

Prayer

Glory be to You Lord God, for you have made us all with such variety and with so many diverse characteristics! We are all so different! May we rejoice in the extraordinary variety you have created within humanity, and wonder at the powerful way You have provided for all through Your Servant Jesus Christ, who has come to save the world! AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Bereavement

Please pray today for those who are struggling spiritually because of the pain of death and lack of assurance of salvation. Pray that they will receive the spiritual help they need.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the care of friends
- Pray for the UN and its attempts to get aid into Burma. Pray against the evil which prevents this
- Pray for those still suffering in China

Meditation

Lord God Almighty:

If we are troubled,
 lead us into the peace of Your presence;
 If our minds are confused,
 bring us knowledge and understanding;
 If our hearts are broken,
 comfort us with Your unsurpassed love;
 If our strength is failing,
 touch us with Your loving help and healing;
 If our feelings are bruised,
 pour on us the balm of Your comfort and Word;
 If our pathway ahead is puzzling,
 guide us with the calm and steady hand of Your Spirit;
 For in You, and in Your peace,
 we are eternally blessed and forever saved.

Bible Study - Isaiah 12:1-6

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>¹ On that day You will say:
 I will praise You, O LORD,
 for indeed, You were angry with me,
 but Your anger has turned away,
 and You have comforted me.</p> <p>² Look, God is my salvation;
 I will trust, and not be afraid;
 for the LORD GOD is my strength and
 might,
 and He has become my salvation.</p> <p>³ With joy you will draw water
 from the wells of salvation</p> <p>⁴ And you will say on that day:
 Praise the LORD,</p> | <p>call upon His name,
 make known His deeds among the
 nations,
 keep in mind that His name is
 exalted!</p> <p>⁵ Sing praises to the LORD,
 for He has done glorious things;
 let this be made known
 throughout the earth.</p> <p>⁶ Shout aloud, and sing for joy,
 O inhabitants of Zion,
 for great in your midst
 is the Holy One of Israel.</p> |
|--|--|

Review

We have had a roller-coaster of a ride through the prophecies of Isaiah ever since the story of his call in Isaiah 6! At one moment we catch glimpses of wonderful words and prophecies that remind us of the Gospel (as in 7:14, 9:6,7, or 11:1,2) and in the next we are thrown headlong into the political turmoil of the eighth century BC power politics; something very difficult for us to understand and interpret. What we can say with certainty is that Isaiah observed the world events of his own day and by the inspiration of God's Spirit, he perceived how God was at work through them. He was also brave enough to declare what had been revealed to him as God's Word, and then others perceived the power of his prophecies and wrote them down for future generations.

Occasionally, as in this small and distinctive chapter, Isaiah breaks from the relentless pace of his prophecies to offer us a hymn of praise to God. This tells us that despite the desperate times in which he lived, Isaiah always maintained a sense of proportion about what he saw and experienced, knowing that God was in control of His world. As a whole, his prophecies encourage us to have the same attitude towards both God and what we see happening in the world around us.

This passage is like a song of pure praise, and there is some evidence that it was indeed written to be sung; singing was a strong feature of Judean worship, and is mentioned twice in our passage (12:5,6). If we examine the structure of these verses, then they outline an understandable structure for worship that could be used even today. The song starts with praise but leads straight into confession (12:1) and then thanksgiving for God's comfort and salvation (12:1,2). This leads into a joyful expression of confidence in the Lord (12:2) and rejoicing in His provision (12:3), and the worship continues with a call to make the Lord known to all the world (12:4). The song concludes with a further round of worship, which encourages everyone to participate (12:5) and proclaim God's 'Holiness' (12:6)! Many a service of worship has been created around similar themes and elements of worship!

Although there is nothing wrong with using Isaiah's song of praise in this way, it does not help us understand what was going on in the book of Isaiah. What we may fail to do is realise that Isaiah's praises may sound familiar to us, but his words would have sounded quite astonishing to those who first heard them. The very idea that God's 'anger' could come on His people and then be turned away without a sacrifice would sound very strange. At the Temple in Jerusalem, they practiced the Jewish substitutionary theory of atonement whereby an animal had to be sacrificed to draw away God's wrath (as in Leviticus 4:20f. and 5:6f.); but here in this song, Isaiah celebrates God's ability to avert His anger and act for the salvation of His people unilaterally (12:1). The Lord God alone is the 'well of salvation' from which His people may draw (12:3)! In addition, Isaiah chose to sing this song at the very point in time when Israel and Judah were experiencing their worst fears; Assyria was on the borders and waiting to invade the land! How could this be the right time to be exalting the Lord and encouraging one another to proclaim the Lord to the heathens, some of whom were attacking Jerusalem?

It is possible to say, as some do, that this song was inserted here without reference to any particular historical context, but I would beg to differ. Its presence at this point in the prophecies of Isaiah gives praise to God for the great revelations which had come out of Isaiah's confrontation with King Ahaz of Judah. Since Isaiah had burst out in frustration to the King that the Lord would come to be with His people like a little child born to a woman (7:14), this prophesy had grown immensely. God had led Isaiah to prophesy further that the child was a King (9:2), and was God Himself, present with His people, and the one who would lead them towards their eternal destiny in the Kingdom of God (11:5-9)! So despite the dire troubles of the day, Isaiah saw a bright hope for the future! We do not always feel like praising God in the midst of trouble; but for Isaiah, this was exactly the right time!

Going Deeper

This only a short chapter of Isaiah, but there is plenty for us to explore! We will look at the subject of God's anger and its withdrawal (12:1f.) and the nature of the salvation which Isaiah saw (12:2,3). Then, we cannot fail to look further at Isaiah's call to make God known to the nations (12:4,5) which itself is a cause for great rejoicing (12:6). If you know this

passage well, you will see that one or two words will appear unfamiliar because of my translation, and the reasons for this are all explained below.

Notes on the text and translation

- V1 *The second line is sometimes translated 'I will give thanks to you O Lord'; but I have translated this 'I will praise You O Lord.' The word concerned is 'jadah'; the word from which the name 'Judah' comes. It does mean either 'give thanks' or 'worship', or 'praise'. However, for us today, 'give thanks' can mean a specific form of prayer, and 'worship' can mean any number of things depending upon the church you attend. For this reason, I have preferred 'praise' which captures the sense of a positive approach to God.*
- V2 *There is some confusion in the Hebrew about the end of verse 2. Some translations have 'for the Lord God is my strength and my song'; instead of '... my strength and my might'. This is a genuine case where the most ancient Hebrew texts we have of this passage have different amendments and corrections to the word, traditionally rendered 'song'. However there is a distinct possibility that is a rather rare form of a word for 'protect' or 'strong'; hence my translation.*
- V4 *I have used the word 'praise' in this verse for the same reasons as in verse 1*
- V4 *The last line where I have translated 'keep in mind that His name is exalted!' is usually translated 'proclaim that His name is exalted.' The verb in the Hebrew is a well known word used for 'remembrance' or 'calling to mind'. Most translators think it unhelpful to say 'remember His name is exalted' in the context, and therefore put in 'proclaim'. However, Isaiah's clear intention is to say that God's people should remind the nations that the Lord's name is highest of all names!*
- V6 *Many translations have in the second line 'O inhabitant' (singular) of Zion. However, there is some evidence that the feminine ending of the Hebrew word indicates that the word is 'collective'. So it refers to all the inhabitants of Zion, not just one!*

Praise for wrath averted!

It is extremely unfashionable to talk about God's wrath, but there is no way to study the Old Testament and not deal with the fact that because of the moral nature of the world God has made, justice means that He will act in judgement, and His negative judgement is wrath! Again and again, it seems, we need to be reminded of the power of sin to afflict all humanity, and even those of us who know salvation still feel its power because we live in a fallen world. It is glorious for us to live at a time when we can be sure that Jesus has made it possible for us to have access to God's grace by faith and so overcome the problems of sin. How was it possible for Isaiah to obtain a glimpse of this before the time of Jesus?

We cannot answer this question on a historical level, but only on a spiritual one. Isaiah had prophesied that God would come and 'be with' His people (7:14) as their just and righteous King (9:6,7), and he must have had sufficient faith in this to believe that God's presence would supersede the rituals of religion which were practiced in the Temple. Why can we have confidence that Isaiah saw the truth of this eight hundred years before Christ? Firstly, Isaiah had already spoken out against the false religious worship of his day which he saw as grossly corrupted. Read again the first few verses of chapter 1 of Isaiah and you will see what I mean. It is possible that all these different parts of Isaiah's prophecies were not isolated but a true reflection of Isaiah's soul, and everything he said went together. The religion of his fathers had become corrupted, so although Isaiah always showed admirable optimism (see 2:1f. etc.), the realisation that God had given him a vision of a real person who would come and be a 'Saviour' ('Immanuel') was for him a source of unrestrained joy. This is certainly the feel of our passage today.

The nature of salvation

If we were to ask Isaiah how it was that the Lord's anger would be averted, I believe that he would say that he did not know, but that God would most definitely 'turn away' His anger,

and, as he said in verse 2 (with some degree of emphasis) 'Look, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid'. The ancient system of worship in the Temple was a system dominated by a hierarchical High Priestly family, and had become a barrier and a source of fear for ordinary people. It had degenerated into a system of 'do this, do that', so how liberating it was for Isaiah to say; 'The Lord God is my strength and my might, and He has become my salvation!' (12:2)

All of this affirms our view of salvation which is that it consist of God's anger 'turned away' (12:1) and access to the Creator through faith (12:2). Isaiah does not use the same language as Paul to describe salvation by faith, but it is all there in this passage. The wonderful expression 'with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation' (12:3) sums up what Isaiah felt about what God had revealed, and in the next verse he seems to challenge those listening or reading his words; 'you will say on that day; praise the Lord ...' We can do this now, but I wonder whether those who first heard what Isaiah said were very wary of this song of praise which was so contrary to the worship of God which they knew in the Temple. One day, said Isaiah, 'you will know ...'

The call to the Nations

The main emphasis of the last part of the song of praise is the telling of the good news of salvation to all the nations (12:4,5). Again, the message is repeated so that we can be in no doubt about what Isaiah intended; 'make known his deeds among the nations' (12:4), and 'let this be made known throughout the earth.' (12:5) Today we recognise this call because it is found in the Great Commission of Jesus Christ from Matthew 28:19. The announcement of God's righteousness and salvation to all people would, of course, have two contrasting consequences. On the one hand, this news would open up the Kingdom of God to all believers; and Isaiah described this work of God as 'glorious' (12:5). On the other hand, such a proclamation would leave the nations open to God's judgement, and we have already seen that Isaiah saw the time coming when God would act in justice against the nations and some would be on the receiving end of God's wrath (10:12f.)

For the time being, the full consequences of God's work amongst the nations would remain something largely hidden and unknown. The Judean people survived for another eight hundred years before the Saviour came and Isaiah's prophecies would be used by God in many other ways, as we will find out. But I do believe that at this moment in his work, Isaiah gained a glimpse of the eternal truth that God was concerned for all of His Creation, and this included general salvation as well; something which few Israelite or Judean people could easily accept, even in Jesus' day. Isaiah remains one of the few prophets who consistently declared that God was far bigger than the people of Israel had seen and understood in their belief that they alone were 'God's people'.

But for Isaiah, this great vision of a world opened up to the love and justice of God was a cause for supreme joy, and he called on the 'inhabitants of Zion' (the people of Judah) to rejoice, and give praise to God (12:6).

Application

To praise God is a natural response for anyone who has been touched by the hand of God. We tend to think of 'faith' as the defining characteristic of a Christian and this comes from our understanding of the work Jesus Christ did for us on the Cross. I would not wish to take anything away from this or from what it means, however, it is worth exploring the idea from the Old Testament that it is the 'praise' of God which marks out those who have a genuine relationship with Him. After Abraham heard the voice of God directing him and then making promises to him, he immediately built an altar in order to offer praises to God in the only way he knew (Gen 12:8f.) for example. Praise happens when someone becomes aware that God is indeed the great Creator, the One who has made them and can save them. The Psalms are all songs of 'praise'; by definition because the word 'Psalm' means 'praises'. Not all of the psalms are happy like Isaiah's song of praise, but all of them characterise what it means to come before the Lord and recognise His power and authority to help. Praise is what as God's creatures, we give to God our Creator.

Isaiah had been blessed with the most amazing set of visions which explained something of God's future plans for all people; His plan of salvation. Without knowing it all, he did not respond by entering into a critical analysis of it, or by telling others dispassionately, or by going back to God with further questions wanting to know more (all of these being things we might be tempted to do!). He praised God with the words of this passage, and they have much to teach us.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways is God at work in the world events we see happening around us.
2. Discuss in your group the quote; 'with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation' (12:3).
3. Is it possible to preach the Gospel to all the nations today, when so many countries and people express prejudice against Christianity?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The chapter of Isaiah we have read today seems to me to be a good guide to worship, and one which could be used constructively by many a worship leader. Something like this should never be used prescriptively, but it can remind us of features of worship which we might otherwise forget.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Try using this poem of praise as a means of praising God yourself on some occasion.*
- *When you go to a service of worship in your church, keep an eye on this chapter and see if the different elements of worship are included in your service.*
- *Discuss the importance of 'praise' with someone in your family who is a Christian.*

Final Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, for the love we receive from others even when we do not know it. Help us respond well when people help us or demonstrate care, and give us the grace to show love in return. In so doing, may we fulfil your call to 'love one another', and do it both in spirit and in practice. We ask this in Your name; AMEN