Spirit is our guide to wisdom and discernment.

Be diligent, brothers and sisters ...

Do not be content with a casual reading of the scriptures
For Satan is delighted when we do not know God's Word.

Be positive, brothers and sisters ...

For all things are possible through Christ Jesus our Lord,
Our victory has been won, and our future is secured!

Bible Study - Isaiah 43:25 – 44:8

²⁵ I, I am He

who has wiped out your offenses
for my own sake;
I have not recalled your sins.

²⁶ Remind me, let us argue this out;
state your case

so that you may be proved right.

²⁷ Your first ancestor sinned,
and your teachers rebelled against
me.

²⁸ So I will profane the holy rulers,
I will commit Jacob to destruction,

and Israel to abuse.

^{44:1} Now listen, Jacob my servant,
Israel whom I have chosen!

² This is what the LORD who made you
says,
who formed you in the womb and
will help you:

Do not fear, Jacob my servant,
Jeshurun whom I have chosen.

³ For I will pour water on whoever is
thirsty,
and streams on the dry ground;

<p><i>I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.</i></p> <p>⁴ <i>They will spring up amongst green herbage, like willows by flowing streams.</i></p> <p>⁵ <i>This one will say, 'I am the LORD'S,' another will be named after Jacob, others will write on the hand, 'The LORD'S,' and adopt the name of Israel.</i></p> <p>⁶ <i>This is what the LORD says Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last;</i></p>	<p><i>Apart from me there is no God. ⁷ Who is like me? Let him proclaim it and declare it and set it out before me. Let him tell what has happened and is yet to come For a people I established long ago.</i></p> <p>⁸ <i>Do not fear, do not be afraid; have I not spoken and told you this before? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.</i></p>
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Review

This whole prophetic vision reads like a speech by God justifying everything He has decided to do as evidenced in the recent prophecies. Over and over again, a great cry goes out from the Lord announcing and declaring His intentions and His authority to act as He chooses: 'I, I am He ...' (43:25), 'I will pour out ...' (44:3), 'I am the first and the last ...' (44:6). Finally, the Lord stands on His own authority to speak out 'Is there any god besides me? There is no rock, I know not one.' (44:8). Throughout this passage, God stands above His creation challenging all comers to contend with Him about whether He has been right in His judgements (43:25-28), insisting that He will fulfil His promise of redemption and salvation (44:1-5), and insisting that He alone has the power and the authority to save the world and redeem it as He has promised. He alone is God, and there is no other way.

Within each of the three sections there are wonderful surprises which both confirm the prophecies we already have heard and add to them, so that our understanding of God's great scheme of salvation is extended. In the first section (43:25-28) there is a detailed discussion of the nature of sin which we will discuss in the later study, but it identifies blame for the sinfulness of God's people on 'teachers' who 'rebelled against me' (43:27). This is a dire accusation, but if we delve into the Hebrew word used here (see the notes on text and translation) it is derived from the word for 'scorn'. This could well be an ancient way of referring to the traditional place of criticism amongst teachers. Criticism plays an important part in the natural process of human enquiry, but God says that it has played havoc with true faith and the heritage of Israel! Doubts and criticism about God meant that kings from Ahaz (Isaiah 7,8) to Manasseh (2 Chronicles 33) had rebelled against their God, their people and their heritage, leaving Israel and Judah in total disarray (43:28)

Nevertheless, the Lord had a rescue plan which was both gracious to Israel (frequently called Jacob in this passage) and yet extended the scope of God's work far beyond their lands and their vision. By means of the Servant, God would offer redemption to the whole world (42:1f.) and here in this passage, God adds to the promises of what He will do using words which thrill the Christian, and must have enthralled the earliest of Jesus' disciples. God said 'I will pour out water ... I will pour out my Spirit on your descendants ...!' This is followed by a poetic description of pastoral landscape worthy of the 'place besides still waters' of Psalm 23. A place of fresh pasture and promise, and an eager response to the living God where all who gather are eager to be identified with the God who has saved them (44:4,5)!

breadth of eternity seems like an impossible thought. On the same day that I am writing, scientists have switched on the new experimental CERN accelerator which will recreate conditions similar to the time of the creation of the Universe, and there seems little doubt that scientists and mathematicians will learn even more about the origins of the universe. One thing they cannot do, however, despite all the statistics and projections, is to be clear about what will happen in the future. This is because everything in the future, from the point of view of humanity, is dependent upon the irrationality and mortality of human existence, and the fact that whatever has happened in the past, God is still working through people to put His plan for the universe into effect. Science may be able to glimpse the past, but only God holds the key to the full breadth of the Universe that reaches out into the future. True scientists know the limits of what they do, whereas those who jump beyond their disciplines and presume to pronounce about God and the universe all too frequently demean their standing as scientists.

The glory of this passage is that we receive a glimpse of the enormity of God and His great plan of salvation for the whole world. We learn that sin and rebellion must be reckoned with and justice will be done (43:25-28), but God offers His compassionate love and saving grace to Israel and to the Gentiles, by means of the Servant and the Spirit (44:1-5), and He does this to show us His glory, to which we are witnesses! Thanks be to God!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How does God wipe out sins, and how can we know that He has done this for us?
2. What does it mean for God to pour out His Spirit on a thirsty ground? Share your reaction to the 'picture' given in this prophecy, and share what it says to you.
3. How meaningful is it to you to talk about God as 'the first and the last'? How can Christians engage with scientists who study the Universe?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The prophecies of Isaiah appear to go through the same ground repeatedly, but each time they unearth something more, some new aspect of God's great work that we have not met before. This reminds us of the whole of scripture, which in the Old Testament tells story after story which repeat similar themes, and yet gradually build, from Genesis to Malachi, a vision of God which is far greater than the sum of its parts. That is the nature of God!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Read through the newspapers and internet news articles about the attempts to understand the origins of the universe in the 'Big Bang'. Alongside this passage, see what God is saying to you about His sovereign authority in the world.*
- *Fast and pray for those who struggle to understand faith and find it hard to come to know God. If you know any who come to your church, do your best to befriend and talk to them.*

Final Prayer

Glory be to You, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. You have triumphed over sin and death, and established the Kingdom where God reigns in love, truth, goodness and righteousness! You have done this for us who are not worthy of Your love; and You have guaranteed a place in heaven to all who have faith in You! Thank You, Lord Jesus, thank You: AMEN

It's a little wonder that the first few verses of Isaiah 44 are reasonably well known as prophecies of salvation! But Isaiah goes on. Verses 6 to 8 are a most powerful and awe-inspiring affirmation and revelation of God. It is here that we come across the words 'I am the first and the last!' We have read something similar in Isaiah 41; 'I, the Lord, am the first, and I will be the last', and Isaiah repeats this in chapter 48 (48:12) as well. However, this phrase is the closest equivalent in the Old Testament to the great shout of God recorded at the very end of the vision of John in Revelation; 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end!' Here is the creative power and authority of Almighty God in a nutshell. There is no god invented by the human mind to satisfy its inner searching who can stand above time and say this.

Going Deeper

All the way through this wonderful passage, the Lord says words like this 'remind me ...' (43:26), 'do not fear ...' (44:2), 'do not fear, you are my witnesses ...' (44:8). Each of these brief phrases reminds God's people that they have a part to play in this great work of God. As we take our study further, we will look at these and other aspects of the text which remind God's people past and present of their clear role to testify to the Great God who has saved them.

Notes on the text and translation

- V26 *The Hebrew of this verse when translated literally says 'make me recall, let us judge together; you, set it out, in order that you might be just'. You can see from the way that this is translated how hard it can be to get a form of English which expresses the original text; 'remind me, let us argue this out; state your case so that you may be proved right.'*
- V27 *'Your first ancestor sinned.' The Hebrew reads 'your first father', but if it was translated like this, then we might think this referred to Abraham, but really this is a reference to Adam from whom all are descended. It is best to say in English 'your first ancestor' because this makes the meaning clear.*
- V27 *'your teachers rebelled against me ...' You will find that most versions have 'our spokesperson rebelled against me.' The Hebrew word here is obscure, but is related to 'those who scorn'. How can we make sense of this? One of the targums gives the suggestion of 'teachers', and I reckon this is because it is the job of a real teacher to be sceptical (scornful) of anything but the truth. I have accepted the evidence of the targum here because the original does not make much sense in the passage and the word 'teacher' together with the idea of scorn and criticism does; see study.*
- V28 *'I will profane the holy rulers' The word 'profane means the opposite of 'make holy', and 'holy rulers' refers to the kings and priests of Jerusalem; those who hold holy office. Most translators have difficulty with this relatively easy text, so you will find the NIV says 'dignitaries of the Temple', and the New American Bible 'repudiate the holy gate'! No change to the meaning of the core words is required.*
- V2 *'Jeshurun' is a poetic name for Israel, meaning 'upright one'. The name is used in parallel with Jacob, so it is clear that this is what it means here.*
- V3 *'I will pour water on whoever is thirsty' The Hebrew says literally, 'I will our water on the thirsty one', or '... on one who is thirsty'. I have taken this to be a generalisation.*
- V4 *'they will spring up amongst green herbage' This is a simple picture of growth in the midst of abundance and luxury.*

V7 *'Let him tell what has happened and is yet to come for a people I established long ago.'* I have changed around the two lines of Hebrew to make sense of this in English, but kept close to the Hebrew text. The Hebrew is very difficult, and many translations are remarkably different. The closest to mine is the NRSV which retains the original lines; *'since I appointed an ancient people, let them declare what is to come and what will happen.'*

Further Study

Sin; dealt with by God! (43:25-28)

It seems quite clear from this passage that sin is something only God can handle. Even the words for sin and wrongful deeds in Hebrew help us understand the nature of sin, how it works and how it may be eliminated. As the first verse in our passage reminds us, God has always been dealing with human sin, and He calls for a righteous settlement between Him and His people of what sin is and what must be done to stop its power. The word 'forgiveness' does not appear in this passage, but there is a clear undertaking by God that he will not allow sin to be a permanent barrier between Himself and people, and He knows that although people bear responsibility for their sins, only He can overcome them, or as we would say, forgive them.

This passage twice uses the Hebrew word for sin, 'pesah'; firstly translated 'offenses' (43:25) and secondly 'rebelled' (43:27). This word is often translated as 'transgressions', but it means deliberate and wilful sin against God; or what we might call 'rebellion'. This word is used, for example, when Saul deliberately performed a sacrifice although he had no authority (1 Sam 13:8f.); he was in direct confrontation with the will of God. This word also describes the sin of the teachers in our passage (43:27), and it reminds us that the critical faculties we use to learn and grow can easily be used to divert the human soul away from its maker. If teachers sin through unbelief then what hope do the people have?

This passage uses one other word for 'sin', as in 'I have not recalled your sins' (43:25) and 'your first ancestor sinned' (43:27 - meaning Adam and Eve). This is the Hebrew word 'hattath' which means 'to miss the mark', whether intentionally or not. This, of course, is where so much sin starts! Adam and Eve failed to live up to their calling because they succumbed to the temptations of the serpent; and we 'miss the mark' in so many areas of life because we are limited by our humanity and cannot do everything all the time! God does not 'recall' such things and hold them against us forever; as with Adam and Eve, He always seeks to overcome the sin (43:25). Sin is never without consequences, but if we accept this in faith, then God can lead us towards blessing and forgiveness (see later). But those who have led Israel down the wrong road will be judged (43:28)!

A new work, a new blessing! (44:1-5)

Chapter 44 begins with God's restated intent to bless His creation, and if you read carefully, you will find that Isaiah interweaves the blessings of Israel with the coming blessing of the redemption of the whole world. A process he began to speak about in the previous prophecies (chapter 42 in particular).

Firstly, the Lord addresses Israel as Jacob. Throughout the Bible, both the names 'Jacob' and 'Israel' are used for God's people, and the nature of Hebrew poetry requires parallels such as these in order to flow effectively. The prophecy also uses the poetic nickname for Israel 'Jeshurun', used previously in Moses' great farewell speech to the people of God (Deut 32:15, 33:5,26). The prophecy picks up this familiarity and warmth, using the famous picture language of God's care for His people by referring to His creation of them 'in the womb'. There is a soft and feminine feel to such words as they convey the reality of God's love, which nurtures and grows by design, and does not destroy.

Then from the Lord's love and care for His people, we are thrust into an astonishing picture of the Lord's abundant provision at times of drought, and a description of the lavish generosity of God in pouring His Spirit 'on your offspring' (44:3)! These words are very similar to the famous prophecy we know from Joel; 'O children of Zion ... He has poured down for you abundant rain ... my people will never be put to shame ... I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh ... and all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Joel 2:23-32 abridged). No one knows the date of Joel's prophecy! Did Joel know what Isaiah said, or did Isaiah know Joel's prophecy? We cannot tell! This is one of only a few Old Testament prophecies which speak of God's 'Pentecost' centuries before it happening, and it is therefore a great treasure for all Christians.

Then, Isaiah records a remarkable vision, with a scene like that of a meadow with streams and trees growing in luxuriant greenery, giving both food and shade and offering that place of safety which is picture of God's salvation. Here, all manner of people are accepting and taking to themselves the name of Israel and Jacob! Isaiah calls them the Lord's 'adopted' (44:5)! This is the first we hear in scripture of this great concept, which is taken up by Paul in his famous letters, where he describes the adoption of the Gentiles as an essential element of God's salvation plan (see Romans 8:15,23, and 9:4).

Israel's King and Redeemer (44:6-8)

The prophetic vision in our text has not yet revealed anything about how such a great work will come about; that is, the work of forgiveness for both Jew and Gentile enabling both to stand together in a place of safety and salvation (44:5); but this is clearly the Lord's intention. It is sad that as yet, most Christians and Jews cannot share together in the manner suggested by this vision.

God, however, has the authority, the power and the right to do this, and to do it by redemption, that is, by taking the responsibility Himself to pay the price of the sins of His own people and the sins of the Gentiles. Israel's true King is her 'Redeemer' (44:6) and the Lord of Hosts who has protected His people through the centuries will stand guard over His work in the future. 'I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God' (44:6)

Then, the Lord challenges anyone to do what He has done (44:7). Can anyone testify to the work He has done in the past, and can anyone testify to what the Lord is going to do in the future? We who read this passage today are drawn into this challenge ourselves, for can we really presume this prophecy is merely about the Judean exiles returning from Babylon (as most commentaries suggest), or are we prepared to believe that when God says 'I am the first and the last' He means what He says? Are we prepared to believe that God has a slowly unfolding plan for the whole of humanity, revealed through prophecy to Isaiah in the eighth century BC? The test of prophecy is whether it comes true; and the reason why Christians hold Isaiah and the Old Testament as scripture is because its prophecies speak to us of the truth of our experience, through the facts of Jesus' life, death and ministry, and in the spiritual reality of our own salvation (mostly as Gentiles).

'Do not be afraid' says the Lord yet again. We can well imagine that when first announced, these prophecies must have caused considerable unease. They were utterly original, at whatever time in Israel's past they came to light. The Lord speaks to us when He says; 'You are my witnesses'; he means not just the Israelite peoples, but also those who had taken the Lord's name by adoption (44:5), and this means us. There is no getting round the fact that a Christian is one who is called to testify to God, as Saviour and Redeemer.

Application

The awesome command of all history by God is something that each of us should perhaps dwell upon from time to time. We are all so locked into the immediacy of our lives that the