

Prayer

We rejoice, Lord God, at the incredible nature of the life You have given us. May we never be so dull as to cease to wonder at the gift of life, or be so heartless as to fail to give thanks for the amazing things all around us, or be so selfish as not to notice the love with which we are blessed. Lord God, open our hearts, our minds and our feelings to the world in which You have set us: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Finance

Pray today for the many accredited accountants and other financial professionals who guide the great institutions of our countries. Pray for their wisdom and humility

On-going prayers

- *Pray for young people caught up in crime on city streets*
- *Pray for those stranded abroad by failed tour operators*
- *Give thanks for the blessing of Christian fellowship*

Meditation

Lord Jesus Christ, we call on You to come and save us;

Save us from the troubles which afflict us from insides ourselves,
And give us the grace to accept our personal faults and deal with them.

Save us from the troubles which come to us by the enemy's evil works,
And give us the grace to identify where Satan is at work and oppose Him.

Save us from the sins which we secretly harbour and covertly enjoy,
And give us the grace to accept that You have made us for better things.

Save us from the sins in which we find ourselves trapped, unwittingly,
And give us the grace to trust that You will provide us a way out of our trials.

Save us from the temptations to which we easily give in because of weakness,
And give us the grace to ask You for help to deal with our spiritual flaws.

Save us from the temptations which strike us when we least expect them,
And give us the grace to submit to Your help whatever the cost.

Lord Jesus Christ, come and save us, so we may be fulfilled in You.

Bible Study - Genesis 45:9-17

- ⁹ *Woe to you who resists your Maker,
A pot amongst other earthen pots!
Does the clay say to the potter,
'What are you making?'
or does your work say
'He has no hands'!*
- ¹⁰ *Woe to anyone who says to a father,
'What are you fathering?'
or to a woman,*
- 'What are you giving birth to?'*
- ¹¹ *Thus says the LORD,
the Holy One of Israel,
and Maker of things yet to come:
Will you question me about my
children,
or instruct me about the work of
my hands?*
- ¹² *I made the earth myself,*

<p><i>and created humanity on it; I stretched out the heavens with my own hands, and I commanded all their hosts.</i></p> <p>¹³ <i>I have justly aroused him myself, and I make all his paths straight; he will build my city and send out my exiles, neither for a price or for a bribe, says the LORD of hosts.</i></p> <p>¹⁴ <i>Thus says the LORD: Egypt's wealth, Ethiopia's profit, and the tall Sabeans, They will become yours, they will follow you; they will come over in chains and bow down to you.</i></p>	<p><i>They will plead with you, saying, 'God is only with you; there is no other; there is no other God!'</i></p> <p>¹⁵ <i>You are truly a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, Saviour!</i></p> <p>¹⁶ <i>They are all ashamed and humiliated; Embarrassed, they will walk together, Those makers of idols.</i></p> <p>¹⁷ <i>But Israel is safe in the LORD with eternal salvation; you are not ashamed or humiliated for all eternity!</i></p>
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Review

This central section of Isaiah's great prophecies is almost incomprehensible unless we have a grasp of who is saying what to whom. When Isaiah spoke these prophecies, each one is addressed to different people for different reasons, and the more we look at what is said, the more this becomes clear. In this passage, verses 9 to 13 are God's response to Israel's complaints about his plan for them, as recently revealed through Isaiah's prophecies; verses 14 to 17 are a commentary on what will happen when the Lord's will is done and Gentiles come to understand that Israel's God is unique and the only God of all creation! There are some wonderful passages evoking well known Christian themes; the potter and the clay (45:9), God's Creation (45:12), and God's salvation (45:15-17). However we will find that they make most sense when we follow through our understanding of God's eternal plan as revealed by Isaiah, and in particular the place of a foreign king (Cyrus – 45:1) within this plan.

Isaiah's prophecies have made clear that God has a plan for His people, even though He no longer intended to use them for the salvation of the world (see previous studies). Isaiah's prophecies continued by explaining that the long predicted collapse of Jerusalem and defeat by Babylon would end when God used a foreign king to liberate His people (45:1f.). We can read this and simply say, 'O yes, that's what happened', because history shows that it did. People who heard such words before they happened however were more likely to say; 'that's impossible because God doesn't work like that, He is Israel's God, and not the God of other nations!' So Isaiah's reply to this was to say 'does the clay say to the potter, "what are you making?"' (45:9) and go on to question whether it right to ask a father or mother about the nature of the child they are bearing – in those days they did not know whether a child would be a boy or a girl, it was one of those things people just did not know. The point of these prophecies was to reply strongly to God's people that they had no right to question God about what He had said He was going to do! God was the Creator of the world (45:12) and could do what He wanted with any part of His creation, including the one He aroused to do His will (45:13 – by which Isaiah means King Cyrus!). These are strong words of rebuke from God to His people!

(Incidentally, for the benefit of those who read yesterday's study, this passage is strong evidence that these prophecies were given long before Cyrus or the events of the Exile

moment, scientists are working to try and discover secrets of the universe which will revolutionise science and our understanding of the nature of the world in which we live.

It is my opinion that what is at stake here are not the specifics of science or enquiry, but an attitude of heart towards God. If the human heart has recognised the Lord and works with God, then all manner of discussion including questioning can take place. Many a man or woman of God, whether scientist, artist, parent or theologian has prayed and talked to the Lord asking all manner of questions about His plans both for them and the world. If, however, people have rejected God's authority and ask aggressively about the right of God to save His people, love them or judge human morality, then their position of rebellion means that their questions about God are as insulting as those asked in this passage of prophecies.

There is always a danger that even Christians will fall into the same trap as the Jews and fall into the place of rebellion where their relationship with the Almighty is compromised. The main difference between us and the Jews is that whilst they have a guarantee of God's love come what may, our pathway to eternity via God's love is one of exclusive faith on our part, and outside this, the Bible gives us no route to peace with God.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Which of the illustrations in this prophecy is most helpful for us today?
2. If God has given a guarantee of redemption to the Jews, what is the difference between their redemption and the redemption of Gentiles?
3. How can the church today best make the universal message of God's love available to people of other nations today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Isaiah's prophecies appear to me to be so deep that they are at times almost unfathomable! In preparing for writing this study, I have read a number of books, and find as I have done many times before, that there is little agreement between authors about the structure of Isaiah's prophecies, let alone the meaning of each part of the work. It is therefore quite scary placing one's thoughts down on the computer and publishing them!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Recall from your memory any references you may heard in sermons or in songs of the use of the image of the 'potter'. Does this passage bear out what was used or said, or not?*
- *What questions do you have which you would like to ask God? Write down a list, and then after praying prayers of confession, ask the Lord, and seek His will and His ways.*

Final Prayer

Bless me, Lord Jesus. Bless my work, my relaxation, my family, my home and all that I hold dear. Bless me also by making me stop to redirect my life according to Your will; and give me the courage to respond to all you need of me. Bless me, and make my day complete, Lord Jesus; AMEN

were known about. If they had been written later as so many scholars suggest, then it is frankly difficult to find a strong theoretical background for these prophecies that makes sense.)

The Lord then speaks to His people to explain that if they trust Him to do what He thinks is right, then they will find that He still loves them (45:17) and their eternal salvation is assured. Moreover, people with the greatest prestige, material influence and power will come knocking at their door to claim their God, the Lord Himself, as their God (45:14); and the people who made idols will find themselves with nowhere to hide from their humiliation when the true God appears (45:16)! Truly, the Lord is a God who 'hides Himself' (45:15)!

We can now see how the coming of Christ and the preaching of the Gospel to all the nations has fulfilled this prophecy, but just for a moment, imagine how heretical such a prophecy must have seemed to the Judean people some in Isaiah's day! It was unthinkable that God should work in such a way! Some have suggested that the scandalous nature of these latter prophecies of Isaiah explains why they were hidden away for many years until the events they prophesied came true!

Going Deeper

We will go on now to look at the two halves of the passage in further detail. Each of the two introductory prophecies (verses 9 and 10) are fascinating, and the whole section (45:9-13) is a strong vindication by God of His executive authority to act in the world of His making. The later prophecies (45:14-17) are also graphic in detail and they provide the maximum possible assurance for the people of Israel, given that God has taken from them their role to bring salvation to the world. He will save them nevertheless.

Notes on the text and translation

- V9 *'Woe to you who resists your Maker' Most translations have 'strives with your Maker', but it makes much more sense to take the essential meaning of the Hebrew word which is 'work against' and translate 'resist'.*
- V9 *'or does your work say "He has no hands!"' Some Bibles have 'your work has no handles!' So why the difference? Literally, the Hebrew text refers to the work having 'no hands', and this may not make sense to us, but if we recognise that this was a complaint by Israel against God (see study), then it is simply an ancient form of complaint that God has no power, because 'hands' means 'power'.*
- V10 *'what are you fathering' This is a rather unpleasant saying. Most translations have 'what are you begetting', but we do not use any expression like this today, whereas we might just understand that 'what are you fathering' is a rather crude insult to a man and his wife.*
- V11 *'... and Maker of things yet to come' Many translations miss out the 'things yet to come' part of this sentence, or try to add it to the next part of the sentence, making it unnecessarily complex and grammatically incorrect. It is in order with the theme of Isaiah here for the prophet to speak about God as Maker of things yet to come, indeed, the future is exactly what God is arguing with Israel about.*
- V12 *'I commanded all their hosts' Most translations have this, but it is obvious that in this setting, the word 'hosts' means the stars of heaven and the sun and the moon, not the armies of God!*
- V13 *'I have justly aroused him myself' This is God saying that He has been right and just to arouse Cyrus - see 45:1f Some versions of the Bible therefore mention Cyrus at this point, but his name does not actually appear in the text.*

V14 *'Ethiopia's profit'* This means Ethiopia's benefit from trade. It seems that although Egypt had many goods to sell, it was the Ethiopians who did the trading!

God's rebuke 1 – the potter and the expectant parents

The fascinating thing about Isaiah's prophecy of the potter and the clay is that it is remarkably similar to Jeremiah's prophecy, as found in Jeremiah 18 and 19. Jeremiah firstly goes down to a potters house at the Lord's command, and he saw a potter working and reworking clay until he made a pot which was according to his intention (Jer 18:1f.). This, of course, is the rather affectionate way in which Christians today remember the image of the clay and the potter from the Old Testament. However, if you read both Isaiah and Jeremiah, there is no homely and comforting message in this picture. Jeremiah saw that the reshaping of the pot was a sign of God's authority to make or destroy peoples and nations, and he ended up taking a finished pot (symbolising Judah) and smashing it beyond repair in the Valley of Hinnom in a dramatic prophetic gesture (Jer 19:1-10) designed to say that Judah was damaged beyond repair! It was definitely not a message about growth as Christians tend to assume today!

Likewise, here in this passage, the pot is Israel, which has no right to question God's authority, and the prophecy directly confronts those who say about Israel 'why should God do this to us?' as if people could expect to be able to play inquisitor to their God! The tone of mockery is obvious; can an object of work say that the one who has made it is without ability or creative power? This is what is meant by the rather cryptic comment 'or does Your work say "he has no hands"'! (45:9 see notes above). It is meaningless for us, the people God has made, to question the wisdom of the Creator's actions; and this is the message of the story of the potter in both Isaiah and Jeremiah; it does not describe how God shapes a human soul! God undoubtedly does this, but illustrations such as Paul's 'running the race' (1 Cor 9:24 etc.) or 'training the mind' (Rom 12:1f.) illustrate His work, not the description of the potter.

The same understanding lies behind the second illustration in verse 10. How do mere people know what happens in the womb? Moreover, it is ridiculous to ask a man about 'what' his wife will bear, or ask a woman what kind of child is in her womb! In some Bible versions, the different translations of this verse are obtuse; but it is best to interpret this as someone enquiring about the sex of a child before it is born. Such questions about what God alone can know do not help anyone, least of all those who ask! Today, of course, we can use modern technology to answer this particular question, but the principle of the question is obvious to us. The illustration also enigmatically paints a picture of God about to do a work through the birth of a child, and that in itself points towards the coming of 'Immanuel', as Isaiah prophesied in his youth (7:14). Verse 11 summarises the point right at the heart of this prophecy; Israel has forfeited the right to enquire of God about His future plans for the rest of the world; 'will you question me about my children, or instruct me about the work of my hands?'

God's rebuke 2 – creation and redemption

Verses 12 and 13 pick up this theme in a twofold way. The authority of God is an authority of both creation and also control of history. This is something to which we should give attention because we too often think of our Creator God as being responsible for creation in the past tense, but not very often in the present and the future tense! In the world God has created, God is creating all the time, making things happen (much of which we remain unawares) in order to complete His will.

In this prophecy, verse 12 is a standard Hebrew statement of God's creative power in making the earth with people and all the heavens, but verse 13 is more pointed. As Lord of both Creation and History, which are one and the same to Him, God alone is responsible

for using a foreign King to liberate His people, in other words, He has the authority to do this, whether His people like it or not. If you read through the whole of chapter 45, you will quickly notice that the one who is 'raised up' in verse 13 is the Persian King 'Cyrus' who was mentioned earlier in the prophecy (45:1). The Lord answers his earthly critics by saying that he has received no payment to do this, no 'bribe'. He has done it of His own free will.

God's rewards for Himself and His people

The incredible vision within verse 14 seems to stand on its own. Here, the ancient world's parade of the wealthy and influential all comes knocking at Israel's door! Egyptian wealth, and Ethiopian and Sabean trade are all represented within the text, and all are well attested sources of great wealth. The only name with which we are unfamiliar are the Sabeans, and archaeology has established that they were a people who lived in the region of the Yemen and who were ideally placed to control trade across the region even from Indian coastal regions to Africa, Ethiopia and Egypt. From Israel's point of view, such wealth and glamorous people were those who normally passed through their land, using the trade routes through the Jordan Valley or along the Sea to Mesopotamia. All these nations would stop and, for once, pay attention to the land through which they were passing, and become conscious of the greatness of the God of Israel (45:14)!

How could this be? From the point of view of those who heard this prophecy, the only way such a thing could happen was if God restored a kingdom like that of David and Solomon, the only Kings who in past generations had received this kind of praise and eulogy on God's behalf because of the magnificence of their Kingdoms. However, they could not see how this could possibly come about in the current circumstances; their kingdom was poor, highly dependent upon other nations and on the verge of collapse, as real history shows.

It was, of course God's intention to make Israel a 'light to the nations' (42:6, 49:6), but since they refused to comply with what the Lord required of them, this could only happen by means of some new revelation. This is what is meant in verse 15, which says 'you are truly a God who hides Himself, O God of Israel, Saviour!' These words follow on from verse 14, and express the surprise at the Gentile nations that they should know God. Moreover, they acknowledge that the God who they have seen is 'God of Israel' and 'Saviour!' Many would suggest that this is a Messianic prophecy, and it does not say much about who the Messiah is or what He does, but tells us the effects of His ministry!

When God finally acts for the redemption of the world, then all the makers of idols will be 'embarrassed' (45:16) at how wrong they have been, but Israel will be able to rejoice that they are already safe in the Lord and already have their 'eternal salvation'. This text is the source of Paul's belief, expressed in Romans 11, that despite their rejection and failure, God's people will enjoy God's salvation at the end of time.

Application

We might be tempted to ask a number of questions because of this text. It is obvious that Israel, despite her failure and her rejection of God's purposes for her, will be saved (45:17), and we will receive the benefits of God's power to save by means of the new revelation through Jesus, the Messiah. However, in this passage, the prophet Isaiah tells us that no one is in a position to question God about His work (45:9,10,11), and there is something inside us that wants to enquire about God and ask 'why'. It is as if this is a deep human need; the Jews questioned their God and rejected His power to act; but can we question God and remain faithful? Can a scientist test and delve into the secrets of the universe without affronting the authority of God at some point? Some would say that when scientists create clones they have 'crossed the line' of presuming on God's authority, and at this very