

Prayer

Forgive me for rushing, dear Lord, for there is too much to do and I can never get everything done. Bless me by Your Spirit, Lord God, who is able to strengthen me for what lies ahead, show me what is right and what is wrong, and guide me through all life's complexities. Your support and presence is the most amazing blessing; how could I ever succeed without You? Thank You, Lord God: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Land

Praise God for the beauty and magnificence of the land and the world in which we live. Each of us sees it differently, so all our praises are immensely valuable to our Lord!

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for personal prayers which have been answered
- Pray for those affected by extremes of weather in different ways
- Pray for the worsening situation for poor people in Zimbabwe

Meditation

We are called to show the compassion of Christ;

To open ones heart to dirty and squalid men and women who live on the streets;
To recognise the humanity of all who have been poorly treated in our world today.
To contribute every penny beyond one's needs to help the poor of this world.

To persist in loving all those who openly declare that they hate God and Christians;
To stand firm in the midst of the oppression of the Church, whatever the cost;
To love one's brother and sister in Christ without any hint of prejudice whatever.

To give one's soul to what is right within the workplace and in every walk of life;
To offer love and affection to all who have given up hope, for whatever reason;
To provide every means of support possible to those who have been oppressed.

So let us do this, openly, in the name of our Lord.

Bible Study - Isaiah 51:9-16

⁹ Awake, awake, put on strength,
O arm of the LORD!
Awake, as in ancient times,
the generations long past!
Was it not you who cut Rahab down,
who wounded the dragon?

¹⁰ Are You not the One who dried up
the sea,
the water of the great deep;
who made the depths of the sea
a path for the redeemed to pass
through?

¹¹ So the ransomed of the LORD will
return,
and come to Zion with singing!
Everlasting joy will be upon their
heads;
they will take hold of joy and
gladness,
for sorrow and sighing will have
fled away.

¹² I, I am he who comforts you;
So why are you held by fear of
men, who die;

of people, who fade like grass?
¹³ *You have forgotten the LORD, your
Maker,
who stretched out the heavens
and set the foundations of the
earth.*

*Every day, you remain in fear
because of the wrath of the
oppressor,*

*As if he was able to destroy!
But where is the fury of this
oppressor?*

¹⁴ *The broken will be released quickly;
they will not die and go to the Pit,*

and they will not lack bread.

¹⁵ *For I am the LORD your God,
who stirs up the sea so that its
waves roar
the LORD of hosts is His name.*

¹⁶ *I have put my words in your mouth,
and hidden you in the shadow of
my hand;*

*to set out the heavens,
lay the foundations of the earth,
and say to Zion, 'You are my
people.'*

Review

The stirring message here is 'get ready!' The Lord is about to do a mighty deed and His Servant will be there to do the work! This reading begins with a summons to 'awake', and if you look ahead in Isaiah, you will find three calls to awake in succession; here, 51:17 and 52:1. These three summons introduce three poems (51:9-16, 17-23 and 52:1-12) which prepare us for the climactic revelation of the Servant (52:13f.), and each of them is a prophetic announcement of the Lord for all who will hear. In different ways, all of them call for people to pay attention to the evidence of God at work in the world, and all of them contain a glimpse of the Servant, awaiting His final revelation. In our passage today, we discover something amazing about the Servant; He has been with the Lord God, kept by Him since creation 'in the shadow of my hand' (51:16), ready to do the Lord's will!

Some of the words in this passage are wonderfully inspiring, but it is hard to work out who is speaking at different places, and the way the passage is interpreted is heavily dependent upon who you believe to be speaking to whom. There are a number of possibilities, but it is best to read this prophecy as God speaking. In other words, when we read, 'Awake, awake, put on strength ...' in the first verse, the prophet Isaiah is speaking out God's words addressed to His own 'arm', which is the symbol of His strength and power to act within the world; so God is calling on His 'strength' to do something. If many of these words were not so familiar to us, this might all sound more strange. However, when Hebrew prophecy speaks of the Lord God summoning Himself to act in this way, it is a form of very powerful emphasis found in numerous places in the Old Testament. Some people find it strange that God is often described as having human attributes which represent His character and power, such as an arm (51:9) representing His strength. However, the Bible revels in such language and although it forbids people from making a visible 'image' of God, it is quite comfortable with the idea that God is 'like' us just as we are made in His 'image'. So the Old Testament speaks about not just God's arms, but His feelings, His emotions and His thoughts and 'wisdom', for example.

In the days of Isaiah and in later centuries, most people of the ancient world believed a variety of myths about the gods and their role in the creation of the world. This is not the place to look at them in detail, but here in this passage God speaks to exert His greatest authority as the Creator who made all things and who has destroyed all the creatures (Rahab, and the dragon – 51:9) of popular myth. The truth about God, as the Old Testament records it, is that He is not like some religious myth, for He is a God who has acted in power to do things within the world. The redemption of Israel through the Red Sea was an observable fact of history, so the faith of God's people is always based on historical

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Is possible to talk today about God as Creator of the World without getting into arguments which distract us from His love?
2. If you were asked to name events which prove God's existence to you, how would you answer?
3. Discuss in your group why God 'hides' the Servant in the 'shadow of His hand' until the time comes for His revelation.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

When I have the privilege of ministering to people, I find that many pastoral issues are rooted in people ideas about God. When praying with people who have asked for prayer, it can often be helpful to ask that person to say a prayer themselves to God about their problem, perhaps expressing their request. Such a prayer will often reveal something about the nature of a person's faith, and expressing this in the open can help the process of pastoral help and care. Many, many times, I have found myself working at trying to help people accept that God truly does love them and want the best for them; Satan tries to put up every barrier possible to stop people believing this.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- Learn the song in verse 11, and if you know a musical version of this, sing it and keep it in your head. Let the words of this song bless you over a period of time as you allow each word or line to speak to you.
- Pray for those who find it hard to accept that God does indeed love them, and pray for those who are truly bowed down by the pressures of this world. Pray for their release in Jesus' name, and be ready to be a means of this release.

Final Prayer

You are patient with us, Jesus, far more than we deserve. We are impatient and always wanting more, but You know what is right for us, and You give us all we need when we need it. Help us be satisfied with what we have, especially what we have from You, so that our energies can be spent serving Your purposes and not our wants, through Your name, Lord Jesus: AMEN

fact, not religious or mythological presumption. Indeed, the prayers of His people such as the famous prayer and song in verse 11 (see also 35:10) are always fulfilled. Pilgrims sang the great song 'the ransomed of the Lord will return ...' as they travelled to Zion (the origins of the song), and it also had a new meaning when the Exiles returned from Babylon (in the fifth and sixth century BC). This prophecy indicates that the prayer will have new meaning when the Servant brings redemption to all peoples (51:4,5)!

This prophecy appeals to all who hear it not to live in the oppressions of this world (51:12,13), but to answer the questions posed by the truth of God's deeds in the world. The Lord has a solution to human oppression and mortality, and He is about to set the broken free (51:14) and provide for them by means of the Servant who has been kept hidden in 'the shadow of His hand' since the beginning of time (51:16)!

Going Deeper

This whole passage is the first prophetic poem leading up to the great revelation of the Servant in Isaiah 53, and it records a series of events by which people may have confidence in the deeds and promises of God; Creation, the Exodus, and the Exile. All of these are historical events and as we unravel this great poem, they help reveal a message in which not only is God's strength summoned to act, but we are challenged to respond.

Notes on the text and translation

- V9 *The expression 'the arm of the Lord' is grammatically feminine because the word 'arm' is feminine. For this reason, the Hebrew reads, quite literally, 'was it not she who cut down Rahab ...' This would not make sense in English, so we translate 'was it not you who cut down Rahab ...' For the meaning of Rahab and the dragon, see study.*
- V11 *'Everlasting joy' The word for everlasting is the same one used elsewhere in scriptures for 'ancient times', because it means 'time without beginning or end', whether past or future.*
- V11 *'They will take hold of joy ...' The well known words here are 'they will obtain ...' and the Hebrew word is 'to reach' or 'overtake', and I have used the sense of 'reach' as in 'take hold of'. In other words, the joy and gladness does not just come to them from the Lord. They have to take hold of it (see study)*
- V11 *'for sorrow and sighing will have fled away' You will be used to the form of this found in chapter 35 of Isaiah, where there is a prayer that sorrow and sighing 'will' flee away. The change of verb tense indicates that the prayer has been answered!*
- V13 *'as if he was able to destroy' There is a hint of sarcasm here in the Hebrew (which is usually translated 'one who is bent on destruction'), and unless you read it in this way, the Hebrew appears odd.*
- V14 *'the broken ...' This is often translated 'the oppressed' to match the words in the previous verse, but the Hebrew word comes from a root meaning 'to bend or stoop'. It describes people who are bent and stooped down, and I have called these 'the broken'.*

Awake, God of Creation and Exodus!

The time has come for action, and Isaiah's prophecies convey a sense of anticipation. They have already revealed to us that the Servant's task will be to take the word of God's redemption and salvation to all the world (49:6, 50:1f.), but what will this mean? In the centuries during which these prophecies were written, people largely believed that the world was made out of battles between the gods, waged largely in the great chaos of the sea or the 'great deep' (51:9, 10). Various names for these gods appear in various ancient

mythologies, some of which have been dug up by archaeologists and deciphered for us to read. A number of gods and sea monsters are mentioned in these ancient texts, and it is clear that the Bible has avoided most of them, especially in its great descriptions of creation (Genesis 1,2). However, they do appear in a few places, such as the names 'Rahab' and 'the dragon' here in this text (51:9), and as 'Behemoth' in Job 40:15 and 'Leviathan' (Isaiah 27:1). Please note that it is entirely incidental that 'Rahab' is also the name of a prostitute in Judges 2:1, 6:17f.

If God was to show Himself as real and powerful to the people of Isaiah's day, then He had to show Himself as more powerful than these beliefs, hence Isaiah's prophetic Word about cutting them down to size at the beginning of this passage (52:9). These were no gods; the Hebrew God of Creation (Gen 1,2) did not create the world in strife, warfare and battle, but in power, in love and in order. The very first work of God and the very first time that God's might (His 'arm') was displayed was in Creation, but in this prophecy, the work of God in Creation is also closely linked with His work in redemption. Unspoken in this prophecy but true to its theology is the fact that humanity is fallen and needs further action on God's part in order to be set free. In other words, people need God's redemption and salvation.

So the next great event alluded to in this prophecy is the Exodus; 'are You not the One who dried up the Sea?' (51:10). In the deliverance through the Red Sea, God redeemed His people from slavery and returned them to the 'Promised Land' by a free and generous act of love. The poem does not dwell on the long and complex story of that journey, in our passage it is enough to recall the fact of God's deliverance, and celebrate it with a song which was sung (51:11) by God's people for centuries in celebration of God's redemption and salvation. Isaiah included this song in his prophecy because it was already known in his day, and it was a song which expressed the hope as well as the fulfilment of redemption and the joy it brings. Here in this passage, it represents a hope that has already been fulfilled in the life of God's people in the past, but it also represents a new hope for those people yet to be drawn to the Kingdom by the work of the Servant. Through prophecy, Isaiah makes this song into a song for all God's people, the church.

Do not fear, the Lord comes with redemption!

Having announced His intent to act and His power to do so within the world, this prophecy continues by announcing a truth which was known to the people of Israel, but was still far from obvious to the people of the nations for whom the Servant was about to be revealed. Verse 12 and 13 analyse the relationship between God and humanity outside of the people of Israel. Those who were outside the Covenant regarded God as one to be feared, not one who would love and care for them. The creation myths mentioned above were all stories of great fear, containing murder, incest, rape and every imaginable horror, and this reflects primitive people's belief in such 'gods'.

It is against this background that Isaiah's prophecy declares something different about God. He is the one who has made all things (51:13), but as the poem emphatically says at the beginning of verse 12, the Lord God is a God of 'comfort' and His attitude towards His people is of care and concern. Indeed, it is His intention to bring redemption and to fill the hearts of His people with song (51:11). Why then should people fear God? Even today, it is common to find that people have a natural sense of fear towards God especially if they have not grown up with the Christian ethos that God is love. However, this is the point of this part of the prophecy, God knows this, and Isaiah's prophecy therefore addresses this fear. Basically, the prophecy says that the oppressors we fear here on earth are not oppressors at all; as the Lord says; 'why are you gripped by fear?' (51:12) and 'where is the fury of this oppressor?' (51:13), He is not that kind of a god.

The Lord will come with redemption, to release those who are 'bowed down', or 'broken' (51:14 – see notes). It is not something we will readily notice, but the words used here for God's redeeming work are not the same as those used frequently for God's redemption of His people Israel, they are different. This supports our theory that His words are mainly addressed to all peoples, not just the people of Israel. Beyond this, it is fascinating to note that what is promised is liberty from the slavery and bondage of fear, and also freedom from death ('going down to the pit') and freedom from starvation ('they will not lack bread'). This is quite different from the covenant promises of God to Abraham and His descendants, but we will find that when Isaiah's prophecies come to their conclusion in chapter 53, these three terrors of fear, death and starvation are the essential enemies of humanity which are overcome by the Servant.

The Servant has been waiting

In a final extraordinary verse of this poem, Isaiah's prophecy turns dramatically to the figure of the Servant and addresses Him directly. God says 'I have put my words in your mouth, and hidden you in the shadow of my hand'. Remember, God's 'arm' has been announced (51:9f.) and therefore His hand will most certainly be used in power! The message is simple, the Lord has put His words in the mouth of the Servant and He will therefore use them powerfully to do His will, which we now know is to bring redemption and salvation to all peoples, as expressed in the previous verses.

Ultimately, the 'Word of God' will be used for a new work; the creation of a new age and a new 'Zion' (51:16) to which God will say 'You are my people'. This, of course is the church of God which has now been established by the Servant, Jesus Christ.

Application

It is not necessarily easy to spot how the Old Testament begins to address people who are not Israelite, and tell them about the God who will save them; but this is what this passage does. God is faithful, and He is always a God of redemption and salvation because it is the essential need of all people to discover that the God who created them loves them and longs to have a relationship with them. He is not a God of wrath who will condemn people out of hand for their sins, He is one who will always give people a chance, and only turns away in sadness from those who have already rejected Him.

Even as I summarise the passage's message in this way, I am reminded that many people today, sometimes even people within the church, have a view of God that is somewhat pagan and has little to do with the God revealed through history and through the Bible. One can come across people in churches who fear God deeply and struggle with all kinds of church issues because fundamentally, they have not come to terms with the fact that God loves them deeply, and longs to be allowed to help them, even to deal with the sins and problems that make it difficult for them to trust Him. These issues lie at the heart of much pastoral work within the church.

Although some of the words and phrases in this prophecy are new both to Isaiah and to Old Testament literature in general, some of the most famous passages are in fact well known. The great song in verse 11 reminds us that all who accept God's redemption and salvation have a great heritage to adopt; the heritage of God's Old Testament people who have experienced His consistent love and have passed on to us in their literature as great pearls of wisdom. This song is one of joy and happiness, surely the true mark of all who follow the Lord and receive His salvation.