

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father, show Yourself to me:
 Speak directly to me so that I may hear Your Word,
 Place Your hand in mine so that I can feel Your guidance,
 Reveal Yourself to me in my daily life so that I may trust You,
 Watch over my deeds and my words so that I may know my sins,
 Whisper in my ear the truths I must hear so that I do not let You down,
 Dear Lord and Father, meet me in the pathways of my life, forever. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Cross

Pray that people will be led to notice the Cross wherever they see it, and be challenged about its meaning, and pray that Christians will be ready to account for their faith.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who have lost much because of financial upheavals*
- *Pray for the leaders of the nations who bear great responsibility*
- *Give thanks for the amazing variety found within God's world*

Meditation

Receive salvation, my friend, it may not now make sense to you
 But you will find that faith will lead you upwards, not downwards.

Follow the Lord, my friend, you may never know what will happen
 But the journey you will take will go far beyond your expectations.

Accept the Church, my friend, be vilified; you will not like the pain
 But the fellowship of believers is the most precious thing on earth.

Bear the Cross, my friend, it binds you to the suffering of Christ
 But it is lighter than the burdens which this world will place on you.

Await the vision, my friend, the Lord has things for you to do
 But you will never know them if you do not give Him time, and listen.

Rest in the Lord, my friend, there's no reward for doing right on earth
 But knowing His everlasting love is safety enough for you, forever.

Bible Study - Isaiah 49:14-21

¹⁴ Then Zion said,
 'The LORD has forsaken me!
 My Lord has forgotten me!'

¹⁵ Can a woman forget the child at her
 breast,
 or have no love for the child of her
 womb?
 Even if these could forget,
 yet I will not forget you.

¹⁶ Look, I have inscribed you on the
 palms of my hands;
 your walls are continually in my
 sight.

¹⁷ Your sons fled from those who
 overthrew you,
 but those who laid you waste have
 left you.

¹⁸ Lift up your eyes and look around;

they have all gathered and come to you. ²⁰ *The children born during your bereavement will say again in your hearing: 'This place is too crowded for me! Give me a place to settle!'*
As I live, declares the LORD, you shall wear them all like an ornament, like the adornment of a bride. ²¹ *Then you will say in your heart, 'Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, I was exiled and rejected so who raised these? I was left all alone So where did these come from?'*
¹⁹ *For you were struck down and wasted and your land was destroyed So now you are too crowded for your inhabitants, and those who devoured you are far away.*

Review

Suddenly, after the wonderful and enlightening prophecies at the beginning of chapter 49, these words remind us yet again of the historical reality against which these prophecies are set. The Lord has announced His Servant and His work of salvation and redemption (42:1f. and 49:1f.), but the complaint that the Lord has abandoned His people and forsaken them persists (49:14)! As we read through these great prophecies we may wonder why it is that we return yet again to the theme of Israel's complaint and her failure to fulfil her role. Remember, most of chapters 46 to 48 agonised over the issue of whether God still loved His people Israel despite their failure and the consequent choice of a new Servant to do what they could not. Does this passage not just churn over the same agony, as if Israel can never accept the truth?

We should expect this to be an issue that never goes away. However, if we read carefully, then we will find that this prophecy does indeed address the complaint of Israel, expressed by Zion (49:14), and it goes on to reveal some subtle new information about God's work through the Servant. From this point to the end of chapter 49, the Servant does not speak, but the Lord replies vigorously to the complaints about what He is doing, repeatedly using the image of caring for a child to indicate the relationship between Himself and His people (49:15,20,21,22,25). By the time we reach the end of today's passage however, we are left asking a great many questions, because the prophecy begins to describe a sudden and rapid growth of God's people all seeking to dwell in Zion (49:20f.), much to the confusion of Zion herself!

To begin with, we should note that this prophecy begins with a complaint that is spoken out by Zion. This is a little strange because the term 'Zion' is characteristic of Isaiah, and his prophecies use this description of Jerusalem mostly with reverence and awe. Zion is the holy dwelling place of God amongst His people, and Isaiah prophesies about Zion throughout, as timeless and immortal (see Is. 2:3, 12:6 etc.), though physically represented by Jerusalem before the destruction of the city and its Temple by Babylon (37:22-32). When Isaiah prophesies about what happens after this destruction, he still speaks about Zion but sometimes as a place to be rebuilt (49:16 – see below, and 61:3,4) and sometimes as a spiritual, heavenly home or dwelling place (51:3,11; 62:11f.) which has no earthly base. Our passage here in chapter 49 is one of the first places in scripture where we begin to see the change from the earthly Zion to the heavenly, but this change is in itself mysterious, at least to the inhabitants of Zion in Isaiah's day, as verses 20 and 21 clearly suggest!

me by a friend many years ago, and it means much to me. This passage of scripture reminds me that if I were to see Jesus hands now, and when I see them in heaven, I will not only see the nail-prints in His hands, but also my own name 'inscribed' in the flesh of His hands. What can I say? It brings it home to me that He died for my sins; and this is my testimony.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group what you believe the term 'Zion' represents both to you and to other people today. How can we correct misunderstanding of this term?
2. In what ways can a Christian justifiably or appropriately speak about Zion and will it be understood?
3. What for you is the main message of this text today? In your group, share your own responses.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find this passage rather touching and the plethora of links with the New Testament is exciting. Clearly, some of these links can be explained by a conscious desire of God's people in the early days of the church to use Biblical imagery from the Old Testament to explain the life of Christ, but it cannot all be explained in this way. The connections are a deeply spiritual aspect of the way all scripture works.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Does your faith mean so much to you that you cannot forget it? In what ways do you remember your faith and purposefully try to put it into practice on a daily basis, or do you imagine that your faith will affect your life automatically? Pray about these things.*
- *What do you feel when you are with Christians who do things differently from you? Do you find it hard to relate to the things they do? Try attending some different churches and submitting your feelings about this to the Lord; it is an exercise in accepting that Zion has no walls!*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you have tracked us down when we went astray. Forgive us our sins and teach us how to repent with sincerity and earnestness. Bless us as we do our best for all who struggle within the 'fold' of the church, and open our hearts to those who are lost so that we fulfil our mission here on earth. AMEN

In this passage, the Lord affirms yet again that His character is immortal and unchanging; He will not forget Zion just as a mother will not forget the child she bears (49:15) and He says with great power 'I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands!' (49:16). This reaffirms God's eternal love for His people despite the fact that He has taken away her role on earth and given it to the Servant (42:1f. and 49:1f.). Then, the Lord begins to speak in a new and mysterious way, saying that people will gather to Zion but without saying who these people are (49:18). He accepts that the earthly Zion will be destroyed at the time of the Exile (49:19) but then describes a chaotic scene in which the great city is capable of being inhabited again, but is too small. It is unable to bear the influx, and she complains yet again, saying 'who raised these?' New inhabitants have come to live in Zion who are not recognisable as the Israel of old! What is the Lord doing? This prophecy pushes us to the edge of our seats in anticipation of what the Lord will do to Zion, His dwelling place, through the Servant.

Going Deeper

Within this overall framework, there are a number of fascinating insights and illustrations used by Isaiah. Clearly, his aim was to push forwards in His prophecy of God's eternal work of salvation as available for all nations, and although the manner in which this is gradually revealed may seem slow to us, these extraordinary prophecies still needed to be accepted by God's people, the Jews. If the Servant was ever to be born as Isaiah prophesied (7:14), the Jewish people still needed assurance that they were God's chosen people in search of the fulfilment of God's plan. Without this assurance, why would they preserve Isaiah's prophecies?

Notes on the text and translation

- V14 *'Can a woman forget the child at her breast' Most translations have 'can a mother forget her nursing child', but I suggest that in today's world where breast feeding of babies is an increasingly important issue, it is worth translating the single Hebrew word for 'sucking child' (literally) as 'the child at the breast'.*
- V16 *'Look, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands' It is difficult to find a way of conveying the strong emphasis within the Hebrew which is placed upon the single Hebrew word for 'on the palms of my hands'. It stands at the head of the Hebrew sentence boldly indicating God's claim of ownership of His people.*
- V16 *'Your walls are continually in my sight' The phrase sounds strange to us, but this refers to the walls of Jerusalem which are of a continual concern to the Lord, especially after the Exile when they had to be repaired.*
- V17 *This whole verse is different from what you will find in many Bibles. The main reason for this is that some of the most ancient Hebrew versions of the Old Testament have 'your builders' as the first word, and others have 'your sons'. The reason for the difference in these texts is totally unknown, but it need not concern us too much. The 'sons' are one and the same as the Jewish builders of the walls of Jerusalem after the exile – see the reference to the 'walls' in the previous verse.*
- V18 *'As I live, declares the Lord.' Strictly, the Hebrew says 'As I live, oracle of the Lord'. This does not make sense in normal English speech so I have enforced the sense of God speaking prophetically by using the word 'declare'. Most versions of the Bible have 'as I live says the Lord', and the sense of prophetic announcement is lost.*
- V18 *'like the adornment of a bride' Most versions speak about the 'binding' of a bride at this point, but I have interpreted what a bride 'binds' (which is the basic Hebrew*

word here) as a reference to the various adornments, jewellery and clothing worn by a bride. This makes best sense of the text here.

I will not forget

When the Lord replies to Zion and defends His faithfulness, the picture He uses is that of a woman with a child. There are many places in scripture where powerful pictures of the Lord's work are given by describing essentially female activities. The child at the mother's breast is of course one of the most powerful of these (see also Psalms 131 and 139 and others). None of these descriptions warrants our conclusion that God is to be described or addressed as 'female', but it does remind us that whilst the Bible undoubtedly addresses God in male terms, principally as 'Father', God contains within Himself all the characteristics we understand as 'male' and 'female'. This is entirely consistent with what is said in the first chapter of Genesis where both 'male and female' are designated as being the very 'image of God' (Gen 1:27).

Within the powerful words; 'can a woman forget the child at her breast, or have no love for the child of her womb' (49:14), there is one word that stands out, and this is the word for 'love'. In most of the Old Testament, 'love' is indicated by one of two great Hebrew words; either 'cheseth', meaning God's faithful, unchanging and everlasting love, or 'ahavah' meaning God's undeserved and unearned love. Both these words are used frequently in the early stories of Genesis and Exodus where the Lord shows His undying and unearned love for His people; in the stories of Abraham, Jacob and Moses in particular. These qualities of God do not change, but there is one other Hebrew word for 'love' which is often missed because of the way that it is translated. This is 'raham' meaning 'compassionate love'. It is all very well saying you love someone forever and that this will remain true whatever happens, but such words are often unbelievable unless in the first instance, a quality of love has been shown which is caring, practical and compassionate. The word 'raham' is connected to the idea of 'feelings' and 'sympathy'; we might today consider that it means 'empathy' (a word created only in the twentieth century).

The Lord God says that He will show this quality of compassionate love; He will not forget His own (49:15), He will inscribe them 'on the palms of my hands' (49:16). This is a powerful image, because it does not just mean writing the name of His people on his hand as if (today) with a biro! The Hebrew words clearly indicate that the name of God's people is etched on the flesh of His hands. It sounds almost crude to us but God's commitment to us is physical! This is part of the gradual build of prophecies which reach their climax in the profoundly physical and disturbing prophecies of the Suffering Servant in chapter 53.

Open your eyes

The Lord is watching Zion, and although she is the one complaining at the beginning of the chapter, she does so only because she reflects the views of those who live in her. Something is happening in this prophecy which slowly begins to change our picture of Zion so that by the time we get to the end of Isaiah (chapters 62-66), she is transformed into the very spiritual presence of God with His people.

The transformation begins in verse 16, where it may seem odd to us that the Lord says 'your walls are continually in my sight'. The prophecy goes on to explain that the walls (from Isaiah's point of view) would one day be 'laid waste' (49:18) and the people of Israel would flee from Zion (49:17). Nevertheless, after this has happened, Isaiah prophesies a great gathering of people to the wasted city. The interesting word in verse 18 which describes this is 'all', for the Lord asks Zion to 'lift up your eyes' and perceive what is happening. The ancient city which was once defined by its walls is now represented by something more like a family gathering, and this gathering contains specific references to a marriage and the 'adornment of a bride' (49:18)!

It is impossible for a Christian to read this and not realise that the new 'dwelling place of God with His people' (which is the Body of Christ in New Testament language) is much less like a city and more like a family gathering; indeed, the Greek word for 'church' means precisely this, a 'gathering' of people. In addition, we cannot escape noticing that the whole idea of a marriage is one which is taken up in the New Testament, to the extent that the Church of God is called the 'Bride' (Rev 19:7, 21:2) and also the 'holy city' which is another name for Zion! All these connections come together in the great vision of John for the great conclusion of all time and God's final re-creation! Yet here in Isaiah, we gain small glimpses of this greater reality to come, and it is what makes these words great prophecy!

The new children

Suddenly, in verse 19, the Hebrew text judders and the grammar does not make good sense. I have not explained this in detail in the notes above because there is little to say about this except that the first line of verse 19 is a series of words rolling on from one another; 'struck down, wasted, destroyed land ... too crowded now for inhabitants!' Yet as we have seen, people are gathering! In great anticipation of what is to come, people are arriving with nowhere to go (49:20)!

It is clear that at this point, there is little connection with the historical reality of what happened after the exile. If you read through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah you will find that the constant problem in Jerusalem after the Exile and after the return from Babylon was the lack of people! Most Jews had become accustomed to their new surroundings and had made new homes and new communities. They did not want to go back to an abandoned city and try to rebuild it, despite the encouragement of Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophet Haggai! We must therefore assume that Isaiah is now prophesying a spiritual reality which includes the growth of Zion without walls! Our suspicions are verified if we read on in Isaiah to discover that at the very heart of the 'Suffering Servant' prophecies of chapter 53, Isaiah speaks about the 'children of Zion' as the 'seed of the Servant' (53:10, 54:1f.).

In addition, the phrase that describes those gathering in the new spiritual Zion says; 'children born during your bereavement' (49:20). This does not refer simply to those who have come to the Lord during the time of the Exile. The word for 'bereavement' in Hebrew also means 'childlessness' and is used elsewhere in scripture to describe 'barren' women. The picture described in the last two verses is therefore much clearer than we might think. It says that through her punishment for past sins, Israel has become barren and childless, and she will find that those who claim Zion, the dwelling place of God on earth (without walls!) are not her children; she does not recognise them! To her they are a mystery, but we will find that they will come because of the work of the Servant!

Application

There are a number of powerful pictures within this prophecy pointing forward to the work of the Servant and the life of Christ. The humanity of Christ, born of a woman, the close relationship of God with the Father, the 'open' nature of God's church, His 'Body'; the gathering of God's people in unity, the marriage of the 'bride' to Jesus as the 'Lamb' (Rev 19:7), and the 'birth' of God's new people through baptism into the limitless Kingdom of God. Also, tragically, the continued puzzlement and disbelief of many Jewish people that their Messiah, the Servant of the prophecies of Isaiah, has indeed come in Jesus Christ.

There is one picture however which is haunting in its power, and this is the promise of God that His own are 'inscribed on the palms of my hand'. As all Christians know, Biblical and Christian tradition indicates that when Jesus was crucified, nails were driven through His hands into the wood of the Cross. I have a genuine old Roman nail from the early first century AD mounted on display within a Cross made of wood in my study. It was given to