

## Prayer

Lord Jesus, Your glorious gift of liberty and peace is a far greater treasure than I deserve. In appreciation; let my words praise You, let my work be a testament to You, let my love be a demonstration of Your passion, and let my life be lived for You in every possible way. So, may my whole life be given back to You in praise and glory, Lord, for ever more: AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Finance

*Pray for your own family finances, and ask the Lord to help you deal properly with the any calls on your resources. If you have problems, seek advice from the Lord and others.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray against corruption in high places, in politicians and leaders*
- *Give thanks for those who have recently been baptised*
- *Pray for young people caught up in crime on city streets*

## Meditation

*(speaking to yourself about priorities)*

Keep pressing on, my soul, the Lord is in control;  
And when things seem impossible, He is so very close

When Satan twists your words and simmering trouble flares,  
Fall back on the Word, and make it your sure defence.

When others take more time from you than you can give,  
Put Christ and family first, your primary foundations.

When the church of God is slow, and fails to act in time,  
Remember the church is us who rely upon His Spirit.

When Jesus asks far more of you than you've ever done before,  
Fear none, act in faith, and trust Him from your heart.

When the glory of earthly success fills your life and lifts your soul,  
Give all of it back to God; no tithe will do, give it all.

Keep pressing on, my soul, the future will always come;  
For everything He does for us comes from His heart of love.

## Bible Study - Isaiah 46:1-13

<sup>1</sup> *Bel stumbles, Nebo wobbles,  
their idols are borne on beasts and  
cattle;  
loaded and transported on weary  
animals.*

<sup>2</sup> *They lurch and stagger together;  
they are unable to escape the  
burden,  
and they go into captivity.*

<sup>3</sup> *Listen to me, O house of Jacob,  
all who remain of the house of  
Israel,  
you who have been borne by me  
from birth,*

*carried from the womb;  
<sup>4</sup> even to your old age I am He,  
even when you turn gray I will  
carry you.*

*I have made and I will bear;  
I will carry and I will save.*

<sup>5</sup> *To whom will you liken me or count  
as my equal,  
and compare me as if we were  
alike?*

<sup>6</sup> *Those who lavish gold from a purse,  
and weigh out silver on the scales  
they hire a goldsmith to make them  
a god;  
then they bow down, and even  
worship!*

<sup>7</sup> *They lift it to their shoulders, they  
carry it,  
they fix it on a pedestal, and it  
stands there;  
it cannot move from its place.  
Even if they cry out to it, it cannot  
answer  
or save anyone from trouble.*

<sup>8</sup> *Remember this and be embarrassed!  
bring it to mind, you rebels,*

<sup>9</sup> *remember things of former times;  
for I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God, with no one like me,  
<sup>10</sup> announcing the end at the beginning  
and from ancient times what is not  
yet done,  
saying, 'My plan will stand,  
and I will do what I want.'*

<sup>11</sup> *I summon a bird of prey from the  
east,  
the man from a far country to do  
my will.  
I have spoken, and I will make it  
happen;  
I have planned, and I will do it.*

<sup>12</sup> *Listen to me, you stubborn of heart,  
you who are far from vindication:*

<sup>13</sup> *I bring my righteousness near, it is  
not far,  
and my salvation will not delay;  
I will put salvation in Zion,  
for Israel, my glory.*

## Review

This chapter stands almost by itself at the centre of the section of Isaiah we are studying, in which the Lord speaks to Israel to explain His eternal plan of salvation. As we have already discovered in these prophecies, Israel has failed in her task but God still dearly loves her, and this chapter demonstrates this love in a powerful way. Essentially it is a hymn in which the Lord compares Himself to human ideas about gods, and then reveals Himself as one who is faithful and consistent despite all the problems of His relationship with Israel. Today, we can read this and delight in what it tells us about both God Himself and also the inadequacy of human replacements for God. We should also listen carefully to the Lord's words to Israel, which warn us about the consequences of stubbornness and rebellion in the face of the work of God in our midst.

The five fold split in the poem is clear, and the first two verses (46:1,2) mock the parades of gods organised by people in their towns and cities. Even to this day, towns and villages across the world have celebratory days with floats and banners, which are remnants of times past when people paraded their gods. In the last two thousand years, Christian towns and villages have often paraded images of patron saints, conscious of the Biblical ban on idols, but the practice goes back deep into history. What is clear beyond doubt is that in this text, pagan parades are mocked; God does not need such a demonstration. The evidence of God's existence is not to be found in the traditions of people who like to have parades, but in the realities of our very existence, our conception and birth, as the Lord argues to His people in the second set of verses (46:3,4)

The central part of the poem (46:5-7) is a challenge by the Lord to anyone to come up with any kind of notion or idea of a god that is equal to Him. Isaiah continues to mock the way in which money is used in the manufacture of the best gods, implying that all human concepts are related to the power and influence of the people who come up with the ideas,

*text, and if necessary talk to your friend about what the text means, and ask whether it is of help.*

## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, touch our lives with Your love and compassion, and as we receive from You, may we be empowered to be Your messengers of peace, love and compassion for others. May we always be willing to share the blessings we have received from You: AMEN

may have made a choice not to comply with God's will, but in Christ, there is no reason why we should not be right at the heart of God's effective plan of salvation now.

## Application

A passage of prophecy such as this may well require a great deal of explanation to anyone who reads it simply by opening God's Word and starting at verse one of this chapter. Our explanation today has glossed over large parts of the text which are similar to others close by in this part of Isaiah, and without studying such works consecutively, it is easy to get completely lost. However, if we can read this passage in context, the helpful comments and additions to the overall picture it contains are of great help. We are encouraged to understand the nature of our God who makes, bears, carries and saves (46:4), and who speaks, makes things happen, plans and does things (46:11), and we are told in no uncertain terms that our God will save us by restoring a right relationship between us and Himself. This was the God who was revealed to the people of Israel, and the same God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

It is easy to get our picture of God wrong. Unfortunately, many people hear a little about God from here or there, or from this sermon or that, and build up a picture based on their own experience and the touch of God on their life which brought them to faith. All of these are starting points for our understanding of the nature of God. We all need to read the Bible and get to grips with passages such as this which help us see our own experience in a wider context, ultimately the entire span of the history of the world. If we can become comfortable with our Lord as the God of all history who is determined to save at all costs and will achieve His will for us and for all people, then our own faith will be enlightened by a true Biblical faith and an understanding of God the Father which befits the God who made the Universe. Someone once wrote a book 'Your God is too Small'; this chapter of Isaiah could be entitled, 'Your God can never be too Big!'

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways does Isaiah's description of the gods of the nations remind you of any pagan beliefs and practices today?
2. Why is it that people pour vast amounts of money into alternative religious beliefs, yet within many churches, people struggle to pay for their leaders?
3. To what extent does this passage tell us anything about God's plan of salvation which we do not know from elsewhere in Isaiah?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*This chapter of Isaiah is a whole and is best studied whole. I can thoroughly recommend reading it several times over, because each time I have read it, I have gained immensely from each verse. Holding together a broad picture of what Isaiah says and yet gaining from its details, is the real challenge of so much scripture. This is an excellent chapter with which to practise the skill!*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Make a copy of this passage and keep it with you for a week. Take it out and read it from time to time, and see whether it has more to say to you in the different settings of life.*
- *Discuss with a friend their 'picture' of God, without talking to them about this chapter of Isaiah. See whether their understanding of God fits in any way with this*

rather than any basis in the real world in which we live. The world is transient and full of living things which move and events that take place, and yet people make gods out of things fixed on pedestals (46:7)! The full force of Isaiah's criticism is that god's screwed down to pedestals are totally incapable of doing anything to help anyone. They cannot move, so they cannot help! Ultimately, this is the key point for the whole poem and the whole revelation of God in this scripture; people may know the Lord through His ability and desire to help and save.

Isaiah then speaks about God's proven command of history, challenging people to remember that only He has presented and worked through a plan for the history of the world that can be observed and known (46:8-11). The poem reminds people of Isaiah's day about the facts of their own history, but the principle is true for us today, for the Bible stands as a commanding testimony to the work and activity of God in human history which is not rooted in the past but through countless Christians today it affects the present and anticipates the future. It explains how what we experience in life fits into God's 'plan' (46:10)

Finally, Isaiah reminds us that the love and help of God comes at a price, the price of 'righteousness' (46:11-13). Although this is not obvious in any translation because of technical differences between Hebrew and other languages, the basic word for 'justice' or 'righteousness' appears in almost every line and stanza of the last verse in one form or another, along with the word for 'salvation'. God's love for His people is just, which is why He does not go back on His Word, and His intention is always to save His people, but He cannot help those who do not trust Him or believe in Him

### **Going Deeper**

The five sections of this poem each have their treasures and show the graphic and somewhat sarcastic nature of Isaiah, especially when talking about other gods! Isaiah cannot resist making fun of almost any god, whether carried or fixed on a pedestal! Nevertheless, when he talks about the saving power of God he is deadly serious.

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

- V1 *'Bel stumbles and Nebo wobbles' The Hebrew strictly reads 'Bel bows down and Nedo stoops low' However, I suggest that the picture painted is of these gods being borne around on cattle who are weary (see rest of verse) and Isaiah's words reflect the poor state of the animals and their movement.*
- V2 *'they lurch and stagger together' Again, the Hebrew says 'they stoop and fall low together' but here, it is the beasts of burden who are described not the gods on their backs, and the description is of their movement.*
- V3 *'All who remain of the house of Israel' This could be translated 'all the remnant of the house of Israel' It is difficult to be certain whether the Hebrew word is used in the technical sense of a remnant or just generally – I think the latter.*
- V7 *'even if they cry out to it ...' The second half of the verse is singular in Hebrew, as Isaiah's mocking tone is focussed on the individual who worships an idol. However, the general sense in English is easier to follow if it is all in the plural.*
- V8 *'Remember this and be embarrassed' The Hebrew for 'be embarrassed' is quite uncertain, and no one knows what the word here means. I have accepted an interpretation which is well attested in traditional scholarship which links the verb to a Hebrew root word for 'embarrassed', largely because this fits well with the sense of the poem at this point.*

### **Further Study**

### **Poor beasts of burden! (46:1,2)**

In verse 1, Isaiah goes to the heart of people's concerns. If Babylon were to take the people of Judah and Jerusalem into captivity, surely, people would say, their gods are greater than the gods of Israel! No, says Isaiah! He has already prophesied that Babylon will be overcome and the Exiles released, so their gods are as useless as all others, because the Lord is ultimately in command of history! This theme permeates this text, but it is in the first verse which we see the gods of Babylon named; Bel and Nebo. If you remember the names of some of the Kings of Babylon, you will recognise the names; for example, Nebuchadnezzar's name begins with 'Neb-' and Belshazzar's name begins with 'Bel-'. It was common for kings to have names which included the names of the gods of their nations, and is why so many Judean kings had names beginning 'Jeho-' (the Hebrew name for God is spelt JHWH).

The picture painted by Isaiah is of a grand procession in which large heavy images of Bel and Nebo were paraded around Babylon. Large national idols made of wood could weigh several tons (examples have been found by archaeologists, and some exist to this day), and had to be carried on oxen, themselves symbols of power and might. However, Isaiah delights to mock the simple fact that at the end of a parade the animals tire, and the oxen stumble and stagger, making the large idols sway and wobble, lurch and pitch around. Isaiah does not have to say any more; the picture is laughable once painted, how powerful is a 'god' who pitches and falls off a cart when on parade, creating panic amongst oxen and people alike! Poor animals, says Isaiah in verse 2; they cannot escape their burden! The one true God does not need to such an exhibition, and certainly would not abuse animals!

### **The God who bears burdens (46:3,4)**

The Lord God does not ask to be paraded around either as the burden of those who worship Him or as the burden of any beasts. He is the one who bears burdens! He has born the burden of the house of Israel, since birth and since being carried in the womb! This is an especially poignant comment for the people of Israel because they knew the great problems of child bearing which were a feature of Israel's early history, in the life of Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Rebecca. Within this section of Isaiah's prophecies we have already been told that although Israel has failed, the Lord will look after her, but the manner in which the Lord promises that care as revealed in this passage is special.

The Lord says; 'I have made, I will bear, I will carry, I will save' (46:4). This fourfold promise is one which we might remember when we need to recall the faithfulness of God, but in Israel's case, it was prophetic as well as merely descriptive. The Lord had made Israel and borne her through centuries of their relationship when at times Israel had utterly rejected her God. Faithfully, the Lord would carry His people through their judgement, the consequences of their rebellion, and bring them through this to salvation. Our circumstances today are different from those of ancient Israel, but the Lord is still faithful to this promise to all people. It is a wonderful text, worthy of being used for a good sermon!

### **God's without saving power (46:5-7)**

Isaiah has asked a question similar to that found in verse 5 on a number of occasions (40:18, 40:25, 44:7). He asks what can be made which is 'like' Him? The world was full (and probably still is) of human attempts to picture the divinity of God or to represent it in some way or other. Some would even argue that the great cathedrals of Europe were attempts to capture the magnificence if not of God Himself, then at least His dwelling place. But in the 10 Commandments, any attempts to make a likeness of God are forbidden, and the whole Old Testament pours scorn on idols and images made by people. Isaiah wrote a whole section of prophecy on this earlier (44:9-20), and little more is said here in this passage to mock idols than has been said elsewhere. Isaiah does lay emphasis on the stupidity of the

immovable nature of idols and the manner in which resources are lavished on them (46:6), but little more is added, apart from the very last two lines; 'even if they cry out, it cannot answer or save anyone from trouble'.

God alone is the God who can do things and save people. This is the glorious fact of our God and the consistent revelation of God in scripture. There is one additional comment that is worth making. The only image of God mentioned in scripture is to be found in man and woman (Genesis 1:27). When people make idols, the tragedy is that they only project themselves, and do not perceive that they are themselves 'images of God'. God does not have to be found 'out there' and made. God is to be found within, in the human spirit, to be exact (Gen 2:7), and all who seek Him may find Him. This of course, was fully revealed through the life and death of Jesus Christ, but Isaiah's prophecies are an important step towards this revelation.

### **The God who commands history (46:8-11)**

This next passage is similar to the previous one. It rehearses the familiar self-announcements of God about who He is; 'I am God, and there is no other, I am God, with no one like me ...' (46:9). Such words are found throughout these great prophecies (42:8; 43:11; 44:6,8,24 etc.), and the idea that the Lord controls history is central to the whole of Isaiah 40 to 66. We have already heard that God has such a command of history that He can command a king from the east to set the people of Israel free (46:11 – see 45:1f.). The beauty of this passage comes yet again in the very last two lines of the prophecy; 'I have spoken, I will make it happen, I have planned it, and I will do it!'

What an incredible statement of God's towering command of history! This confirms the Christian's belief that God Almighty has an overall plan for the whole of His Creation, but it is not just any plan and neither is it a mystery. We already know that God is just, He seeks reconciliation with the whole world, and He has sought to find this through the testimony of His people Israel. This plan could be said to have failed because Israel did not prove to be a 'light to the Gentiles', but the reason for this was not God's; the responsibility of failure lay with Israel. In the light of this, God's plans are only shown to be greater, however, because His ultimate will is not thwarted by this any 'glitch'. God will bring His Saviour into the world through Israel despite her disobedience and rebellion (46:9), but the nation itself will have to bear the punishment for its failure. God's method of working is this; He speaks, He makes it happen, He plans and He does what He says. He does not necessarily work in this order, but this is what He does, unfailingly, and for our salvation.

### **The God with saving power (46:12-13)**

The last part of this touching and forceful prophetic summary is an unmistakable promise from Almighty God to complete the plan He has always had in mind since the beginning of time, and the Fall (Genesis 3). He says 'I bring my righteousness ... I will put salvation in Zion ...' This is not a fourfold proclamation as in the previous two instances, but the double promise is clear enough. There are no obstacles capable of standing in the way of God's plan of salvation for His people, and this is symbolised by the mention of 'Zion' (46:13). The glory of the Lord will appear in His dwelling place with His people.

This language here is symbolic, of course, but within the midst of it is the small detail 'it is not far away ... it will not delay' (46:13). Our own timescales are often not the measure of God's activity. You could say that the several hundred years between the giving and receiving of this prophecy was a long time before Christ eventually came and completed the plan to 'save the world'. On the other hand, you could say that God's plan is constantly being put into effect and is never far away from any of us; it is as near as a prayer or a moment spent with the Lord. God has always been ready to act and complete in us the part of His salvation plan which is ours to fulfil, ours to submit and be obedient to. Israel