

Prayer

All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for You give us hope of new life in the midst of our suffering; You have travelled our paths, and You have endured the worst the world can offer. So from the immeasurable wealth of Your experience and love, Lord Jesus, speak words of compassion and reassurance to us that will lift our hearts and give us a new and certain hope for the future both in this life and the next. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Land

Land is amazingly complex, and the geography of all our countries is fascinating. Pray to give the Lord thanks for what He has given us, that we might use it well and for His glory.

On-going prayers

- Pray for all those caught up in the scandals which feed the press
- Give thanks for personal prayers which have been answered
- Pray for those affected by extremes of weather in different ways

Meditation

Can you see beyond what happens now?

Can you see what God will do with all of your life?

They say a measure of intelligence is found

In how much one can see beyond the present,

To understand the cost of what we do right now;

And give up short term gain for a greater benefit ahead.

If so, God's people demonstrate this giftedness;

For in Christ, they glimpse beyond the present troubles

To view the good that lies ahead of us, tantalising,

And beckoning us to taste the future Glory of our Lord.

Some doubt this can be so; but it is a spiritual intelligence

God places graciously within, both for now and for eternity.

Bible Study - Isaiah 51:17-23

¹⁷ Rouse yourself, rouse yourself!

Stand up, Jerusalem,

you who have drunk at the hand of
the LORD

His cup of wrath,

You have drunk the cup of staggering

You have drunk the goblet to the
dregs.

¹⁸ There is no one guiding her,

of all the children she has borne;

there is no one taking her by the
hand

of all the children she has brought
up.

¹⁹ These are the two things you have
encountered

who will grieve with you?

Ruin and destruction by famine and
the sword;

who will comfort you?

²⁰ Your sons have fainted,

they lie exposed in every street

like an antelope (caught) in a net;
they are full of the LORD'S wrath,

<p><i>the rebuke of your God.</i></p> <p>²¹ <i>So then, hear this, you who are afflicted, made drunk, but not with wine:</i></p> <p>²² <i>This is what your Sovereign LORD says, your God who pleads the case of his people:</i></p> <p><i>Look! I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering;</i></p>	<p><i>you will never again drink from the goblet from the cup of my wrath.</i></p> <p>²³ <i>And I will place it into the hand of your tormentors, who have said to you, 'Bow down, that we may walk over you' so you made your back like land, like the street for them to walk over.</i></p>
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Review

For the second time in the run up to the revelation of the Servant, Isaiah's prophecies call out, 'Wake up!, Wake up!' (see 51:9 and 52:1). Yesterday we learned of the Lord's readiness for action and His call on all people to recognise that He, the Creator of all things, was at work in power and authority to bring salvation and redemption. Today, the summons is to Jerusalem, to God's Old Testament people. It is in fact a 'last chance' call of God to His people to recognise that with the coming of the Servant (52:13f.). God has fulfilled His promises to His people and there is nothing left for them in their relationship with Him except to face their true state; drunk with suffering (51:17), helpless and without assistance from amongst her own peoples (51:18), ravaged by famine and the sword (51:19), and exposed to the fury of their God (51:20). The herald who summons them then calls Jerusalem to accept that God has removed all their suffering and pain and placed it in the 'hand of their tormentors' (51:21-23). Surely they can recognise that their God is marching in power once again to do His work on earth!

The whole prophecy is addressed to Jerusalem, representing all God's people left after the Exile from Babylon, and it speaks after this event as if it was God's last great punishment of His people before the coming of the Messiah. The history of God's people after the Exile is generally a sad story; Ezra, Nehemiah Haggai and Zerubbabel struggled to generate enthusiasm amongst the Jewish people of their day to return to Jerusalem to rebuild Israel; and for centuries, the Jewish people lived under the rule of Persian, Greek and finally Roman occupiers. It only gained a slight advantage after the Maccabean revolt against Greek influence (163 BC) by creating a hybrid Greek/Jewish ruling dynasty with a small degree of autonomy for the state as found at the time of Jesus. Some historians say that the Maccabean revolt was the 'last chance' for God's Old Testament people, but the scriptures themselves show no sign of being aware of it. As far as the 'salvation history of the world' is concerned, the Exile was Israel's 'last chance' to recognise their God's saving and redeeming work freely available to them for no other reason than they were His chosen and loved people. Surely they could recognise the signs? Maybe some individuals did, but as a whole, the nation did not.

So this whole prophecy has a sad tone; it comes from the heart of God begging His people to recognise that once they have experienced the punishment of Exile, the Lord has taken the 'cup of staggering' from their hand. He has another plan for dealing with sin and suffering and has no more plans to afflict His people again; but the appeal of this prophecy of Isaiah ultimately falls on deaf ears, just as Isaiah was told by the Lord when He first began to prophesy (6:9-13). The whole prophecy is centred around two main themes, firstly the 'cup of God's wrath' (51:17,22) which is the same as the 'cup of staggering' (51:17,22), and secondly the children of Jerusalem who are mentioned in verses 18 and 20. As we have seen, the prophecy points out to Jerusalem that her suffering has been

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What does the expression 'the cup of the Lord's wrath' conjure in your mind? Share your responses in your group.
2. How can Christian people best relate to Jewish communities today, and what is your experience of contact with Jews today?
3. This prophecy announces the end of God's 'wrath', to what extent, if any, is God's wrath experienced today, and by whom?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Whilst I feel deeply for those people who, as Jews, remain in the position of people who still reject the message of God's love found in Christ, I believe there is little we can do to help except remain faithful to our task of witness to the love of God. I am not afraid to say that God's wrath means that all who reject Him will reap a reward of that rejection, and some may indeed walk away from God never to return. However, the amazing fact about God is that His wrath does not define Him, His love does. For this reason, the last word about God must always be that He is a God of salvation and redemption, and He loves us so much that He is prepared to die for us. That is His proof, delivered by His Servant, Jesus.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Pray for all those who find it hard to believe that Jesus really loves them. Make it your aim to do all in your power to speak about God's love, and when you hear people speaking about God, in whatever context, try to bring things round to this truth.
- When you next go to church, try to keep in mind the wonderful fact that God has limits to His own wrath and anger, and chooses to love instead. Seek to copy the Lord and have the same positive attitude to others.

Final Prayer

Jesus, please do Your work within my life, a work of peace and love and care which removes the tension, strife and worry from my soul. Transform me according to Your purposes and make me fit for the calling You have placed upon my life. Thank You for caring about me enough to do this work so that I may become complete in You. AMEN

taken away and God's intention is no more to bring suffering on her people, but the two mentions of Jerusalem's children tell a tragic tale which does not bode well for the future.

Unfortunately, the young who might have had a chance of spotting the new work of their God are not helping and guiding those who have experienced the cup of God's wrath; instead of helping their parents who endured it, they have succumbed themselves to the sins of the world and are 'full of the Lord's wrath'. In other words, they have not learned from their parents; they 'lie exposed on every street' (51:20), unable to give the historic people of Israel and Jerusalem any hope. Using the metaphor of this prophecy, they are 'drunk'.

Going Deeper

There is no doubt that this is a sad prophecy, but although it is a call to awake which is not heeded, it is a call which must be made. Although it is a call which Jerusalem rejects, it still shows to the whole world the justice and love of God for His own people. They are never separated from God's plans for the future of the world, and although Isaiah prophesied all this centuries before the time of the Exile and many more before the time of Christ, He was given an unparalleled understanding of the even-handedness of God towards all people. Ultimately, His redemption and salvation is offered to all on equal terms.

Notes on the text and translation

- V17 **'You have drunk the cup of staggering, you have drunk the goblet to the dregs.'** Most translations have 'You have drunk to the dregs the cup of staggering'. There are more references to 'cup' in the Hebrew than most translators feel they can include in the English. However, two different words for 'cup' are used, one is a general word for a cup and the other a rarer word for 'goblet'. Because it is used later in this passage (verse 22), I have included this distinction within my translation. As usual in Hebrew, the repetition is a form of dramatic emphasis.
- V18 **'there is no one guiding her'** The Hebrew word 'guide' means 'to lead to a resting place', or 'cause to rest', and in the next line, **'leading her by the hand'** could also mean 'assisting' or 'strengthening her by the hand'. The emphasis here is on the quality of assistance given.
- V20 **'they lie exposed in every street'** The Hebrew says literally, 'they lie at the head of every street'. However, I have taken the expression to colloquially express exposure, which is appropriate for those who are 'drunk' and are lying in the streets!
- V22 **'you will never again drink from the goblet, from the cup of my wrath.'** As in verse 17, the Hebrew uses two words for 'cup' and repeats itself, making it difficult to convey in English what is said. This is my best attempt.
- V23 **'who have said to you'** The Hebrew says 'who have said to your soul'. This is a strong way of speaking about the individual but not the way we speak in English, so it does not make for an easy translation.

The cup of God's wrath

We find the idea of the 'cup of God's wrath' in other parts of scripture. Psalm 75 says:

'but it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another. For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed; he will pour a draught from it, and all the wicked of the earth will drain it to the dregs.' (Psalm 75:7,8)

This descriptive notion of God's punishment is also found in Jeremiah (16:7, 25:15f. etc) and also the Psalms (as above, 11:6, 116:13) as well as Ezekiel (23:31f.). The unique

feature of Isaiah's prophecy here is the phrase a 'cup of staggering'; for whereas most of the other references to the cup of wrath in scripture speak of the Lord giving this either to Israel or to the nations to drink, here, the contents of the cup have been drunk. Consequently, the people of Jerusalem are staggering, through the effect of the wine, or perhaps staggering through suffering the blows of the enemy who has beaten and defeated Israel (according to the analogy). The wrath has been poured out, the cup has been drunk and the affliction of Israel and Jerusalem is in the past, indeed, in this passage, she may be described as having a 'hang-over'!

If you read some parts of the Old Testament, it may seem that God's wrath is an ever present reality, for example, as Joshua fights against the pagan religions of the people of Canaan with the clear instructions to wipe out what is not of God. This may also be said of the book of Job where throughout the disputes between Job and his friends, God is seen as absolutely just and vengeful against all that is unjust or sinful. Here, however, Isaiah clearly announces the end of God's wrath. It has already been 'drunk to the bottom' or as most translations say, 'drunk ... to the dregs' (51:17).

We have to say therefore that the message in Isaiah is an announcement not found elsewhere in the Old Testament; God's wrath is finite and ends. It is God's will to limit His wrath and act for the salvation and redemption of those He loves; and here in Isaiah, through the Servant! It is of course a tragedy that Jerusalem no longer recognises what is happening and does not engage with the offer of salvation, but for all of us who benefit from this grace of God, this is wonderful and truly prophetic news from the Old Testament. Here is the clearest of all revelations that God is not defined by His wrath, but by His love.

The children of Jerusalem

It is worth noting that in verse 21, Isaiah speaks about the children who have failed in their duty to support the faith of elders (51:18), and have been found exposed on the streets as if caught in a trap (51:20). Their predicament is questioned by the Lord; have they really become drunk because they have endured the same affliction as their parents? The Lord says 'You who are afflicted but not with wine.' (51:21) However, we are not told why the children (sons) of Israel and Jerusalem have become drunk and passed out in the streets (51:20). It is possible that the complex and double reference to 'cups' and 'drinking' in both verse 17 and 22 (see notes above) indicate that the cup of God's wrath has been replaced with plain drunkenness, but this is only a presumption from the text, and it is not openly said anywhere.

The plain prophecy spoken by Isaiah is that God has stopped His wrath. His justice means that He has every right to be angry with those who have rejected Him, but He has decided to stand back and 'hand the cup of my wrath ... into the hand of your tormentors'. The prophecies of Isaiah elsewhere speak eloquently enough of this action of the Almighty, for example, in the early chapters we saw how Assyria (ch10f.) and Babylon (ch 12f.) were punished severely by the Lord for their presumptions in treating Israel and Jerusalem harshly. It was they who had 'walked over' Israel, as we might say, and as Isaiah graphically portrays in the last verse of the prophecy; 'those who have said to you "bow down, that we may walk over you", so you made your back like land, like the street for them to walk over.' This pitiful picture represents the final servitude of Israel in a world that dominates them. She allows herself to be walked upon by the great powers of the day, even lying prostrate to make it easier for the superpowers to keep her in subjection. There is some evidence that in the years before the life of Jesus, many Jewish people felt that the ruling families of the Herods, for example, prostrated themselves to the Romans in a sacrilegious way in order to retain power for themselves. Herod the Great, for example, tried to overcome such criticism by building the great Temple complex which was newly available in Jesus' day for the worship of God in Jerusalem.

The clear message resounds through the whole passage however, that God's anger and wrath does not last forever and it is therefore only a matter of time before the Servant is revealed! When the Servant is fully revealed, then God's wrath will be fully completed, or 'satisfied' through His work, and His patience and love for all people made known. At the very least, our prophecy today which anticipates the work of the Servant, says that He will not punish His people Israel any more for their rebellion, even if they continue in rebellion, and this is something which is important for us to know. One day, when Christ comes in glory, the grace of God will go out to His people Israel again, and they will be forgiven and drawn back into the Kingdom. The pain of the separation is deep, but it is not insurmountable to God!

The ruin of Jerusalem

In the middle of this prophecy there is one verse which is especially interesting. Verse 19 reads; 'these are the two things you have encountered, who will grieve with you? Ruin and destruction by famine and the sword; who will comfort you?

This is a description of the state of Israel, and it is a particularly perilous state. On the one hand, we know all about the ruin and destruction that has come upon Israel due to the invasions of both Assyrians and Babylonians. This dominates the whole of Isaiah's great work, and here Isaiah typifies the horror of this invasion by comparing it with the classical two-fold description of terror found throughout the Old Testament, that is, the perils of 'famine and the sword' (see for example 1 Chron 21:12, and Jer. 14:12f., 44:12f.).

However, the true awfulness of the isolation of God's people is emphasised in the repeated and emphasised phrase 'who will grieve with you ... who will comfort you?' (51:19). The vision seems to expect that when Israel and Jerusalem fail to respond to the call to awake, and therefore fail to respond to the Servant, they will have no friends left on earth, and no one with whom to share their loneliness as one who have rejected God. It is an unhappy picture, but central to our theme today.

Application

This passage of scripture is a prophecy which tells us two things; one of them sad, and one of them wonderful. It is the greatest of tragedies that the people of Israel have rejected their Messiah; that is, not individual Jews, some of whom have most certainly accepted faith but the nation as a whole. Today, the situation is even more complex because the state of Israel as we know it today is a secular state and it is hard to perceive how we can relate this secular state to the historic 'Israel', and nation bound by its commitment and centralised worship of the One God. Those who know Judaism today will be aware that many Jewish groups remain highly isolated within society (though by no means all), and it can be hard to sustain good relationships between Christian churches and Jewish groups within any city or country. It is always worth pursuing the aim of friendship, however.

For Christians, the good news of this prophecy is that God's anger does not last forever, and we are justified in our belief that God's intention is always to redeem and save rather than condemn or destroy. Paul expresses this most admirably when he says; 'who will bring any charge against God's elect? ... Who will separate us from the love of Christ?' (Romans 8:33-35) meaning that 'nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!' (Rom 8:39). However, the drama of this announcement is its placing within Isaiah's prophecy, as the second of three announcements made by the Lord before the revelation of the Servant. Whatever comes next in Isaiah's great prophetic drama, this fact is secure, and it is also a basic revelation of the character of God in its own right.