

Prayers

Opening prayer

Be close to me, Lord God, for I long to live my life according to Your standards of gracious and generous love. Give me a forgiving heart towards others, a desire to do all I can to meet their needs, the courage always to discern what is right and true, and the strength to persevere through trouble so that peaceful solutions to human conflict may be found. You alone can help me live such a life; thank You, Lord God, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: ACTION

1. For yourself

Pray in penitence; pray asking the Lord's forgiveness for the things that you have not done. Pray also about those things you have done that have proved to be wrong or unhelpful. Let the Lord search your heart

2. For your friends and family

Place before the Lord your feelings about some within the family who have not done for you what you believe they have promised. If necessary, forgive those who you feel have hurt you

3. For the church and its work

Pray that the church of God might be a forgiving community, and one that is always open to the true healing of forgiveness in all its forms

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

Pray for reconciliation within your country and your local community. Pray that people who have long been enemies may by the grace of God become friends. Pray that God's people will be willing to do the work necessary for such things to happen

Meditation

Did you know that Jesus was born for you?

You have heard that Jesus died for you;
That He gave His life to forgive your sins;
That in dying He conquered sin and evil,
And made a way for you to go to heaven.

You have heard that Jesus rose for you;
He has conquered death to defeat all evil,
And live a life that demonstrates true love;
A true message of Good News for you.

You have heard that Jesus gave you His Spirit;
That He has poured His gracious gifts on you,
To enable you to live the life He has given;
And come at the end to your eternal home.

He was born for you; Jesus has come for you.
He became a human being just like you,
He felt pain and love and laughter, just like you;
So your faith is real, and God, your God, is true.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 56:1-8

- ¹ *This is what the LORD says:
Uphold justice and do what is right,
for my salvation is coming,
and my righteousness is being revealed.*
- ² *Happy is the one who does this,
the son of man who holds on to it firmly,
one who guards the Sabbath from profanity,
and guards himself from doing any evil.*
- ³ *Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say,
'The LORD will surely remove me from his people';
and do not let the eunuch say,
'Look! I am like a dry tree!'*
- ⁴ *For this is what the LORD says:
To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what I am pleased with,
and hold firmly to my covenant,*
- ⁵ *I will give them within my house and my walls,
a work and a reputation
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.*
- ⁶ *Now, the foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD,
to serve him and love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who guard the Sabbath from profanity,
and hold firmly to my covenant -*
- ⁷ *I will bring these to my holy mountain,
and give them joy in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.*
- ⁸ *This is what the Lord GOD says,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to him
besides those already gathered.*

Review

Today's passage from Isaiah begins a new section of the prophecy stretching from chapter 56 to the end of the book (chapter 66). In these chapters, the prophet has a vision of what happens after the redeeming work of the Servant, and it begins in today's reading with great optimism and the revelation of some powerful promises of God. Nevertheless, as we continue beyond this passage in coming days, we will find that Isaiah's prophecies about this time are not always optimistic in nature; indeed, some of them are highly critical of God's people. So after God's redeeming power has come to the world, not everything will be what it seems; for as long as this world exists, evil is At hand.

The first question to ask about this passage is this; what was Isaiah speaking about when he delivered these prophecies? To begin with, it is easy to see that these words could refer to the return of God's people from exile in Babylon, and the resettlement of God's people in Jerusalem and Judea. If we focus on this, then the redemption of Israel by the Servant is indeed a victory for the nation, but Isaiah warns the people of many problems ahead. They must guard against profanity on the Sabbath and doing evil (56:2).

This explanation however, does not explain the majority of text, and the passage says far more than is readily explainable by thinking of Jewish people return to Jerusalem from Babylon. It is far more helpful to see here a more general vision of the coming of God's Servant to redeem not just Israel but the whole world, and the Christian will understandably believe that Jesus has fulfilled this promise. Also, Isaiah's vision reaches out beyond the time of Isaiah and the exiles, not just to the time of Jesus, but to us now, who live long after God has come in Christ to redeem the world. There is no doubt that back in history, the people of Israel found great solace in these prophecies and applied them to themselves, as anyone might do who he is such words. However, through Christ, these prophecies has gained momentum and mean even more to us today.

It is exciting to read prophecies from the Old Testament that arose in ancient times and yet reach out to us who live now. As we read them, we will find treasures here that can speak directly to our spiritual condition, and it is not too hard to interpret them. Isaiah has prophesied that God will come in the form of His suffering Servant (52:13-53:12) to reveal His conclusive work of redemption, which available for all people (55:1-13).

The prophecy begins with a straight challenge from the Lord to all the redeemed, to *'uphold justice and do what is right ...'* (56:1); moreover they should keep the Sabbath and refrain from all evil (56:2). It is right and proper that this challenge should be made now that God's gracious work through the Servant has been accomplished in Christ, for it was the absence of justice, righteousness and due reverence to the Lord amongst His people that caused God to punish His people Israel in the first place. We of all people, should hear this challenge and respond with spiritual vigour.

After this, the prophecy describes the new people of God in a profoundly moving and revealing way. It speaks primarily about *'foreigners'* who have *'bound themselves to the Lord'* (56:3,6) who will not need to fear being separated from the Lord, and also *'eunuchs'* who will have an inheritance! Isaiah's talk of foreigners is relatively easy for us to understand, for it fulfils the Lord's pledge to make redemption available to nations. Eunuchs, however, are used here symbolically to refer to those who are 'not perfect', and their inclusion in God's promises means that the Lord reaches out to all who were previously excluded from His people because of impurity, such as the sick or possessed. All people are now welcomed into God's presence and given a new, greater inheritance (56:4-5)!

The whole prophecy is like a cascade of themes and pictures, of salvation, righteousness, foreigners, eunuchs, promises of blessing, inheritance, covenant relationship with the Lord, happiness and joy, and above all the assurance that God has now changed from being exclusive to Israel, to inclusive of all (56:8)! It is a goldmine for those whose eyes are spiritually open to God's Word.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- The general call and promise (56:1,2)
- The inheritance of the foreigners and the eunuchs (56:3,4,5)
- The worship of the new covenant people (56:6,7,8)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V1 '... my righteousness ...'

In the last line I have retained the meaning of the Hebrew word for 'my righteousness' ('tsadiq') which some modern translations change to 'my deliverance'. The Hebrew word does indeed cover the meaning of righteousness as a moral state and also righteous deeds which arise from righteousness. The translators who use 'my deliverance' make the theological assumption that God's righteous work is His deliverance of people.

V2 'one who guards the Sabbath from profanity.'

Strictly, the Hebrew reads 'one who guards the Sabbath from its defilement'; or possibly '... from his defilement'. I have taken the sentence to refer generally to the keeping of the Sabbath.

V5 'a work and a reputation'

The Hebrew here has 'a hand and a name', and most translations leave it at that, making the reader try and work out what this can possibly mean. However, there is ample evidence that the hand represents 'deeds' or 'work' (just as the arm is a symbol of 'power') and 'name' also means 'what other people know about you' which is the same as 'reputation' in our language today.

V8 'I will gather others to him ...'

Although the Hebrew is singular and has 'gather others to him', most translations have 'gather others to them'. The confusion is due to our understanding of who is being gathered to what or to whom! Whether translated 'him' or 'them', the nation (singular) or people (plural) who benefit from God's gathering are His people Israel.

Because of the way the themes tumble over each other, it is quite difficult to pick our way through this prophecy, but we will look at the details of what is said in the light of the overall picture of the opening out of God's blessing and the Lord's inclusive character. As we do this, however, we should bear in mind that the new things described by Isaiah are only possible because of the work of the Servant. That is, because of the work of Jesus Christ.

The general call and promise (56:1,2)

Most of the great prophets give a summary message to Israel to do what is right and act justly; this message is for God's sinful people as they struggles with their relationship with God (e.g. Jer 22:3,15, Amos 5:24). Other prophets, together with Isaiah, project this call forward and address it to the Lord's redeemed people. Isaiah says 'uphold justice and do what is right' (56:1), and Micah says famously 'he has told you what is good, and what the Lord requires of you; to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8). So it is inexcusable for those who have received the benefits of God's redemption and blessing to imagine that they are called to anything less; and this is true for God's people today.

We are entitled to ask what it means to do this, and the first answer is given in verse 2. This describes an act of will whereby someone purposefully seeks to do what is right before God, as reflected in their keeping of the Sabbath and protecting its holiness, and also doing everything possible to protect oneself from evil. It is interesting that the first call is to uphold the Sabbath for oneself and others, and we should be careful today to understand what this means. The prophet does not refer to one day of the week on which we worship the Lord, but to God's original and unique command to all people to take one day's rest in seven and thereby honour God and the creative process by which we were made (see Genesis 2:1-3). The association we have in our minds between 'worship services' and the Sabbath simply did not exist in the Old Testament, and the Sabbath is a universal principle given to all humanity by God for its protection, health and sanity. By honouring it we identify ourselves with God Himself who rested one day in seven.

The call to guard ourselves from evil is always a matter of intent, and God is not setting us up for a fall by asking us to stand firm against sin and evil. The Old Testament is under no illusions that humanity falls, but we are called to stand firm because we want to and we know it is right; and this is necessary as a demonstration of our desire to receive the blessings of redemption and salvation. Isaiah does not give us here a full blown theology of salvation, starting with redemption and requiring a response of repentance from the sinner so that the power of sin and evil can be removed. However, these elements of salvation have been set in place due to the work of the Servant. When Isaiah says 'my salvation is coming ...' (56:1) he states the obvious conclusion. If we respond by doing what God asks of us and are intent to do His will, then He has already put in place the means of redemption required for our salvation.

The inheritance of the foreigners and the eunuchs (56:3,4,5)

It is a truly amazing think to read these words in the Old Testament; 'let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say "the Lord will surely separate me from His people"! The whole mindset of the Old Testament mitigates against such a sentiment, or so we might think. Of course, this wonderful vision is the completion of God's earnest work to bring 'a light to the nations' because He was not content to be a light to Israel alone (49:6). These words ensure that we know Isaiah's vision lies beyond the work of the Servant when the love of God is available for all humanity. This vision must have shocked the Israelites who first heard it.

In truth, Israel did have a tradition of being generous to 'resident aliens' who came to live within Israel because they felt attracted to God and the way of life of the people of Israel. Moses gave plenty of laws to define how 'resident aliens' from other nations could live alongside God's chosen people and receive its benefits, including a share of the Passover meal (see Ex 12:19f. 23:9, Lev 19:33f. etc). However, they were not allowed an inheritance within Israel and had to live in servitude; they remained 'cut off' from God's people because of their lack of physical descent. This prophecy announces the complete removal of this legislative separation between the physical descendants of Abraham and two categories of other people; those of other nations (Gentiles) and all those (Jew or Gentile) who were impure through illness or sickness or other ritual impurity (of which there were many prescribed in Leviticus, including women during menstruation – 5:2f. 7:21, 12:2 etc.).

In this passage (56:3) the eunuchs represent the impure because of their castration, and Isaiah dramatises this picture by forbidding the eunuchs from saying 'Look! I am like a dry tree!' (56:3). The expression may have meant more in ancient times, but we can easily see that it caricatures the fact that a eunuch could not have a family or a place in a family because of their condition. The very nature of God's redemption, says Isaiah, is that even eunuchs can be included in the family of God, providing they do what has previously

been prescribed in the earlier part of the vision, which is to show intent to do God's will and hold firm to His fundamental law of the Sabbath (56:4,5).

At this point, Isaiah introduces another theme into the mix which makes up the prophecy, and this is the theme of 'covenant' (56:4). It is only introduced briefly, reminding us that what we are talking about is inclusion within God's covenant family; the people of Israel once defined the covenant, but the new covenant includes all. The mention of the covenant seems to trigger the next and last part of this prophecy, which expounds themes of love usually associated with the covenant.

The worship of the new covenant people (56:6,7,8)

Isaiah mentions the foreigners again in verse 6, and repeats the emphatic phrase 'foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord' as if it is one which has great significance. In order to understand the rest of the prophecy, it is necessary to read verse 6 as a verse that stands alone, defining those people God will now award great blessing. It is a fascinating verse because it speaks about the 'service and love' of 'the name of the Lord' given by such foreigners. This phrase is a profoundly Christian understanding of devotion to God, for the word 'service' could equally well mean 'worship', and the word for 'love' is not the expected Hebrew word for 'covenant love' ('cheseth') but the other Hebrew word for love ('ahavah') which means 'unconditional love'. Usually, Scripture speaks strongly to us about God's unconditional love for us, but here it speaks about this high quality of love as given by foreigners to Almighty God! Most Jews of Isaiah's day would not have heard anything like this before in their lives! Nevertheless, all those, says God, who show love and worship/service to Him, keep the holiness of Sabbath rest and maintain covenant faithfulness to Him, are eligible for blessings!

The open and inclusive blessings of God offered in this vision are firstly joy in worship! It is something we observe even today that when people have a fresh experience of God, they feel renewed in worship, and express a joy and zeal for the Lord that can often shame their elders! When Isaiah says 'their burnt offering and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar' (56:7) we may be tempted to think that he has not yet seen the revelation of God that the Servant (Jesus) will do away with this type of worship (as explained logically in the letter to the Hebrews). We must be generous to Isaiah and accept that this is only a picture of worship, and then notice with interest that the very next line of his prophecy is highly significant.

Isaiah says these words next; 'for my house will be called a house of prayer for all people.' Jesus quoted this phrase when He went into the Temple at Jerusalem and threw over the paraphernalia of sacrificial worship; the stalls of the money changers and cattle stalls in the outer courtyard of the Temple complex (Matt 21:13). Isaiah must have seen something of the revolution that would have to take place in the Temple if it was to be restored to being a house of prayer, as David and Solomon originally intended (2 Sam 7:27, 1 Kings 8:29f.)!

Isaiah's last comment in this prophecy is simple. He says that what God has begun, He will continue to do (56:8); 'I will gather others to him (meaning the new Israel) besides those already gathered. Once God has set something in motion, it cannot be stopped!

Discipleship

Application

Throughout this passage, we may find connections with God's call to His people today. Firstly, no-one is outside the love and care of God and His offer of redemption. Further, redemption and salvation is not automatic; it requires our response, and our intent to turn away from evil and do what is right. The word repentance is not used by Isaiah, but it is implicit within the text (56:1,2). The Lord also sets down some firm guidelines for those who believe, and this is represented in this passage by the 'Sabbath' command by which people rest and honour God. It is no use our trying to argue our way out of hectic Sundays and work for the church as well as work done for our living; what the Lord asks of us is to stop, for one day in seven, and be fulfilled by honouring God simply by resting. This is a great challenge for us today because it is a message that has largely been drowned out by the complexities of the Christian use of Sunday (the first day of the week) for Sabbath and the way in which modern society constantly cuts across this divine and very humane principle; it is nevertheless important.

Underneath the whole passage is the importance of complete openness and inclusion amongst God's people. This is surely something which we need to address today, when so many young people want young people's church, and elderly people gravitate towards churches which accommodate them, and the adventurous try 'cafe' or 'internet' church. Surely, the message is that there is one church open to all, in every way! If we as individuals want to place limits on who we will worship with, then we place limits on the

appeal of the Gospel and the work of God in our midst, as so many have realised through the ages. Our destiny is to worship and serve our Lord and offer Him the devotion (56:7,8) which is His for having saved us and redeemed us through the Servant, Jesus Christ our Lord. There is no more wonderful thing than this.

Questions for groups

1. How can we '*uphold justice and do what is right*' within our own society and the life of the church today?
2. How can we make sure that the church of God is open to all people in our own day? What prevents us from being fully open to people of all races and languages and beliefs, if they are willing to hear the Gospel and receive it?
3. Who are the disinherited within our world today, who most of all, need to hear the Gospel of God's love?

Discipleship challenges

- **Something to think about.** *To what extent does this passage of scripture reflect your own journey of faith? Read through the passage again and as you do so, offer to God your own salvation and tell Him your feelings about what He has done for you. He will bless you through your prayers.*
 - **Something to do.** *Have you heard people say that the Old Testament has much to offer us in the life of the church today is? Look out for opportunities to challenge this misperception of God's Word.*
-

Final Prayer

Holy Spirit, come and inspire us now. Give us an insight into the Father's will and His purposes for the Kingdom here on earth and also in Heaven. Guide us by grace and the power of Jesus' love, and strengthen us for all that lies ahead in the days to come. Thank You, Holy Spirit: AMEN
