

Prayer

Loving Lord Jesus Christ, by Your Cross and Resurrection You have overcome the problems of the world. Minister to all whose lives remain scarred by illness, injury, bitterness, despair, pain, and every kind of personal anguish. Make it clear to us where we can be of help or where we should stand aside, so that Your perfect will may be done for those who need Your help: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Preaching

Pray for those who teach and mentor new preachers. Pray that they may teach proper and relevant skills, and also how the Holy Spirit works in power through God's Word.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the joy of knowing that Christ has forgiven our sins
- Pray for countries of the world where people are not free
- Pray for those who entertain us in great sporting events

Meditation

Start believing;

Not because you must, but because Christ has saved you!

Start praying;

Not just when you need to, but when the Lord prompts you!

Start listening;

Not because you ought to, but because the Saviour loves you!

Start rejoicing;

Not just when you want to, but when the Spirit leads you!

Start living;

Not because you must, but because your God has set you free!

Start expecting;

Not just when you have a reason, but all the time God gives you!

Bible Study - Isaiah 48:12-22

¹² Listen to me, Jacob,
and Israel, whom I named:
I am He; I am the first,
and I am the last.

he will do what he wants to
Babylon,
and his arm will be against the
Chaldeans.

¹³ My hand set the earth in place,
and my right hand spread out the
heavens;
when I summon them,
they take their places together.

¹⁵ I myself have spoken, yes, I have
called him,
I have brought him, and his way
will prosper.

¹⁴ Come together, all of you, and hear!
Which of them has foretold these
things?
The LORD loves him;

¹⁶ Come near to me; hear this!
From the beginning I did not speak
in secret,

<p>from when it happened I have been there. And now the Lord God has sent me and his spirit.</p> <p>¹⁷ This is what the LORD says, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: I, the LORD your God, teach you what is good for you, and lead you where should go.</p> <p>¹⁸ If only you had heeded my commandments! Then your peace would be like a river, and your righteousness like waves of the sea;</p> <p>¹⁹ your offspring would be like the sand,</p>	<p>and your descendants like its grains; their name would not be cut off or destroyed before me.</p> <p>²⁰ Get out of Babylon, flee from Chaldea, announce this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the ends of the earth; say, 'The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob!'</p> <p>²¹ They did not thirst when He led them through deserts; he made water flow for them from a rock; he split the rock and water gushed out.</p> <p>²² 'There is no peace,' says the LORD, 'for the wicked.'</p>
--	---

Review

There are some wonderful and astonishing words within this prophecy; and they speak in sweeping terms of the great and majestic acts of God in creation (48:12,13) and also His command of history (48:14,15). The passage closes however with an extraordinary prophecy addressed to Israel (48:17-22). It speaks about why Israel failed to reap the specific rewards of the Covenant promises made to Abraham of prosperity and wealth, and of righteousness (48:18 – Gen 12:2,3; 15:6), and of offspring numbered like the sand on the seashore (48:19 – see Gen 22:17). The force of this message is driven home by the fact that God's people had already lost the key covenant promise of possession of the 'Promised Land', and were living as exiles in Babylon, and the Lord wanted His people to leave Babylon and go home (48:20)! The themes are all familiar, but the nuances of what is said are not, and as we look at these prophecies carefully we will find that a number of surprising things are revealed.

It is important to grasp the breadth of Isaiah's prophecy here so that we do not get lost when trying to work out who is saying what to whom. Within each prophecy, different people are speaking at different points. The Lord is clearly speaking to His people in the first two prophecies (48:12-13; 14-15), but in the third, the extraordinary verse 16, the voice of the speaker sounds like the Lord's Servant who speaks Himself about being 'sent' together with the 'spirit'! This verse is very controversial, because it seems as if the person speaking here is the servant (Jesus), and he speaks about the Lord God using both the names for God used in the Old Testament (JHWH and Elohim), and he also speaks about the spirit. It seems as if we have a form of reference to God as Trinity here in the Old Testament! Of course, Christians feel free to talk in the language of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but the Israelite people did not, so it is understandable that here, the Trinity is 'servant' (who is speaking) 'Lord God' and 'spirit'. Isaiah and those who read this prophecy in the past would not have perceived the Trinity from this, but because it is prophecy and Isaiah was speaking about God's Servant who would suffer for the sins of the world (Is.53), it seems perfectly fair for Christians to recognise the Trinity here in Isaiah!

to be faithful to their God. Christians should always seek to ensure that they do not find themselves in the same position as God's people of older times; bearing something of God's Word, but ineffective and still loved by God, but obstinately doing their own thing rather than follow the directions given them by God for their greater good.

In the midst of this prophecy however is the stunning small verse 16. You will not find a great deal about this verse within most commentaries because most scholars are unwilling to follow the logic of what I have explained here in this study. I think it wrong, however, not to consider that God was indeed revealed as Trinitarian in nature even in Old Testament times. There are hints of this in other texts, especially in Genesis 1; however, we should not expect these hints to be more than pointers to truths that will eventually become clear in the New Testament. It is nevertheless important that we pick up the hints because it is important for us to study the revelation of God's nature in scripture. Christ is there throughout the history of the world, and it is exciting when we see glimpses of Him in prophecies even if they only hint at the full reality of His presence and power.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group what you have learned about the nature of God through reading this scripture.
2. What does this passage say to someone who is Jewish? How would you react if this was part of the history of your own people?
3. In your group, make a timeline chart from about 1500BC to the present day, and mark on this when the people of Israel, the Jews, have occupied the Promised Land as a nation.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

There is a sad quality to this prophecy which ends the series of prophecies about the place of the people of Israel in God's plans for the future. Basically, it says that the Lord will look after His people, and it will not be easy. They are not given hope that they will find peace! Christians should do their best to have good relationships with Jewish people, but the difference between us is the work that God seeks to do through us and the Gospel that has been revealed through Jesus. There is no escaping this fact.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Pray for the Jewish people and for their nation at this time. Israel is not an easy part of the world in which to live because of the political tensions about which almost everyone has deep feelings. But God's people are still loved by their God.*
- *If you have a friend at church who is theologically trained or has studied the Bible, seek to discuss Isaiah 48:16 with him or her. Without revealing your own thoughts too quickly, try to find out their interpretation of the passage.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, save me from imagining more of myself than is true or right. Help me to understand the call You have placed on my life, and give me the grace to accept the things You have asked me to do; then, as I live each day, may I be content to do Your will. AMEN

Then in the last longer prophecy, Isaiah announces the Lord's last word to Israel, His old servant, before the whole focus of the prophecies turns towards the figure of the new servant (Isaiah 49 to 55), already announced to the world in chapter 42. The Lord's message to Israel is tragic; He has done all he can for her; providing her with teaching and commandments (48:17,18), but she did not receive 'peace' as God intended. The Lord has even saved Israel from the just punishment she deserved and gave her a 'punishment of affliction' (48:10) which he had brought to an end, telling the people to 'go home!' (48:20). The whole prophetic word from verse 18 to 22 begins and ends with the 'peace' which God wanted so much to have with His people. His relationship with them had been turbulent, as we have seen over and over again, but the Lord's desire had always been for peace. If the people of Israel had done what was asked of them, they would have peace, the 'shalom' of God ('shalom' is Hebrew for peace); but as the Lord concludes about His stubborn and stiff-necked people, "there is no peace" says the Lord, "for the wicked". So the Lord's people were left as onlookers observing the work of God instead of key participants in it; it is a tragic conclusion to the life of God's Old Testament people.

Going Deeper

As we go further, there is much for us to find within the details of the text. The way that the three prophecies at the start of this passage go together witnesses to the divine nature of the servant (who speaks in verse 16) and the power of this revelation is set against Isaiah's final call to His people to honour what He requires of them, which is to go home to Jerusalem and leave Babylon (48:20). When we look in scripture, we will find that enthusiasm for the Lord and for His will after the experience of the exile was at a low ebb. The people were indeed tested by the 'furnace of affliction' (48:10), but the Lord was still ready to help them as He had always done since the time of the Exodus (48:21).

Notes on the text and translation

- V13 *'My hand set the earth in place' The Hebrew says 'My hand established the earth', meaning that it set up the earth as a disc under the heavens. Clearly, the reference is to Creation, and 'established' is used throughout scriptures to speak of God's making the earth under the heavens as in Genesis 1. The simple expression 'set up' conveys this idea most simply in English.*
- V13 *'They take their places together'. Most Bible versions have 'they stand together'. However, the Hebrew word for 'stand' means taking up a position, as a soldier does on parade, for example. The phrase means that the earth and the heavens take their relative places in God's creation at His command!*
- V14 *It is difficult to understand this verses because the subject of the sentence is not made clear. However, in the context of these prophecies, this must be the Lord's servant commissioned to do His will. I have not yet used a capital 'H' for his name because he has not yet been formally announced as divine.*
- V17 *'Teach you what is good for you.' The Bible versions are somewhat different here, and the Hebrew says 'I teach you to your gain'. I have interpreted this as meaning for the good of the people of Israel.*

Further Study

As we read through Isaiah, we may well be glad that the prophet soon leaves the subject of Israel and her punishment. It is certainly something we need to understand, for it tells us why, due to Israel's failure, God created a new work and a new covenant to achieve His will. It also tells us why He remained faithful to Israel because it was not in His nature to abandon them even though they had not done what He wanted. In this past passage

before we move on from the subject, this whole scenario is re-affirmed, along with the great covenant promise of God 'the Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob!' (48:20).

Listen, gather together, and draw near!

Each of these word-phrases begins one of the three prophecies in the first half of our passage (48:12,14,16). It is important to see this link, because it obliges us to see that these prophetic 'oracles' belong together. It is true that different people appear to speak in them (see above) but the literary connection begs some serious questions. If the first two are the voice of God and the last is the servant, are God and the servant connected? Of course the servant could be any figure chosen by God, at least, in theory, but the fact that he speaks almost on the same level as God in this trio of prophecies suggests that the servant is no mere mortal. Could he be a heavenly being or form of God. No Jew would easily accept this, and Isaiah may have perceived the servant as an angelic messenger. Nevertheless, all this suggests that we should look carefully at how the prophecies about the servant unfold in the coming chapters of Isaiah. Will they tell us more about the relationship between God and the servant? Will Isaiah identify the Trinity?

Clearly, the three prophecies speak about the might and power of God throughout history. The first prophecy has the grand proclamation 'I am He; I am the first, and I am the last;' (48:12), words which cross between the Old and New Testaments to speak of God's command of the end and beginning of all things. They are echoed in the last few verses of the New Testament; 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.' (Rev 22:13). It is essential for all who think of God as Creator to know that He is the One who also ends all things; and it is essential for all who are interested in the End Times to know He who comes is the One who has made all things. We appreciate the true breadth of God's nature in both the beginning and the end of all things. He gives everything its meaning.

In verse 14, the problem is not so much who is speaking, but who is being spoken to. Firstly, the Lord obviously derides the idols used by people for divination. What an insult they were; 'which of them has foretold these things?' calls the Lord again (48:14 see also 48:5,6,7). Then, the prophecy speaks about one who will 'do what he wants against Babylon, and his arm will be against the Chaldeans' (48:14). Here, the Lord is speaking about Cyrus, the King of Persia as we have already been told (45:1f.). The interesting thing about this verse is the fact that Cyrus is described as 'loved' by the Lord (48:14), although the Hebrew word means 'love for no particular reason'. It may be a 'red herring' or a coincidence, but there is independent evidence from ancient Persian court records that Cyrus had what might best be called a 'nick-name' in royal circles which was 'friend', or perhaps 'loved one'! It may not seem important to us, but the matter was of crucial importance to Isaiah and the exiles, but this identification of Cyrus was a 'proof text'; the point at which someone could say; 'God predicted this by Isaiah, and it came true!'

It seems logical, however, for this crucial prophecy to move on, because some may assume Cyrus to be greater than he was. He had a role, but it was limited to helping end the punishment of the 'furnace of affliction' (48:10) given to the people of Israel. There was in fact one greater than Cyrus as far as doing God's will was concerned. Helping Israel was one thing, but picking up the mantle of what Israel had failed to do was another. The servant announced in chapter 42 was commissioned by God with the task of doing what Israel had not done; moreover, God had this plan ready and at His disposal from the beginning; 'hear this! From the beginning I did not speak in secret' (48:16). The Lord had already made it known through Moses, Joshua and Samuel and others (see yesterday's study) that if Israel failed, then He would have to bring into effect a different plan for the salvation of the world. It is in this context that the prophecy says those stunning words;

'and now the Lord God has sent me and his spirit'. These remarkable words stand out as God's new solution to the delivery of salvation for all humanity; there can be no mistake!

The Lord's last words to Israel

We have already heard much of what the Lord says to Israel in this text, and it is said again by way of conclusion and summary; and in particular, the Lord is Israel's Redeemer and always will be despite her rebellion (48:17). Now, I have explained the general theme of verses 17 to 22 above, but there is one major feature of it which needs our attention. In verse 20, the Lord speaks urgently and directly to Israel; 'Get out of Babylon, flee from Chaldea, announce this ... with joy ... the Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob!' The question is this, why should Israel and Jacob be told so urgently to leave Babylon and Chaldea?

The situation which occurred (and Isaiah prophetically foresaw), was that once the people of Judah and Jerusalem had been taken into exile to Babylon and Chaldea, they were badly treated, but in order to survive, they worked hard to re-create for themselves a new life in the country to which they had been taken. In the event, the prophet Jeremiah encouraged the exiles to accept their circumstances (Jer 29) and learn the lessons of their captivity. Part of Jeremiah's message was that God's people should learn that their God was a God whose laws were written on hearts not tablets of stone (Jer 31:31-34), and all this served eventually to settle the people in their new surroundings, even though they started from a very lowly position. If we read through the relevant sections of the Old Testament which speak about the return of the Exiles to Jerusalem (particularly Ezra and Nehemiah), we discover that the exiles came back only very slowly and often with great difficulty. The anticipated joy of returning to Jerusalem was tinged with an unbearable sorrow at the complete destruction of the city that had taken place. Both Ezra and Nehemiah and eventually the prophet Haggai had to work very hard indeed to motivate and organise the returning exiles for the arduous and dangerous work of rebuilding the city. Frankly, many Jewish people stayed behind in Babylon; they had found a new life, and begun to organise themselves as an ethnic group with religious practices which did not depend on the Temple.

It is in this context that Isaiah's prophecy says urgently to the Jewish people 'go back!' They are redeemed! They may not have a divine commission to save the world any more, but they have a place in God's world and a Promised Land in which to live, but they must accept the responsibility of what their God has given them; Jerusalem and the Promised Land! The Lord had led His people there once before by leading them through deserts, splitting rocks and performing miracles, and there was no reason why they should not take advantage of the Lord's blessings!

If we understand this background, then it is easier to see why the final concluding comment in Isaiah's prophecy is a heartfelt cry from God. He had acted through Cyrus to free His people and yet they had not fully accepted the opportunity God had given them. Those who returned continued to have difficulty in Jerusalem (see Nehemiah 1f.), and the Lord observed of His people, the people He loved; 'There is no peace for the wicked.'

Application

It is important to recognise that this prophecy was told to Jewish and Israelite people, and the message about their future was not wonderful from the point of view of the details of what would happen to them. God loved them and they were still a people 'redeemed' by His love, but even after the great trial of the exile, things would not become better for the relationship between the Jews and their God. He was still asking them to do things (return to Jerusalem) which they were not doing, and the evidence of scripture is that after the exile and in the times of Nehemiah and Ezra, life was exceptionally hard for those who tried