

## Prayer

Great Creator and Lord of all, show us your power by restoring Your Church again. We are confident in You alone for this great work which will encourage our faith and empower us to do Your work in the world. Use us according to Your great plan and may we be responsive to You and humble in our attitude to all You require of us. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Cross

*Pray for the work of the 'Red Cross'. It has evolved into a secular organisation doing world-wide humanitarian work, but pray for it because it bears the sign of Christian faith.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for the leaders of the nations who bear great responsibility*
- *Give thanks for the amazing variety found within God's world*
- *Pray today for those who report the news by TV or by newspaper*

## Meditation

What religion can tell us anything about God or life  
Which cannot be found through Christ Jesus our Lord,  
When we accept His love and care as our Creator?

What can we do about the world's suffering and pain  
And the strangleholds of the enemy which grasp each soul,  
Except trust in Christ who has risen from death?

Where else can we find complete and eternal liberty,  
Except on the Cross where Christ's love is victorious,  
And people are released from the burden of sin?

How can we live our lives free from guilt and shame  
And be champions of truth and justice, freedom and love,  
Unless the Holy Spirit has free reign in our hearts?

Friends, stand firm in Christ each hour of the day,  
Rejoice in your calling, and your fellowship in Him;  
So when called to account, He will know you.

## Bible Study - Isaiah 49:8-13

<sup>8</sup> *This is what the LORD says:  
I answer you at a time of favour,  
I help you on a day of salvation;*

*I watch over you and give you  
as a covenant for people,  
to establish a land,  
and to allocate abandoned  
inheritances;*

<sup>9</sup> *to say to prisoners, 'Come out!'  
to those in darkness, 'Be revealed!'*

*They will feed along the pathways,  
they will have pasture on all  
barren heights;*

<sup>10</sup> *they will not hunger or thirst,  
Or be struck down by hot wind or  
sun,*

*for they will be led by one who has  
pity on them,  
and He will guide them by springs  
of water.*

*and look, these from the north,  
and the west,  
and these from the land of Syene.*

*<sup>13</sup> Heavens, sing for joy!*

*<sup>11</sup> And I will turn all my mountains into  
a road,  
and my highways will be raised up.*

*Earth, rejoice!  
Mountains, break into song!*

*<sup>12</sup> Look, these will come from far away,*

*For the LORD comforts His people,  
and has compassion on His poor.*

### **Review**

Isaiah 49 continues with a wonderful and fascinating series of prophecies about the commission of the Servant. Although there is no mention of 'Israel' or 'God's people' in the text, it is full of words and phrases which connect us to the stories of Israel's past; for example, the talk of 'covenant' and the distribution of inheritance (49:9). It also projects ahead of time, anticipating the saving work of Christ and indicating themes at the heart of Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus did not just take these great words of Isaiah (and others) and merely use them for His teaching, such as the 'release of prisoners' theme (49:9) and the 'humble poor' (49:13). These connections exist because this prophecy reflects God's will, and Jesus did God's work as His Servant. Every verse and line of this great poem is full of significance as part of God's saving plan for all humanity, put into action by the Servant.

It is difficult to analyse this text, and if you read other books about Isaiah you will find there are many theories about how all the prophecies in Isaiah 49 fit together. For example, some Bibles include verse 13 together with the verses before it, and some versions place it with the prophecies which follow. It may be that here, just after the book of Isaiah has begun its final focus on the work of the Servant, there are a number of smaller prophecies gathered together in order to form a comprehensive collection of Isaiah's sayings. Despite these uncertainties, this whole section is presented as a speech by the Lord declaring what He will do through the Servant; remember that yesterday's passage was mostly spoken by the Servant!

This speech begins with a promise of God to act to bring salvation (49:8). Indeed, the Lord says quite clearly that He will make the Servant a 'covenant for people', thereby promising that the covenant, which He had established with the forefathers and been compromised by later generations, would be remade. At the end of verse 8 and the beginning of verse 9 there are four great covenant promises of God which follow on from this; He will 'establish a land', 'allocate ... inheritances', release prisoners and bring enlightenment. Between them, these promises span Old and New Testaments, beginning with issues of land and inheritance and ending with liberation and revelation. However, God's promises cannot be divided between the two halves of the Bible. As Matthew reminds us, Jesus came to establish a new 'Promised Land' which he called a 'Kingdom', and John reminds us that each of us has an inheritance in that eternal Kingdom if we choose to respond to Jesus and believe that He is the Messiah, the Son of God, and His Servant.

The passage then continues with a series of three pairs of promises, each one introduced by 'they will ...' (49:9,10). All of these promises are about sustenance and guidance. God Himself will do the work required, and He will sustain His people through the difficulties they face; 'they will feed along the pathways ... they will not hunger or thirst ... they will be led ...'. At a time in the life of God's church when there is a great deal of emphasis on renewal (and quite rightly so) it is right for us to be reminded that salvation is God's work, and we are dependent upon His sustenance!

faith is no religious system, it is the truth. Of course, faith can only be practically demonstrated in the world as a form of religion, but by the revelation of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we demonstrate the truth of our faith. Liberation and revelation are Isaiah's relevant and pertinent contribution to our understanding of salvation from the depths of the Old Testament!

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group whether this passage tells us anything unique or original about the nature of salvation.
2. What does liberation mean today? How many people be liberated and come into God's Kingdom?
3. How can the heavens sing for joy, the earth rejoice and the mountains break into song? What does this poetry mean?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*I find it fascinating that there is so much in this text. I have discussed one issue above, but I am equally fascinated by the way in which comfort and compassion are singled out in verse 13 as an expression of the Lord's joy and favour towards those He saves by means of the Servant. I also love the series of verbs in verse 8 which indicate the purposeful action of Almighty God; 'I answer ... I help ... I watch ... I give' The intense sense of activity generated by these verbs speaks volumes about what God is doing all the time, even though what He does appears to be ignored by most people for most of the time!*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *What is your inheritance of faith? What will you pass on to others and what will you receive from the Lord; surely we cannot assume one and not the other! Make a note of your response to this question, for later use.*
- *How easy do you find it to sing in joy to the Lord, or express joy about your faith and your salvation in other ways. Ask the Lord to liberate you into joy, and reveal Himself to You in visions of happiness and splendour!*

## Final Prayer

Great and mighty Lord, the smile of Your face means everything to me. You have made Yourself known to me in many different ways, and your voice is precious and your touch is a blessing of grace. However, to know that You look on me kindly is perfect joy, and by this I know that all things are possible through You. Thank You, Lord, AMEN

After this, the Lord declares that He will do the work previously prophesied by Isaiah in the famous words 'prepare the way ...'. Yes, He will 'turn ... mountains into a road' and raise up highways (49:11)! He will also gather His people from all over the earth, not His chosen people of Israel, but a new people of His choice, from unexpected places (like Syene – see 49:12)! As we now know because of the work of Jesus, everything promised by the Lord is a matter of the greatest joy and anticipation. The Lord has spoken, He has done what He has said, and the whole universe celebrates (49:3)!

### **Going Deeper**

Most of the condensed promises within this text are a fascinating commentary on the saving work of God through the Servant. Sometimes, people refer to the 'suffering servant' prophecies of Isaiah as if the whole poem contains nothing except a lengthy analysis of what it meant for the Messiah to suffer, but this is not the case. If we look at everything Isaiah prophesies about the servant, we will find a complete theology of salvation and a well rounded understanding of what Jesus came to do on earth. Certainly, this work was concluded in suffering and death, but this must be seen in its proper context which is the unstoppable desire of God to bring salvation to all the world.

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

- V8 *Some versions of the Bible translate this verse in the past tense, and others in the future. They are in fact Hebrew 'past' tenses, but the prophets often state something yet to happen in the future as so certain that they declare it as 'already having happened' (past tense); this is sometimes called the 'prophetic perfect' tense. I have translated this in the present because this captures the general sense of the prophecy that God establishes the Servant to be one who from our point of view, always 'does' what God requires of Him.*
- V8 *'as a covenant for people' This phrase in Hebrew is very uncertain, yet it seems clear that the purpose of the Servant is to be the covenant Himself (see study). My translation attempts to avoid adding words to the text which are not there in Hebrew.*
- V13 *This verse has been translated in the same way as verse 8, using the present tense to describe the general work of the Servant which the Lord has promised he will do.*
- V13 *'and has compassion on His poor' Most versions of the Bible have 'has compassion of his afflicted.' However, the Hebrew word for those 'afflicted' is also the same one used for the 'poor of the land' who have been disinherited. The word is enigmatic and reminds us of the Beatitudes (see study).*

**The Lord promises to act (v8)** The first section of this passage is God's promise of action through the Servant. The four lines after 'this is what the Lord says' are a fascinating description of how God works in the world, and in typical Hebrew fashion, the first two lines go together in parallel, and the third and fourth do the same.

When the Lord says; 'I answer you at a time of favour, I help you on a day of salvation ...' this pair of lines declares that God does what He does at the time of His choosing. He will answer our prayers and acknowledge our concerns, but His agenda for our benefit is always the agenda of salvation, and the timing of His work is often a mystery known only to Him. For example, Isaiah must have wondered why the Lord did not send His servant shortly after he prophesied about Him, but it was centuries before Jesus came. We may wonder why the Lord does not seem to answer our prayers especially when we feel justice must surely require the Lord to act, but God sees more than we do, and He will only act when it is right according to His plan of salvation. This is what is meant by the expression 'time of favour' which is not a matter of arbitrary likes or dislikes on God's part, but a moment which is right or just according His greater plan.

When the time comes for God to act through His servant, verse 8 says that He will 'give' the Servant as 'a covenant for people' (the word for people here is entirely general). Each part of this phrase is important. Isaiah's prophecy that God 'gives' the Servant is remarkable in itself, because we often speak of Jesus being 'given' or 'handed over' to men in the story of His Passion (for example Matthew 26:2, 27:2,18f.). In addition, Isaiah prophesies that the Servant Himself is the New Covenant; that is, the new relationship between God and humanity replacing the Old Covenant made with Abraham, Moses and David. In the translation notes above you will see that the expression 'a covenant for people' is difficult to translate, and the difficulty with the Hebrew text may arise simply because for Isaiah, the idea of this new covenant was virtually inexpressible. We are used to speaking about Jesus as the 'Mediator of a new Covenant' (see Hebrews 8:6, 9:15, 12:24), but for Isaiah, it was something totally new, but that is what real prophecy means!

**The New Covenant (v8,9)** We have already seen that the new covenant is characterised by the last two lines of verse 8 and the first two of verse 9. The idea of land was always important to the Old Testament Covenant; and here, Isaiah specifically speaks about the setting up of a new 'land' and an re-apportioning of 'abandoned' inheritances. This is something which becomes necessary because as prophesied by Moses (Ex 23:33, Deut 28:15f.), the Promised Land of Canaan has rejected the people of Israel because of their sin. Isaiah undoubtedly saw the coming invasion of Jerusalem by Babylon as a perversion of the land and a fulfilment of Moses' prophecies that required a new work of God. Hence, Jesus did indeed come to bring a new Kingdom and a new inheritance, but as Isaiah foresaw, He did it in a completely unexpected way.

The characteristics of the New Covenant (see 49:9) are twofold; liberation ('say to prisoners 'Come out!') and revelation ('to those in darkness 'Be revealed!'). There are many ways for us to understand the saving work of God through Jesus, our 'Suffering Servant', and the New Testament tells us a great deal about this in the letters of Paul and others. However, the Gospel message of salvation is surely incomplete unless, as it says here in the Old Testament, people are set free from bondage and come to see God. It is at the heart of the Gospel message that the individual may be released from sin and death and may see, perceive and experience the revealed truth of God's love. By this revelation, salvation is made real in the heart of the believer.

**The path of salvation, led by the Servant (v9,10)** The third and fourth lines of verse 9 begin the sequence of three pairs of lines (see above) about God's sustenance and guidance. The metaphors used in this passage all come from various 'journey experiences of the people of the Old Testament, principally the journey of the people of Israel through the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land. That original journey must have been very difficult, and the people of Israel had to learn to rely upon God for the very basic necessities of life; food and water (see Exodus 16,17). Isaiah's prophecy contains generous images of God's provision; food and water, shade and protection, sympathy and guidance. All of these are reassuring, announcing to us that God has laid aside His anger with His people. There is no anticipation of tension and trouble here, just the continual and generous provision of God, and this is our just expectation of the Lord's salvation achieved through the Suffering Servant.

**The Lord's work to enable the Servant to come (vv11-12)** The remainder of this prophecy is not what we might expect. On the one hand we would expect to see that God is genuinely excited about the work of the Servant and the fulfilment of His plan of salvation; but on the other hand, not all of us pick up the specific statement here that the Lord Himself will 'turn all my mountains into a road and my highways ... lifted up'. This, of course is a fulfilment of what Isaiah prophesied earlier; 'every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain be made low' (Isaiah 40:4f.) We tend to think of this as being fulfilled by

John the Baptist acting as the 'Elijah' (see Malachi 4) who would come and prepare the way for the Messiah. Verse 11 reminds us that although it is true that John fulfilled this passage, it was a work of God.

Together with verse 12, this passage reminds us not to try and interpret world events as fulfilment of prophecy unless they are clearly 'acts of God', perceived by God's people as the Lord's work in the midst of our troubled world. Notice how the Lord draws attention to what He is doing in verse 12, as if delighted by what is happening. He says, 'Look, these ...' and describes people He has brought from 'far away, from the North and the West' (though unfortunately, no-one knows the significance of coming from the 'land of Syene! – 49:12!) The Lord is keen to reveal His work for people to see; there are no secrets once the Servant begins His work; the Lord wants His work to be made known!

**God's work, pure joy! (v13)** The passage concludes with a wonderful but little used expression of joy; 'heavens, sing for joy; earth, rejoice; mountains, break into song!' Most of these phrases are found in various psalms with other verses around them making more extensive songs (see for example Psalm 44:23, 49:13). If you look at these Psalms, you will find that these expressions of joy are part of larger songs with different emphases, but here, the context makes all the difference.

This prophecy of song and rejoicing is a direct consequence of the announcement by God of His long awaited plan of salvation, which will be fulfilled by the Servant. One has the impression that God Himself is happy and wants us to be happy as well! It is from the Lord's own heart of joy and contentment that His comfort and compassion comes (49:13). Comfort and reassurance from the Lord that He has all things in control is a wonderful part of the Lord's work of salvation. If we know we have been saved, then the awesomeness of that great deliverance is enough to give us confidence that He is able to deal with all our problems even though the timing of things may well be beyond our understanding.

## Application

As we have followed these prophecies through today, we have said a considerable amount about the nature of salvation as the work of the Servant. Looking back, it is easy for us to assume much of this, but the more we read prophecies such as this, the more we should be staggered that what we now take for granted as the meaning of our personal salvation was revealed first to Isaiah eight hundred years or so before Christ came. Here, we have read about the coming of a Kingdom (the 'land') and an inheritance for all who are helped on the 'day of salvation (49:8); the nature of salvation as liberation and revelation (49:9); the journey of faith on which the Servant leads us (49:9,10); God's joyous supporting work which enables salvation to be an ever present reality for generations (49:11f.); and the joy of the Lord which is revealed in His love and compassion (49:13).

There is plenty for us to dwell upon, discuss or take further, but the one thing I suggest is worth a closer look is the identification of salvation as a combination of liberation and revelation. People often think they are 'saved' when they are not, or to put it another way, some people regard themselves as Christians without having a personal relationship with God or experiencing any specific religious experience; they simply follow their relatives or decide they like what Christians do and thence join them. There is nothing wrong with this as a starting point, but such an experience of Christian faith falls far short of God's intention for us. His is desperately concerned for us to know that we are liberated from our sins and from the power of death, and that we have a home with Him in heaven for eternity. How can anyone turn away from so great a gift from God? How can people go to church and be comfortable in their religion without facing the truth of what the church has consistently preached for centuries? Secondly, the Lord longs to reveal Himself to us in personal and real ways so that we can have the assurance of our sins forgiven and the assurance that