

## Prayer

All praise be to You, Living Lord,  
for you show us in the simple things of life  
the greatest truths and brightest treasures of the universe.

All praise be to You, Living Lord,  
for all things demonstrate Your sustenance and care,  
your beauty, Your truth, You wisdom and your eternal glory.

All praise be to You, Living Lord: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Life at Home

*Thank God for all the wonderful memories we have associated with our homes; great family events, the smell of good food, quiet moments of great joy. Give thanks.*

### On-going prayers

- Pray about the current difficulties in the world economy
- Give thanks for the inventions of scientists and engineers
- Pray for those who suffer because of extremes of weather

## Meditation

You are everything to me, Lord Jesus,  
Do not let me turn away from You  
Through ignorance, weakness or neglect,  
Or through the poverty of my discernment.

Tutor of Life; teach me love, and test my skills;  
Divine Physician; heal my body, and strengthen my bones;  
Holy Comforter; calm my spirit, and grant me peace;  
Knowledgeable Guide; lead me on so I may not turn back  
Great Preacher; challenge me again, and again and again.  
Eternal deliverer; give me hope, and take me to my peace.

Never will I leave Your side,  
Never will I deny Your Cross,  
Never will I forget Your presence,  
Lord Jesus Christ, my Saviour, my all.

## Bible Study - Isaiah 44:9-23

<sup>9</sup> *All who make idols are mad and their precious works are worthless, as they testify themselves; they see nothing and know nothing, so they will be put to shame.* <sup>10</sup> *Who would make a god or cast an idol that gives no profit?* <sup>11</sup> *Look, all associated with it are ashamed; the craftsmen are only human. Let them all come together and* *take their stand; they will be terrified, they will all be put to shame.*

<sup>12</sup> *The ironsmith works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers, and forging it with his strong arm; Even so, if he becomes hungry his strength fails, and if he drinks no water he becomes faint.* <sup>13</sup> *The carpenter marks out a*

line, engraves it with a stylus, he shapes it with a plane, and marks it with a compass; he makes it into a human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. <sup>14</sup> He cuts down cedars; or he takes a cypress or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He may plant a cedar but the rain nourishes it, <sup>15</sup> and then it can be used as fuel. He takes some of it and warms himself, and he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it into an idol and bows down before it! <sup>16</sup> He burns half of it in the fire; over this he roasts meat, eats it and is full. He then warms himself and says, 'Yes, I am warm, I can feel the fire!' <sup>17</sup> But the rest of it he makes into an idol to be his god, and he bows down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, 'Save me, for you are my god!'

<sup>18</sup> They do not know, they do not understand; for He has shut their eyes so they cannot see, and their hearts so they cannot make decisions. <sup>19</sup> No-one stops to think, no-one has the knowledge or discernment to say, 'Half

of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Shall I now make the rest of it into an abomination? Shall I worship a block of wood?' <sup>20</sup> He feeds him astray; he cannot save himself or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?'

<sup>21</sup> Remember these things, Jacob, for you are my servant, Israel; I formed you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you.

<sup>22</sup> I have swept away your rebellions like a cloud, and your sins like mist; turn back to me! for I have redeemed you.

<sup>23</sup> Sing, You heavens, for the LORD has done it; shout, you depths of the earth; break out into singing, you mountains, You forest, and every tree in it! For the LORD has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel.

## Review

Today's passage contains an extraordinary piece of mockery, unparalleled in the Old Testament. Isaiah pours out his wrath on those who make idols and images, the very gods worshipped in the homes of Israelite and Judean people who have abandoned the Lord. Throughout the history of Israel and Judah some have remained faithful to the exclusive worship of the Lord, but too many people had succumbed to pressure to worship the Ba'als and other gods who had been worshipped for centuries in that part of the world, many of them being represented by crafted images. There was a substantial industry of making these images, and this was the target of Isaiah's wrath. The passage then ends with another warm and embracing prophecy from Isaiah which speaks tenderly to the people of Israel. They had received from Isaiah the shocking news that because of their unfaithfulness, God intended to use another servant to do His will, and not them (ch42f.). Yet despite this, the Lord assured them of His continued personal love and redemption, reaching beyond time into eternity (44:21-23).

The unique feature of this passage is that throughout most of the scriptures, prophets have denounced the people of Israel for the sin of abandoning God (apostasy), and most of them have prophesied about it on a grand scale, speaking of the abandonment of Temple worship (Ezekiel) or of confrontation with Kings (Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah). Only rarely do we find a piece of scripture which breaks out of the upper echelons of Israelite or Judean society and speaks about what this apostasy meant to ordinary people who lived in

occasion I have asked a young person whether they believe in Jesus and receive a positive answer, only to hear them go on to say they also believe in Reiki, Stones, Buddha, and Mohammed as well! I have found it harder to witness to those who believe in many gods, than I do to those who are genuine atheists. Moreover, almost every form of religious belief I have come across has its objects of worship, mass produced today in cultish signs and symbols available in stores as jewellery. I have even seen a Christmas tree in church adorned with assorted pagan symbols featuring Egyptian 'ankhs', and few really knew what was on their tree!

The danger is that we assume idolatry to be a thing of the past, but as Isaiah saw, it is something that fills a need within people if they have not known the living God. From our perspective, Satan can use anything and everything to create false idols to tempt the human soul away from God. Together with Isaiah, we must stand firm in our belief that there is only one God, and there is no image or idol of Him in the world at all.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In the light of what we have been saying about idols and images, do you agree with using pictures of Jesus / God in banners within church buildings?
2. Why is it that people invest spiritual qualities in immaterial objects? Why do people worship idols?
3. As Christians today, what are we in danger of making into idols?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*This passage is challenging to me because as I have indicated above, I have struggled to explain the Gospel of Christ to some people because they have been unwilling to give up a variety of beliefs in order to accept Christ. I really did not know this might be a problem before I came across it, and it has surprised me; in fact, I often feel that this is one of the main ways used by Satan to draw young people of a 'spiritual' nature, away from church and from faith. They are like 'open books' willing to receive anything going! Only the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit can overcome such problems.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *When you go to church, have a look around the building and from what you see, try to imagine what a complete outsider may make of who and what we worship, as evidenced in the surroundings of worship.*
- *Go to your church and spend an hour in prayer for the world, and pray for people who you know who believe in other gods.*

## Final Prayer

In faith we place our trust in You, Heavenly Father. We find our rest in Your love, our peace in Your care, our help in Your provision, and our eternity in Your presence. May we always remember the price You have paid to secure our place within Your Heavenly Kingdom, through Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN

the towns and cities. These were the people who worshipped God by attending all the right festivals and performing all the right sacrifices according to the Laws of Moses, but saw no difficulty in having a fertility idol at home to appease at seed time and harvest in order to ensure a good crop! From Isaiah's description of the busy artisans and blacksmiths at work producing idols for the 'home market' in Israel, it seems that there was no shortage of demand for their labour. They certainly needed to eat and drink well in order to keep their strength up (44:12)! We can feel the heat of the furnaces casting idols (44:12), and the carpentry industry obtaining the right wood for good quality products (44:14) and the artistic skills of those who combined cast metal, carved wood and burnished metals to produce high quality products. This passage is the nearest description we have in the Old Testament to an industrial factory!

As we translate this passage, it is by no means certain that this passage (apart from the last three verses) was written in poetic rhythm. As in many cultures, Isaiah may have reserved the higher art of poetry for what honoured God, and used mere prose text for what was less than glorifying. Some translators have attempted to find Hebrew rhythm within this text, but the versions that use poetry here do not assist our understanding of the passage by so doing. Written as prose, the passage is coarse, and we feel the full weight of Isaiah's sarcasm. The most highly intelligent and trained craftsman doing this work is not even able to think, and cannot see the idiocy of finely working one half of a piece of wood into an image to worship, and using the same wood to keep himself warm and cook his own food (44:15,16). Isaiah despairs of the stupidity of this and is reminded of the core theme of prophecy which the Lord gave him at his call; the blindness and lack of understanding of Israel which has become so deep rooted it has fatally deluded all God's people (44:20) so that they cannot see they are living a lie!

It is remarkable that God is able to sustain His eternal promise to Israel (44:21-23). God speaks as if He is in heaven celebrating the truth of His eternal love for His people, but the people of Israel are still wandering in ignorance. He calls out; 'I formed you ... O Israel, I will not forget you!'

### **Going Deeper**

But as we go deeper into the text we will discover that Isaiah says more than this, however. The vision throws open the relationship between the things of God and the things of this world, the material and the spiritual. It also asks a powerful question about whether what people really want is to be allowed not merely to have their own idols and religions, but to shape 'gods' according to their own image. In other words, they reject the idea that God is all-powerful and beyond them, and seek gods they can make, create and shape for themselves, making religion just another human art. These issues touch on important issues, even the way in which Christianity is taught and presented in schools and universities today.

### **Notes on the text and translation**

*The text today is part prose and part poetry. Along with what has been said above, scholars mostly detect whether poetry is present by watching for the rhythmic flow of the text, and the idea parallels that tend to make up pairs of verses in Hebrew poetry. Such features do not exist within verses 9 to 20 here, hence the prose.*

V9 *'All who make idols are mad' The traditional reading is 'all who make idols are nothing', but the word at the end of the sentence is the Hebrew 'tohu' which means 'chaos, foolishness confusion or madness'. The term 'mad', which conveys the idea of stupidity and foolishness, seems to me to summarise what this means here.*

- V9 *'as they testify themselves'* This is an uncertain piece of Hebrew which is translated in very different ways by different versions, but it is generally clear what the sentence means.
- V18 *'He has shut their eyes'* The Hebrew word is peculiar, meaning 'he has smeared over' the eyes of the people. Some translations have 'he has plastered over their eyes!'
- V18 *'and their hearts so they cannot make decisions'* Many translations have 'minds' here, which is quite wrong. The Hebrew specifically mentions the heart which is the seat of will power and decision making, hence my version; to 'decide things'.
- V19 *'no-one stops to think'* The Hebrew is 'no-one returns to his heart' which is a colloquial way of speaking about thinking again, or as I have translated 'stop to think'.

## Further Study

### Idolatry

Isaiah's description of idolatry has some interesting features. Over the years, some have complained that Isaiah does not really understand the nature of idolatry and the importance to people of 'images' which may be used to assist worship. Indeed, there are many parts of the church today which use a variety of images and crafts to 'give glory to God' through sculpture and decoration, even banners in church which depict scenes in the life of Jesus. Isaiah's outright condemnation of any form of idol without even enquiring whether they were images of other gods or even 'the Lord', has led to criticism from some church quarters. However, this is scripture, and Isaiah is doing no more here than graphically describe the outworking of the famous second commandment of the Ten Commandments:

*'You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I am the Lord your God.'* (Exodus 20:4-5)

Neither is Isaiah alone in his criticism of what was happening in ancient times; Greek philosophers saw the idiocy of idolatry and sought higher ideals. In his commentary, Martin Noth quotes the philosopher Horace:

*'Once I used to be an oak tree, a useless stick. A craftsman, however, ... preferred I should be a god ...'* (Martin Noth – Isaiah p40)

Isaiah was not concerned to mock idolatry for the sake of it, however, he was only concerned because he knew (as has always been known) that people seek God in many different ways. The reason Isaiah spoke out because God's people had been shown something of the true nature of God, and yet had chosen to meddle with objects and make idols according to their own interests and cultural fashions. In so doing they looked for God within themselves, and not to the revelation they had received. It was an insult to God, and Isaiah named it as such.

Isaiah began by describing the meaningless nature of idol making and idol worship. I may have been bold in translating the first line, but I do not think it inappropriate; 'All who make idols are mad, and their precious works are worthless.' (44:9). He went on to ridicule the manner in which time and expense was poured on the making of idols; no other goods would be made without people receiving a good financial reward for their work (44:10)! True workmen should be ashamed of the meaninglessness of such endeavours (4:11)!

Firstly, Isaiah emphasised the fact that people make idols, so they can never have greater power than the strength of those who made them. By saying this, Isaiah made an

argument that would have been well understood in his day. Craftsmen who were given the task of making something divine could only make an object which was a product of their own effort, and certainly not divine or beyond the realms of humanity! Isaiah stressed this point by describing the work of the ironsmith who used his strength to hammer, forge and shape (44:12f.). These words themselves mock the process of manufacture because it was well known in his day that gods were supposed to have made the world; so why should these idols need to be 'shaped'? The trouble is that even when people say that idols only symbolise gods, there is no doubt that even today, they quickly slip into believing that the objects have power intrinsic to themselves. Isaiah was intent on exposing the ridiculous manufacturing process in order to expose this lie.

Finally, he mocked the material nature of the idols, talking about the trees from which they were made by name, and implying that the majesty of the living tree was always far greater than anything made from their wood (44:14)! The truly cutting illustration is Isaiah's last. A piece of wood may, at random and at the whim of the worker, either be destroyed in the fire or made into an idol. So who has the choice over the destiny of the wood; the worker! Isaiah's argument is that the idol cannot rise above the human, and any claim to divinity it stupid (44:15-17). Isaiah repeats the final illustration (44:18-20), stating yet again the terrible sin of blindness and delusion which has captivated Israel (44:18). Can the worker not see that he is handling a lie (44:20)?

### **'Remember these things, O Jacob'**

The last three verses use themes from Isaiah's mockery of idolatry to call Israel back to her true and only God. An idol is a piece of wood and cannot 'remember', but the Lord says to Israel (Jacob) that He remembers His people; 'O Israel, I will not forget you' (44:21) and appeals to Jacob to remember the Lord. God made and shaped Israel through the centuries and in the midst of the known history of His people; 'I formed you, you are my servant.' (44:21) Indeed, the Lord had done what no block of wood could do, however gilded, He had 'swept away your rebellions like a flood' and forgiven them, over and over again. He had 'redeemed' His people (44:22).

In a wonderful piece of simple poetry, Isaiah concluded his lament for Israel and his curse on the makers of idols. The song of praise at the end of this prophecy affirms the might and glory of the Lord as Creator. For Isaiah, there was no greater way to glorify God than to praise Him for His great creative and redemptive acts intertwined in their history. Notice how Isaiah brings into his praise a mention of trees, the material used for the creation of idols. Instead of people bowing down to blocks of wood (44:17), the trees and the mountains would bow down to Almighty God! Yes, the Lord had decided to use a new servant to complete His work of salvation for the world, and not use his servant Israel, but Jacob was still redeemed, and still loved (44:23).

## Application

It does not take too much to observe amongst even the most modern of people that many still feel drawn towards giving a far higher value to material goods and objects than is right before God. Some will value their cars or their homes with almost religious reverence, and certainly, people readily speak of things that are important to them as 'sacred'. What can this mean? Is it just a language left over from the time when people did believe in the sacredness of things? Materialism, however, is not the only way in which life today mimics what Isaiah saw happening in Israel, seven hundred years before the time of Christ.

There is a general tendency today to describe any set of religious beliefs as 'valid' for those who believe them, and in this sense, the secular world is not truly secular, but allows anyone and anything to be 'a god'. All the different religions have their 'gods' we might say, and all must be equally treated, like party politicians before an election! On more than one