

Prayer

Glory be to You, O Lord:

You bring us peace because You are the source of all peace.

You bring us hope because You are the source of all hope.

You bring us courage because You are the source of all courage.

You give us love because on Calvary's Cross

You have demonstrated Your love, the greatest love of all.

Glory be to You O Lord Jesus Christ! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Finance

Pray today for the government officials and politicians who are responsible for the finances of your country. Pray that they may be led by the godly motives of justice and equity.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those stranded abroad by failed tour operators*
- *Give thanks for the blessing of Christian fellowship*
- *Pray for the success of political talks in Zimbabwe*

Meditation

Make us a people of prayer, sovereign Lord,

Prayer is opening our hearts in honesty, to Jesus.

Prayer is praising Him using the words of Scripture;

Prayer is giving honour to the One True God who made us;

Prayer is telling the Lord all our concerns for the world.

Prayer is waiting on the Saviour with listening ears, in silence.

Prayer is agreeing with another by faith, saying 'AMEN'

Prayer is finding and reading the great prayers of the saints;

Prayer is beyond rational thought when speaking in tongues.

Prayer is the challenge to speak the truth to our Lord.

Prayer is accepting whatever He says in reply.

Make us a people of prayer, sovereign Lord.

Bible Study - Isaiah 44:24 – 45:8

²⁴ *This is what the LORD says, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who has made all things, who stretched out the heavens alone, who spread out the earth by myself;*

²⁵ *who breaks the pledges of false prophets, and makes fools of mediums; who turns wisdom on its head, and knowledge into foolishness;*
²⁶ *who supports the word of His own Servant, and who fulfils the counsel of His own messengers;*

*who says to Jerusalem, 'Be inhabited,'
 and to the cities of Judah, 'Be rebuilt,
 and to her ruins 'I will raise them';*
²⁷ *who says to the deep, 'Be dry;
 I will dry up your rivers';*
²⁸ *who says to Cyrus, 'my shepherd',
 and 'he will finish what I require';
 saying to Jerusalem, 'be rebuilt,'
 and to the temple, 'be set up'!*
¹ *This is what the LORD says to his
 anointed,
 to Cyrus, whose right hand I have
 taken
 to subdue nations before him
 and strip kings naked,
 to open doors before him
 and gates will not be closed:*
² *I go before you
 and level city walls,
 I shatter the doors of bronze
 and cut through the bars of iron,*
³ *I give you treasures of the depths
 and riches stored in secret places,
 so you may know that I am the LORD
 who calls you by your name;*

Review

This is a lengthy section of Isaiah's prophecy but it is hard to understand it if we split it up in some way. If we focus on some of the verses, we will find wonderful passages describing God's creative power (44:24,45:8) and His ability to control all history (44:26,27, 45:2,3). We will find also some astonishing words about the Lord's relationship with Israel, and some awesome verses such as 'I am the Lord and there is none other ...' (45:5,6). However, we will only gain a good understanding of this passage by asking the question, 'how does this passage fit with the series of prophecies within which it is found?' Only by asking this question can we discover why Isaiah speaks about someone called 'Cyrus' and calls him one who is 'anointed' (45:1); and why Jerusalem is described as uninhabited and in need of the Lord's command to receive inhabitants again (44:26)! These are only some of the puzzles you may have spotted as you read this passage, and they are only explainable if we find a proper structure for this prophecy that makes sense of the whole.

Traditional scholars will tell us that there is only one explanation, and that Isaiah did not write this prophecy. They say it was written by a later prophet during the Exile (around 530 BC) who knew that Jerusalem was abandoned (see 44:26), who had heard that Cyrus had decreed Israel's release from captivity (see 2 Chron 36:23 and Ezra 1:1) and obviously praised God for this. In his enthusiasm, he wrote about the power and majesty of God in creation and in His strength to act, hence the power and obvious beauty of the poem.

If you have read the notes so far you will already know that this is not how I would interpret this passage, although I accept that this particular text lies at the heart of arguments about

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You forgive all who willingly turn to you and confess their sins. Clear the unhappiness and fear from our lives and bring us the joy of reconciliation and the promises of Your blessing. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord: AMEN

I am the God of Israel!
⁴ *For the sake of my servant Jacob,
 and Israel my chosen,
 I call you by your own name,
 I name you, though you do not
 know me.*
⁵ *I am the LORD,
 and there is no other;
 besides me there is no god.
 I equip you, though you do not
 know me,
 so that they may know,
 from sun's rising to its setting,
 that there is no one besides me;
 I am the LORD,
 and there is no other.*
⁷ *I form light and create darkness,
 I make peace and create calamity;
 I the LORD, I do all these things.*
⁸ *Shower from above, you heavens,
 Clouds, rain down righteousness;
 Earth, open up, let salvation spring
 up,
 and enable righteousness to spring
 up as well;
 I the LORD have created it.*

It has been necessary to write this study with a significant amount of attention to the theory of how it is interpreted. Nevertheless, it is still remarkable that God's love is shown to His people in this way. The Lord had redeemed Israel at the exodus from Egypt, centuries before, and He would not go back on that. The Old Testament is the essential 'teaching pack' for those who would like to understand the faithfulness of God and the meaning of redemption and salvation. If we read it like this, then we will understand more fully the amazing work of Christ.

Christ comes into the world today and says to the scientist 'I am the one who made you, who set the speed of light and determined the parameters of the universe'. He comes into the world today and says to politicians, 'I am Almighty God, and there is no other, you only have power because I give it to you, so be careful what you do, I am watching.' He comes to peoples of all backgrounds and says 'I love you without condition, see, this is true because throughout history I have been the same; I have given you your name, even though you do not know it, and I love you.' He says to us all; 'I am still in control of your world with all its crime and sin, corporate and individual, and with all its global warming, population growth and genetic engineering. Open up the doors of life, let me in, and let justice and salvation come amongst you!'

If God said this to Cyrus through Isaiah, and the work of some faithful Jews who were intent upon influencing the Persian King to let them go home and rebuild Jerusalem, how much more can God change our world today, if we let Him work through us to bring not our word, but His!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group what you know of the debate about whether Isaiah 40 onwards was written by Isaiah or some other prophet. What is your reaction to what is in this study?
2. Why does God use foreign or worldly powers to do His will, and does He do this today?
3. How can we best use the magnificent passages which glorify God in 45:1-7?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This study is the culmination of a great deal of study on my part, and over many years. For a long time I was content to go along with the conventional wisdom that Isaiah 40 onwards was written by someone other than Isaiah. But the more I read about the argument, the more convinced I became that it was based on a lack of faith in the concept of prophecy and some Biblical connections and assumptions which are, to put it mildly, rather loose. I have therefore taken the risk of nailing my colours to the mast of those who disagree, and believe that Isaiah was written by Isaiah.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Check out your facts by reading another book about Isaiah which will tell you more about what we have been discussing. Think and pray about the issues involved.
- Do you best to discuss this passage with another friend who has not thought about the issues it raises before, and see if you are able to explain it for yourself, and in a way which makes sense to you and your friend!

who wrote Isaiah 40-66. The passage certainly appears to fit this argument; however, I hope to show that it is possible to read it in a different and perfectly reasonable way, given two essential points. Firstly, that we accept the possibility of a prophet being able to write about the future under the power of God's Spirit; and secondly that the general structure of Isaiah's prophecies from chapter 40 onwards is as we have just discovered in recent studies. Briefly, Isaiah anticipated that Babylon would defeat and sack Jerusalem at some point in the future, but he believed this judgement on Israel would not derail God's plan to bring salvation to the whole world. This was because God had decided to do two things; firstly to let the judgement of Israel run its course and maintain His love for His people through that judgement, and secondly to introduce a new 'Servant' (42:1f.) who would fulfil the work of salvation at some other point in the future, beyond the Babylonian exile.

With this background, we do not have to suppose that 'someone else' wrote Isaiah; this ceases to be a determining factor. So within the framework we have uncovered, we must then perceive whether any passage is about the future of God's old servant Israel who He still loves, or whether it is about the new Servant who will do what Israel would not. It is in fact clear that from this point on, chapters 44 to 48 are about Israel, and chapters 49 to 55 are about the New Servant.

With this established, our passage today clearly is a prophetic word which announces the love God will show His people by releasing them from defeat and exile by Babylon. The exile was something Isaiah had foreseen ever since Babylonian emissaries delved into the treasuries of the Temple with Hezekiah's foolish permission (Isaiah 39). In his own lifetime, Isaiah had also observed the exile of the northern people of Israel (ch 12) and concluded that whereas Assyria would not release Israel, Babylon would be punished by God and release Judah (ch 13,14). This only extends what Isaiah spoke about earlier in his life.

Going Deeper

The introduction has only touched briefly on the amazing and heart-warming prophecies within this text, but it is vital to see that they are a revelation of God's love for His people, and not linked to the prophecies about the 'new Servant'. The Lord is indeed Israel's God, as this passage repeatedly says, and so much of what He does for His people is because of His love (44:24, 45:4,5). In going deeper, we will look at the promises God made to His people and how He fulfilled them, to their amazement, through a foreign king named Cyrus. As Isaiah's prophecies have frequently said, the proof of real prophecy is whether it comes true, and the reason why we have these magnificent prophecies in scripture is because by their own criteria and as judged by Israel, they proved to be true prophecy.

Notes on the text and translation

- V25 *'who breaks the pledges of false prophets' In this fascinating verse the Hebrew clearly indicates an untranslatable pun on words which is designed to make the work of mediums, diviners and other 'false prophets' look stupid. A medium or fortune teller would in those days offer a 'pledge' as a sign that what they said would come true. This is the 'pledge' referred to here.*
- V26 *'who supports the word of His own Servant' I have translated this slightly differently from others in order to emphasise that this is what the Lord is saying is about what He will do.*
- V26 *In the latter part of the verse, most translations have 'who says of Jerusalem 'you will be inhabited ...', but in Hebrew it is a straight command to Jerusalem 'be inhabited'. When the Lord speaks, it is done!*
- V28 *'he will finish what I require' This statement of the Lord's about Cyrus says that Cyrus will finish what the Lord wants him to do. Some translations do not indicate*

clearly that God has a purpose for Cyrus, it is a limited one, and he will complete it. This is what the text says, quite literally, and it is important for our interpretation of the text.

45V1 'whose right hand I have taken' It is hard to convey the idea within the sentence here that God is using Cyrus' hands to do His will; Cyrus is like a puppet.

V1 'to strip kings naked' This sounds rather extreme, but the idea is to remove the royal robes of kings thus destroying their authority and power.

V2 'I will ... level city walls' This whole verse is ambiguous and it is very uncertain what it means. The text says literally, 'I will make smooth the adorned ones'. The best estimate is that the 'adornments' referred to are the embattlements on the walls of cities, built to impress and warn off potential invaders; hence my translation.

V3 'I give you treasures of the depths' The Hebrew says 'treasures of the darkness', but the word 'darkness' could well mean the 'dread terror' of being in the darkest reaches of caves or mines. This is what I have assumed in this translation.

The Redeemer will act for His people, in surprising ways! (44:24-28)

In the latter part of chapter 44, the Lord continues to address His people Israel. Remember, the Lord has just spoken to them by castigating their dependency on the manufacture of gods made of wood and precious metals (44:9-20) but insisted that he loves them and calls them back to Himself:

'I formed you, you are my servant, O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me ... return to me, for I have redeemed you!' (44:21,22)

Our passage continues this tender theme in which the Lord continues to remind His people that He has already redeemed them (from Egypt – see 43:3) and He is the one who has created all things (44:24), knows the difference between real prophecy and false prophecy (44:25), and makes things happen in the world at the voice of His command (44:26). It is interesting to see that Isaiah's turn of phrase in verse 25 speaks about turning human wisdom on its head and turning 'knowledge into foolishness'; and this is remarkably similar language to that of Paul who said 'for the wisdom of the world is foolishness with God' (1 Corinthians 3:19). It is hard not to imagine that Paul took his illustration from Isaiah!

The gist of the passage however is that after punishment for their sins, God would save Israel again. Now, those who knew Isaiah and his times knew full well that God did not save the people of the northern Kingdom of Israel, and they never 'came back' from the exile imposed on them by Assyria. Those Israelites who did come back of their own accord were a changed people and became the 'Samaritans'; effectively a separate group of people to the Jews of later years. Isaiah promised the people of Judah that despite their sin and the loss of their purpose to be a light to the nations, the Lord would save them from the coming Babylonian exile. He would do this work not through their own merit or power, but by showing His own command of the world by using a foreign King (Cyrus) who had nothing to do with Israel or Judah and had no reason to be interested in them! Through him, Jerusalem would be habited again, and Judah built up (44:26,28)! But who was this 'Cyrus'? Why should God use Him?

The Lord's amazing speech to Cyrus (45:1-7)

God's use of this person, Cyrus, is impressed upon God's people by the prophecy in 45:1 that the Lord would 'anoint' him for his task. For some, this is an almost scandalous proposition. How could a foreigner be 'anointed' by God? The very word 'anointed' is the one out of which we make the name 'Messiah'! However, until Isaiah turned in his prophecies to speak about the One who would be the true Servant and Messiah, there is

no real connection between prophecies of Christ and this passage here; Cyrus is no 'Messiah', he is simply someone specially used by God.

Now, scholars reckon that the specific mention of Cyrus' name means that the prophet who wrote this must have known the real history of Israel at the end of the Exile, when a Persian king named Cyrus decreed that the people of Jerusalem (in particular) should return (see 2 Chron 36:23 and Ezra 1:1). However, things are not what they may seem. Cyrus was a general name for a number of Persian kings, and scripture itself is less than committed about this than we may think. If you read Ezra and Nehemiah, you will discover that the permission they obtained to return to Jerusalem may not have been the first 'return' from exile, and in Daniel, the Persian king who ruled after the Babylonian empire collapses was one Darius, not Cyrus (Daniel 5:31f.). The truth is that it is hard to construct a watertight 'history' of this time-period in relation to the return from exile, and the fact that 'Cyrus' was a relatively common name for a Persian king (rather like 'George' for an English King) means that Isaiah 45:1 is far less 'specific' than some assume. It is far easier to believe that Isaiah foresaw from the politics of his own day that Persia would be the nation to dislodge the Assyrian / Babylonian empires of his day. The name 'Cyrus' was as good as saying 'the King of Persia', no more.

If we can dispense with the modern fascination with the figure of Cyrus and accept that it was scandalous enough for Isaiah to tell God's people that they would be saved by a foreign king, then we can begin to pay attention to the amazing words that God said to this king (45:1-7). This passage is a speech by God to the Persian king, and it is even possible for us to imagine that in days when the words of prophets held great value and importance, Jewish people could have petitioned the Persian king with this prophecy as part of a campaign to gain their freedom! The court intrigues described in Daniel and Esther indicate that the Jews were nothing except ingenious in their attempts to flatter and manipulate their overlords to get what they wanted!

This passage tells Cyrus that the God who made the world had given him power and might (45:1,2) to win victories and conquer cities; to take him to places he had never been before and give him riches, secret and undisclosed wealth beyond his imagination (45:3); all backed up by the solemn promise of Almighty God! The passage also tells Cyrus that the Jewish people belong to this same God who has given him such personal gain and success; 'besides me, there is no other god, I equip you, though you do not know me.' (45:5). Then the speech to Cyrus ends with an impressive account of God's creative power as one in charge of the whole universe, and one who governs the affairs of people on earth, light and darkness, peace and war (45:6,7). Even the weather was the Lord's (45:8)!

It is possible to read this passage and lift some of its phrases straight into modern worship songs and sing them as if they had nothing else to say except praise God. However, they say more than this. They are God's own testimony to King Cyrus, given to him, but also give to the whole world!

Application

It was important for Israel to understand that they had failed to be a 'light to the nations', and that was why God punished them and then saved them again by foreign powers and kings. Why would they not accept that God's intention was for them to be the ones to affect the world for good? The obstinacy meant that God had to turn the tables on them, and judge and save them by means of foreign kings in order to teach them a lesson. It is my firm belief that God's judgement of His people at that time was purposeful and significant; moreover, if you follow the line of thinking of those who like to separate out Isaiah 40 onwards as the work of a different prophet than Isaiah, then this rich message is quickly lost. It has no power if it is simply an observation of events with a happy ending.