

Prayer

We have faith in You, Lord Jesus Christ, because You have touched our lives. You have saved us from the enemy, You have healed us of sin and sickness, You have befriended us and led us on our way, and You will bring us to our final destiny in glory. All praise be to You, Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Finance

In a week in which the financial institutions of the world have been in turmoil, continue to pray urgently against the evils which are making a few very rich and others very poor.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who risk their lives to help keep international peace*
- *Pray against corruption in high places, in politicians and leaders*
- *Give thanks for those who have recently been baptised*

Meditation

It is a wonderful thing to know and trust God's healing touch.

He heals when we confess all our sins;
He heals by forgiveness with a touch of His Spirit.

He heals before we know we have a need;
He heals even if we have been bound for years.

He heals when our hearts cry out and call for help;
He heals through the love of those who do His will.

He heals as we turn around and reach for Him;
He heals by doing miracles; we know not why!

He heals at any time or place, He knows no bounds;
He heals us completely, in body, soul and spirit.

He heals because He loves us, and His compassion never ceases!

Bible Study - Isaiah 47:1-15

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| <p>¹ <i>Get down and sit in the dust,
virgin daughter Babylon!
Sit on the earth with no fine throne,
daughter Chaldea!
For you will never again be called
tender or delicate.</i></p> <p>² <i>Take the millstones and grind meal,
remove your veil, strip off your
skirts,
uncover your legs, pass through
the rivers.</i></p> <p>³ <i>Let your nakedness be uncovered,</i></p> | <p><i>and your shame be seen.
I have taken vengeance,
I compromised with no one.</i></p> <p>⁴ <i>Our Redeemer; the LORD of hosts is
His name,
He is the Holy One of Israel.</i></p> <p>⁵ <i>Sit in silence, and go into darkness,
daughter Chaldea!
You will no more be called
the Queen of kingdoms!</i></p> <p>⁶ <i>I was angry with my people,
I profaned my inheritance;</i></p> |
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*I gave them into your hand,
but you showed them no mercy;
You placed upon the aged
A very heavy yoke.*

⁷ *You said, 'I will always be a Queen!'
You did not take these things to
heart
or think about what might happen.*

⁸ *Now hear this, you pleasure seeker,
You who dwelt securely,
and said in your heart,
'I am, and there is no one like me;
I will not live as a widow
or suffer the loss of children'*

⁹ *These two things have come to you
suddenly, in a day:
bereavement and widowhood
have come fully upon you,
despite your many sorceries
and the great strength of your
spells.*

¹⁰ *Because you trusted in your evil;
you thought, 'No one sees me!'
Your wisdom and your knowledge
have led you astray.
So you thought in your heart,
'I am, and there is no one like me.'*

¹¹ *But evil has come on you,
and you don't know from where it
originates;
disaster has fallen on you,*

*and you could not ward it off;
ruin has come on you suddenly,
of which you knew nothing.*

¹² *If you had continued with your magic
and your many sorceries,
which you have played with since
your youth;
perhaps you would have succeeded,
perhaps you would inspire terror.*

¹³ *But you were worn out with your
schemes;
Did they stand and save you?
Astrologers who scan the heavens,
and those who gaze at the stars,
who predict what will happen
from observing the new moons!*

¹⁴ *Look, they were like stubble,
the fire has consumed them;
they could not deliver themselves
from the power of the flame.
It was not a coal for warming
oneself,
Or a fire to sit before!*

¹⁵ *This is what it is like for you
and those with whom you have
worked
and journeyed since your youth;
each has wandered away to his own
place
and there is no one to save you.*

Review

This is a prophecy against Babylon, the nation Isaiah prophesied would take Jerusalem and Judea into Exile, and the nation King Cyrus would suddenly defeat (45:1) to enable the Jews to go home. However, God's use of Babylon to do His work would not mean that she could escape judgement. No nation or individual could escape the supreme justice of God, and any who assumed special treatment was available were wrong. Only Israel was special and loved by God, and after her judgement the Lord would complete His redemption of her (see ch.43), and Babylon would receive no such redemption because her sins were an affront to the righteousness of God.

There are six stanzas to the poem in Isaiah 47, and they all fit together to prophesy the degradation and collapse of Babylon and the reasons for this. Isaiah spoke a century or more before these events, and yet the whole poem is written as if God was speaking to Babylon after the exile of the Jews and Babylon's defeat at the hands of King Cyrus. We can read the chapter knowing that the prophecy came true, but it is astonishing to think that God's revelation came before the events of which it speaks. Isaiah confidently describes the logic of future events because of God's revelation and his own experience of God's work in the past (particularly the Assyrian invasions of Israel and Judah around 721BC).

- *Read through a newspaper and see if you can find stories which have parallels with the prophecy you have read today; for example, in religious affairs, or in justice and injustice. Test out scripture to see how it relates to our world.*

Final Prayer

You, Lord Jesus Christ, have won the total victory over Satan which guarantees the end of all evil. All praise to You, Living Lord! May we accept this truth, live this truth and proclaim this all our lives, without fear of the one who has been defeated! Thanks be to God; AMEN

Application

The fate of Babylon is a lesson to us all, as is evident throughout. How proud we are today with our science and our technology, anyone would think that we have created gods out of computers! I have made this point already in this study, but one thing stands out, and this is the place of false religion in Babylon which gave the empire a false sense of security. The secular religion of today is the idea that anyone can believe what they want provided they do not offend anyone else. This seems to be an admirable goal, but firstly it fails to account for the sheer strength of people's personal beliefs and also the power of the large religious systems which will not accept anything other than domination within their own 'world' (of which Islam is an example). Religious pluralism as practiced in many western countries is a recipe for cultural disaster, as, unfortunately, many are now beginning to realise.

It does not take much for us to realise that this passage may be telling us something. The Christian roots within western society which have generated science and technology as we know it, religious tolerance itself, the morality of international institutions (which increasingly, politicians realise cannot be taken for granted) and much more, are precious because they are a reflection of One true God revealed by Jesus Christ, and lived for centuries by people who have now shaped the world in which we live. If the so-called Christian countries of our world do not return to acknowledging and publicly accepting the nature of the God who has blessed them, then I fear that they call on themselves God's judgement; and there is only one God.

We are blessed by the faith in which many of us have been brought up and which has been handed on to us; let us not give it up for superstitions, acceptance of other gods and religious systems which have far less of a contribution to the world, and the idea that we can live as we choose, without needing to obey the Lord. He has given us a commission to spread His Good News!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group what evils brought down the Babylonian empire, in God's eyes.
2. How can we avoid the presumptive and arrogant attitudes demonstrated by Babylon in this prophecy?
3. In what ways do Christians find themselves compromised by religious beliefs which do not come from the Bible or Christian heritage?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This passage is a complicated piece, and I have found it hard to explain it, given that Isaiah said it before it happened, and said it in such a way as makes you think it already has happened! The power of the passage however is in its prophetic vision of an end to an empire that presumed upon God and took advantage of Him. I find it hard to think of the 'empires' of our world today coming to an end when I see the parallels between this prophecy and today, so I wonder whether the Lord will come in glory soon?

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Pray for your own country and its Christian heritage. Pray for those who try to influence government for good and maintain the Christian heritage we have. Pray for the Lord to bless those who do His work in difficult circumstances.

The first two stanzas of the poem describe the judgement of God on Babylon. God's authority is shown by His command of the great Empire which regarded itself as the 'Queen' of empires (47:5,7). He turns the empire upside down and shames this once great empire (47:1-3), to ensure that those listening might know exactly who was responsible, and emphasises this with a classic announcement of the Lord's credentials as Israel's Redeemer and 'Holy One' (47:4). Babylon is then chastised for not appreciating the consequences of her actions (47:5-7). It was indeed God's intention that she should take the people of Israel captive, but Babylon proceeded to place a heavy burden on the exiles and show 'no mercy' (47:6); so Babylon would be judged.

The next two stanzas form a pair and describe the chronic sickness of Babylon as a nation (47:8,9 and 47:10,11); Isaiah mentions pleasure seeking, selfishness (47:8), and then the presumptive attitude that 'nothing will go wrong'. The curses of widowhood and loss of children (presumably in childbirth and in early years) were regarded as things of the past because the empire of Babylon had attained the confidence which goes with greatness and wealth; moreover, they were masters of magic and astrology, as almost every independent archaeological enquiry into ancient Babylon has revealed! However, when Babylon became presumptuous and over-confident in her superstitions, she failed, 'disaster has fallen on you and you could not ward it off ...' (47:11).

The reason Babylon failed was because she paid no attention to the God of Israel, the God of the people she conquered. In the last two stanzas (47:12,13 and 47:14,15), the Lord mocks the religion of Babylon. Surely they should have been able to discover through their magic how to save themselves. Had they become 'worn out'? Was it impossible for the astrologers of Babylon to predict what would happen (47:13)? If we now read the story of the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast and its dramatic climax with Daniel's interpretation (Daniel 5:24f.), Isaiah's prophecy makes sense. Babylon has been 'weighed in the balance and found wanting' (Daniel 5:27), and the empire collapses overnight (Dan 5:30, Isaiah 47:15).

Going Deeper

Most of this prophecy is a fascinating assessment of the judgement of Babylon, but it gives strong hints to us about a variety of social sins which incur God's judgement even today. Many of the presumptuous attitudes we find within society today are mentioned in some way in this text, such as pride and pleasure seeking (47:8) and also playing with spiritual things through astrology and other magic arts (47:12f.). As we go deeper, we will find a number of features of God's judgement worthy of our careful attention. God's people need to bring these issues to the attention of the world as it staggers forward today with the weight of global warming, energy crises, population growth and food shortages. God is speaking to people even today through these things, and we must be mindful of His judgments.

Notes on the text and translation

Many of the verb tenses in English translations have followed traditional lines that do not necessarily hold closely to the Hebrew; rather, they reflect a certain way of reading the text. My translation takes a different route to give the prophecy the feel of one looking back at events certain to happen because they are God's will.

V1 'Get down and sit in the dust' Most translations say, 'Come down ...' However this is a command not an invitation! God is acting in vengeful justice against Babylon!

V2 'strip off your skirts ...' Most translations have 'strip off your robes' but the image is coarse and intended to indicate abuse (see study notes).

- V3 *'Let your nakedness be uncovered ...' The verb tense possibly indicates a command to allow something to be seen or done as in 'let your nakedness be ...' You will not find this in other translations.*
- V3 *'I will compromise with no one' The Hebrew says quite literally, 'I will meet no man', where the sense of 'meeting' is to do business with someone or negotiate; hence my translation.*
- V8 *'Hear this, you pleasure seeker!' The Hebrew word here means this exactly, but in most Hebrew dictionaries, the English equivalent is stated to be 'voluptuous' which means roughly the same thing – and this is why most translations have 'you voluptuous one'.*
- V12 *'Continue with ...' The Hebrew says 'take your stand then ...' It is a challenge to keep going with their past practices, so I have made this clearer in English.*
- V13 *'Astrologers who scan ...' The Hebrew here contains a number of uncertainties and it is thought that this is because it reflects a number of references to Babylonian practices of sorcery and astrology. Each translation is a form of best guesswork!*
- V14 *Many translations here have the future tense, but I reckon that the original past tense in the Hebrew should be preserved, and it makes sense. Isaiah is speaking about a future event that will have taken place. This is what prophecy means, of course.*
- V15 *The Hebrew of this verse is difficult, and although it is uncertain, I suggest that the verse refers to the gods and sorceries who Babylon has played with 'since youth' who are unable to save her. Most translations give you the impression that this is about the people of Babylon in general. However, many of the words used are the same as those used earlier in the poem to speak about Babylonian gods and sorcery.*

Further study

The vengeance of God (47:1-7)

The first few verses of this chapter of Isaiah are graphic in their portrayal of a 'Queen' whose life is turned upside down. This is a 'riches to rags' story which is the direct result of God's judgement on Babylon, and it is expressed in a number of different ways. In verse 1, she is dethroned and has to sit in dirt, ruining her complexion; and yes, the Hebrew words for 'tender and delicate' mean both smooth of skin and dainty of manner! The once proud queen is reduced in verse 2 to doing the work of a housemaid and grinding grain for food, she is stripped of her clothes to be prostituted and abused, and made to strip from the waist to walk through rivers on a long journey. All these pictures are sarcastic in nature, for it is likely that such things were the lot of any women taken into captivity after war in ancient times; arduous journeying, abuse at the hands of soldiers and hard work to survive. The Lord shows no pity on Babylon for doing such things; she will experience them herself!

After the shocking start to the prophecy, Isaiah includes a brief reminder of the God who makes this judgement; 'Our Redeemer; the Lord of hosts, He is the Holy One of Israel.' Babylon will not suffer this at the hand of Cyrus, the King of Persia, but at the hand of God. In reality, history shows that Cyrus maintained his empire in a manner unlike that of any empire before. Previous empires had ruled by might, intimidation and exploitation. Cyrus was the first ruler who was noted for being benevolent, allowing people to live and do as they pleased within their own countries providing they kept to set guidelines and financial requirements. In this atmosphere, many nations and peoples, previously treated badly by Babylon, took the opportunity to exact revenge and vengeance on their former masters,

and much of the Babylonian empire was destroyed in the process. This was God's judgement.

In the second stanza (47:5-7), the Lord commanded Babylon to sit in silence and hear the charge against her. She had acted without mercy towards God's people without any right or justice. God was 'angry' with His people, but this did not mean that Babylon could do with Israel as she pleased. She had shown no mercy and insulted the aged, with no thought for anything other than her vanity; 'I will always be Queen!' (47:7)!

The Pride of Babylon (47:8-11)

Babylon's pride was evident in all she did; she believed she was the greatest empire the world had ever seen; 'I am, and there is no one like me' she said (47:8). As we read these words, it is clear to us what has happened. Babylon perceives herself in the way and with the same words that the people of Israel perceive and speak about their God. How many times have we read in the recent chapters of Isaiah the resounding affirmation of the greatness of God in the words 'I am God, and there is none like me!' (44:24; 45:5,18; 46:9). The same words are repeated in the next stanza (47:10), and Isaiah comments 'wisdom and knowledge' have led them astray to believe they are as a god to themselves!

Pride, as they say, comes before a fall, and the prophecy describes the awful fall of confidence which comes with the destruction of an empire; 'evil has come upon you' (47:11). In a society which is well ordered and confident in itself, people are often cared for simply because 'there is enough to go around', and in verses 8 and 9 the loss of empire mean that those at the bottom of the social ladder suffer most. The two scourges of womanhood in ancient times, the death of children and widowhood, return with a vengeance to peoples who thought they were cared for, despite the incantations and magic commonly used in those days. Society was in free-fall and confidence had gone.

As I write, the world is struggling with recessionary forces through the economies of the largest nations. This has not been forecast and people and companies have been caught off guard; 'disaster has fallen on you and you could not ward it off!' (47:11) says Isaiah to Babylon, an ancient foretaste of angry words possibly being shouted across boardrooms right now! We would do well to consider that the Lord might be at work in judgement.

The failed religion of Babylon (47:12-15)

One of the strongest features of Babylonian life was magic and sorcery, and all the black arts known in those days including a strong interest in astrology. However, says Isaiah, 'they did not stand and save you!' (47:13). Much of the last two stanzas is written in quite rare and obscure Hebrew which makes many translations unclear at this point. However, there is a repeated theme here of the Lord mocking the effort and hard work put into magic and astrology by the Babylonians, and certain Hebrew words give this away ('played with since your youth' in verse 12 and 'worn out with your schemes' in verse 13), and in the regular and tiring pursuit of 'star-gazing' in verse 13. However, all this has proved worthless at a time of crisis and the Lord introduces the sign of His judgement, the sign of fire (47:14) which consumes and refines. Mocking, the Lord says of Babylon that she only perceived fire as a means of keeping warm!

The very last verse (15) is strange in Hebrew, and it contains some words which echo those previously used in the text. When you read it, it sounds like a comment on Babylon's abandonment by her friends at a time of trouble. Nevertheless, I have changed my mind about this, and reckon that the words 'those with whom you have worked' (47:15) are close to 'which you have played with since your youth' (47:12); this means that those abandoning Babylon and leaving her at her time of crisis are none other than her gods. It is Babylon's religion which has failed, not its friends or its people.