

Prayers

Opening prayer

We thank You Lord God, for the gift of Christmas time. As we prepare to celebrate this great feast, give us a heart to be generous to others just as You have been generous to us in sending us Your Son. May we become more like You each day, and may we celebrate this Christmas time with joy and laughter, as befits a great celebration. Come, Lord Jesus, Come! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: AID

1. For yourself

Pray in thanksgiving for the goodness of God who has come to the aid of all people in sending Jesus. Pray with gratitude that God will continue to bless people through the celebration of Jesus' coming.

2. For your friends and family

Pray for those within your family who will have to travel through Christmas time, perhaps to see relatives and friends. Pray for their safety and that God will enable them to have a blessed time in all their celebrations

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the many people who will come to Christmas services this Christmas time, those who perhaps will not come at any other time. May they hear the Good News of Jesus proclaimed and lived within your church fellowship

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for any items of news you hear or see this Christmas time, especially those that report any tragedy or disaster

Meditation

(a meditation arising from Psalm 68:5,6)

The Father of orphans and a protector of widows ...
this is our God in His holiness.

The liberator of prisoners and a home to the desolate ...
this is our God in His justice.

The head of His army and a conqueror of His enemies ...
this is our God in His might.

The healer of sicknesses and a guide to the blind ...
this is our God in His mercy.

The leader of His people and an everlasting presence ...
this is our God in His majesty.

The Saviour of the world and a lover of His people ...
this is our God in His glory.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 40:6-11

⁶ A voice says, 'Cry out!'
And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

- All humanity is like grass,
 their devotion is like the flower of the field.
- ⁷ The grass withers, the flower wilts,
 when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
 surely the people are grass.
- ⁸ The grass withers, the flower wilts;
 but the word of our God stands forever.
- ⁹ Get up! Climb into a high mountain,
 Zion who bears good news;
 Raise your voice with strength,
 Jerusalem who bears good news,
 raise it up, do not fear;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 'Here is your God!'
- ¹⁰ Look, the Lord GOD comes in power,
 and His arm rules for him;
 His wages are with Him,
 yet his work is in front of Him.
- ¹¹ He will graze his flock like a shepherd;
 He will gather the lambs in his arms,
 And He will give rest to the ewes
 He lifts up to His bosom.

Review

Isaiah continues to prophesy about the coming of God to His people. Here, he speaks further about the 'voice' that cries out to prepare for the coming of God. Much of this passage can be matched to the ministry of John the Baptist

In the first few verses of chapter 40 we hear voices in God's heavenly court calling out and announcing the love of God for His people and His return to Jerusalem (40:1-5). In itself, this is extraordinary; but as we read today's passage, something interesting is happening, because verse 6 reminds us of when Isaiah was first called. In this famous story, a voice said to Isaiah '*whom shall I send?*', to which he replied, '*Send me!*' (6:8). Now here, as Isaiah listens to the heavenly court, with voices calling out God's words, they remind him of his first calling, because a voice says, '*cry out!*' (40:6), and Isaiah responds immediately, just as he had done before, saying this time, '*what shall I cry ...*' (40:6f.) and thus taking up a renewed call to prophesy. He then makes his own contribution to the vision (4:6-8) and hears other voices prophesying God's message (40:9-11)! This is an extraordinary picture, and it may well explain why the prophecies of Isaiah that follow take us further than before. God has spoken anew to Isaiah.

As Isaiah joined in the voices of the heavenly court, he spoke first about the fragility of humanity (40:6,7,8), as someone who was deeply aware of the sinfulness of Israel, his own people. However, the reply he receives takes up the theme of the arrival of God in Jerusalem (40:9) in judgement; but when the Lord arrives He brings 'good news' (40:9)! He comes in power and glory (40:10) not to condemn but to act with love and mercy, and with pastoral care; '*He will graze His flock like a shepherd ...*' (40:11)! The combination of these visions makes a compelling and dramatic prophecy, indicating the nature of God's work of redemption. In the face of His people's sins, God acts in love to bring redemption (40:11). Isaiah was utterly realistic about human nature and the paucity of people's response to God, and yet totally convinced of the glorious power of God to overcome all obstacles of human sin and fragility to bring the 'good news' of His love.

There is a famous psalm with words very similar to those found in the first three verses of our passage:

As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him. (Psalm 103:15-17)

We may wonder which came first, the prophecy of Isaiah or the Psalm! Did Isaiah join in the prophetic calls of the heavenly court by using a psalm he knew, or was the psalm itself a meditation on Isaiah's great words which likened the fragility of humanity to mere grass? We can never know, but the message is clear, people are mortal and their lives and their influence come and go; God, however, is different. He is immortal and constant, and His love for His people will never change; '*the word of the Lord stands forever!*' (40:8), and Zion is called to bear the 'good news' and shout it out to Judah (40:9)!

This is first time that the Bible speaks about a 'Gospel', and Isaiah describes this 'good news' (40:9) as God's message for the whole earth (the New Testament Greek word for 'good news' is 'Gospel'). It is therefore true to say that the Gospel is formally announced not in the New Testament, but here in the Old Testament! And its message is that God has come to be with His people; a message which means that the barrier between God and humanity created at the time of the 'fall' (Gen 3) will be overcome when God comes to be with His own people, as announced by Isaiah 'Here is your God!' (40:9) In addition, when the Lord comes in power, He will both achieve what He sets out to do (40:10), but also give the care and succour that people need in order to know that He is with them, like a 'shepherd'!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- All humanity is like grass (40:6-8)
- The Gospel; shout it out! (40:9)
- Gentleness and power (40:10,11)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V6 'And I said ...'

These words are an interesting example of where recent finds in archaeology (the Dead Sea Scrolls) have clarified that this is the correct translation. The older King James Version has 'and he said ...' but that has now been conclusively proved to be wrong by the discovery of more ancient copies of Isaiah than were previously available!

V6 'Their devotion is like ...'

You will find that different translations have a widely different range of words here, because the Hebrew word 'hasdo' is impossible to translate with any accuracy. Because the word is very similar to the Hebrew 'heseth' which refers to covenant faithfulness, and the basic Hebrew word with consonants 'HSD' relates to acts of kindness, I have decided to translate this 'devotion'. The prophets appears to be describing the people's devotion to God as like grass, having but fleeting significance and meaning!

V9 Notice how Zion and Jerusalem are personified as those who bear the 'Good News' of God. This is exactly as the grammar of the Hebrew describes them. 'Good News' is not told to them, they are the bearers of it to others.

V10 'His wages are with Him'

This phrase is usually translated 'His reward is with Him'. However, the word 'reward' really means the reward paid for work done; that is, 'wages'. In other words, the sentence means that the Lord will have the benefit of the payment for His work before He even does it, because God trusts in the work to be done. For the meaning of this, see notes.

V11 'He will give rest to the ewes He lifts up to His bosom'.

You will find many different translations of these last two lines; usually; 'and He will carry them in His bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.' (NRSV). These translations add a few words to the text in order to give it meaning, but I have kept it as brief and as close to the Hebrew as possible, matching the second half of the verse with the first so that the flow of the Hebrew poetry is preserved.

The breadth of this vision is breathtaking, and there are many who wish to interpret this passage in a far more restricted manner, describing it as relating to the Exiles in Babylon, for example, or to the experience of Jewish people of later years. All of this may be true, but the evidence is that this passage has affected far more people than that, and such a powerful vision has its origins in an experience of God rather than the experience of an event (such as the exile). As we read further, we will discover more about the way this text transcends human experience to anticipate the Gospel.

All humanity is like grass (40:6-8)

The amazing connection between Isaiah 40 and Psalm 103 begs huge questions (see above), but if asked for an opinion, I prefer the (improvable) idea that when Isaiah first began to enter into the heavenly prophetic chorus, he did so using words which he knew were holy, taking them from the psalms. They did, after all, express what Isaiah himself thought about the wayward faithlessness of humanity. Isaiah had himself argued with King Ahaz (chapter 7) and agonised with Hezekiah over his illness and his oblivion in the face of Babylonian interest in the treasures of Jerusalem (Isaiah 39). He had seen the people of Israel claim

faithfulness to their God and yet be punished for their sins in worshipping gods other than the Lord, and he had seen both good (Hezekiah) and evil kings (Ahaz and Manasseh) reign in Jerusalem. Such was the passing frailty of human dedication to the Lord their God, the one who had made them and whose 'breath' (Hebrew 'ruach', otherwise translated 'spirit') sustained them.

When we use the Psalms ourselves, they have a general tendency to lead us on from one thing to another, and always in the direction away from ourselves and towards the Lord; this is why their poetry is something which we cannot afford to lose from our church hymnody and worship. Psalms carry within them the essential Gospel heart of redemption, and this is what Psalm 103 does for Isaiah. From the despairing sighs of an old man about the transient and foolish people he has met in life, he is moved to turn to the contrasting faithfulness of God. The psalm says; 'but the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting' (103:17), and Isaiah was moved to say 'but the Word of our God stand for ever' (40:8)!

The Gospel; shout it out! (40:9)

Now that Isaiah's own changed and deeply moved spirit perceived the eternal glory of God, his spirit was able to connect with the vision he had just seen, and he was moved to prophecy in power! He had just seen a vision in which a voice called out that the Lord God was overcoming all obstacles to be with His people again; 'Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed and the people will see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it' (40:5) What amazing news! This was not something that could or should be kept within the bounds of Jerusalem herself! Isaiah therefore prophesied in a visionary way about going further to proclaim this good news to 'the cities of Judah' (40:9) beyond Jerusalem!

We must remember that in this passage, both Zion and Jerusalem stand for 'God with His people', according to the picture we have already been given (40:1-5). Also, we think of Jerusalem as being on a 'high mountain' and some scriptures speak of it as being the 'highest mountain' simply to convey its importance. In reality, Jerusalem is indeed set on a mountain top, but not the highest in the range in which it is set (remember, even Jesus looked down on Jerusalem from the 'Mount of Olives' – Matt 24:3, 26:30). Isaiah's prophecy here speaks of the Good News being borne up from Jerusalem to higher peaks (physically) from where it can be pronounced further, notice the words of Isaiah which sum up the great prophetic call he heard earlier in the heavenly court; 'here is your God!' (40:9).

This is the Gospel Isaiah saw as broadcast from Zion, from Jerusalem! The interesting thing is that whereas the historic covenant relationship with God enjoyed by the Jewish people was one bound by duties and obligations to the law and to ancient traditions as well as faith and love, Isaiah did not see this at all and made no reference to it! Instead, he saw the connection between God and His people as a physical and earthly reality which had to be proclaimed! This was utterly new in Jewish thought and experience, and Isaiah was the first to see it, and eventually, Isaiah spoke about it as a 'new covenant' (59:22, 61:8). God's relationship with His people was Good News to be spoken and proclaimed. You may say that this passage saw the proclamation as only to the 'cities of Judah'. However, as we all know, spoken words have a life of their own, and are repeated and passed on to others, because that is the nature of humanity! Just as Jesus said at first that His mission was for the Jews, but it inevitably ended up as a mission to the whole world (Matt. 28:19); so the message Isaiah saw pronounced to the cities of Judah could not be limited, and as he later saw, it would become a 'light to the nations' (42:6, 49:6).

Gentleness and power (40:10,11)

The signal of this great Gospel was the 'coming of the Lord' in power and authority (40:10), symbolised in his prophecy by the Lord's 'arm' of strength and might. The second part of verse 10 is not straightforward because as I have explained above, the traditional translation of this is 'His reward is with Him ...', and people have traditionally believed that this refers to the Lord bringing the exiles with Him back to Jerusalem. However, the interpretation I have presented of this passage is far greater and grander than this and demands a fuller explanation. The picture Isaiah gives is of a Master coming to supervise work to be done. He carries with Him the 'wages' or 'reward' which He will give to those who do His work. In other words, He is carrying with Him the gift of eternal salvation! As Isaiah says, this work is yet to be done, but the Lord comes into the world bearing it, and this is the Good News. It is a picture of Jesus coming into the world and living amongst people, bearing with Him the salvation of God, and yet only being able to give it when His own work is done and completed, as we now know, on the Cross! Isaiah did not see all this of course, but he saw a glimpse of it in the Lord coming in power, with a work to do and a gift to give. It is an astonishing vision.

Finally, Isaiah saw the other side of God's great majestic character. He saw the power of God, and he also saw the love and compassion of God, as reflected in the traditional picture of the shepherd. These words about the Lord looking after His people like a shepherd are more graphic than almost any others in scripture. We all know about the emotional force of Psalm 23; 'the Lord is my Shepherd ...' and the great chapter in Ezekiel where the prophet speaks about the scandal of poor leadership in Israel which requires the Lord to come and be a good shepherd who will look after his sheep (Ez 34:12f.). Only here, however, do we read the passionate words in which Isaiah speaks of the Lord not only grazing his flocks with care, but gathering

the 'lambs' in His arms, and also the bearing the weight of 'ewes', female sheep bearing lambs and tiring on the journey to restful pastures (40:11). You have to go to John chapter 10 (describing Jesus as the Good Shepherd) to read anything else in scripture as compassionate and caring as this, and using the imagery of the sheep and the shepherd! If we note that the Hebrew word for 'lambs' used in this passage is the same one used in Leviticus for lambs appropriate for sacrificial worship, it only adds to the sense of compassion and care in this text.

Discipleship

Application

Isaiah was clearly caught up in a great visionary process whereby he saw things beyond time and beyond himself. Unless we see this passage as prophecy of this kind, we are left with guessing at historic connections and suggestions which have little spiritual significance either for the people of Israel and Judah in the past or for people of later generations. With the connection we have discovered above, we find the passage speaks to us about the things of God in a new way which points directly to God's eternal plan of salvation in Christ. It is also an inspiration to us to see that God can and will draw his people into His own vision of the future, and bless them with this insight both for their own reassurance and through prophecy, for the inspiration of others.

Not all of us are called to be prophets, and we do not often receive prophetic messages. However, when I hear someone speaking in a fellowship group about a vision of God they have had which has brought them into the very presence of God, and they tell of the amazing things they have heard (I have heard people speak in this way on more than one occasion), then I know that this is an authentic blessing. All that is missing is the courage to share the word of God we have heard with others, in other words, the courage to be a prophet. All too often, people are content to receive brief and relatively comfortable messages given in church as 'God's Word', but He has so much more for us. The Lord is seeking to reveal far more to us than we can possibly understand, if we will accept our responsibility to share with others the prophetic Word He has first given to us. He has words of judgement, power, authority and love to give us which if we hear them, will sort out all the problems within His church and the world!

Questions for groups

1. Are people today conscious of their mortality? In what ways do we recognise our frailty and the brevity of life?
2. Discuss in your group what you believe the Gospel is, and try to express the Gospel in words as simply as possible.
3. What does the picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd teach us today?

Discipleship challenges

- *Read through Psalm 103 and gain a picture of how this psalm enables the reader to give glory to God for salvation. Does it help you in the same way that it helped Isaiah?*
- *Find a Christian friend and ask them to read this passage. Without telling them anything else about it, discuss it with them, and see if they have come up with anything similar to yourself. You will find the exercise very enlightening!*

Final Prayer

Ever present Lord, touch the hearts of your servants, who own Your name and seek to live the Gospel. Touch them so that they might know the spiritual power at their disposal for the proclamation and establishment of Your Kingdom. Melt hearts of stone, strengthen weak hearts, and encourage those who are tiring in Your service, O Lord. May Your Kingdom come. AMEN
