

The message which stands out for us from the passage however, is that Isaiah could see that God's way of dealing with the world would be a way of peace. It was almost unheard of in Isaiah's day to talk in this way, and Isaiah must have received this by revelation because the evidence is that before his time, most of God's people thought that the right way to secure their peace and integrity was to fight for it, just as David and Saul had done, a few centuries previously (see 1 and 2 Samuel). So why should peace be God's way now, and not war? Perhaps Isaiah saw by revelation that for God's work of salvation to be achieved, God needed to act not only with justice, but with love; and this needed a new approach of peace. If Isaiah had spoken in the same way as Amos and Hosea, then the only answer he could have given to the sins of the people would be God's wrath and judgement by warfare; but Isaiah's prophecies go beyond this. Isaiah was convinced that God had more to offer than judgement.

To express this, Isaiah used an expression which has become well known; 'they will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks'. In other words, the implements of war will be turned into agricultural tools! It is interesting that Isaiah's compatriot and fellow prophet Micah also uses the same expression (Micah 4:3), and for the same reason. Isaiah was not the first person to observe that you can use the implements of war for peaceful purposes if there is the will so to do!

Application

We started this study with a prophet speaking words of hope to the people of God who needed to know that their God would help them in times of trouble, but the prophecy they were given by Isaiah gave them far more than this. It told them that God would act to save His people, but it also gave a much broader picture of God's work of salvation which, in its time, was the beginning of a new revelation of God's love and His purpose for the world.

These words help us see something of God's overall plan. He is always directing history towards the time when He will be 'the highest mountain peak', and although it may not seem to us that the Church is making headway towards this goal in our own day because of secular opposition and antagonism from other religious faiths, that is the truth of history as God has made it. He will raise Zion, and it may be important for some of us to take hold of this fact.

The rest of the prophecy gives us insights about God's work which are quite pointed. God is our teacher, and His laws are still His ways. By 'laws', I do not mean the sacrificial laws which Jesus died to complete, but the teaching which explains to us the principles of God's justice and what is right and wrong in God's eyes, all of which we can learn from God's Word. Lastly, this prophecy challenges us at least to consider that war is not an answer to anything in God's eyes. God is ultimately interested only in peace, and although we live in a sinful world in which much war happens because of godlessness and sin, let us all work towards the goal of making sure that aggression and war are not our pathway. Some have done this in the past and created terrible damage both for individuals and the work of the Gospel. Let us be people of peace.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How can we worship God in a way which makes His presence known in the world today? How can we 'lift Him high'?
2. How do God's people learn the truth about God and about their faith today? Are these means adequate?
3. Is it wise to believe that peace can be achieved peacefully?

Discipleship

Although it is good and right to look at the details of a great passage of scriptures such as this, it is very important to see the broad sweep of its majestic poetry. God, after all, is far bigger than we can imagine, and it can often be helpful to read a passage such as this and be challenged to realise that He is bigger than our thoughts and experience. Our God is awesome and we need to take opportunities to allow Him to speak to us out of His majesty. We must wait on Him for this, but purposefully.

Final Prayer

All glory to You, God of laughter and smiles, of conversation and happiness. Bless us today in the good things of life, and may we radiate the happiness of those who are at peace with themselves and with You. May we declare with every part of our being that You are the One who 'makes the difference' to our lives! AMEN

Prayer

Jesus, You are the one who helps us in the time of our deepest need. When we do not know where to go or what to do because everything has become like a weight on our shoulders, You extend Your hands to us in support and care. Give us spiritual eyes to see Your love and spiritual courage to place our troubles into Your hands, and so be free: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The United Nations

Pray today for the many parts of the world where soldiers from different countries act as peace-keepers for the United Nations. In some places this is successful, and in others it is highly controversial and deeply political. Pray for the soldiers who do this work and who find themselves in difficult parts of the world. Pray for those who manage and organise their work.

Meditation

We weep when we have missed the mark and let ourselves down;

We wish that we had learned our lessons long ago;
For life has given us time to get things right.

We weep when we have failed and let our loved one down;

We wish that we had shown more love
To those who always mean so much to us.

We weep when we have been faithless and let our friends down;

We wish that we had shown the courage and love
Which would have made a difference, for everyone.

We weep when we have sinned and let our Saviour down;

We wish that we had kept closer to the path
That Jesus showed; the way to life eternal.

But do not fear. We weep because we know we have gone wrong,

For tears of repentance open doors of love
And lead to restoration, peace with God, and all.

Bible Study - Isaiah 2:1-4

¹ The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² In days which are to come the mountain of the LORD's house will be established as the highest mountain peak, and will be raised above the hills.

³ All the nations shall flow to it, and many people will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; so that He may teach us His ways and we may walk in His paths."

For the Law will go out of from Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He will judge between the nations, and will decide the future for many peoples; they will beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift up sword against nation, and they will never again train for war.

Review

This is indeed a powerful word within the early prophecies of Isaiah, and it has had a profound impact on many people ever since it was revealed. In chapter 1, we have already seen that Isaiah was convinced that God would act in justice to deal with the sins of His people, and yet he would not give up believing that God would somehow save His people, and do it from Zion. Isaiah perceived that God would not simply destroy the people of Judah and Jerusalem in the same way that the northern kingdom of Israel was wiped of the map of history (as predicted by the prophets Amos and Hosea, in 721 BC). In this astonishing prophetic vision Isaiah revealed

some surprising facts about how God intended to overcome the sins of His people by His own power and authority, and eventually establish His righteous Kingdom.

Many people read this passage of scripture too literally, for example, we do not have to imagine that God will one day lift Jerusalem high above Mount Everest! We will gain most from this text if we allow ourselves to see that God was 'thinking big' when he gave this prophetic word to Isaiah. Isaiah's vision of the 'mountain of the Lord's house' (2:2) being 'lifted up' therefore means that God will indeed create His Kingdom on earth, and from this 'high' position, rule over all things and all people (2:3,4). When put like this, the prophecy reminds us of the work of Christ, and its language reads like the book of Revelation.

The breadth of the vision is stunning. Isaiah describes 'all the nations' (2:1) coming to Zion with enthusiasm, and wanting to learn about God's revelation through Jacob (Israel) so that they can 'walk in His paths' (2:3). It also paints a picture of God's Law spreading out from Zion to become the plumb line of right judgement amongst the nations (2:4). Although there is nothing here about the Messiah, all of this is something that we can see fulfilled today. God has come to reign through Christ and in the visible form of His Kingdom on earth, the church. Isaiah perceived that it was God's nature to save the world and He had already begun to reveal His plan. God would not wipe all His people off the face of the earth because of their sins (as He had done at the time of the Flood – Gen 6-9), and no new religion or way of coming to God would be required. He would find a way to save His people and fulfil His goal of making Himself known to all the world!

We may be familiar with such things, but such thoughts were unparalleled in Isaiah's day, in the later part of the eighth century BC. It is remarkable that although this vision does not put much flesh on how this great work of the salvation of humanity would be achieved, it does reveal one significant thing about how it would be done. Isaiah's prophecy says that God will establish His Kingdom by peaceful means; 'they will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks ...' (2:4). This peace is not merely the result of God's saving work; there is nothing in this prophecy about the 'End Times' as we think of them today; the vision speaks abstractly about future describing God's work as happening in 'days which are to come' (2:2). The peace described here is a practical peace that comes from accepting God's ways, and as such, it is an inspiration to all those who believe that the path of faith should be one of peace, not war. Moreover, the prophecy confirms the Christian understanding of Jesus as essentially a 'man of peace'.

Isaiah prophesied that God would save the world despite all human sin, even the sin of His own people, and do this not through war, but through peace. We cannot afford to ignore the importance of this remarkable prophecy about how God has worked in Jesus, will work through us, and will one day be victorious in both heaven and earth.

Going Deeper

Each part of this brief passage contains fascinating prophetic insight and leads us into a deeper appreciation of other scriptures. Verse 1 tells us little more than the same information about Isaiah which we found in the first verse of chapter 1. Verse 2 (into verse 3) describes the elevation of Zion and God's purpose for His city; verse 3 describes the action of the Word of the Lord; and verse 4 describes judgement and peace. Each has its treasures!

The elevation of Zion (verse 2)

Verse 2 tells us about 'days which are to come', and the Hebrew words read literally 'in the end part of the days'. Isaiah's vision is that God will lead His people on a journey from where they are to a future in which they are secure in Him, but he does not tell us much about the exact timescale. For that, we will have to go elsewhere in the Bible. The point of this verse is not the timescale but the nature of the journey. Zion, as explained in yesterday's study is a word which describes God's dwelling place with His people. In Isaiah's day, Zion was a specific place, the Temple Mount on which stood Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem (on a geographical map) is itself located on a series of hill tops of which the Temple Mount was one, and it is tempting to think of this prophecy as telling us that God will raise the Temple mount of Zion higher than all the other peaks in the range of Judean hills, just to signify its importance.

This, however, just scratches at the surface of what the text means. The notion that God dwelt on hill-tops and mountain tops was strong in ancient times, and so Isaiah's words tell us not so much about the geography of Zion as the nature and character of the God who dwells there. Isaiah saw the coming of a time when the one true God would be observed by all people as superior to all other gods, and this is the core meaning of his words. The universal breadth of this vision is extraordinary because the Old Testament does not often revert to its core theme of

the universal love of God for all humanity and Creation. The people of Judah and Jerusalem had played about with the worship of many gods over the centuries, and Isaiah knew that eventually the truth would come out that there was only one God; and of that, he had absolute faith. But the Judean people also had to learn that the Lord was not their private god; He was the Lord of all, and one day this would be evident to all people.

Today, the Christian is able to say that this became true when Jesus was 'lifted high' on the Cross to die. At that moment, metaphorically speaking, 'Zion' was lifted up above all mountain tops, and Jesus' death was God's unique demonstration to the world of His love and passion for all humanity. In addition, the 'Lamb standing on Mount Zion' in Revelation (14:1) also fulfils this prophecy at the end times of Christ's coming again, in preparation for the coming of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:2). This prophecy of Isaiah still challenges all people to believe that God is leading them on a journey from where they are to where He wants them to be, which is a place in which God reigns supreme. Neither should we forget that although this is all familiar language to us, it was first revealed to Isaiah, in this passage.

The Word of the Lord (verse 3)

In a quite extraordinary way, Isaiah prophesies that God will draw people to Zion as it is raised above the other mountain peaks (2:2,3). This opening out of God's Word to other nations is an essential feature of Isaiah's prophecies, and is shown elsewhere in Isaiah's prophecies to 'many nations' (see chapters 15-24 which cover a large number of nations) and also his famous references to Israel as a 'light to the nations' (42:6, 49:6). This theme points forward to the evangelistic mission given to the disciples after Jesus' resurrection (Matt 28:18-20) and the call to all Christians to bring the knowledge of God to all nations (Romans 10:14-17).

What is interesting in Isaiah's prophecy is that no mention is made of any effort on the part of people to affect the gathering of the nations to Zion, which happens simply because Zion is 'lifted up'. Because of this text, there has always been a school of thought which says that if Christians perform their proper duty of lifting up God in public worship, then people will naturally be drawn towards Him. However, I suggest that Isaiah is not attempting to be prescriptive about how God's mission is done. He simply observes that people come when Zion is 'raised'.

People come 'to Zion' spiritually, as well as physically. Jerusalem is an important centre for faith and for learning about God, but the Zion which is the dwelling place of God with people today is the church (which is why 'Zion' was a popular name for a church in times past!). The heart of Isaiah's message in verse 3 is that people will learn about God because of their connection with the 'house of Jacob'; that is, the people of Israel. They will therefore learn about God from a historic connection with the God who revealed Himself to the forefathers of Israel: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No Christian today can therefore ditch the historic truths of God's faithful revelation throughout time and history as recorded in the Bible, Old and New Testaments. The Bible remains fundamental to our knowledge of God.

Isaiah says of the people who come to be taught, that they desired 'that He may teach us His ways'. Of course, teaching about the things of God normally requires the human agency of a teacher, but the heart of any teaching about God is always brought to the heart of the learner by the Spirit of God. All the human methods which we can think of cannot compete with the way that the Holy Spirit works in the heart of one who truly wants to know more about the things of God, and every true teacher knows when the things they say and do are being used by the Lord in this way. Teaching faith is different from any other kind of teaching.

Lastly, in verse 3, when Isaiah talks about the knowledge about God as the 'Law', we should not forget that he is using the word 'Law' in its loosest technical sense. All too often, we think of it as 'the Ten Commandments' and the rule book of Leviticus. However, a proper understanding of the Law of God (the 'Torah') is that it is God's revelation of Himself through the ancient stories of the world and the forefathers, as found in all of Genesis to Deuteronomy!

Judgement and peace (verse 4)

Again, Isaiah's vision and prophecy is extraordinary. The idea of God judging 'the nations' is not commonly found in the Old Testament; indeed, it is more common in the teaching parables of Jesus (see Matt 25), so what did it mean to Isaiah? In his day the world was in turmoil and the different nations in the region of the 'Near Middle East' were all jockeying for power. The more we read in Isaiah, the more we will connect with what was going on. However, this prophecy says to God's people that the Lord God Himself was in control of what was happening around them and would judge all nations appropriately; they should therefore trust their God.