

## Prayer

We ask for mercy, Heavenly Father, on all who struggle this day with work, with family, with life itself, and also with faith. Have compassion on all who are depressed, and save them from its cruel destructive web. Give us such love and understanding that we can walk alongside those who suffer in this way; and by Your grace draw them back to the security of Your love. In the name of Jesus, AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Preaching

*Pray today for preachers who have preached yesterday; perhaps those you heard or for others you know. Preaching affects people quite powerfully, and they need our support.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for countries of the world where people are not free*
- *Pray for those who entertain us in great sporting events*
- *Give thanks for scientists who work to find medical cures*

## Meditation

Is there really any justice in this world,  
When a man who kicks a football earns 500 times more  
than a man who tends plants?

Is there any compassion in this world,  
Where a newspaper editor decides who benefits from news coverage  
Based on his assessment of what will 'sell'?

Is there any love in this world,  
Where the death of its Saviour on the Cross is regarded by many  
As so much religion, legend and myth?

Stand up, God's people, and fight Satan's lies!  
Dispel the false trivia of the enemy and battle for truth where it counts;  
On your own doorstep and wherever you go!

## Bible Study - Isaiah 48:1-11

<sup>1</sup> Hear this, O house of Jacob,  
who are called by the name of  
Israel,  
and who came from the line of  
Judah;  
who swear by the name of the  
LORD,  
and confess the God of Israel,  
but not in truth or righteousness.  
<sup>2</sup> For they call themselves after the  
holy city,  
and gain support from the God of  
Israel;

the LORD of hosts is his name.  
<sup>3</sup> 'The former things I declared long  
ago,  
they went from my mouth and I  
announced them;  
then suddenly I did them and they  
happened.  
<sup>4</sup> Because I knew that you were  
obstinate,  
your neck had iron sinews  
and your forehead was of bronze,  
<sup>5</sup> I announced them to you long ago,

before they happened I told them  
to you,  
Lest you would say, "My idol did  
them,  
my idol and metal god ordained  
them."  
6 You have heard; now look at all this!  
Will you not accept them?  
From now on I will make you hear  
new things,  
secrets you have not known.  
7 They are happening now, not long  
ago;  
before today you had never heard  
of them,  
lest you should say, "I knew them  
already!"  
8 You never heard, you never knew,

You never listened, even long ago.  
For I knew you would be very  
treacherous,  
and you were called a rebel from  
birth.  
9 For my name's sake I postponed my  
anger,  
and for my praise I held it back  
from you,  
so that I might not cut you off.  
10 Look, I have refined you, but not like  
silver;  
I have chosen for you the furnace  
of affliction.  
11 For my own sake, for my own sake, I  
do this,  
for why should I be profaned?  
My glory I will not give to another.'

### Review

With these words, the prophet tells Israel why she has endured all the suffering of exile. This passage begins with a prophetic call (48:1,2) by Isaiah, speaking in his own words. With these words he calls on Israel to listen and pay attention before launching into the full prophecy (48:3f.), and speaking the words of the Lord directly as he has perceived and received them. From verse 3 onwards, we hear the voice of the Lord declaring to Israel powerfully and dramatically the reasons for the failure of their covenant relationship. Israel needed to know what her sins were if she was ever to atone for them or accept the Lord's salvation. Remember, we already know from Isaiah that the Lord had removed from Israel her task of bringing salvation to the world and given it to a new Servant (42), but insisted that he still loved her and would redeem her; but this did not mean that she should not know the truth about her sins.

When the Exiles read and understood these words, many years after Isaiah wrote them, these people were the remnant of those who had been taken into exile into Babylon from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas of Judea. Doubtless most of them were Judeans, but Isaiah begins his prophecy specifically by addressing them as representative of all Israel, from the beginning (48:1,2). We are fairly sure that after the Assyrian invasion of 721 BC, faithful and loyal Israelites from a variety of the tribes came south to live in Judah and Jerusalem, thus ensuring that a small number of Israelites from the other tribes were present amongst the Jews who went on to experience the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem and the Exile. This is what Isaiah had meant by the 'remnant' (Isaiah 10:19f. 11:11f.). It is important to establish this because what Isaiah prophesied is a stunning and comprehensive account of God's complaint against the Israelite people as a whole, not just the peoples of Judah or Jerusalem.

In the first part of our passage today, the Lord told Israel that he knew from the beginning about her obstinacy, and accepted this as part of her humanity (48:4); but she had the evidence of prophets to tell her God's will and God's ways. Obstinacy was therefore no excuse, particularly for the deep offence to God of idolatry, one of the most prominent sins Isaiah identifies as an affront to the Lord. Idolatry, the second of the great Ten Commandments, is the first one to begin with a command to stop doing something; it says 'You will have no other God but me', and goes on 'you will not make for yourself any image

I feel slightly awkward about 'banging a drum' in my conclusions of this piece, but I can hardly avoid it. My interpretation goes out on a limb from all but one major commentary currently published, and I have only found one commentary (by Alec Motyer) which maintains a similar line to mine; and his book would not be accepted as scholarly by some. Nevertheless, I ask you to consider carefully what is said here. Prophecy is of profound importance to our understanding of the nature of God and His revelation, and we need to take the subject very seriously.

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- If possible, find some commentaries on Isaiah from a local library if necessary, and read some of the comments on this passage made by authors who do not believe in prophecy. Try to learn from how they treat this text in comparison to how I have treated it and how you have responded to it.
- Discuss with a close church friend what you believe about how prophecy is used and understood in the life of the church today, or not used and understood. It will raise some serious issues, which must be considered and followed through.

### Final Prayer

As this day unfolds, Lord God, Your love unfolds like an opening flower; revealing ever more depths of colour, hue and saturation. May we benefit not just from a mere snapshot of Your faithful loving-kindness, but from a high-definition video of Your magnificent grace! Through Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN

The Lord then continued; 'look, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have chosen you for the furnace of affliction.' (48:10). This astonishing verse tells us that God could not refine the last of Israel (the remnant of Judah) as silver is refined, because if he did, there would be nothing left. For this reason, He would refine Israel in a different way, by a 'furnace of affliction'. What does this mean? Before the time of Isaiah, people would have assumed that this meant the Exodus wandering in the wilderness. But this Word of God was about the future; about the Exile itself and the terrible experience of having all Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed and its people all removed as slaves to Babylon.

By making the choice to refine Israel in this way, He left the door of the future open for His people, making it possible for some to respond to Him in a new way and to the new things He planned to do with them; but this is the subject of what comes next in Isaiah, and we will have to wait to see what the Lord says next!

### Application

Prophecy is an incredible thing, and here in scripture we have a word from God which says that prophecy is something only God can do, and it marks out what is true about God and what is not. Only the God who has made the world can tell what will happen in the future because of what is happening in the present, and be right about it. Prophecy and the way God uses it to speak to His people about the future is therefore at the heart of our understanding of God. I find it amazing therefore that that majority of scholars who write about Isaiah today persist in saying that this is not so, and in particular, they say that because Isaiah could not have known about the future and could not have known that the Exile would take place, he could therefore not be the author of these prophecies. Their alternative explanation is that these passages of scripture were written by anonymous scribes who used Isaiah's name to tell the people of Israel after the Exile a form of kindly lie to help them believe that God was somehow with them in the awful experience of exile! I find it hard to believe that as stiff-necked and savvy a people as the Israelites would fall for that!

Either prophecy is a real consequence of our contact with a God who knows the present and the future and can tell it to us, or we are engaged in a complex game of religiosity and guile. I do not believe that the second option is true, because it has no power to affect people's lives; it has no spiritual power now and it does not account for the power of Isaiah's prophecies in the past. I believe God spoke His word prophetically through Isaiah for a people who would one day understand it in the future; and I believe in a God who speaks to people in the present about what is happening to them so accurately that He is able to predict their consequences for generations to come, and tell us. It is up to us to believe Him and listen to what He has to say.

### Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your house group what you believe prophecy to be. How does God use prophecy today, and what kind of things does He seek to tell us?
2. If possible, look up prophecy in any Bible dictionary or reference book at your disposal, and compare it with what God says about it here.
3. What idols do people use today to tell them about the future and satisfy their thirst for knowledge about the unknown? How should a Christian react to them?

### Discipleship

#### Personal comment:

...' (Exodus 20:2,3 – note that the first commandment says 'I am the Lord ...'). Indeed Isaiah's own prophecies had begun with a censure of Israel's idolatry (Isaiah 1:10-17).

The prophecy goes on, and from verses 6 to 11, we hear about Israel's 'treachery' and rebellious nature from birth (48:8), and her blindness and lack of knowledge (48:6,7 - being regular themes of Isaiah's prophecies). However, the Lord tells Israel that she must now accept a new reality. New things will happen (48:6) which have been prophesied (48:7,8), and some of them are things which she should have known from the very beginning (see the double mention of 'long ago'). Finally, the prophecy declares that Israel has been punished and 'refined' by the Lord, with a punishment which He has chosen for them; a punishment of affliction (48:10). The Lord had to do this to humble His people because they had come to think of themselves too highly, and He had brought them low.

The punishment of course, refers to the exile, as those who read this prophecy after the event fully realised. It is doubtful that anyone would have been able to grasp the full meaning of this prophecy of Isaiah before that time, but it is of the very nature of prophecy that this was so. Prophets declare truth before it is fully understood and we only understand it fully after what it has said comes true.

#### **Going Deeper**

There is a great deal in this passage about what the Lord said He would do, how it would be fulfilled, and what the Lord said beforehand that He would do for the benefit of the Israelites, but they did not take advantage of this. It was of the very nature of God to speak to His people through prophets, but they had not listened! It seems that this and the idolatry of the people lie at the heart of God's complaint. However, only by reading and studying all of Isaiah 40-55 will we get the whole picture; each part of it builds up a section of the greater picture.

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

- V1 *'Who came from the line of Judah' The Hebrew says 'from the waters of Judah', but no one is able to make sense of this or what it might mean. The best guess is that it refers to descent from Judah.*
- V4 *'your forehead was of bronze' Some translations have brass rather than bronze, but it is difficult to know exactly which this was apart from the fact that it was mostly copper smelted with tin and other base metals.*
- V5 *"my idol made them, my idol and metal god ordained them"* *The Hebrew uses three different words for idols of various kinds. Today, we do not have a large range of words to describe the numerous wooden and metal idols common in those days. The large number of words to describe them indicates the scale of the problem!*
- V6 *The beginning of the sentence is difficult to follow because the subject of the sentences is not clear, but the Lord is asking Israel to accept responsibility for seeing those things He has done as mentioned in the previous verses.*
- V7 *'they are happening now' The Hebrew uses the same word 'barah' (meaning 'create' or 'do') which is part of the Creation story in Genesis 1. The link is essential to Israel's understanding of God's authority to act within this world.*
- V8 *'you never listened ...' This part of the sentence is dramatic, and the Hebrew emphasises this by the expansive expression 'your ear was never opened ...' Because we do not speak in that way, I have translated the sentence in a way which highlights the phrase and gives it emphasis in natural English.*
- V10 *'have chosen for you the furnace of affliction' For reasons I cannot fathom, most translations have 'I have tested you in the furnace of affliction'; however, my version*

is exactly what the Hebrew says. It is a deeply challenging sentence however, and this may be why it has been changed.

V11 *‘why should I be profaned?’ Many translations assume that the words ‘my name’ are missing and give ‘why should my name be profaned’. I think the lack of ‘my name’ adds to the drama of this sentence, God is speaking directly about himself!*

### Further Study

#### Isaiah's call to Israel

The first two verses of this prophecy are Isaiah's heartbroken call to his own people. Looking at the verse line by line, He called on all of the chosen people, identified through the forefather Jacob, whose name was changed by the Lord to Israel at Peniel (Gen 32:21f.). He then narrowed this down to the faithful tribe of Judah, and then to those 'who swear by the name of the Lord, and confess the God of Israel'. In narrowing down God's people to a faithful remnant, Isaiah also used the two essential names of God used in Israel, 'God' and 'the Lord' as if to emphasise the solemnity of his prophecy. So Isaiah knew there was a faithful remnant amongst God's people and trusted that there always would be, but even of these, he said that they confess the Lord 'but not in truth or righteousness!' How terrible it must have been for Isaiah to say such words. On the one hand he knew that there were people whose intent was to be faithful to their calling, but Isaiah knew in his heart that this faithfulness was not enough before God, it was lacking in truthfulness and righteousness; blessings which could only come from God Himself. The people's intent may have been honest, but they were unable to attain their godly goals!

This, of course, is the heart of the dilemma of the Old Testament people of God. It is the reason why Jesus sought to mission amongst His own people and agonised over them, even in the days before He died, and why Paul struggled to understand what God was doing to His own people (as he describes in Romans 9 – 11). The people of Israel, the Jews, continue as a nation of people to this day, and they still focus their religious life around Jerusalem, and call on the support of the God who named them, the 'Lord of Hosts' (48:2). However, they live with an on-going problem in their relationship with their God which was identified by Isaiah many hundreds of years before Christ, and have not accepted the solution to that problem offered by Christ. Nevertheless, the Lord still loves them and has not abandoned them, even though He has made plain the nature of their sins and the reason why He has not used them as a nation to fulfil His Covenant mission, and this is what Isaiah speaks about next.

#### The Lord declares things 'long ago'

However, in verse 3, the language of the prophecy changes to the direct speech of God Himself. It is worth checking out the prophecies of the Old Testament as you read them, to see who is speaking at any one time, because when a prophet speaks like this, there is a special sense of God's Word spoken directly. The prophet needs to stand back and allow revelation to take over from all personal issues and mannerisms, for when the Lord takes over who can stand in His way?

Firstly, the Lord speaks plainly, telling His people that He had told them beforehand what would happen if they disobeyed his laws, and were both persistently self-willed and idolatrous in their attitude towards their God. Of course, the Lord was addressing the nation as a whole like this rather than individuals, but contrary to our own day, few individuals would imagine that they were somehow separate or not responsible for what was happening within their own nation. When the Lord says through Isaiah's prophecy 'the former things I declared to you, they went out of my mouth ... then suddenly I did them' we should look back to Deuteronomy and other earlier texts to see how this is fulfilled. Moses

made it clear that the people would suffer abandonment by their God if they abandoned Him (Deut 29:10-29; 30:4). Joshua warned the people of Israel that they had to 'put away' all their gods and idols before entry into the Promised Land, and worship the Lord their God wholeheartedly (Judges 24:14f.). Samuel reminded the people about the terrible consequences of their sins and the people's idolatry in his farewell address before he died (1 Samuel 12:6f.), and individual prophets such as Elijah had fought the prophets of Ba'al (1 Kings 18). Other prophets were killed, such as the prophet Zechariah son of Jehoida who was killed by King Joash for warning against the king's idolatry in the Temple (2 Chronicles 24:20f.).

The Lord had spoken each time about the consequences of abandoning the covenant relationship Israel had with her God (including, in some cases, the specific detail of being thrown out of the Promised Land). Nevertheless, they did not listen because of their abiding obstinacy, graphically described in our prophecy as like a neck with 'iron sinews, and a forehead of 'bronze' (48:4). However, the reason the Lord had spoken in prophecy was so that Israel could not claim that her own idols had predicted what would happen (48:5)! What God has to say is clear; the Lord declares that He is a God who works by prophecy, and prophecy marks Him out from all other Gods. All other predictions of the future obtained by idols or by necromancy (meaning 'from the dead') are false and always will be. Only the true God, the Creator and sustainer of all things and the One with a plan for the whole of His creation, can successfully perform prophecy, announcing beforehand what will happen and then fulfilling it (48:5). Only the true God can say what will happen.

#### The announcement of a things to come, and the 'furnace of affliction'

In verse 6, the tone of God's words change. Having challenged His people with the truths of their past, and what He had revealed which had already become true, the Lord spoke with authority to give a new prophecy; 'Now look at this!' He says, 'Will you not accept them (His new prophecies)?' This is a signal of a change in what the Lord is saying; the past is the past and the Lord was intent on explaining to His people what was happening to them and why, and what the consequences would be. In other words, He was prophesying to them anew. The Lord God was about to reveal something about Himself which had not been revealed before, and any claim from the people that they had heard this before would be false (48:7)! This is in fact the beginning of a new sequence of revelation, and it goes much further than the remaining verses of our text today. The rest of our reading (48:8-11) is the only beginning of this fresh revelation; the 'opening shots' of what the Lord wanted to say to His people.

There is much more to come in future chapters and verses of Isaiah, but to conclude today's reading, God explains something about Himself, and why He has acted as He has towards His own people.

Essentially, God reveals in verse 9 that He has not wiped His people out on account of their sin because He could not do so; 'for my name's sake I postponed my anger, and for my praise I held it back from you.' (48:9) God had every reason to abandon His covenant with His people, but we are told that there is something in the very heart and nature of God which prevents Him from going back on His promise to be faithful to His people. The more we think about this, the more astonishing it is, for here, God is speaking the language of love. God could not cut off Israel totally; His own nature of love meant He could not! At various times in the past God had wiped out people because of sin; at the time of the Flood (Gen 6-9) he wiped out all the people of the world other than Noah and his family. At the time of the Assyrian invasion (in fulfilment of the specific and terrible prophecies of Amos and Hosea) He wiped out the northern tribes of Israel. However, when it came to the remaining people of Judah, He could not do it. Love prevented Him.