

## Prayer

Lord God, the glory of Your presence sometimes seems so far away. We flounder in our problems and fail to connect with You who can make sense of all that we experience and endure. Change us we pray from people who wallow in self pity to those who lift their eyes to the higher things of life; to You, the Creator of all things who has the authority to change us, inside and out! Come close, Lord God, come close! AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Clothes

Pray today for the many people involved in the fashion industry. It does not rest easy on many people's hearts to see women paraded merely in pursuit of fashion; but it is all part of the business processes which bring us clothes. Please pray for models, and for better regulation of their work to reflect women's needs rather than the priorities of those who gain their wealth through them.

## Meditation

May your qualities be godly, well learned, considered and applied  
 May your strength be in peacefulness; which cannot be disturbed  
 May your capacity be for love, the more you give, the more you receive  
 May your vigour be in the way you think, always astute for the truth  
 May your assets be in the friends you keep, who cover you in prayer  
 May your might be in the words you speak, full of wisdom and faith  
 May your decisions be right, based on feelings and shrewd intellect  
 May your intentions be upright, because your love for all is pure  
 And may your blessing be complete, for you know in whom you trust. Alleluia!

## Bible Study - Isaiah 5:8-25

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| <p><sup>8</sup> Woe to you who join house to house,<br/>       who add field to field,<br/>       until there is no more room,<br/>       and you are made to live alone<br/>       in the midst of the land!</p> <p><sup>9</sup> The LORD of hosts has sworn in my<br/>       hearing:<br/>       Many houses will be in ruins,<br/>       large and fine houses,<br/>       with no one to live in them.</p> <p><sup>10</sup> For ten acres of vineyard will yield but<br/>       one bath,<br/>       and a homer of seed will yield a<br/>       mere ephah.</p> <p><sup>11</sup> Woe to you who rise early in the<br/>       morning<br/>       To run after strong drink,<br/>       who stay up late in the evening<br/>       to be inflamed by wine;</p> <p><sup>12</sup> who have at their feasts lyre and<br/>       harp,<br/>       tambourine and flute and wine,</p> | <p>but who pay no attention to the<br/>       LORD's deeds,<br/>       or consider the work of His hands!</p> <p><sup>13</sup> Therefore my people go into exile<br/>       without knowledge;<br/>       their nobles are dying of hunger,<br/>       and their crowds are parched with<br/>       thirst.</p> <p><sup>14</sup> Therefore Sheol has enlarged its<br/>       appetite<br/>       and opened its mouth without<br/>       limit;<br/>       the nobility and the crowds go down,<br/>       all the hordes and revellers in<br/>       Jerusalem.</p> <p><sup>15</sup> People are humbled, all are brought<br/>       low,<br/>       and the eyes of the haughty are<br/>       lowered.</p> <p><sup>16</sup> But the LORD of hosts is exalted by His<br/>       justice,</p> |
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- and God shows Himself holy in righteousness.
- <sup>17</sup> Then the lambs will graze as in their pasture,  
Strangers will eat in the ruins of the rich.
- <sup>18</sup> Woe to you who tug at guilt with cords of deceit,  
and at sin as if with cart ropes,  
<sup>19</sup> who say, 'Let God hurry,  
let him speed up his work  
so that we may see it;  
let the plan of Israel's Holy One happen,  
so that we may know it!'
- <sup>20</sup> Woe to you who call evil good  
and good evil,  
who put darkness for light  
and light for darkness,  
who put bitter for sweet  
and sweet for bitter!
- <sup>21</sup> Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,  
and clever in their own sight!
- <sup>22</sup> Woe to you who are heroes in drinking wine
- and champions at mixing liquor,  
<sup>23</sup> to those who acquit the guilty for a bribe,  
and deprive the innocent of justice!
- <sup>24</sup> Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up stubble,  
and as dry grass shrivels in the flame,  
so their root will become rotten,  
and their flowers scatter like dust;  
for they have rejected the law  
of the LORD of hosts,  
and reviled the word of Israel's Holy One.
- <sup>25</sup> Therefore the anger of the LORD  
burned against His people,  
and He stretched out His hand  
against them and struck them;  
the mountains quaked,  
their corpses became refuse in the streets.  
For all this His anger has not turned back,  
and His hand is stretched out still.

## Review

This is a cry of anguish from the prophet Isaiah. If God did not love His people, He would not call out with words such as this; and if the people of Judah and Jerusalem had not persistently rejected the Lord and all His ways, there would be no need for them to be disciplined by the rigours of earthly reality. The hand which the Lord outstretched to His people over centuries previously was a hand of love and affection reaching to them in all circumstances; but because they rejected Him, it became a hand of judgement and wrath (5:25). This is a poem full of emotion and feeling, but within it, we can find a great deal to help us understand what was going on which was so offensive to God and rejecting of His ways.

Before we look at this passage further, I need to explain some things about our study of Isaiah. So far we have read and studied Isaiah verse by verse and paragraph by paragraph, treating it sequentially, one prophecy after another. We could do so with this passage today, but it is rather long, and although each verse is fascinating, some of it is repetitive and we already know it from Isaiah's previous prophecies. For example, the general theme of today's passage is something we have already studied. God's punishment was coming on Judah and Jerusalem in the form of war and exile, but whilst Isaiah predicted this just as other prophets did (e.g. Amos and Hosea), he would not give up on his belief that God had a glorious further purpose for some of His chosen people. Without knowing this, we will misinterpret what is said; and this needs to be emphasised very strongly, but not repeated! The wrath of God is not loveless anger, it is the anger which arises from rejected love.

As we study the rest of Isaiah, we will come across many long prophecies which may seem daunting because of their size, breadth and complexity; so what is the best way of studying them? I will give a shorter edited selection of the text to be read on the first page of the website, suitable for devotions. However, the full text will always be on the complete Bible study page; all will be explained on the website. The downloadable text will contain the whole passage and as a consequence, sometimes the file will be longer than usual. The written devotions will concentrate upon explaining and expounding the

text in sections which make sense to us now. The sheer length of the eloquent speeches of times past is not necessarily helpful to us as we try and understand God's word today, even though it may be good to read it, and this approach will help us follow the 'plot' of Isaiah more closely. We will then be ready for the wonderful parts of Isaiah where the Word of God through this amazing prophet is incredibly powerful.

The passage flows like this; there are two 'woes' (5:8,11) followed by two 'therefores' (5:13,14), then a separate stanza in the middle (5:16,17), and then four 'woes' (5:18,20,21,22) and two 'therefores' (5:24,25). It is noticeable that within the general theme of gloom and doom, the central stanza tells us that God's ultimate and as yet unfathomable intentions are peaceful and generous. The rest, however, is difficult reading. The 'woes' speak about how the people of Judah and Jerusalem broke God's laws for the distribution of land so that the rich became richer and the poor poorer (5:8,9). They lived a life of affluence and drink (5:11,2), questioned God (5:20-21) and practiced bribery and corruption (5:23). The 'therefores' pronounce God's judgement on such appalling practice; war and exile are described with poetic license (5:13,14), and the anger of God is compared to 'tongues of fire' (5:24,25) with graphic vividness.

### **Going Deeper**

There is in fact a great deal more for us to find in this passage, which we will now explore, but we should be aware that these verses are the final set of prophecies before a great upheaval came in Isaiah's life, together with a revelation from God which changed Isaiah's prophecies and his whole life. We are in the last stages of 'setting the scene' before the powerful work of God's Spirit in Isaiah's life recorded in Isaiah 6.

It is also worth noting that the prophecies in today's reading are very similar to those found in 10:1-4, later on in Isaiah. If you have read other commentaries on Isaiah you may be familiar with theories about the 'fragmentation' of the prophecies found in Isaiah. This may sound rather strange to you if you are unfamiliar with this idea, but think of it like this; in today's reading there are 6 'woes'. However, there is plenty of evidence from other prophets that 'woes' were grouped together in 'whole' numbers (see Amos 5:18f and 6:1f.), either three or seven. Now if we have six of them here, where is the seventh? Some say it occurs in Isaiah 6:5, and others in Isaiah 10:1. We will discuss this later when we look at these texts.

#### **Two 'woes' (5:8-12)**

It is extraordinary how these words of Isaiah encapsulate some of the most ancient sins of humanity. Most of human social and economic history can be focussed around 'who owned what land; battles have been fought over it, lords have enslaved populations to work it, and kings have used it as a bargaining tool since earliest times. In addition, people have moved from land to land in order to find fertile ground on which to grow the food they need to live; land has always been essential to human identity and wealth. So it was that God set down His laws for the ownership of land back in the 'Law' (see Deuteronomy 15,19:14, 26f.), which if read together with the laws relating to Sabbath and Jubilee (Leviticus 25,27), are a radical system of land ownership which is fundamentally egalitarian. This was the norm for God's people; every Judean was supposed to own some land and even if it was sold, it should by law return to him or his descendants every fifty years.

It was Ahab who broke this tradition of equality in the northern kingdom of Israel when he had Naboth killed for his vineyard (1 Kings 21:1f.), but despite what happened to the northern kingdom, it appears that during the reign of Uzziah in the south, Jerusalem itself became wealthier and wealthier with a larger and larger number of rich families buying up the surrounding Judean lands (5:8) and like mediaeval lords, making the people of the land work it for them. Because they had thrown aside the 'law of the Lord', God said he would abandon them, making the produce of their land worth less and less. The measures of wine and seed mentioned in this verse are not familiar to us, but they indicate that the landlord would get less in produce than their investment in it (5:10).

Partying and feasting have always been a delight to all people, but where individual growth grows unchecked, there are always dangers in reckless excess, whether eating, drinking, or revelry. The picture of such excess painted by Isaiah in verses 11 and 12 are somewhat familiar to us, particularly drunkenness. One who is drunk is in no position to appreciate the good things of God or 'consider the work of His hands' (5:12)!

### **Two 'therefores' (5:13-15)**

As a direct consequence of these sins, Isaiah prophesied 'my people will go into exile' and described the cruel manner in which death reduces all people to the same level, 'nobility' and 'crowds' together (5:13), all would be 'brought low' (5:15).

We have already seen this warning before in the prophecies of Isaiah, but this is the first verse where Isaiah which mentions 'exile'. This is a loaded word, because from our perspective, we know that around 150 years after Isaiah prophesied, Judah and Jerusalem were indeed taken away into exile to Babylon. Did Isaiah foresee this 150 years before it happened? Some people think it rather farfetched to imagine that Isaiah could predict this and suggest that this passage must have come from a later time and perhaps another author. However, within Isaiah's own lifetime, he often saw the consequences of war and battle amongst the nations around him, and he certainly saw the northern kingdom of Israel invaded by Assyria (in 721BC) when many people were taken into exile (see 2 Kings 17). As far as he was concerned, exile was the terrible consequence of the invasion of one land by another, yet by prophesying as he did, he did indeed speak of a time when this would happen to Judah and Jerusalem, and he said it would be God's doing.

### **Four 'woes' (5:18-23)**

The four 'woes' in these verses are acutely descriptive of a generation which has known about God in the past or been brought up knowing God, but has decided it knows better. To that extent it could be said to be similar to today! As a whole, the woes seem to describe a rather superior attitude towards God, just as we often find in the world today!

The deceit mentioned by Isaiah in verse 18 is that of people who say God doesn't matter and neither does what you do! With such values propounded within society, people often feel guilty because they know inwardly that certain things are wrong, but society does not allow them to deal with that guilt. It is common for people in such a setting to say 'all's fine, don't worry, you're not a sinner, and forget God.' It is not easy to work out exactly what is meant by 'tug at guilt with cords of deceit' (5:18), but this is close!

The passage continues with all manner of ungodly attitudes exemplified by Isaiah. The arrogance which calls on God to prove himself by showing what he can do (5:19) reminds us of the Pharisees who asked Jesus for a sign (Matt 12:38,39), baiting the Lord to see what he will do! This kind of attitude comes from those who have confused evil and good, darkness and light, bitter and sweet (5:20), and those who are 'wise in their own eyes' (5:21). Also, like many evils in society such attitudes can be fuelled by alcohol (5:22) and although they appear clever, are often accompanied by corrupt behaviour (5:23). Isaiah is colourful in his language as he identifies these details, but it is fascinating to read a passage of scripture from eight hundred years before Christ which speaks of human behaviour with such extraordinary detail and insight, such that we can recognise all these things today. For that, these prophecies are valuable.

### **Two 'woes' (5:24,25)**

Because of all this godlessness amongst His own people, 'the anger of the Lord burned against His people' (5:25). Why should we doubt that this is an appropriate response from God? His anger is because He loves those who have rejected Him, and as God, He cannot just disregard such rebellion or let it go unchallenged. The people who behave in this way are supposed to be a 'light to the world' (42:6, 49:6) but they have changed direction completely to become an example to God of the excesses of the world, rather than an example to the world of the Covenant love of their God.

These last two verses describe God's 'wrath' as like a hot wind which burns the land and whips up fires in parched scrublands (5:24). Isaiah is, I believe, shocked at what he sees going on around Him. He sees God's hand stretched out towards His people; not 'for' them, as when Moses stretched out His hand over the Sea and the people walked through on dry land, but 'against' them. He saw no end to this judgement; 'His hand is stretched out still' (5:25), but this prophecy came before Isaiah had his famous experience in the Temple, and his life was changed forever by the commission he received from the Lord (Isaiah 6).

## **Application**

I always find it distressing to read the considerable quantity of evidence in the Old Testament of how God's people can be unfaithful to Him. The reason for this is because as I read passages such as this, I see echoes of how people in the church behave today, and it makes me cringe. I believe that God is working powerfully through His own people in the churches of the world today, but there are still many people, many congregations and many theologians who talk about God or manage their general wealth and belongings as if nothing had changed since the days of the people of Judea and Jerusalem at the time of Isaiah! And for all our joy at the presence of Christ who enables us to deal with all manner of sin and problems in the church, and the joy of proclaiming the Gospel which has been given to us, it seems as if we still battle some of the same ungodliness today.

Personally, if I were to choose a moment to preach about the 'wrath of God', I would not speak against the people of the world who have had little to do with the church, or do not know the Gospel or the power of Jesus. I would speak to God's people and warn them about the terrible consequences of presuming upon the God they claim to believe in without living the transformed lives and changed characters which are a result of the true work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. There are too many people who think they are Christians and in practice are not; their behaviour is too like that described in this passage. And there are also many people who think of themselves as unworthy of the Lord's name yet who are far closer to the Kingdom, and they need to hear the Gospel and receive the Spirit. Those of us in God's church must read the words of the prophet Isaiah with caution, lest they refer to us!

## **Questions (for use in groups)**

1. Discuss your own reactions to this passage, and discuss how much of it is new material to the prophecies of Isaiah.
2. How can we present God as a God of justice to the world today?
3. In what ways does the Lord tell us now what he intends for the future? Do we hear prophecies and just apply them to our own times?

## **Discipleship**

The book of Isaiah is a complex book, and we are just getting in to it. So far, we have just read the 'introduction'! Reflect on the message of Isaiah you have read so far and try to apply what you can to the life of the church and the world today. It is worth doing this exercise with this part of Isaiah because the prophecies are all part of God's Word; but what is said by Isaiah is just about to change, and we will soon be discussing different issues!

## **Final Prayer**

Bring us peace this day, Lord Jesus, bless us with peace, love, joy, hope, and all the good things of faith which sustain us through the ups and downs of life. You are our helper and our guide, and You are our King: AMEN