

## Prayer

Cover us with the protection of Your Spirit, Lord God;  
 Challenge us today to be people who do Your work willingly;  
 Speak to us as we pray about everything that happens to us;  
 Encourage us in the midst of life's adversity to maintain faith;  
 Energise us with Your supernatural grace, gifts and resources;  
 And may we do what is good and right in Your sight, Lord God:  
 AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Cross

*Pray that the Cross will be raised high in the midst of the great cities of the world, on churches and other buildings, as a testimony to the Kingdom of God in our midst.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for all who seek to solve the world's troubles in peace*
- *Give thanks to God for people who do good in our midst*
- *Pray for those who have lost much because of financial upheavals*

## Meditation

There is joy everlasting in knowing Your love, Lord God,  
 For it lifts our hearts in wonder, awe and praise.

There is wonderful security in knowing Your peace, Lord God,  
 For it stills the heart and calms the anxious soul.

There is amazing relief in knowing Your salvation, Lord God,  
 For it gives the gift of life which lasts for all eternity.

There is incredible release in knowing Your forgiveness, Lord God,  
 For it restores the broken spirit and heals the past.

There is surprising liberty in knowing Your guidance, Lord God,  
 For it shows that You know what is best for us; always.

There is great encouragement in knowing Your promises, Lord God,  
 For they are secure for all time, dependable and sure.

There is no reason why we cannot find our faith in You, Lord Jesus,  
 For You have nothing to prove, only gifts to give.

## Bible Study - Isaiah 50:1-11(a)

- <sup>1</sup> *This is what the LORD says:  
 Where is this writ of your mother's  
 divorce  
 with which I sent her away?  
 Or to which of my creditors  
 did I sell you?*
- Look, you were not sold because of  
 your sins;  
 your mother was dismissed for  
 your rebellion.*
- <sup>2</sup> *When I came, why was no one  
 there?*

- When I called, why was there no-one there?  
 Has my hand become so short it cannot redeem?  
 Or have I no power to deliver?  
 Look! By my rebuke I dry up the sea,  
 I make the rivers into a desert;  
 their fish stink for lack of water,  
 and die of thirst.
- <sup>3</sup> I clothe the heavens with gloom,  
 and cover it with sackcloth.
- <sup>4</sup> The Lord GOD has given me a scholar's tongue,  
 To know how to sustain the weary with a word.  
 He awakens, morning by morning,  
 He awakens my ear to listen like one who learns.
- <sup>5</sup> The Lord GOD has opened my ear,  
 and on my part, I was not rebellious,  
 I did not turn my back to Him
- <sup>6</sup> I gave my back to those who beat me,  
 and my cheeks to those who pulled out hair;  
 I did not hide my face from insult  
 and spitting.
- <sup>7</sup> The Lord GOD gives me help;
- so I have not been humiliated;  
 and I have therefore set my face like flint,  
 and I know I will not be shamed;  
<sup>8</sup> The One who vindicates me is near.  
 Who will contend with me?  
 Let us stand united!  
 Who wants to master my cause?  
 Let him come near to me!
- <sup>9</sup> Look! the Lord GOD helps me;  
 who will declare me guilty?  
 Look! They are all like a garment that wears out;  
 the moth will eat them up.
- <sup>10</sup> Who among you fears the LORD  
 and heeds His Servant's voice?  
 He who has walked in darkness with no light,  
 should trust in the LORD's name  
 and rely upon his God!
- <sup>11</sup> Look! all of you who light fires,  
 And arm yourselves with torches!  
 Walk in the flame of your own fire,  
 and among the flares you have set alight!  
 This is what you will have from my hand:  
 you shall lie down in agony!

### Review

There is no doubt that this is an extraordinary prophecy. No one can read this and fail to be aware that it combines powerful and enigmatic phrases which describe the work of God's Servant; 'has my hand become so short that it cannot redeem?' (50:2) and 'I gave my back to those who beat me ... ' (50:6). This is the first Servant poem in Isaiah to describe Him achieving His work through exclusively peaceful means, and bearing physical suffering and abuse (50:6f.). We learned about the Servant first in Isaiah 42 where He was introduced as one coming in humility to do the Lord's will (42:1-4), and then in chapter 49, the Servant was identified as the one who would take the Lord's message of salvation and redemption to the whole world, beyond Israel. Now in this short chapter, we are introduced to the Servant as one who will go to any lengths to achieve the Lord's will, and is prepared to take on all opponents and face them down (50:8) purely in non-violent pursuit of God's cause. This is the first passage in Isaiah to identify the Servant fully with suffering; and it is a deeply moving passage.

In order to study this passage well, we will look today at the way the whole prophecy works and then focus on the first six verses. Tomorrow's study will contain the same passage but it will focus on verses 7 to 11. The division of the passage in this way is rather false, but it will allow us to give full weight to the importance of the text, because as you will clearly,

As we continue with this passage in our next study, we will find out more about the amazing humanity of the Servant. It is the beginning in earnest of the Bible's great exploration of the mystery that is the revelation of God in the Messiah, the Christ, the 'Suffering Servant'.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group which parts of this great text reveal something of the love of God.
2. What experiences have you had of learning? Are they good experiences or bad, and how do they affect your response to this passage?
3. What do daily devotions mean to you, and what would you add to the definition of 'devotions' which is in the third and fourth lines of verse 4?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*I have to say that this passage of scripture has taken me a great deal of time to translate and to comment upon. The text is fascinating, but it seems that over the centuries, some of the more interesting passages of scripture such as this have received the attention of those who have not always understood the complexities of these prophecies. Sometimes, their interpretations have not been helpful to later generations. In preparation for this study I have had to wander from book to book and one Hebrew resource to another; but it is always worth having an open mind or 'ear' to God's Word in scripture and letting Him lead you on a journey of discovery!*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *To what extent do sins still prevent you from having as full a relationship with God through Jesus as you believe is right? Pray about this and listen to what the Lord might wish to say to you. He will reveal if there is any sin or rebellion in your soul; that is, if you listen and are ready to learn!*
- *Share this text with someone else and ask them to tell you what it means to them. Show them the translation here and that in one other common version, and ask them what they think about the differences. Discuss these and learn from each other about how the Lord speaks to us in scripture.*

## Final Prayer

Gracious Lord, we can never fully appreciate all You do for us. When we think we have grasped some great truth, we find that you are leading us further and there is infinitely more for us to learn, many more issues to explore, and much more love to live by faith. We rejoice in Your love and guidance, Lord God; stay forever with us on our way: AMEN

see, it contains a number of references that connect to Jesus' teaching (for example, the garment that wears out 50:9 – see Matt 6:19 and 9:17) and also the experience of Christ on the Cross (His loneliness - 50:2 and His suffering - 50:6f.). The passage also concludes with a deeply challenging passage, for verses 10 and 11 speak of the terrible consequences for those who persist in rejecting the Servant and who subsequently reap awful consequences. These two verses point us towards the teaching of Jesus that those who have utterly rebelled against God end up separated from Him in 'hell', which the New Testament frequently describes as a place where there will be 'weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth' (e.g. Matt 8:12,13:42, 22:13 24:51 etc.). It may seem hard to reconcile the work of one who is pacifist in nature with His prediction of the eternal damnation of those who reject both God and His Servant, but we will look at this in more depth next time.

The whole chapter, however, holds together as a strong justification of God's decision to work through the Servant; a defence made necessary because of the objections of Zion that God has abandoned her (49:14,22), and in places it acts as a warning to Zion and the people of Israel not to push their objections too far. A writ of divorce does not yet exist between God and His chosen people (50:1), and Zion must surely see that the Lord's hand continues to save and deliver (50:2)

The central two sections of the prophecy (50:4-6 and 50:7-9), however, are packed full of interest and fascination. The Servant speaks about his ministry of care and learning (50:4) in a way that reminds us particularly of Jesus. He also speaks dramatically about standing united with the Lord God in a manner which opens Him up to the abuse and persecutions of the world (50:5,6). This leads to Him to suffer, but He stands firm (50:7) because He is convinced of God's cause. He even calls any enemies to show themselves and fight (50:8), knowing that their capacity to endure is mortal; they will 'wear out' like a garment (50:9).

### **Going Deeper**

At almost every turn, there are verses sentences and words which fascinate us in this passage, and no Christian can fail to be moved by the connections we see with the suffering and death of Jesus our Lord. Today, our further study of verses 1 to 6 will begin to open up this great and memorable chapter of Isaiah.

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

*(verses 1-5 only – for verses 6-11 see next day's study)*

V1 *'Look, you were not sold because of your sins, your mother was sent away for your rebellion'. (Compare with the NIV 'because of your sins you were sold, because of your transgression you were sent away') You will see that mine is a new and different translation from that found elsewhere. I have included the negative at the beginning of this phrase (as does the NRSV) whereas other translations interpret this small Hebrew word differently. This enables me to provide a translation that does not suggest in the second half of the verse that a divorce has happened, when the first half of the verse says that no divorce has taken place! In addition, it explains why this has happened (see study).*

V4 *'a scholar's tongue' You may be used to the famous line 'The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher.' However, the Hebrew says literally, 'the Lord God has given me the tongue of those who have learned.' Of course, a teacher is someone who has earned, but so has a student! I prefer the idea that those who make learning their business are, technically speaking, 'scholars'.*

- V4 *'to listen like one who learns'* The word used at the end of verse 4 for 'one who learns' is related to the same word translated as 'scholar' at the beginning (see previous note).
- V5 *'and on my part I was not rebellious.'* Most versions simply have 'and I was not rebellious'. However, the 'I' is emphatic and I have tried to convey this.
- V5 *'I did not turn my back to Him.'* I have included the words 'to him' because they are strongly implied by the text, and their inclusion helps us make sense of what follows.

### **The Lord's explanations of His actions to Zion**

At the beginning of the chapter, Isaiah declares the word of the Lord with the usual prophetic formula 'This is what the Lord says' (50:1) and he speaks out God's words as addressed to Zion. She has been complaining about the Lord's worth throughout the previous chapter, but now God has heard enough. The laws of Moses indicate that a wife could be divorced on production of a written notice (see Deuteronomy 24:1f.), but although Zion felt abandoned, the Lord had explained His continued love despite her unfaithfulness. In no uncertain terms, the Lord speaks in a manner which decidedly cross, but not angry. He has not sought divorce or sold His wife to any creditor (50:1)! The truth is set out simply and clearly, if you accept the translation I have given. The situation is explained by careful attention to the actual words used in the Hebrew of verse 1 (see notes above). Israel has not been sold or divorced because of her 'sins' (the Hebrew word refers to the individual acts of transgression done by individuals). She has been dismissed (sent away into Exile) because of her persistent 'rebellion' (which is the precise meaning of the Hebrew word here). This is the exact nature of the eternal anguish which exists between God and His people (Zion).

Even though terrible difficulties had beset the relationship between the Lord and His chosen people, He had not divorced them; He had punished them but called them home to Jerusalem (see 45:1f.) so why, when He called, 'was no-one there' (50:2)? God then declared His character and power, He was still in the business of redemption and deliverance, He was still as able to lead people through the wilderness and perform miraculous plagues as He had done in the past (see the picture of fish dying in the rivers as in the plagues of Egypt – 50:2). The Lord's response to the abandonment of His wife was similar to that of Hosea when his wife Gomer (Hosea 3) abandoned him, He went into mourning ('I clothe the heavens with gloom and cover it with sackcloth')!

### **The work of the Servant in learning and in healing**

The truth which Isaiah prophesied was that the Servant was now the chosen vehicle of God's work for the redemption and salvation of the world. We have already been told this earlier in Isaiah's prophecies, but here, we learn something about how He will do this. In a fascinating and powerful trio of verses, Isaiah's prophecies identify firstly the caring and teaching work of the Servant (50:4) and then His pacifist credentials (50:5,6). Any analysis of the ministry of Jesus would conclude that during His life, He concentrated on caring for people often through miraculous intervention and healing; and also teaching them about the Kingdom of God.

Here, Isaiah's prophecy has the Servant saying of Himself, 'the Lord has given me a scholar's tongue'. This first phrase is fascinating because the different Bible versions vary between saying that the Servant's tongue is that of a teacher and a learner! The truth is that the Hebrew (see above) means 'one who learns', and anyone who has spent time with 'teaching theory' as an academic subject will recognise within this an issue which lies at the heart of learning and education. The one who is most qualified to help other people learn, is one who has learned for himself or herself. The Servant (Jesus) is one who has learned

the truth about humanity through the centuries old covenant relationship between God and His people. It was a covenant the people of Israel broke, but God kept it, and He learned from it what kind of Servant would be needed to deliver salvation and deliverance to humanity! The result, of course, is Jesus; who taught because as part of the Godhead, he had learned what was required of Him. Indeed, even as the Christ, Jesus was humble enough to come to this world as a child and learn like any child and teenager (Luke 2:39f. and Phil 2:4f.), and He waited until His Father said He was ready for His task! This is what makes Jesus the most quoted teacher in the world.

All this learning and teaching made the Servant (Jesus) fit for His other great task, which was the pastoral and caring work of how 'sustain the weary with a word'. You may be familiar with the Authorised version which says 'a word in season to him who is weary'. Most scholars today agree that the AV has misunderstood one word in Hebrew to give this translation (the word which comes out as 'in season'), but the general sense of the text is clear. If we recall the healing ministry of Jesus, most of his great miracles combine miraculous acts of deliverance and healing with powerful conversation which stirs the heart (the centurion's servant – Matt 8:5f. or the woman with the haemorrhage – Matt 9:18f.). Notice the wonderful way in which our text (50:4) speaks about being awoken each day, 'morning by morning' with an ear open to the Lord. The Old Testament comes close to defining what we mean by 'daily devotions' with this wonderful phrase; 'morning by morning he awakes my ear to listen like one who learns'!

The subject of the work of the Servant in standing firm to bear suffering comes next; and although it begins in the same stanza as verses four and five, the theme continues into the next (50:7-9). It is nevertheless fascinating to see that the beginning of the Servant's pacifist credentials follow on directly from what we have just been observing. The Servant was one who was not rebellious because God had 'opened His ear' (50:5). The Servant is God's faithful listener, and all of us who seek to follow in the footsteps of the Servant, our Saviour Jesus, know from this that our fundamental duty is to have an ear which is open to our Lord, even 'morning by morning'!

### **Application**

This powerful passage moves us inescapably closer to the highlight of Isaiah and his description of all that He endured for us. We cannot fail to stop here, however, and wonder at the way in which Isaiah prophesied about the importance of learning. Some do not like the idea that Jesus or God somehow 'learn' from their contact with humanity; surely, they say, God is so big and He knows everything there is to know about us, so what can He 'learn'? Unfortunately, this argument is something like an academic sleight of hand; it conceals more than it reveals.

The truth is that God is indeed bigger than all His Creation which is something we cannot fully understand. However, who are we to say that God does not 'learn' all the time, as part of the dynamic way in which He is omnipotent and omniscient in His relationship with this world! At a simple level, our Lord has given each of us independent minds and a will to decide how to live and act. If He has a genuine relationship with us, then He learns about us even within the friendship we have with Him, just as any friend does. The very nature of our independence means that He will learn through us who are His creatures; it is amazing but it is true. His love for us is not automatic or merely functional because He already knows all things before they happen; love is something that grows through discovery, through listening, learning, and through the giving of genuine attention. God's love is not phoney, automatic or predetermined. It is real.