

Prayer

Let our voices speak out in praise of Your Name, Holy Lord and God Almighty! Make praise so natural to our being that it comes from our lips in all the words we speak, that it gleams within our eyes and in the light upon our faces, and that it speaks out loud through all the work we do. Lord God, bless us with an unending spirit of praise which never ceases because we love You! AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Land

For centuries, men and women have lived on the land in a sustainable way; but increasingly, this is not true today. Pray that people and governments will respect the land.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those affected by extremes of weather in different ways*
- *Pray for the worsening situation for poor people in Zimbabwe*
- *Give thanks to God for the fellowship of the church*

Meditation

The heart is not defeated
When it rests in the freedom of our Lord,
And the truth of eternal peace has been installed within.

The mind is not dismayed
When it is satisfied by an explanation
Of God's eternal revelation of Himself to all humanity.

The spirit is not downcast
When it is constantly renewed, refreshed,
By the liberating touch of the wondrous Holy Spirit.

The body is never useless
When it is committed to its loving Lord
To do the glorious things for which it has been made.

The soul is never conquered
When it is secured in Christ's salvation
And redeemed to take its place in God's amazing world!

Bible Study - Isaiah 51:1-8

¹ *Listen to me, you who pursue
righteousness,
and who seek the LORD.*

*Consider the rock from which you
were hewn,
the quarry-pit from which you
were extracted.*

² *Consider Abraham your father
and Sarah who gave you birth;*

*he was only one when I called him,
but I blessed him and increased
his number.*

³ *For the LORD has comforted Zion,
He has consoled her in all her ruin;
He will make her wilderness like
Eden,
her desert like the garden of the
LORD.*

Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of song.

⁴ Pay attention to me, my people,
listen to me, my nations;
for law will proceed from me,
I will give rest to the nations,
and my justice as a light.

⁵ My righteousness is at hand,
my salvation has gone out
and my arms will judge the nations;
the coastlands eagerly await me,
they long for my authority.

⁶ Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens dissipate like smoke,

the earth is wearing out like a garment,
and its inhabitants will die out in the same way;

but my salvation will exist forever,
and my deliverance will not be defeated.

⁷ Listen to me, you who know righteousness,
you in whose heart is my law;
do not fear human reproach,
or be dismayed by their insults.

⁸ For a moth could eat them up like a garment,
or a worm devour them like wool.
My righteousness will exist forever,
and my salvation from age to age.

Review

This is surely the most wonderful and amazing announcement! Whilst studying the prophetic book of Isaiah, we often use superlatives because of the power of its great ancient prophecies; but this part of the Old Testament is stunningly expressive of God's eternal will. In other places, Isaiah tells us about God's deep and abiding love for His people, and Isaiah's prophecies also describe God as heartbroken because of the failure of His people. However, underneath the whole drama of Israel's relationship with her God is the driving force of all history, which is God's determination to bring salvation and redemption to all people of all time and all places. We cannot come to terms with any of the mysteries of Isaiah's prophecies without referring to this, and here in our passage, almost uniquely within the whole book, Isaiah's vision speaks directly and without allegory or analogy, about this unstoppable will of God. The sheer force of these words should drive home to us the energy and power with which God pursues His ultimate goal, which is to establish His authority, rule and justice on earth and bring an indestructible and everlasting salvation. Then, and only then, will God be found faithful to His covenant promise to overcome the powers of sin and death and show undying love for all people!

'Listen!' say the Lord, speaking firstly to His chosen people who 'seek the Lord'; these are His people Israel who have failed to be a 'light to the nations' (42:6, 49:6). The Lord implores them to use their minds and reflect on the covenant heritage and promises they have received from their forefathers (51:1,2) and the miracles of grace by which those promises began to be fulfilled in the life of Abraham and Sarah (51:2). Despite the consequent antagonism, questioning and ruinous behaviour of daughter Zion (see chapter 49 and also 1:8, 10:32, 16:1, 52:2, 62:11), the Lord will restore her (51:1-3), it is an integral part of His plan for the whole world.

Nevertheless, says the Lord, He alone is able to bring His light to the whole world; a light which is described in this passage as justice, authority, salvation, righteousness and deliverance! Verses 4 to 8 overflow with magnificent visionary announcements which describe what the Lord intends to do. We already know from the previous prophecies that the Lord will do this work by means of His Servant, and we have just learned that the Servant's work will mean great suffering (50:5,6f.). But as if to hold us into the vision and

I find this an amazing passage of scripture upon which to write. Frankly, before I read this passage carefully, I am not sure that I fully appreciated how complete an expression and revelation of God's eternal will it is. I feel that this scripture would fit well into a number of places in the New Testament without us really noticing the difference, with us reading the whole passage as words said by Jesus. Personally, I am always challenged by the idea that my faith is something which has eternal consequences, for this reminds me that I cannot sit back and take things for granted.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Read through this passage and attempt to condense the passage down to eight to ten lines at the most. Learn this condensed version and let God use these words to minister to you and remind you about some key aspects of your faith.
- Pray for those throughout the world who have no chance at this moment of time to know anything about the love of God and His determination to love them. Pray that God will use His church to break down barriers to the Gospel.

Final Prayer

Dear Lord and Father; You understand things which are a mystery to us, and when we place ourselves freely in Your hands, You are able to reveal to us the truths of Your grace, the truths about Your plans for the world, and the truth which sets people free! Liberate the world by means of Your Gospel, we pray: AMEN

To this day, centuries after Isaiah first spoke these words, the promise that God's care, love and forgiveness lasts forever is paramount and essential for our sustenance and faith. This is why my translation emphasises the emphatic nature of the phrases in verse 6 and 8 which refer to God's salvation 'existing' forever. Unless our God is able and willing to offer such unconditional and everlasting love, our faith would be an empty vacuum. However, the testimony of scripture and centuries of faith in the lives of millions of people, is that God is true to His word; 'my righteousness will exist for ever, and my salvation from age to age.

Application

There can hardly be a more comprehensive statement of God's saving purposes and intent within the Old Testament. That is not to say that there is not much more to find out about God's work within the rest of the Bible, but the stunningly open and complete nature of this revelation marks it out. After this text, Isaiah's prophecies begin to build up to the awesome revelation of how this work of salvation is done by the Servant (in chapter 53); but it is essential that this revelation takes place here. The Servant does not suffer without reason (50:6,7), and this is the reason (51:1-8).

It may appear to many that Christians take for granted the worldwide and eternal nature of the salvation we proclaim. Many churches are involved in attempting to help Christians from all over the world and it is mostly true that if you go into a church you will find some evidence of a connection with a church in some other part of the world, of one supporting the other. However, such almost incidental connections do not do justice to the power of what we are speaking about here. It was the universal and eternal nature of salvation which led missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to travel for months and seek to spread the 'Good News' to unknown peoples in unknown parts of the world; sometimes in vast numbers. Often, they faced knowing they would die in months because of diseases they had previously not encountered, and in past generations, if a missionary died in one part of the world, there would be a queue of people willing to take their place.

Today, organised attempts to share the good news of God have largely been disassembled because of modern politics, travel bans on clergy and troubles due to religious extremism in various parts of the world. However, the Gospel still has the same power and force, and if we wait on the Lord, He will tell us how we might go about taking the amazing good news about the love of God to all people, despite the cynicism of modern and 'post-modern' society. In our complex, 'multicultural' world, I have often wondered whether the way in which Isaiah expresses the good news of God as 'reaching out in love to all and at all cost' may be an essential starting point for our renewed missionary endeavours. We will see what the Lord will do with us!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Describe your 'heritage of faith'. Do you find it helpful to think of Abraham and Sarah as your 'forebears'?
2. How does your church express its commitment to spread the Good News of God to all the people of the world?
3. What is the value of thinking about life beyond that which we experience here on earth? How does this help our faith?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

prevent us from becoming downcast at the awfulness that awaits the Servant in being a 'light to the nations', the vision of Isaiah now shows us the most complete confirmation of God's will possible.

This is a glorious prophecy of that opening out of God's covenant love to and for all people and nations (51:4). They await from the 'coastlands' (that is, from the very edges of the earth), and we discover that non-Israelites are 'longing' for God's authority and rule to be revealed (51:5). Then, in an extraordinary prophecy, the Lord says through Isaiah that the salvation and deliverance He brings will be permanent, so permanent that they will last even when the created world wears out, and the heavens 'disappear like smoke' (51:6). Lastly, the Lord calls all who hear Him to take heart. No human deed or word can stand in the way of this great work (51:7), and in contrast to the temporary nature of this world; 'my righteousness will exist forever, and my salvation from age to age!' (51:8).

Going Deeper

The whole prophecy is fascinating, awe-inspiring, unique, comprehensive and conclusive. God's work is set out in this vision in such a remarkable way that it hardly seems possible for someone to have had it written down centuries before the time of Christ. Of course, the people of Israel preserved it until Christ came to fulfil it, in anticipation of their Messiah. The early church was made up of Jewish people who recognised that Jesus was the Messiah and fulfilled these prophecies, and we can read passages in scripture about where people were led to study the prophets carefully in order to understand this (see Luke 24:25-27 and Acts 8:29f. for example). It appears that the prophet Isaiah (including this and similar passages) was used extensively for evangelism as the infant church grew.

Many commentaries on Isaiah written today will help you understand this passage exclusively as a prophecy of hope for God's Old Testament people at a time when they had been scattered all over the world because of the exile. This devotional study goes further and picks up the age-old use of this text to explain how this vision sets out God plan of eternal salvation for the whole world, through the work of Christ, and for all who are willing to receive it. It also says much more and we have not yet begun to study it all.

Notes on the text and translation

- V1 **'Consider the rock from which you were hewn'** You may well be familiar with the translation 'Look to the rock ...' The Hebrew word does indeed mean 'look', but more in the sense of 'pay attention to' rather than 'gaze'; hence my translation 'consider ...'
- V2 **'... increased his number.'** This is often translated '... made him many', however the Hebrew verb is the one often used for 'be fruitful and multiply'. In the context of this verse it seems best to indicate that God increased the number of his household.
- V3 **'For the Lord has comforted Zion ...'** Most translations put this in the future tense, but the Hebrew of the first two lines of the verse is certainly in the past (perfect) tense. Some argue that this is a 'prophetic perfect' in which the prophet declares something as so certain, it is as good as 'having already happened'. However, as I explain in the notes, it makes perfect sense as it stands without diminishing the sense of prophecy.
- V4 **'I will give rest to the nations, my justice as a light.'** You will not find this translation anywhere else, the closest being the English Standard version with 'I will set my justice for a light to the peoples.' Most translations miss out the verb 'I will give' because it does not seem to fit in this sentence and they attach it to the next verse. Frankly, if you read it as I have done here, it makes a crucially important point; see study.

V5 **'... they long for my authority'** *The literal translation 'they wait for my arm' is found in most translations, but this expression means the authority of one who rules with power, and with God's 'arms' and judgement already mentioned in the verse, this translation brings out the full meaning of the text.*

V6 **'Its inhabitants will die out in the same way'** *Opinion is equally divided between whether the Hebrew word at the end of this line means 'like flies' or 'in the same way'. The only way to produce a translation is to put in what fits best to the flow of the prophecy. In my opinion it is 'in the same way', and if it is a reference to flies, then it is an ancient colloquialism we cannot verify.*

V6 **'my salvation will exist forever and my deliverance will not be defeated.'** *This is an important phrase which is over simplified in some translations. The salvation specifically stated as 'happening' or 'existing' forever, so a translation such as 'my salvation will be forever' (as in most versions) is simply inadequate to convey the emphasis of the Hebrew. In addition, the final words of the verse literally say 'will not be broken in pieces;' hence my translation which tries to convey this dramatic conclusion.*

V8 **'my salvation from age to age.'** *The Hebrew words here express handing on from one generation to another.*

'Listen' – the evidence (vv1-3)

God's people, the church, cannot escape the truth that God's first 'chosen people', Israel, are a part of the salvation which He has planned, even though they failed in their task and the nations ended up rejecting its Messiah. It is obvious to all who read the Bible that not only was Jesus a Jew, but so also were the disciples, and the majority of those who formed the early church. These were the people who established the missionary efforts that took the Gospel eventually to the whole known world. It is their heritage which we rejoice in when we read 'consider the rock from which you were hewn ... (51:1). Isaiah's prophecy tells us centuries before Paul's letter to the Romans that our spiritual origins are in the faith of Abraham and Sarah, who 'believed God' and miraculously bore a child (Gen 12-22). This vision begs all God's people including us today to consider our covenant heritage, which is a promise of God to love us and a faith-commitment on our part to be obedient to the Lord our God. Certainly, those today who long to see the church be fruitful and 'increase in number' (51:2) must pay attention to the story of Abraham.

The second piece of evidence to which we should pay attention comes in verse 3. In a highly condensed Hebrew poetic triplet, Isaiah's vision states that despite everything, the Lord has 'comforted' and 'consoled' Zion, the dwelling place He chose on earth which questioned him and rejected Him (see ch. 49). Moreover, in the face of her continued rejection even whilst the Servant suffered (see ch. 50), God promises to make her anew, like Eden (51:3). He will bring again the sound of laughter and true joy. This is a miracle, a miracle of pure grace just like that of the birth of Isaac and the whole history of God's redemption of Israel through the years.

The evidence to which we should pay attention is that God works in miraculous power to achieve His will, like the miracle of new birth (as in the birth of Isaac) and the miracle of true love, by which God forgives even the rejection of His own people Israel. These two miracles speak to us now because Jesus was born by a miracle of grace (His birth, the 'incarnation') and He achieved salvation for us through a miracle of love (His death and resurrection). If our faith today is not rooted in these same miracles of grace; Christ's incarnation and His death and resurrection, then we have lost the plot of God's eternal plan.

Peoples, nations, and the light (vv4-6)

But there is more for us to observe and more for us to hear (51:4f.). The Lord speaks at the beginning of verse 4 with a remarkable phrase which must surely have stuck in the throat of any Israelite except that it was delivered by prophecy. The first two lines of Hebrew poetry parallel 'my people' and 'my nations'! In the New Testament, we would translate this 'Jews' and 'Gentiles'! Let us be in no doubt about this; for no Jew, not even a godly man like Isaiah would have naturally spoken in such a manner. If ever we needed proof that these words are prophetic, it is here, and the manner in which these words have been translated in Bibles over the centuries reflects a cautious desire to cover up the stark truth of what must have felt scandalous to those who first heard it. God was extending His love to those whom He had not chosen; to Gentiles!

The force of this argument is maintained by the last line of verse 4, which, yet again, is frequently miss-translated in many Bible versions following centuries of tradition (see notes above). The words are quite clear and scandalous; 'I will give rest to the nations, my justice as a light'. Previously in Isaiah, the word 'light' has been used as a shorthand for God's everlasting saving and redeeming purposes (see 42:6, 49:6). Here, the Lord promises that even His Law, His 'Torah' (the Hebrew word meaning 'law' and also referring to the first five books of the Bible) will 'go out' from Him in order to do its work amongst the nations of the world (51:4)! It is impossible to explain adequately how these words compound the scandal of this work in the eyes of God's people, but it is of course exactly what happened when Jesus taught in His 'Sermon on the Mount'. He took God's law, His 'Torah' (see Matt 5:17) and explained it anew for people of all times and places.

The connection with Jesus is maintained in the very next verse, where Isaiah's vision continues; 'my righteousness is at hand'. I have purposefully and correctly used the expression 'at hand', because it is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word used in Jesus first sermon; 'the Kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matt 4:17). Here, Isaiah prophesied that the saving work of God would be made available to the whole world; and Jesus did the same as He opened the Kingdom of heaven to all who would repent and believe in Him!

Then, in an extraordinary passage, Isaiah went even further, offering a glimpse of God's purpose opening out further, beyond even the foundations of creation. He foresaw a time when the earth and the heavens would melt away and yet God's 'salvation will exist forever'. Here, Isaiah's visions says something which we have simply not heard said anywhere else in scripture (up to this point). God's salvation is eternal; it is beyond time and will last forever, and remember, we already know that this salvation is to be achieved by the Servant and through His suffering!

Do not fear (vv7,8)

The Spirit of God has always known those who are committed to Him, whether in Old Testament times or New; He knows those whose hearts are right and who yearn to stay close to God's law. It is to such people He says 'do not fear human reproach or be dismayed by their insults' (51:7). The previous chapter has told us that the Servant would endure both insult and injury on our behalf, so this should bring us hope and sustain us in life. The Servant can help us stand firm in the face of all human rejection and insult, even physical abuse, because our God has promised us a salvation extending beyond the life even of this world; it is eternal. In this prophecy, Isaiah uses again the same image of earthly decay which was used earlier (50:9) and describes the wasting away of clothes being 'eaten' by moths (51:6,8). The repeat of this picture reinforces the idea that when Jesus used it (Matt 6:19,20) he was most certainly saying something about the eternal nature of His Kingdom.