

Prayer

Glorious Lord, break through the clouds of our darkened, broken world, and shine the light of Your Glory on its difficult and seemingly intractable problems. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, give us the courage to follow where Your light shines; and so, in the name of our Living Lord, may we be part of the solutions rather than the problems. Thank You Lord, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Finance

Pray today for those caught up in the middle of the turmoil in banking following the recent collapse of Lehman Brothers in the US. Pray for stability in our banking systems.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for those who have recently been baptised
- Pray for young people caught up in crime on city streets
- Pray for those stranded abroad by failed tour operators

Meditation

I love You my Lord; this and every day.
My feelings are too complex for simple words;
But I am sad, for there are people in this world
Who say that those who have a faith in God
Are weak, because they need a 'prop'.

I know it's just an insult, designed to offend;
For the truth I've found is I am most secure
In You who makes me fully human;
Thinking, feeling, learning, growing,
Knowing all it means to be most fully human;
For the Christ who made the Universe is just like me.
Are people jealous because I have a friend in Jesus?

Those who say they need no prop for life
Had better brace themselves for things unknown,
When life on earth will reach its timely end.
But as for me, the message of the Word I've found
Says I will meet a friend I know.

Bible Study - Isaiah 45:18-25

¹⁸ For this is what the LORD says,
the creator of the heavens
(He is God! the one who formed the
earth;
and made it and established it;
he did not create it a void!
he made it for living!):
I am the LORD,

and there is no other.
¹⁹ I have not spoken in secret,
From a place of darkness;
I did not say to the offspring of
Jacob,
'Seek me in emptiness.'
I the LORD speak the truth,
I declare what is right.

²⁰ Assemble and come,
draw near together,
you fugitives of the nations!
Those who carry wooden idols
are ignorant!
They keep on praying to a god
who cannot save.

²¹ Declare and present your case;
let them take counsel together!
Who foretold this long ago?
Who spoke about it of old?
Was it not I, the LORD?
There is no other god besides me,
a righteous God and a Saviour;
there is none besides me.

²² Turn to me and be saved,

all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, there is no other.
²³ I have sworn on myself,
righteousness has left my mouth;
a word that will not return:
'Every knee will bow down to me,
every tongue will swear
allegiance.'
²⁴ Each will say of me;
'Only in the Lord
is righteousness and strength!'
all who were enraged against him
will come to him and be ashamed.
²⁵ In the LORD all the descendants of
Israel
will have justice and praise.

And I know I am set free!

Alleluia!

Review

Some of the recent prophecies of Isaiah we have studied have been rather technical. They have required a considerable amount of care to extract a message capable of being reasonably well understood! It is impossible to avoid complexities when dealing with an ancient language of course, but sometimes the clues are easier to follow than others, as is so in this passage today. At first sight, the reading may seem to continue the same themes we are used to finding in Isaiah about God's creative and saving power, but the key to how it all fits together in this passage is relatively simple. This is a summary of God's plan of salvation which declares what God will do, but not how; and it speaks of Israel as being at the heart of God's plan, but not the means of it coming about. This prophecy paints a picture of God's power, revelation, salvation and glory in which Israel is present, but which is also blessed by the presence of peoples of other nations!

This, of course, fits with the general theme developing in Isaiah in which the Lord has announced a Servant who will do His will because Israel will not, and yet the Lord will bring Israel through her own trials and judgement to share in the Lord's salvation. It was a message that had grown in Isaiah through a lifetime's prophecies, and which he wrote down in uncompromising fashion in the prophecies we now have as Isaiah 40-66. It is quite understandable that when he first penned this, his message was scandalous to the people of Judah and Jerusalem who heard it, and yet they were kept because of Isaiah's high reputation. Only when his prophecies about Israel's release from captivity in Babylon (see 45:1f.) came true did God's people realise their worth.

The Creative power of God is celebrated yet again in verses 18 and 19, and the powerful words which have echoed right through this part of Isaiah appear several times; 'I am the Lord, there is none other' (45:18,21[x2],22). This is Isaiah's clarion call to all people to recognise that there can only be one God, and the very idea that there are others is crazy! The text is fascinating because Isaiah begins with the usual prophetic announcement 'this is what the Lord says ...' but then appears to add his own comment. He emphasises that the God who made the Universe is the same one who is active in the world now, speaking out what is true and what is right (45:19); by which Isaiah means His message of salvation.

Verses 20 and 21 tell us about the assembly of people who come to hear God's revelation; people arrive from various countries and are invited to examine the evidence. Who is the only God who has correctly foretold history, says the prophecy; 'who foretold this long ago?

which explains the sweep of God's vision for His world. Some suggest that a preacher should not try and preach the whole Gospel in one sermon, but this might suggest otherwise! (Personally, I reckon that unless I can hear the whole Gospel within a Sunday morning sermon, upon whatever text, then it is not a proper sermon).

The sweeping majesty in the vision of God's creation, revelation, salvation and glory here in this passage challenges us to think bigger about God. Israel's national identity did not confine God, and neither do our Christian denominations, structures or churches, whatever their place in the Kingdom of God. We are called to see a Gospel which goes to the ends of the earth (45:19,22), is not secret or to be kept private (45:19,21,23) but broadcast to all; it challenges the world's presumptions (45:18,20, 24), and it opens the door to Jews and Gentiles worshipping together in the presence of God and enjoying their salvation together (45:25). This is no small vision.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss whether it is possible or reasonable to try and preach the whole Gospel in one sermon, perhaps along the lines of this prophecy.
2. What will it take for the nations of the world to sit up and take notice of the Gospel of God and His love for the world He has created?
3. How may we reach out to Jewish people and say that we believe we have a future together with God? Is this desirable or helpful?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I was once asked by the head of a post-graduate theology school to respond to the criticism that there was no 'missiology' in the Old Testament. I should have pointed him to this passage, though if he was one who believed that these texts from Isaiah were limited to the Exile experience, then he may not have seen the wider connections. It seems incomprehensible to me that Christians might imagine that God was not always interested in loving all His people, even though He chose to work through His own people.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *If you are a preacher, write a sermon based upon this passage and its themes. If you are not a preacher, try the same exercise and ask someone else to look at your work.*
- *Fast and pray for the Jewish people and ask the Lord to bring some measure of peace again between Christians and Jews, as a sign that God's love is for all and His will may be done.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, Holy Father;
I repent of what is evil,
.....
I confess my sins,
.....
I seek Your forgiveness,
.....
I ask for Your healing,
.....

Was it not I, the Lord?' (45:21), and the characteristics of the one and only God are set out as evidence; 'a righteous God and a Saviour ... there is none besides me!'

Dramatically, the prophecy then announces the great offer of God to save people; turning back the clock on the Fall which had been a barrier between God and men and women, for thousands of years; 'turn to me and be saved!' (45:22). We hear the cry of salvation many times in the Psalms (Psalm 80:2, 106:47 etc.) but in a psalm, people cry out to God for salvation and the Lord grants it. Here in Isaiah, it is the Lord who calls people to come and receive what is freely on offer! The word of salvation has gone out of the Lord's mouth and He does not intend that it should return (45:23)!

Finally, praise and glory is given to God by those who were previously 'enraged against Him' (45:24), that is, the Gentiles. But this praise and glory is given by 'all the descendants of Israel' together; a scandal to the people of Israel and a surprise to the Gentiles!

Going Deeper

This prophecy does not tell us how God will go about achieving this salvation, but we already know two things, firstly that Isaiah has already announced God's intention to use a Servant (42:1f.) and his many other prophecies point to a Messiah as the source of that salvation. In this passage, it is sufficient for us to rejoice in the revelation of the plan. Despite Israel's failure and inability to be a witness, nothing can thwart God's plan. He will reveal Himself and He will bring salvation. The details show us the amazing scope of this revelation and salvation!

Notes on the text and translation

- V18 *The problem with this verse is the 'voice' in which it is said. It begins as an announcement of the Lord, but then after the second line it proceeds like a description, as if the prophet is speaking. For this reason, I have put the next four lines in parenthesis. No such grammatical marks exist in Hebrew, but the sense of the text indicates that this is appropriate in English.*
- V19 *'seek me in emptiness' Here in verse 19 as well as where it says 'create it a void', the word for both 'emptiness' and 'void' is the Hebrew 'tohu' which occurs in Genesis 1:2 as the empty chaos which existed before the God created the world. 'Tohu' stands for where God has not yet been at work.*
- V20 *'those who carry wooden idols are ignorant' The Hebrew says 'they are not knowing, they who carry ...' but it makes more sense in English to swap round the two phrases.*
- V21 *'who foretold this' The Hebrew is 'who made this heard about ...' which in this context really means 'who prophesied this?' However, it reads best and closer to the Hebrew to say 'who foretold this'*
- V23 *'righteousness has left my mouth' Most translations have 'righteousness has gone out of my mouth' because the Hebrew verb is an emphatic form of 'go out'. I have used the more common English 'left my mouth', and the notion of 'leaving' compliments the idea of a word not 'returning'.*
- V24 *The grammar of the beginning of this verse is difficult, and you will find the other Bible versions very different. However, this translation 'each will say of me ...' enables the text of the passage to flow properly from one verse to the next.*

Creation (45:18,19)

Isaiah's commentary on God's proclamation within verse 18 is a wonderful almost personal touch within the prophecy. The grammar of the verse (see notes above) reveals the

comment, which emphasises two things, firstly that the creation of God is purposeful. God did not just make a structure, he 'established' His work, and this word is paralleled with the word 'living' in the next line, making it obvious that God always had in his mind to create the world as a place where people, made in His image, could enjoy the world in which they had been placed and the opportunities it held; 'he made it for living!' (45:18). If presented well, this is a message worthy of being proclaimed today, at a time when people are becoming cynical about the world in which we live and uncertain about its future. God has a purpose for everything, and the task of godly people is to find this and to work with it for the benefit of all who live on the planet. There is no reason for Christians to be ashamed of this message or cautious about declaring God's creative purposes today.

In verse 29, Isaiah's prophecy continues this theme, but in response to a different problem. In Isaiah's day, God's people had become content to believe that their faith and their relationship with God was exclusive and no business of any other nation, just like Christians today who fail to broadcast God's message to the world because they are too cautious! The message from the Lord is categorical; 'I have not spoken in secret, from a place of darkness' (45:19). Nowhere had the Lord made a covenant with Abraham that told them to keep their God a secret or live in a vacuum, isolated from the rest of humanity either physically or spiritually. In a cutting turn of phrase; 'I did not say ... seek me in emptiness' Isaiah said that the Lord never intended Israel to live as if the rest of the world had not been made. The very fact of God's creation unites all people, as it has always done!

Revelation (45:20,21)

Verse 20 is an amazing vision of people who run away from the nations and their ignorant idolatry to find the true God who has made the world. The Lord has summoned them; this is His will, and they are called 'survivors' of the nations, because the Gentile nations continue to be pagan nations which worship their gods of wood. The line 'those who carry wooden idols are ignorant' is a reference to the pagan processions common in ancient times, in which pagan god's (or wooden carved statues of them) were carried around in procession for public display.

There are two reasons why people might flee from such nations to the God of Israel. Firstly because they perceive that these idols cannot have made the world and the God of Israel acts, behaves and reveals Himself as One who has. Secondly, they perceive that the wooden gods their compatriots worship cannot save them or do anything for the same reasons Isaiah explained earlier; they are made by people and so cannot be gods (44:9-20)! All this comes by way of revelation, of course, because the nature of God is to reveal Himself in the world as He sees fit and to whom He wishes.

The greatest test of revelation however is prophecy, and in verse 21, the Lord lays down the challenge. Has anyone else ever foretold the future of the world? This challenge, of course, would be fruitless and mere words unless Isaiah had written this centuries before Cyrus released the captives (45:1f.) and the Jewish people began to discover that the scrolls of Isaiah were true prophecy and could be trusted.

Salvation (45:22,23)

The end of verse 21 moves us into the subject of salvation, as the Lord declares His justice and His salvation. He then calls directly to everyone; 'turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!' The Hebrew phrase here speaks about the nations which spread to the very edges of the known world, and the meaning of the pronouncement is obvious. Salvation is God's singular and sole purpose for all people! It is hardly possible to find a more outright and clear statement of God's love for all humanity in the Old Testament, outside the first

few chapters of Genesis. Furthermore, the prophecy is added to by the Lord's sworn testimony on His own self (45:23) that this is His desire.

Then in the same verse (23), we read two powerful phrases both of which have an important place in Christian heritage. Firstly, 'righteousness has left my mouth, a word that will not return'. The idea that the word leaves the mouth of God on a mission to convince the Gentiles of the saving power of God is repeated by Isaiah later in his prophecies;

'so shall my word be that goes out of my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it will accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.' (55:11)

Both these passages of Isaiah have been taken up by Christianity to describe the work of the Holy Spirit in guiding God's people on their mission to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God, and it is easy to see why the church has warmed to these prophecies. This is not just one prophecy of Isaiah, but a theme which speaks of God's driving purpose to achieve salvation.

Secondly, the magnificent phrase 'every knee will bow down to me, every tongue will swear allegiance' (45:23) is taken up in the great Christian hymn recorded in Philippians 2:6-11:

'so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' (Phil 2:10,11)

This, of course, is the ultimate end of our salvation, which is the praise and worship of God. Some scholars say that Paul took this section of his letter from a known Christian hymn of the day, but there is no doubt that this, one of the greatest expressions of faith and salvation in the New Testament is based heavily on Isaiah 45.

Glory (45:24,25)

Isaiah's prophecy concludes with a picture of the glory of God shared, perhaps uneasily between Gentiles and Israelites. The phrase 'in the Lord' introduces firstly the realisation amongst Gentiles that their previous antipathy towards the God of Israel has been ill-founded and they are wrong; so they are 'ashamed' (45:24). Secondly, it introduces the Israelite people back into the saving purposes of God with the slightly ambiguous phrase 'all the descendants of Israel' who will have 'justice and praise'. The glory of God is therefore shared between the Gentiles who respond to God's Word and the descendants of Israel, and is summarised by the phrase 'justice and praise'. Justice because a just relationship has been established between God and people, and 'praise' because this relationship brings God praise not just from His own people, but from the people of the world who have responded to Him.

The end result of the work of God is therefore a just settlement of the division between God and humanity which has existed since the Fall, and a people who praise God because they know He is their Maker, whether Jew or Gentile.

Application

If you were to start with the theory that this prophecy is all about the Jews returning from Babylon to Jerusalem, then the pattern of these prophecies is not so much lost, but rendered infinitely less significant and full of mystery which cannot be explained. As it is, the frank explanation of the theory of God's plan to save the world (without telling them at this stage how) is remarkable. Furthermore, the famous passages in verse 23 are clearly evidence of how people of earlier times understood the prophecy just as we have interpreted it here; as a four point sermon on creation, revelation, salvation and the glory of God. With some care and insight, this passage is worth using as a basis for a sermon