

Prayer

Great and glorious Lord, Creator of all and Master of the Universe, help each of us who honour You as Lord to turn to You each day for the forgiveness of our sins, and therefore live our lives as people who are forgiven and free. Draw us daily to this saving, healing and redeeming grace, we pray. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Cross

Pray in repentance for the sins of the world that led Jesus to die on the Cross. Pray that God's people will remember what the Cross means, and what happened on it.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the amazing variety found within God's world
- Pray today for those who report the news by TV or by newspaper
- Pray about the world economic downturn and its driving powers

Meditation

Teach us, Lord God, what we do not know,
So that we may be more useful in Your Kingdom.

Teach us, Lord God, what we do not want to know,
So that we may learn Your spiritual disciplines.

Teach us, Lord God, what we really ought to know,
So that we are not caught out by the enemy.

Teach us, Lord God, to re-learn what we have learned before,
So that we do not become pretentious in our faith.

Teach us, Lord God, what we are afraid of knowing,
So that we may face Your truth and stand tall in You.

Teach us, Lord God, what we can never fully know,
So that our hearts embrace the mystery of Your grace.

Teach us, Lord God, to stay true to what we have been taught,
In the love of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Bible Study - Isaiah 49:1-7

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| <p>¹ Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you distant nations!
The LORD has called me from birth,
He named me whilst in my
mother's womb.</p> | <p>³ And He said to me, 'You are my
servant,
Israel, through whom I will be
glorified.'</p> |
| <p>² He made my mouth like a sharp
sword,
He hid me in the shadow of His
hand;
He made me like a polished arrow,</p> | <p>⁴ But I thought I had toiled in vain,
I spent my strength uselessly, for
nothing.
Yet surely my just cause is with the
LORD,</p> |

<p><i>and my reward is with my God.'</i></p> <p>⁵ <i>And now says the LORD, who formed me in the womb to be His servant, to restore Jacob to Himself, and gather Israel to Himself, for I am honoured in the sight of the LORD, and my God has been my strength</i></p> <p>⁶ <i>He says, 'It is too little for you to be my servant to arouse the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel; I appoint you a light to the nations,</i></p>	<p><i>and be My salvation throughout the earth.'</i></p> <p>⁷ <i>This is what the LORD says, the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel, to one who is a despised soul, to an abhorred nation, to a slave of rulers, 'Kings will see and stand up, Princes will bow down in worship, because of the LORD, who has proved to be faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen You.'</i></p>
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Review

At this point, these great latter prophecies of Isaiah turn away from addressing the old servant of the Lord, the nations of Israel, and announce in a fascinating and exciting manner the work of the new servant, previously introduced by Isaiah in chapter 42 ('Here is my Servant whom I uphold ...' 42:1f.). Previously, in chapters 46 to 48, Isaiah agonised over the fate of Israel, because they had failed in their task to bring God's love to the whole world, and his prophecies conclude that although they had failed, God still loved His own people and would care for them (see 48:17-22). Nevertheless, the crucial and important task of being a 'light to the nations' (42:6 and 49:6) would no longer be theirs. With great drama, Isaiah returns to the main theme of his prophecies which is the work of the newly announced 'Servant' who bears the task of bringing God's 'light' to the nations!

Each part of our passage today contains fascinating references that remind us of other scriptural texts, sometimes in the New Testament. For example, the idea of the Lord forming His Servant in the mother's womb (49:1) reminds us of David's great psalm 139; 'for it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.' (Psalm 139:13). Christians of early times would have seen in this a connection between the Servant prophesied by Isaiah and a Messiah who would be a 'Son of David'. In verse 2, the phrase 'He made me like a sharp sword ... like a polished arrow ... hid in His quiver' (49:2) reminds us of Psalm 127 which describes the descendants of Solomon as like a quiver full of arrows (Psalm 127:4). The picture is also taken up in the New Testament by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews who speaks of the 'Word of God' as like a 'two-edged sword' (Heb 4:12), or the 'sword of the Spirit' in Ephesians 6:17. All of these connections remind us that a passage such as this keys into the essential theme of salvation which lies at the heart of God's Word. Indeed, they begin to point us to what we already know through familiarity with scripture, that Isaiah's 'Servant' is none other than the Messiah, and his prophecies speak about Jesus Himself and His work on earth.

Some of the text is harder to pick through because it does not seem clear who is speaking to whom about what. For example, verse 4 says; 'I thought I had toiled in vain, I spent my strength uselessly, for nothing. Yet surely my cause is with the Lord ...' However enigmatic this may seem, we are presented here with the voice of the Servant, speaking out for the first time about His role and His call. He has come from God and been prepared and commissioned (49:1-3), His work through Israel has been frustrating and fruitless, but now comes the time to prove God as faithful and true (49:7). The Lord will restore Jacob to Himself, but now the Servant will do God's bidding, and the work which Jacob was unable

There are many things which happen around us today which are very confusing, and some Christian people are keen to try and interpret various prophecies from scripture or from other modern prophets in an attempt to find the truth behind world events. The question we should ask ourselves is whether our agenda is God's agenda; for God only has one agenda, and that is offering His salvation to the world through the Servant, who is Jesus, our Messiah and Christ. I suggest that any so-called prophecy that does not expound this fundamental truth about our faithful God is liable to fall short of the mark. Every Christian today has a duty to pursue the single-minded objective of their God, and follow the example of the Servant in pursuing what it means to be a 'light to the nations'.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In your group, read through this passage carefully, and share your thoughts about each verse. Help each other to understand what is said.
2. Why did God try to work through the people of Israel, if He knew that they would not be 'a light to the nations'? Why should God continue to love Israel?
3. To what extent is verse 7 fulfilled in our own times?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This scripture is an incredibly moving passage on which to comment. The purpose and intent of God is phenomenal, even the description of the servant as a 'polished arrow' (49:2) evokes patient skill and preparation! The whole passage makes the individual feel very small against the awesome purposes of God and the amazing work of the Servant. Knowing that there is much more to come from Isaiah in the next few chapters fills me with anticipation!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Pray to the Lord and ask Him to help you understand what He has been preparing you for, and how it fits into His plan for the salvation of the world. This seems a bold prayer, but why prayer about anything less?
- Find a friend or loved family member to share your own thoughts about this great passage of scripture. Explain what you have discovered and share your faith.

Final Prayer

I love You, Lord. Even when I am uncertain or troubled, even when I feel ill or in distress, and even when I have been hurt by someone I love myself. Your love is the power of the universe and it shines as fiercely as the sun. Lord Jesus, may it shine in and through me now. AMEN

to do; the Servant declares God's commission of Him; 'it is too little for you to be my Servant to arouse the tribes of Jacob ... I appoint you as a light to the nations!' (49:6). It is hardly possible to underestimate the importance of this announcement. It is previewed in Isaiah 42:6 ('I have given You as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.'), and now the Servant accepts the role. God's salvation plan through the Messiah has been revealed!

Going Deeper

There is a great deal more in this text, and I strongly suggest that you look at the notes on the text and translation. Many versions of the Bible current today have been written by those who do not accept the interpretation of Isaiah that I have built up over recent studies, and this is reflected in their translations. If you read my notes you will discover why this translation connects far more strongly with the work of the Messiah than some other Bible versions you may read.

As we study the text in greater depth, we discover that Isaiah is reporting the speech of the Servant and describing three things; the announcement of His coming; His relationship to Israel and His task; and lastly the world's reaction to His work. The passage is not straightforward, and it is only the beginning of a massive prophetic work by Isaiah concluded in later chapters. So we must be patient, seek to understand what is said, and not read into the text any more than that which arises directly from the text.

Notes on the text and translation

- V1 *'He named me whilst in my mother's womb.' Strictly speaking, the verse says 'He called me to mind from my mother's womb' and the Hebrew uses the same verb used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe those moments when God 'calls to mind' or 'remembers' His people and then acts for their salvation (as in the story of the Exodus (Ex 2:24) and Noah (Genesis 8:1))*
- V5 *'To restore Jacob to Himself and gather Israel to Himself.' This is a typical Hebrew 'parallel' with one half of a verse echoing the other; it sounds repetitive to us, but the restoration of Israel, God's people, is no small matter. It lies at the heart of the prophecy. You will find that many translations make each line of this pair different, but the Hebrew words are a close parallel.*
- V6 *'It is too little for you ...' This phrase is essential for our text, and the sense of the Hebrew is that God says, finally, that it is not enough, it is merely 'trifling' for the servant to rescue and restore the tribes of Israel. God has a bigger agenda.*
- V6 *'I appoint you a light to the nations.' This crucial phrase is quite clear; the Hebrew verb 'I appoint' is also used of God making things as at creation or doing some new work. This is a classic prophetic pronouncement of God's coming work.*
- V6 *'and be my salvation throughout the earth.' This is a bold translation, but I believe a correct one. The Hebrew reads quite literally; 'to be my salvation to the extremities of the earth'; and many versions prefer to translate this; 'that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.' However, I think the Hebrew does not say that the servant will 'bring' the salvation; rather He will 'be' the salvation. There is a big difference here, and it really counts in our interpretation of the text.*
- V7 *'to an abhorred nation' For a variety of reasons, but principally because translators have no clear theological view of this passage, you will find this brief line of text is quite different in various Bibles. The Hebrew is simplicity itself; God describes His servant as a despised soul, an abhorred nation and a slave of rulers. Any other translation makes the whole thing more complex than it need be.*

V7 *'Princes will bow down in worship'* Most versions of the Bible have *'Princes will bow down to you'*, but the Hebrew word is one of worship and adoration, and implies more than mere homage. For this reason, I have added *'worship'*.

V7 *'Who has proved to be faithful'* Most versions have *'who is faithful'*. However, the word for *'faithful'* is not the usual Hebrew word, and basically it means *'confirms'* or *'supports'*. For this reason, the idea conveyed is that the Lord is found to have supported His people and done what is right; hence my translation.

The announcement of the Servant

The Servant announces Himself in verse 1 to 4 with the dramatic and meaningful Hebrew word 'hear', or 'listen'. Prophetically, He speaks not to Israel but to the farthest ends of the known world, to the 'coastlands' and to 'distant nations'. There is no doubt that the salvation plan of God is intended for all Creation, and with these words, the Old Testament itself breaks out of the stifling mould of Judaism to reclaim the will of God for all people as the heart of its message.

Some have wondered whether it is right or possible to speak about the Servant (who we know as Jesus) as being called from birth and created in a mother's womb (49:1); surely, Christ was 'in' God from the beginning, as John describes in his Gospel (John 1:1f.). Others have suggested that these words in 49:1 prophecy Jesus' birth of the virgin Mary, an event specifically prophesied by Isaiah in his younger days (see 7:14). These ideas, I fear, lead us astray. If we take up the other scripture references to being created in a mother's womb as in Psalm 139 or Psalm 131 and check out the words used, we will find that all of these texts speak about being made in 'inner parts'. It is therefore perfectly reasonable to suggest that this passage describes the Servant's origins as being within the mysterious 'inner parts' of the Godhead. The female imagery of 'birth' is not really the issue here; the Servant comes from God, as God and with His authority, and I suggest that Isaiah used the imagery of birth because he knew full well that the Lord had given him an earlier prophecy that when the Messiah came He would be born to a woman.

The announcement of the servant contains two other small points of interest. Firstly, there is the theme of being 'named'. This is first mentioned in verse 1, where, if you read my notes above, the 'naming' is an essential part of the Servant's preparation for action. The Servant is mentioned specifically three times in this passage (49:3,5,6), and on the first occasion, He is identified with Israel simply because the work of the Servant has been done up to this point in time by Israel; but it has been a frustrating and pointless task (49:4). The Servant is called out of Israel because of Israel's failure and because the task of God's saving work must be done. This is why the Servant declares boldly at the end of verse 4; 'my cause is with the Lord and my reward is with my God!' He alone becomes the bearer of God's work of salvation!

The Servant's relationship with Israel and His task

Having announced that the Servant is to be separated from Israel, the question becomes, what is the difference between the Servant and Israel? The answer comes in verses 5 and 6. The task of the Servant is firstly to 'restore Jacob ... and gather Israel to Himself.' (49:5). This is part of the prophecy of Isaiah which is indeed still to be completed, because the Lord has yet to do this great work of reunification; but Isaiah has already spoken out an impressive prophecy that God will indeed gather His people back to Himself in His own time (see chapters 46 to 48). It is vital that Christian people today accept that it is part of God's plan to bring His people, the Jews, back into His Kingdom at a time of His choosing.

Some are fascinated by the nation of Israel today and the way in which Israel has been gathered into a nation state amongst the world's other nation states. We should be more

interested in praying for the day when God will reunite His people with the Church. How this will come about we do not know and Paul certainly believed it would be part of the 'End Time' processes (see Romans 11), but our prayer should be that prophecy is fulfilled and God will be proven to be faithful in His promises to Israel, despite their rejection of the Messiah.

Verse 6 is the highlight of this text, as we have already seen. The Hebrew text of this verse is fascinating as it explains that the gathering together of Israel is just too small an objective for God; His goal is the salvation of the world! If Israel's gathering were to effect salvation for all, then the Lord would be satisfied with this, but verse 6 says that the Lord regards this gathering as but a small thing, a trifle. Everything in the Bible focuses around this one fact expressed prophetically here in Isaiah in such an astounding way; God's intent is to bring salvation to all, 'a light to the nations ... My salvation throughout the world'. Isaiah 53 is regarded as the central feature of the 'Servant' prophecies because of its obvious description of the saving work of Christ, but this passage declares the intent of God to save 'the nations' and chapter 53 gives us a description, albeit a terrible one, of how that will be achieved.

The reaction to the Servant in the world

Verse 7 is a fascinating and long verse of scripture that has been substantially misread by many. Again, the Servant is speaking about Himself and His task, and He describes Himself in three ways; a despised soul, an abhorred nation, and a slave of rulers. You will not find this clearly translated in most Bible versions, but this is an essential verse of scripture. It is the beginning of Isaiah's description of the fact that the Servant will suffer and be an abhorrence within this world, the very opposite of what we might think of as a 'ruler' (indeed, a 'slave'). This brief trio of phrases previews the great description of Isaiah's 'suffering servant' in chapter 53, and it is a powerful analysis of the evil barriers God has to overcome through the Servant in order to bring salvation. We know that Jesus the Messiah was 'despised', and that He was a Jew, a member of an 'abhorred nation'. We also know that He came with the humility and weakness of one who ruled through the authority of the Father and not by earthly might.

Ultimately, despite the implausibility of the prophecy that he spoke, at least from the point of view of any Israelite living in his day, Isaiah's vision was of the faithfulness of God. The whole prophecy hangs together through his belief that God is faithful and will resolve the impossibilities of the human condition, the rejection of humanity and the evils of this world in whatever way they present themselves. When God's Servant brings salvation, all earthly authority will be obliged to do homage (49:7) to the awesome faithfulness of a Creator God who is able to do the impossible, and conquer evil, sin and rejection, with faithful love.

Application

This truly remarkable passage has far more for us than any one person can write down. Throughout the passage, we are reminded that God does things carefully and in His own time. Indeed, the Servant is here being commissioned to act in the prophecies of Isaiah, written probably seven or eight hundred years before the coming of Christ! Everything in God's plan of salvation happens according to His will, and as Amos says, the Lord 'does nothing without revealing it to His prophets' (Amos 3:7). We look back at these prophecies with awe because we are able to see how they have been fulfilled specifically through the life, death, resurrection and ministry of Jesus, and in the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. As we do this, we should be reminded by Isaiah that the careful and methodical manner in which salvation has come to the world is characteristic of a God who consistently and faithfully works for the good of all. What He does may be a mystery to us at times, but who are we to argue with the Creator of the World?