

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus Christ; Your presence is more precious to us as each day goes by. We yearn for Your friendship, Your compassion, Your healing, Your guidance and Your salvation. In this season of 'goodwill', come to us afresh and challenge us to go further in our love, our generosity and our compassion. In this way, may we show that Your presence has made a difference to our lives. We praise You, Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: AID

1. For yourself

Look back over everything you have given money towards this last year, by means of tithe or other giving. Pray that these organisations and institutions will continue to do a godly work

2. For your friends and family

Pray for those of your family and friends who are in particular need at this time. Pray that they will know the love and support of others in this Christmas season

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the work of the church this Christmas, especially for its special service; carol, midnight or Christingle services, and also its charitable work. Pray that all these will receive good support

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

Offer to the Lord the aid organisations you support. They will receive funding from various sources; pray that their good work will receive as much support as possible

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

Bible passage – Isaiah 11:11-16

- ¹¹ *In that day the Lord will reach out His hand again to claim the remnant of His people, what remains from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastal regions of the sea.*
- ¹² *He will raise a banner for the nations
and will gather the banished of Israel,
and assemble the scattered people of Judah
from the four corners of the earth.*
- ¹³ *Ephraim's envy will turn aside,
and Judah's hostility will be removed;
Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah,
and Judah shall not vex Ephraim.*
- ¹⁴ *They will swoop westwards down the side of Philistia,
and plunder together the people of the east.
Edom and Moab will be an extension of their power,
and the Ammonites will obey them.*
- ¹⁵ *And the LORD will dry up
the gulf of the Sea of Egypt,
and will sweep His hand over the River (Euphrates)
with His scorching wind,
and split it into seven channels,
so that people can cross with sandals.*
- ¹⁶ *And there will be a highway
For the remnant of His people
Who are left from Assyria;
as there was for Israel
on the day they came up
from the land of Egypt.*

Review

Here, following the vision of God's Kingdom we have just read (11:1-10), Isaiah sweeps across time and space in a far-reaching series of prophetic utterances about the future of nations. Typically, Isaiah offers us a glimpse of God's eternal plan for the world, and we are left asking why he does this, and what the vision means. Remember, Isaiah has shocked us by saying bluntly that God would judge His people by means of an Assyrian invasion of their lands; God's hands was on Assyria to use them for judgement (ch10). Yet though we assume God has washed His hands of His people, He has not. The story has just begun! Isaiah has seen beyond this judgement to a greater glory (11:6-9), and though we might be utterly confused, he now prophesies with conviction that beyond judgement lies a new work of God, and this is what we read about here.

As we study this text, some of what it describes evidently is plainly true. For example, Israel and Judah were indeed gathered together (11:12) after the Exile, when those left after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and Judea was complete (around 530BC). Some of this, however, we simply cannot verify, for example, the drying up of the mouth of the Nile and the splitting of the Euphrates (11:15). Regions around the Nile were prone to drought, and the river Euphrates has always been prone to changing its course (to this day), but we do not have the data to link this to any historical events in Biblical times. Yet the main point remains the work of God to bring the remnants of His people together again in some new glorious work.

We are used to reading about this in the New Testament, but not in the Old. For example, the life of God's people, the church, is intended to reflect the glory of God's perfect future, or as Paul puts it in his famous poem (1 Corinthians 13), we experience now in part what we will one day know in full (1 Cor 13:8-13). Paul also tells the Christians of the early church that the gift of the Holy Spirit is the 'guarantee' of all God has for us in His Kingdom (e.g. 2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5). We must now accept that it has always been part of God's plan that His people experience here on earth a sample of His glory, His love and His peace.

In Isaiah's day, there was clearly much more for God to do before the Messiah could come; but the promise of real peace and some new work of God is something to be treasured. Isaiah prophesies that God will reach out and gather His people together from an extensive range of nations representing all the known world (11:11). The Lord will 'raise a banner' for this gathering (11:12), and will immediately allay any fears, bringing all hostility, envy, jealousy and vexation between the different tribes of His people to an end (1:13). In peaceful co-existence, Isaiah could see God's people living as they did in the times of King David, when

they had the upper hand over other nations, and the Lord went before them to smooth their pathway (1:16). Some of the vision refers to the continuing war-like activities of other nations (11:14), but the Lord was at work bringing peace through His people.

Right at the end of this prophecy comes a final important message, for Isaiah saw a vision of a new highway allowing the remnant of God's people to return from captivity in Assyria (11:16). This pathway was similar to the path God had made for His people when they escaped from Egypt and travelled to the Promised Land. We will find that this theme returns later on in Isaiah's prophecies (see chapter 40 onwards), where it is central to Isaiah's vision of God's redemptive work. Indeed, it is on this pathway that a messenger cries 'prepare a way for the Lord' (Isaiah 40:3f.). Once again, these early chapters of Isaiah's prophecies give us glimpses of greater things to come, even though they may be difficult for us to understand at first!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the text and translation
- The ingathering
- Living together in peace
- The pathway

Notes on the text and translation

- V12 *The word 'banner' means a flag or standard raised as a rallying point normally in battle, but also as a signal in days before other means of communication over long distance.*
- V12 *The word 'banished' means those who have been thrust out of the Promised Land because of sin. Some translations use the word 'exile', but the word is not the one usually reserved for someone who was an 'exile'.*
- V13 *The translation 'Judah's hostility will be removed' is different from many translations which read 'Judah's foes ...' The Hebrew word 'tsar' can mean 'narrow', or 'constricted'; or 'that which makes narrow or constricted', which could either mean stressful circumstances or perhaps an enemy. The poem parallels Judah and Ephraim, and Isaiah is talking about the two become friends not enemies; so it is better to talk about the hostility between the two tribes being removed.*
- V14 *Some translations assume that the united Israelites will attack Moab and Edom, but the Hebrew says literally; 'Edom and Moab the extension of their hand'. What this really means is that Israel will have conquered these two countries and use them as an extension of their own power again (as in the days of David); hence the translation above; 'Moab and Edom will be an extension of their power'.*
- V15 *'Will dry up the gulf of the sea of Egypt' The Hebrew say 'the tongue of the sea of Egypt', and we must assume that this was a colloquial expression possibly for the regions of the Nile Delta.*

This passage speaks of God's gathering of His people, which is a great Biblical theme, and also the peaceful co-existence of God's own people and the promise of His help in going before us to smooth the pathway of our salvation. All of these are important theological themes for the whole Bible, let alone the Old Testament, and we will look at each in turn.

The ingathering

The ingathering of God's people is described in verses 11 and 12 of our text. Much has been made in recent years about the ingathering of the Jewish people to the state of Israel, and the belief that this is a fulfilment of scripture which points towards the end-times. It may be possible to find such a theme elsewhere in the Old Testament, but this is not really what is described here. In this passage, the vision of the glory of God's Kingdom enlightens what will happen on earth, not the more popular view of prophecy which holds that what happens on earth anticipates or points towards the coming Kingdom.

In Isaiah's vision, God is a God of peace, and He commands the whole earth, gathering from Assyria those who have survived the onslaught of the empire's sweeping judgement (11:11) and from distant lands those of His people who have been 'banished' (11:12 – see above). Notably, Isaiah described God's people by using both terms; 'Israel' and 'Judah' (11:12) for after the judgement, it was God's intention to reunite His people again. In the whole of the history of God's people since they entered the 'Promised Land', they were only united during the latter part of the reign of David (see 2 Samuel 5:5) and the reign of Solomon, so the scandal of their divisions would be ended by the ingathering.

Living together in peace

The imperative of unity amongst God's people comes out in verse 13. Isaiah's prophecy uses a double parallel stanza to make the same point, which is a clear sign of emphasis. Ephraim (the tribal name representing the ten tribes of Israel) and Judah had been at each other's throats, fighting numerous wars against each other ever since the young leader Jeroboam rebelled against Solomon's son Rehoboam and took ten tribes of Israel with him (1 Kings 12:12f.). It is also possible that one of the reasons why Isaiah was so upset with King Ahaz in chapter 7, was that as the King of Judah, Ahaz was planning to confront the aggression of the northern state of Israel; the two nations of God's people were fighting again! It was this event which triggered Isaiah into the whole series of prophecies which we are now studying.

Peace on earth is never the same as peace in heaven, however, and Isaiah's prophecy about God's people acting 'together' (11:14), 'swooping' down the western seafront past Philistia in the direction of Egypt and rampaging eastwards in the direction of eastern nations as well, is a very limited peace. At this point in history, God's Covenant was with His people, living in a world in which to survive meant being strong enough to repel all invaders; God's peace could not be demonstrated across the whole world. The vision of God's Kingdom at peace (11:1-10) is inspirational and speaks of our eternal destiny, but the history of the world indicates that it is not something which appears achievable even in our age of a 'global village'. However, it is God's will that His people demonstrate that peace now. If that message was given by Isaiah 800 years before the time of Jesus, how much more relevant is it now for God's people, rent apart as they are today by divisions!

The pathway

The amazing truth of Isaiah's prophetic vision is that within it, God promises to go ahead of His people to make a 'highway' (11:16), in order to help His people return to Him. In addition, Isaiah prophesied that the Lord would be with His people in a special way as He was when the people of Israel left Egypt and travelled through the wilderness to the Promised Land. On that occasion, He had directed the people by His presence in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex 13:21,22, 40:38). In its day, this holy presence was regarded as a supreme revelation of God specially available for the journey of the Exodus, but Isaiah now prophesied that God would bless His people by preparing a highway again. This time, the highway would be for the gathering of God's people to Him, but this time to receive His peace.

At this point in Isaiah's prophecies, the word 'highway' remains an element of great interest, but as with many other prophecies in Isaiah, it is something which we will discover returns again at a later stage and is built upon. The later prophecies in Isaiah we know so well speak of 'a highway' for God's purposes (35:8, 40:3, 62:10) and this anticipation of God's coming work became closely linked in people's minds with the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 3:1f.). Yet again, this is the first place in scripture, chronologically, that we find this word about a highway. God would provide a pathway whereby His own people, and eventually all people could come to Him, and through the Messiah, gain access to the eternal Kingdom of peace which awaits us.

Discipleship

Application

There is a clear message in this passage about the coming together of God's people. It would be helpful if Christian people collectively accepted that first and foremost, this is God's will for His people in Christ. It is all very well rejoicing in the gathering of Jewish people in Jerusalem and Israel, even though the history of this fact in the last century has proved to be less than happy for all involved. These prophecies speak directly to the Christian church now, and our peaceful life together is intended by God to be a testimony to the world. There are many Christians who believe that they are a testimony to the world, but few who live in peace with one another; and this suggests that God's people as a whole are not as far forward in their walk of holiness as some might think. Jesus prayed for peace amongst His disciples before He died, and at length (see John 17) and I have written about this many times in these studies. I pray that one day I will see something of the work of God's Spirit to bring God's people into repentance before each other and the Lord, and listen to Isaiah's visionary prophecies of peace, and Jesus' final great prayer.

Questions for groups

1. When the Old Testament speaks of God's people being gathered to Him, what does this mean for a Christian today?
2. Is world peace a worthy objective? If it is, is it achievable and worth our effort?

3. What does the word 'highway' mean to you?

Discipleship challenges

- *Go for a walk and spend the time praying about where the Lord is leading you.*
 - *Write down your own vision of peace amongst God's people and share it with others, if you can.*
 - *Check out that you understand the history of the separation of God's people by reading passages such as 1 Kings 12-16.*
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Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You have given us the greatest of all gifts; You have given us life and You have saved us. Accept the worship and service of our lives, given in our work, our sharing, our conversation, and our taking part in all You have given us to do this day. Revive our souls for all that lies ahead for each us we pray: AMEN
