

Prayer

Thank You Lord God, for the daily provision You make for our lives. We often thank you for food and drink, but fail to remember those things which give our lives vigour and excitement such as sights and sounds, or characteristics such as inspiration, fascination or intuition. Open up our minds and our lives so that we may enjoy to the full the glory of our potential in you, Lord God; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Land

Pray today for your country and the land on which it is set. Each has its characteristics, which affect the people who live there; so ask God to bless and use your land for good.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for the worsening situation for poor people in Zimbabwe*
- *Give thanks to God for the fellowship of the church*
- *Pray for all who are affected badly by the world recession*

Meditation

Why is life so complicated and taxing,
And why, Lord God, is there so much for us to learn?

We would like love without responsibility,
Yet its glory lies in the beauty of mercy and forgiveness.

We want faith to be simple and sound,
Yet the Gospel demands that we read God's Word and think.

We aspire to a life with no trouble or strife,
Yet we are bored and frustrated without the challenge of the unknown.

We long for peace of heart, and healing,
Yet know full well that life has its cost, and the last cost is death.

Lord God, reveal the truth of our condition,
And lead us to life eternal, and the goal of ultimate perfection.

Bible Study - Isaiah 50:1-11(b)

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| <p>¹ <i>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.</i></p> | <p><i>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.</i></p> |
| <p>² <i>When I came, why was no one there?</i></p> | <p>³ <i>I clothe the heavens with gloom,
and cover it with sackcloth.</i></p> |

- ⁴ *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.*
- ⁵ *The Lord God has opened my ear,
and on my part, I was not rebellious,
I did not turn my back to Him*
- ⁶ *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.*
- ⁷ *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;*
- ⁸ *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!*
- ⁹ *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.*
- ¹⁰ *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!*
- ¹¹ *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

This is the second study of this passage, and in the first, we found that the whole chapter reveals more about the work of the Servant than previously in Isaiah. Remarkably, it hints at the teaching and healing ministry of the Servant (50:4), as fulfilled in Jesus' own ministry (Matt 5-9 etc.). The Servant also speaks about the daily process of learning from God, a devotional discipline which lies at the heart of His work; 'morning by morning, He awakens my ear to listen...' (50:4). Yet again, this reminds us of Jesus and the time He spent alone with God, seeking strength to sustain Him in His awesome ministry (Matt 14:23 etc.). Now, in the remaining verses of this great passage, Isaiah's prophecy about the Servant begins to focus on the most remarkable part of this revelation, which is the suffering of the Servant as He does God's work (50:5,6), and how God reacts to this suffering (50:7-9). The last two lines issue an unparalleled challenge to the doubters in Zion (see chapter 49) who must respond to the Servant because ultimately, the despised and suffering Servant will make Zion His home (as we will later discover).

In verse 5, the Servant says categorically; 'I was not rebellious, I did not turn my back to Him'. This simple statement declares that the Servant does not rebel against God's will. The phrase 'turn my back' graphically describes what it means to rebel, quite literally, to 'turn and go in the opposite direction'; but the Servant, unlike Israel and Zion, refuses to be rebellious to God, for that is the nature of a true servant. Then, we realise that from the perspective of the New Testament, Isaiah begins to describe specific details which link with the death of Jesus with the words; '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.' (50:6). Most of us have witnessed some impressive instance in which someone has endured undeserved abuse from others. This kind of behaviour occurs as 'bullying' in schools, and we immediately sympathise with the one who suffers unjustly. However, our world is full of the more brutal and adult forms of such behaviour as people are tortured worldwide because of

what God is doing, or are we so blinded that we reject Him together with the Old testament people of Israel, and thus light the fires of our own destruction!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group which part of this passage is most meaningful to you. Share your response to the suffering of the Servant.
2. How much of the Gospel can you find within this passage of scripture? What is missing?
3. Summarise the main points of contact between Isaiah 50 and the life of Christ.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Suffering is a fact of life. It is part of the nature of our world that is not negotiable, and some people suffer more than others, and this is regarded by most people as a basic unfairness within life. They claim it is a fundamental criticism of God. Some suffering is of course random according to the laws of nature and the way the world works, but by far the most terrible suffering is what people inflict upon other people, and it is to expose this that Christ, the Servant is willing to receive all human rejection and suffer so that we might live. This is the mystery of God's grace, and I, for one, am deeply grateful for it.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Pray for those you know who are suffering through no fault of their own, and possibly because of the sins of others. Ask the Lord to help you minister God's love and grace, through Christ, to any such people you know.*
- *Consider a plan of action whereby you might be able to give a little time on a regular basis to help other people who suffer for one reason or another. Ask the Lord to help you understand the suffering of others, just as He does.*

Final Prayer

All glory be to you, Lord Jesus Christ, for when we are in despair, You minister hope to our souls; when we are in turmoil, You minister peace into our hearts; when we are clouded in the mists of uncertainty, You minister Your assurance into our minds. You have an answer to all our needs, all glory be to You, Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN

their beliefs or because they are believed to hold valuable information. I write this because it seems impossible to me that Isaiah is doing anything other than describing torture here in verse 6, and this torture is administered against the Servant of God for no other reason than that He does God's will, peacefully and without rancour.

This whole picture stands as a challenge to all brutal human behaviour of whatever kind and against whoever it is practiced, but supremely, it describes the torture of Jesus before His death. As with many of Isaiah's prophecies, a subject is introduced in principle long before it is described in detail, and we who know the Old Testament recognise that in a few chapters, Isaiah will set out this vision of brutality against the Servant in gory detail (Isaiah 53). But for the moment, the prophecy shocks us. How can this be? People, perhaps even God's people (the antagonists in Zion who complained in chapter 49) act with supreme inhumanity against God's own Servant!

There is little doubt that we are meant to be shocked by this prophecy, but Isaiah goes on (50:7-9). God will sustain His servant who will not be humiliated or shamed. Vindication is near as the Servant stands together with His God (50:8) and defiantly rises above the appalling victimisation He has suffered. His antagonists are nothing but mortal beings who are 'like a garment that will wear out' (50:9), and dramatically, the Servant calls people either to join Him and trust Him (50:10), or to go their own way and light the fires of their own damnation (50:11)!

Going Deeper

Within this early prophecy of the suffering of God's Servant is a powerful revelation of the Word of God, and it sounds very much like the Gospel. We cannot avoid this. Some books on Isaiah specifically deny that we can find any message here for the Christian church, but such books are only interested in very limited forms of literary analysis. They only object to finding the Gospel here in this text because they know that Christian readers have spotted it for centuries and they wish to question such faith and limit the significance of prophecy.

There is much more in this text, because prophecy always points beyond itself and people always find within it spiritual truths which God is waiting to reveal. This prophecy is an essential read for anyone who wants to understand the suffering of Christ, and the fulfilment of God's work of salvation through Christ's death and the resurrection.

Notes on the text and translation

- 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.
- V6 *'my cheeks to those who pulled out the hair.'* This is a very strange sentence, but the expression *'those who pulled out the hair'* comes from one Hebrew word which refers to *'those who make smooth.'* The only way to make a Jewish man's bearded face smooth is to pull out the hair! This was a supreme insult, mentioned in several scriptures (Isaiah 7:20, 2 Sam 10:1f.)
- V8 *'let us stand united'* This is the clear meaning of this phrase. Some versions have *'Let us face each other'* (NIV) which assume that the Servant is challenging His opponent to a duel! Far from it, the Hebrew suggests that the Servant and the Lord God stand *'united'*!
- V8 *'who wants to master my cause'* Most versions have *'who are my adversaries, but I have chosen to translate the Hebrew by sticking more closely to the actual Hebrew words here, because it gives us information about the enemy faced by the Servant.*

The idea that the Servant is opposed by one who wants to take over His cause is intriguing and will be looked at in the study.

V10 *'He who has walked in darkness with no light ...' This passage is translated quite differently in most versions, but the tense of the verbs and the sense of the passage make me believe that the second half of the verse is a strong challenge, rather than a mere addition to the first two lines. This fits with what comes next!*

V11 *'and arm yourselves with torches' The Hebrew here is difficult and few translations are similar. This is the best sense I can make of the two Hebrew words, one meaning to 'strap around' or 'equip' (hence my 'arm yourselves') and 'spark' or 'thrown torch' as used for war.*

Rebellion and acceptance

In the first part of this study, we saw that the Servant refused to rebel against God, and as a consequence, He suffered. In order to understand this prophecy, we must look at what happens in sequence, after the confession of the Servant that He would learn God's will and do it (50:4,5). Firstly, He said 'I did not turn my back to Him' (referring to God) and therefore indicated His faithfulness to God's plan and purpose, both for Him and for the salvation and redemption of humanity (see 49:6-13). Next, however, the Hebrew phrase for 'turning the back' occurs in verse 6 as well as verse 5 (where 'not turning the back' in indicates non-rebellion against God). In verse 6, it indicates a rejection of the violence and inhumanity meted out by those who had taken offense at the Servant's stand for the things of God; 'I gave my back to those who beat me ...'.

In this dramatic phrase, the Servant declared that His rebellion was against violence, destruction and all inhumanity, but the price He paid for this stance was high, because by doing this, He accepted being beaten, having His facial hair torn out, and being insulted and spat upon! The extraordinary thing about this passage is that all the punishments meted out against the Servant were sanctioned in the Old Testament Law. Deuteronomy 25:1 states that beating is the form of punishment given to one who was found 'in the wrong' in a civil dispute, and in verse 9 of the same chapter, spitting was the punishment for those who had failed to maintain God's laws of inheritance. Removal of hair was regarded as a disgrace to a Jew (see Isaiah 7:20 and 2 Sam 10:1f.) and therefore 'pulling out hair' from someone's face (50:6) was the ultimate insult. Someone would only receive such treatment if they had been judged as deeply offending the people of Israel.

The truth is that God's people had lost their way and were far from their God, so the presence of the Servant representing God was to them was an insult, and they reacted according to their understanding of the Law. The irony of it all is staggering and awful. We know from Isaiah's previous prophecies that God commissioned the Servant to bring salvation and redemption to the whole world, but this is the first prophecy of Israel's aggressive opposition to God's work.

The unity of the Servant and God

The response of the Servant to this suffering was not to cave in, but to stand firm, and the phrase 'set my face like flint' in verse 7 has become a well known expression of determination and defiance. The Servant was able to stand against the violence He received because He said, 'The Lord God gives me help' (50:7), and He defiantly declared 'I have not been humiliated', and 'I will not be ashamed'. In the face of suffering, the Servant held on to God and insisted that He was doing God's will and would be vindicated by Almighty God (50:8); 'The One who vindicates me is near!' So in this prophetic vision, the Servant stood receiving the abuse, blows, spitting and insults of God's Old Testament people, declaring that God was with Him.

The picture is virtually a total rejection of all the Old Testament stands for, and we cannot do anything other than find in these words a prediction of Christ's passion and suffering before the Sanhedrin. Christ's physical agony on the Cross often receives the focus of our attention today because someone who can take extreme physical abuse and stand firm fascinates us; indeed, this appears to be a major theme of Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion'. However, it is possible that for Christ, the agony of the Passion was more to do with the tragedy of His arrest and the damningly unjust treatment He received by His own people at the hands of Caiaphas (see Matt 26:57f.), together with the insults hurled at Him when on the Cross. The people said to Him 'if God is with Him, let Him deliver Him' (Matt 27:43), not knowing that according to this prophecy from Isaiah, God was indeed already with Him (50:8).

We are left to wonder whether Jesus, who may well have known this prophecy, had His Passion in mind (see 50:9) even in the early days of His ministry as He taught that treasures on earth would wear out, eaten by moths (Matt 6:19,20), and explained that old garment should not be patched by new cloth (Matt 9:16). The connections with this passage are too strong for Jesus to have used such illustrations without recognising that they first described not merely the mortality of people in general, but the rejection of the Messiah by God's people.

The great choice

The last two verses present a challenge and a complete contrast. Side with the Servant, 'fear the Lord ... and trust in the Lord's name' (50:10) in order to find one's way out of darkness to light, or join those who are bent on destroying God's work with fire! The prophecy about fire is dramatic, but intended to be cataclysmic. Fire was something ancient people feared, especially when living in a dry climate, and verse 11 is like a warning to God's people that by opposing the Servant, they are lighting a fire to burn themselves rather than anyone else. Isaiah says; 'walk in the flame of your own fire'. This prophetic vision sounds awful, and it is, but not because God has meted out punishment on His people. Remember, God has firmly said that He will not destroy Israel because of her rebellion, but will 'test you in the furnace of affliction' (48:10). He has no desire to destroy, but people who decide to light their own fires, it seems, decide their own fate (50:11)!

Application

Whilst we may follow the logic of this prophecy and connect it to the life and death of Jesus, it is still hard for us to come to terms with the fact that God decided to work through the suffering of His Servant in order to bring salvation and redemption to humanity. It seems brutal, and surely, there should be another way? Despite our problems with understanding suffering, however, it is not impossible to see that God can begin to do His new work only when the Servant deals fully with the rejection of the people of Israel; and here in this passage, this is what He does. He receives rejection and does not return it, standing firm with God and absorbing all the evil thrown at Him.

The truth is that what is described here in this passage is something that none of us can do. Whatever our bravado or heroism, and there have been many such acts within human history, no-one has ever sustained the personal spiritual rejection described here in Isaiah, and stood firm by the grace of God, for this is the work of God's Servant. In the heat of this awful scene, the Servant even promises that those who walk in darkness should trust in God (see also Isaiah 9:2f.) if they wish to see light again! Isaiah's understanding of the Gospel was many years distant from that of Jesus, but his words and prophecies eloquently speak the language of a Gospel yet to come; a Gospel we now know through Jesus. Isaiah 50 asks us only one question; do we recognise the work of the Servant and