

Prayer

I place to one side all the cares of my soul and place myself in Your hands, O Lord, my Saviour and my God. I rest in You, I take my peace from You, I learn from You, I look forward by Your guidance, and I rejoice in Your presence. Jesus Christ, my Lord, may I always value every moment I place aside from worldly cares to be with You! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Cross

Pray for those who wear the Cross and yet know little of its true power; some wear it as a 'lucky charm', so pray that the Lord will reveal His true love for all who seek Him.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for people who do good in our midst
- Pray for those who have lost much because of financial upheavals
- Pray for the leaders of the nations who bear great responsibility

Meditation

Lord, when there is nothing left and I feel poured out like water;
I come to You to renew my soul.

Lord, when my bones ache with weariness, stress and toil;
I come to You to heal my body.

Lord, when I have lost my way and fail to find my directions;
I come to You for guidance.

Lord, when the repeating nature of my earthly life oppresses me;
I come to you for restoration.

Lord, when I am troubled by the things I see around me every day;
I come to You for peace.

Lord, when the people around me fail to see me for who I am;
I come to You for affirmation.

Lord, when the world has lost its way and I do not know where to go;
I come to You for salvation.

You never let me down!

Bible Study - Isaiah 49:22-26

²² *This is what the Lord GOD says:
Look! I will lift up my hand to the
nations,
and raise my signal to the peoples.
They will bring your sons in their
bosom,
and your daughters will be carried
on shoulders.*

*and their queens will nurse you.
They will bow down with faces to the
ground
and lick the dust at your feet.
Then you will know that I am the
LORD;
And those who wait for me will not
be shamed.*

²³ *Kings will support you,*

²⁴ Can the plunder be taken from a victor,
or can you escape from just captivity?

and I will personally save your children.

²⁶ I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh;

They will be drunk with their own blood as with wine.

Then all flesh will know that I am the LORD;

your Saviour and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

²⁵ But this is what the LORD says: Even the captives of a victor can be taken, and the plunder of a tyrant be rescued; for I will oppose those who oppose you,

Review

On the surface of it, this passage continues from yesterday's text; and within it, God reassures Zion who has complained that the Lord has forgotten her. In the course of yesterday's prophecy, Isaiah revealed in a small but powerful way, the Lord's intent to develop Zion spiritually and without walls. Enigmatically, He speaks about drawing to Zion people she does not recognise because they are not part of Israel's heritage (49:20,21), and the whole picture seems to project forward beyond the time of the Exile to reflect a spiritual vision of God's dwelling. Here in this passage, the Lord continues to speak to Zion, and what He says both addresses Zion's concerns and questions about what He is doing, and also continues to hint at the spiritual reality of the coming Zion, God's new dwelling place with people on earth as heralded by the Servant.

When we read the passage at first, we can quickly see that the Lord is reassuring Zion that the nations which He once summoned to chastise and punish her (see Isaiah 10, 12,13f.) will one day come under submission to God Himself and therefore serve Zion rather than destroy her. Indeed, the picture presented in verses 22 and 23 is graphic, describing 'kings and queens' who will go to great lengths to restore Zion and return her people. They will carry them back with tenderness, and the prophecy uses similar parent / child imagery to that used earlier (49:15,20) to illustrate their care; 'they will bring your sons in their bosom' (meaning within folds of cloth draped from arm to chest) and your daughter will be carried on shoulders!' These same kings and queens will also bow down in homage, and will 'lick the dust at your feet' (49:23)!

This is indeed an extraordinary vision and if fulfilled would most certainly convince Zion of God's renewal. But here we face the sharp issue as far as Zion is concerned; will God really do this? In verse 24 this basic question is asked; 'can plunder be taken from a victor; or can you escape from just punishment?' Here Zion asks whether God really has the power to return to Jerusalem the people and goods taken away when the city was sacked. Zion also questions God's integrity, for Isaiah's prophecies argued from the very beginning that the captivity of exile was God's just punishment; so if the punishment was just, how could anyone escape from it? These questions are all wrapped up in the cultural and political circumstances of the day, but they are both very similar to the questions people ask today; does God really have the power to 'save' people as He claims, and can He really forgive sins and remove the curse of evil?

The reply (49:25,26) is clear and almost wholly within the context of Israel and Zion's complex life after the Exile, but it is not too hard to see the spiritual principles which undergird the Lord's response, and this is what we should be looking for. The Lord speaks strongly here and with great emphasis. The Lord says that 'captives ... can be taken' and 'plunder ... be rescued' because He has the greater authority and power and He will certainly now fight for His people (49:25 – note, the appalling beginning of verse 26 may

3. Discuss in your group whether the last four lines of verse 26 are an adequate expression of the Gospel.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

This passage of scripture is only a brief part of Isaiah, but it contains a strong and relevant message about the nature of God and His ability to do what He says. I find that when engaged in pastoral work, many people have doubts about whether God will indeed do things for them. They may even accept that God could be doing something which is beyond their understanding, but still express reticence that the Lord is actually interested in their personal affairs. It is crucial that the church of God maintains its witness to the activity of God in this world on behalf of each and every individual, and especially when they respond to Him by faith.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Pray for all who find it hard to accept that God is helping them through their troubles, because they find their circumstances too painful to bear. Pray especially for people of faith who find themselves in such a position.
- Write down the last four lines of verse 26, and then write down your own thoughts about these words. Let the Holy Spirit lead you in this exercise to see what he will reveal to you through these great words.

Final Prayer

You are the One who has brought me to this place, Lord Jesus. Guide me therefore to where You would have me go from here. Show me a sign, a light, a map; any guidance by which Your Word may lead me on, so that I may give glory to You in all I do, from this time on: AMEN

describe in poetic terms the awful reality of living under siege, and it is used to describe the fate of those who oppose the Lord and His actions – see later study).

Lastly, in the last four lines, the spiritual truth of the whole passage shines through this talk of war, captives, plunder and 'eating of flesh'. As if with a fresh vigour which leads us on to the next phase of Isaiah's great prophecy, the Lord announces that the whole world (all flesh) will know Him as 'Saviour' and 'Redeemer', and also the 'Mighty One of Jacob'. The spiritual vindication of the Lord includes both all those who are saved and redeemed by Him from within the world, and also the people of Jacob (that is, Israel).

Going Deeper

This whole passage leads up to the formal announcement of the Lord's intention to save and redeem, and also to include Jacob in His plan (49:26). So many of the prophecies in chapters before this have pointed towards this and indicates that this is what the Lord intends, but here it is presented as a fact of Isaiah's prophecy. As we look more closely at the text, we will find that this theology of salvation and redemption does in fact lie behind everything that is said, even though some of it sounds initially quite difficult; but it is the purpose of study to unravel such things!

Notes on the text and translation

- V22 *'the nations' Here, the Hebrew word 'go'im' is a general word for 'nations' which in this context could also mean 'Gentiles'.*
- V23 *This surprising verse is often translated 'kings will be your foster-father's' but the idea conveyed by the Hebrew here is 'one who gives support as a father. The combined reference to kings and queens here clearly indicates that God's people will receive the patronage and support of Gentile nations who will also do homage to them as children of the Lord.*
- V24 *'Or can you escape from just captivity?' You will find this is not the same as most Bible versions which struggle to make sense of the Hebrew words in a variety of ways. The problem facing every translator is that the word 'tsadiq' meaning 'just' or 'justice' is in the middle of the sentence, and does not seem to fit, so clever means have been devised to make it into another word, meaning 'tyrant' (as in 'or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?' – NRSV). However, my translation is very close to the Hebrew and makes perfect sense. The Lord is asking whether it is right for someone to escape who is justly held – see study.*
- V25 *'I will personally save your children' There is an emphatic 'I' within this sentence which requires the addition of 'personally' in English to bring out this emphasis.*

The signal for return! (49:22,23)

So much of Isaiah's prophecies, along with so many prophecies of the other Old Testament prophets, contain stark descriptions of God's wrath, poured out on His people because they have been disobedient to His will (Isaiah 1,2,3,5,10 etc). It is no wonder that many people think of the Old Testament God as a God of wrath and anger. If you have followed these studies you will be aware that this is an unhelpful and largely incorrect conclusion because God's just anger always has a reason. It is entirely understandable that when God's people Israel fail to do the Lord's will and be a 'light to the nations' (42:6, 49:6), they jeopardise God's entire plan of salvation. It is not that God cannot find another way to achieve His ends, but that He is heartbroken that He will have to act with just wrath against His chosen because they refuse to comply with the greatest mission ever given! The whole Old Testament is the story of this struggle, and without it, the coming of the Saviour in the New Testament would appear to be a random act of charity on God's part rather than a consistent and faithful act of compassion and love. So despite the ancient language of war

and battle found throughout these verses, we must have the courage to see through this and perceive that here, God is presented for who He is, a God whose purpose and aim is peace, love and fellowship for all His creation.

When we read about God 'raising a banner' elsewhere in scripture (see Exodus 17:5, Psalm 60:4 etc.) the talk is largely about war, albeit just war. But here, when God raises His hand 'to the nations' as a 'signal to the peoples' (49:11), Isaiah tells us that it is for peace and not for war. This is consistent with the inspiring visions dotted throughout his work, of the glory of the Lord's final peace which will rest on all the world when He is at last in control of all things (Isaiah 4, 11:6-9, 26, 35 etc.). Here in this passage, Isaiah sees a vision which indicates something of what must happen if God is ever to bring about His peace to the world; the powers and authorities of the world must be broken, to the point that they serve God's purpose knowingly. The picture Isaiah presents is of kings and queens acting as parents to God's children, and no-one can act as a foster-parent unknowingly and without compassion, least of all the leading powers and authorities within any community!

This is important, because, earlier in Isaiah we read about the way in which God would use Cyrus to achieve His will (45:1f.). Cyrus announced the release of Israel's captives, a decree which enabled the Exiles to go home (see 2 Chronicles 36:22,23 and Ezra 1:1,2), but he did the same for many other people as contemporary records make clear, and it is doubtful that he did this as a conscious act of benevolence towards Israel because he had a revelation from God. To him it was expedient politics. What God declares in Isaiah's prophecies here in our text today is that the time will come when He will make the powers and rulers of the world aware of His authority and they will 'bow down' (49:23) and accept it. In other words, the Lord will bring about peace through the exercise of His authority and not through the horrors of war. War is the way of the world; peace is God's desire for all.

Incidentally, the phrase 'lick the dust at your feet' (49:23) is a poetic description of the position of someone bowing down in worship; it does not pretend to indicate grovelling, as in the way that people use the phrase today!

The Lord has the power to do His will

Yes, God has the power to do what He says, and this is the difference between the Lord and all other gods. This is why He is able to take 'plunder ... from a victor' and justify 'escape ... from captivity'. Be careful with this part of scripture because many modern translations simply do not convey the strength of this message here, being trapped by textual problems (see notes above). The last two verses (24 and 25) are clearly intended to answer the questions raised in verse 24, and declare that only God Almighty has the authority and the power to change the order of human affairs. This is controversial, for many people even today find it hard to think that God will intervene in human history; they prefer to think of God as standing back and observing, albeit kindly, the affairs of humanity. But it is essential that we believe in a God who has the power and authority to act when circumstances change because of sin and evil human behaviour. Unless God does this, then evil would manipulate the will of God. This is not the reality of spiritual affairs. God is able to fulfil His consistent plans for the world by intervening in earthly situations, changing people's lives, altering situations and ensuring that His salvation is in truth the driving force of history, even if our small perspective on this may not show this to us.

Verse 25 is a strident explanation of this to Israel and Zion. Remember, Ahaz had rejected the notion that God would intervene and help His people, so he arranged political alliances according to his plan, rather than search out God's plans. This had earlier caused a great row between himself and Isaiah (see Isaiah 7 and 8); and this incident was just the tip of the iceberg which showed Israel's increasing disbelief in God's desire and ability to do

things in the world. Look at God's answer to these charges in verse 25; He states categorically that He can overturn the human order of things; 'captives of a victor can be taken' and 'the plunder of a tyrant be rescued'. He also emphatically declares that He will 'oppose those who oppose you', in other words, He will intervene in history to protect His people and to save them. He says 'I will personally save your children!' What other declaration and promise can we want from our God? Is this not enough for us to hear and accept that our God will put His enemies in their place (which is the meaning of the rather gruesome first two lines of verse 26).

The wonderful finale of this text transports us directly from the Old Testament to the New, using timeless words which speak about God's eternal blessings. 'All flesh' makes clear that God is only interested in saving the whole of His Creation, and this is the lesson which Israel could not stomach and the reason for her failure. Once chosen, she wanted to have God for herself, but God tore Himself away and said 'No – my desire is for all flesh'. The towering affirmation 'I am the Lord' reaches through time from God's revelation of Himself to Abraham (Gen 15:7) and Moses (Ex 3:14) to His many deeds of love and mercy for Israel (Judges 15:18, 1 Kings 20:28 etc.) and into the future declarations of Jesus about Himself and His work of salvation (John 4:26, 6:35 etc.) and the final triumphant shout of God's joy at the End 'I am the Alpha and the Omega!' Make no mistake, God's purposes for His world are 'salvation and redemption' (49:26).

Application

The same problems which the Israelites had is reflected within the life of God's people today. Now we have the presence and witness of Christ and the power of His Holy Spirit to help us deal with it, but the problem is the same. Because of our lack of vision and our experience of the troubles of this world, people naturally tend towards thinking that God is not active on our behalf or anyone else's, and the saving work of Christ is something we must enter into by our own decision, will and efforts. In the eighteenth century, such theology was widely held in the churches of England, and it was called 'deism'. Some described God as like a watchmaker, who, having made the world like a great complicated clock, has set it in motion and watches whilst His work unfolds, not needing to do anything except let His creation do its own work. It was John Wesley who finally broke the power of such heresy in England (others did the same on the continent and in America) by insisting that God was actively at work in the lives of those who responded to Him by faith; this was the birth of evangelism as we now know it. Yet even today, I find some within the church who find it hard to believe that God cares enough to intervene in history, and is big enough to do this whilst maintaining the integrity of His eternal plan of salvation. The sin of disbelief in the power of God to act has also been in evidence in recent times in the opposition to the Holy Spirit declared by some people and congregations. All the prophecies of Isaiah warn us that such disbelief is a denial of Biblical and historical truth.

The church of God today can claim exactly the same Gospel as that announced in Isaiah 49:26, and the only addition we might wish to make to the last four lines of this verse are that we now know who this Saviour and Redeemer is. We know that the Servant is Jesus Christ, but His purpose and mission is the same as that prophesied by Isaiah.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do people in the church today generally believe that he will intervene in human history and act?
2. To what extent do we need to accept that the Lord will fight for His people within this sinful world, and in what ways do we see Him do this?