

Prayers

Hear our prayer, O Lord. You have seen so much more than we have seen, You have heard so much more than we have heard, You have touched more lives than we can ever know. Therefore, make us humble before Your majesty, Your greatness, Your experience and Your wisdom, and help us always learn of You, this Christmas and throughout our lives. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: CHRISTMAS

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to help you remember the wonders of Christmas in the coming months and year. If you have a diary, write down the things that have spoken to you especially, and wait to see how the Lord will use them.

2. For your friends and family

Ask the Lord to bless your family and friends at the turn of the year. Praise God for the good things of the past year, and off to Him the difficult things

3. For the church and its work

Thank God for the year that has passed by and especially for the good work that has been done by your church and its fellowship. Pray for those who have put themselves into the life of the church and blessed many by their work.

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

Thank God for your country and for the many good things you enjoy about it and your privileges of citizenship

Meditation

Jesus is the bright light of God;
And through Him we have life in all its fullness.
He shines with brightness and clarity;
And by His light we see the beauty of our surroundings.
He shines across the whole of the world;
And by His light we know the Creator may be found.
He shines to expose all our darkness;
And by His light our troubles and sins are resolved.
He shines into the depths of the soul;
And by His light we can find eternal forgiveness.
He shines between heaven and earth;
And by His light our future is eternally secured.
Come, Lord Jesus, and shine on me.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 54:1-10

- ¹ *Sing, O barren woman who never gave birth!
Break out into song and shout,
you who have not been in labour!
The children of the desolate woman*

- Will exceed those of the married woman,
says the LORD.*
- ² *Make the pitch of your tent-sites bigger!
Stretch out your tent-curtains!
Don't hold back;
lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.*
- ³ *For you will expand to the right and the left;
Your descendants will inherit nations
and will occupy deserted cities.*
- ⁴ *Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;
do not back down, for you will not be disgraced;
for you will forget the shame of your youth,
and never recall the taunt of your widowhood.*
- ⁵ *For your husband is the one who made you,
and the LORD of hosts is his name;
your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel,
and He is called the God of the whole earth!*
- ⁶ *Like a forsaken woman grieved in spirit,
the LORD has called you back!
Like a wife of youth when she is cast off,
says your God.*
- ⁷ *For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.*
- ⁸ *In a flood of wrath
I hid my face for a moment from you,
but with everlasting faithful love
I will have compassion on you,
says the LORD, your Redeemer.*
- ⁹ *This is for me like the days of Noah!
When I swore that the waters of Noah
would never again pass over the land.
So I have sworn I will not be angry with you,
or rebuke you.*
- ¹⁰ *For even if the mountains move
and the hills be removed;
My steadfast love will not leave you,
the covenant of my peace will not be shaken
says the Lord who has compassion on you.*

Review

In chapter 53, Isaiah revealed the prophetic vision in which he saw the Servant draw the sting of death from the sins of humanity in order to bring God's gift of redemption and salvation not just for His own people, Israel, but for all the world. After such an earth shattering revelation what can be said? It seems almost impossible to follow a revelation of this nature; yet here in the next chapter of Isaiah, we read prophecies of Isaiah that speak about God's complete and utter commitment to love. These prophecies and poems do not speak specifically about Israel, because although they use pictures and images from Israel's past, the prophecies can only refer to peoples who respond to the work of the Servant, and we have already learned that what He did, He did for all. In Isaiah's vision, the Servant's suffering was held up for the entire world to see (52:13-15), and these prophecies are God's consequent promises of love for everyone. It is not easy to see this from a first reading, but if we bear this in mind, then we will find that the whole prophecy begins to make sense; indeed, it is deeply moving in its own way, and almost as emotional as the previous chapter.

First of all, we are presented in today's passage with two related family pictures of growth in the form of songs. The meter and 'feel' of the songs has been lost in translation, but the first, in verse 1, is about a barren woman who gives birth, and subsequently has more children than a woman who has been successful and borne children throughout her marriage. The second picture-song (54:2,3) describes the activity of enlarging a nomadic tent-complex to allow for an increased number of family members.

But what do these two pictures mean? Essentially, they tell us that after the accomplishment of the saving work of the Servant, the people of God must be prepared for substantial growth! The activity of bearing children represents the expansion of God's people, and strange as it may seem, Israel is the married woman who has already borne children, but has not been faithful (as we know from Isaiah's previous prophecies, e.g. 1:10-17, 48:6-10; and also from Hosea). The 'barren woman' who has not borne children represents the Gentile world, which, because of the work of the Servant, is able to contribute to the growth of God's people, and will eventually contribute more than Judaism! The song goes on to sing for joy that the home of God's people has to be extended, stretched out, and strengthened (54:2), and members of the family will be spread throughout the world (54:3)! This is wonderful news because it means that the Servants work has been successful!

After this, verse 4 to 10 make up a longer and more complex prophecy-song which speaks of the relationship between God's people and the Lord God as wife and husband, bound together by a covenant of marriage. The song describes the strength of God's love for His bride, His people, and the deep bond between them as 'Maker' and 'people'; a relationship restored by the redeeming work of the Servant (54:4) and unequivocally identifies the husband as the 'Holy One of Israel' (54:5). The song then gathers together (vv 6 to 10) a host of Biblical motifs of flood, covenant, marriage, and redemption. These verses explain that although the Lord God had turned away from the rest of the world for a period of time whilst He loved Israel exclusively, His covenant love is now open to all through the same redeeming work of the Servant. The highlight of the song comes at the end when the Lord says to His new family 'the covenant of my peace will not be broken', because of the Lord's strong compassion for all and the awesome power of His work (54:10).

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- God's family grows (54:1-3)
- A renewed marriage covenant (54:4-1)
- The Flood and the Covenant!

Notes on the translation of the passage

V2 'Make the pitch of your tent sites bigger'

Also translated 'enlarge the place of your tent' (NIV), the language here refers to that of the nomad rather than the city dwellers, but it is intentionally figurative.

V4 'Do not back down, for you will not be disgraced ...'

The Hebrew sentence here is 'do not be humiliated, for you will not be disgraced'. However, the word 'do not be humiliated' is paralleled with 'do not fear' (in the first line), and it carries the sense of 'do not let yourself to be humiliated'. For this reason, I have translated 'do not back down', because it makes understanding of the text easier.

V6 '... like a wife of youth when she is cast off ...'

This is very close to the Hebrew, though some versions of the Bible prefer to explain this a little within their translation by saying something like this; 'like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off ...' (NRSV). In truth, this describes the distressing circumstances of a woman whose youth no longer pleases a man as she grows older, and the Bible clearly expresses displeasure at a man who rejects a woman on such grounds.

V8 'In a flood of wrath ...'

The word 'flood' is not the same as the Hebrew word for 'flood' used for Noah's flood. However, the whole verses reminds us of what happened at the time of the flood, so I have left the word 'flood' in here even though most other translators use 'surge' or 'overflow'.

V8 'with an everlasting faithful love ...'

Most translations regard it as extravagant to say this much here, and settle for 'everlasting love' or 'everlasting kindness'. The fact is that two Hebrew words are used here, and each one has an important meaning. The first one is translated 'everlasting' and means just that, but the main word for love is the Hebrew 'cheseth' which means 'covenant love', or as I have translated here, 'faithful love'. God's love is secure – see study notes.

It is not easy to get used to the complex array of Biblical motifs and images within this passage, but they all speak about the positive and life-giving effect of the redeeming work of the Servant. There is a danger that people today read too much into it, and ask questions, for example, about why the Lord God seems to have

more than one wife (verses 1,2)! We should not be led astray from the fact that these songs are governed not by our ideas and presumptions but ancient ones. And coming after Isaiah 53, this passage is a rich celebration of the consequences of redemption (which is mentioned in two key texts - 54:5,8). As we study this passage further, we must allow the scriptural themes to help us reveal this rich panoply of festivity and joy!

God's family grows! (54:1-3)

It helps us interpret this passage properly to know that Isaiah did not use a picture of 'real life' from his own day in order to express the growth of God's family after the successful work of the Servant. If this was so, then we might be entitled to ask why Isaiah partially suggests that God has two wives, one barren and one fertile! But I do not believe that Isaiah is being fixed about his metaphors here in the strict way we like in English poetry or prose. The barren woman who never gave birth is on the one hand, representing the nations of the world who have not yet contributed to God's family, but she is also like Sarah, Abraham's wife, awaiting the work of God to give birth herself! Of course, it is the work of the Servant that enables her to give birth.

Note the air of praise and celebration; 'break out into song and shout!' (54:1) says the prophet. Not only will the Gentile nations become fertile, but they will become the majority contributors to the family! This is surely an amazing vision of what we now know and experience. It is wonderful when the Old Testament speaks not simply to the days of the early church, but prophesies things which are true now, because most of us who read this are the children of the 'barren woman' (the Gentiles). We must maintain our optimism that in God's good grace and strength, our instructions are to grow and never to stay the same (54:2,3). The wonderful picture drawn by this passage describes the way in which an extended nomadic family grows (imagine Jacob's family as it grew after the birth of twelve sons – Genesis 30). The tents must be made bigger and pitched further apart, and the whole area upon which the group of tents is set must extend, along with every part of the fabric of the home; including tent pegs, draw strings and tent curtains! But finally, as if to extend our minds further than anything, Isaiah's song reveals an unimaginable growth into nations and previously deserted cities! Such is the hunger of God's people for growth.

A renewed marriage covenant (54:4-10)

The Lord calls out in the next song; 'Do not fear ... do not back down' (54:4), there is no reason for shame now that God has cast the net of His love all over the world. The song does not ask us to identify who has been 'taunted' in widowhood, or who has been 'shamed' in youth, these are simply images of unhappiness and shame from the past which the Lord says have no place in His family. The Lord God identifies Himself in verse 5 in four ways. He is a 'husband' to His bride the people of God (now open to all), He is known historically as the 'Lord of Hosts' and the 'Holy One of Israel', He has brought redemption into the world and therefore may be called 'the Redeemer', and He claims a title 'the God of the whole earth!' This is a comprehensive analysis of the nature of the God in whom Isaiah believed, and he wrote this in days when even his own people found it hard to believe that the Lord was anything more than a private God! For this reason, this is a stunning portrayal of God which reaches out into the New Testament and to us with its call to recognise the historical nature of God's revelation, His essential nature as 'Redeemer' and a comprehensive understanding of God as Creator.

This is the God who calls to Himself all who accept His redemption, to be His people in covenant relationship with Him (54:10). However, in Isaiah's day, the analogy of marriage was one that had two main 'problem' issues, barrenness and divorce. The first song has already dealt with the issues of barrenness, and here in verses 4 and 6, the Lord speaks to reassure His bride that He has no thoughts of divorce. The comments may not be clear to a modern reader, but we must remember that in Isaiah's day, it was common for men to marry, but then use divorce as permitted by Moses (reluctantly) in Deuteronomy 24:1f. as an excuse to get rid of women they did not like, and they even felt entitled to divorce if a woman was not sexually appealing. Tragically, there is plenty of evidence that within Israel, some men divorced their women once they reached an age at which they did not appeal to them sexually; it was a cruel and distasteful aspect of Judaism, and Jesus attacked it vigorously when asked by the Pharisees about it (see Matt 19:1-9). It is against this background that this song describes the Lord 'calling back' a 'forsaken woman' and 'a wife of youth ... cast off'. God would not act unfaithfully; indeed, He could not act unfaithfully, because He is a God of Covenant faithfulness, as the song says in verse 8.

In a fascinating verse, the song accepts that for a period of time, the Gentile nations were without their God, and for them, this was like being without their 'husband'. In the great span of time commanded by the Lord, however, the period from the days of Abraham until the fulfilment of the prophecy of the Servant, was only a 'brief moment' (54:7), and one for which the Lord would make up later on. The Lord says 'in a flood of wrath I hid my face for a moment from you' (54:8), and although this sounds awful, this is in fact a perfectly understandable comment about the separation of God from vast numbers of people at that time. Wrath is not merely anger, it is 'just' anger, as the Lord showed when He brought the flood on the earth (Genesis 6-9)

because people had sinned and utterly rejected God and all sense of morality. However, now that redemption had been revealed (53:1f.) a different aspect of God's character had been revealed, and the problem of sin had been overcome.

The Flood and the Covenant! Of course, the interesting connection here is the fact that the song uses the idea of the Flood first to describe God's wrath, but also later in verse 10, where the relationship between God's wrath, the Flood and human sin is set out for us. The fact is that God has only ever expressed His wrath (His just anger) rarely and cautiously, and the Flood was the first of these occasions. After the Flood, God promised to give generous love to all humanity (Gen 9:8-17) in the form of a covenant, accepted by Noah, illustrated by a rainbow (Gen 9:14). Now, just as the Lord created a covenant after that catastrophic event, He now promised a marriage covenant with His people after their time of separation.

Once we have understood this aspect of this text, then we can easily see how the vocabulary of love and 'covenant' fills this passage. In verse 8 the text speaks about the Lord's 'everlasting faithful love' using the Hebrew word 'cheseth' (see notes above) which is closely associated with the covenant throughout the Old Testament. Then, in the last verse (54:10), the Lord says to His new people; 'my steadfast love will not leave you, and the covenant of my peace will not be shaken ...'. This powerful pronouncement by the Lord tells us that God does not intend to abandon the new (marriage) covenant made with His new people through the redeeming work of the Servant. This is a firm guarantee for all who believe in God and have faith in Jesus as the Servant, and it stands to this day.

Discipleship

Application

There are a number of fascinating aspects of this passage which are useful for the church today; firstly, the idea of church growth (54:1,2,3)! In the 1980's much work was done on 'church growth' theory, but like the 'charismatic renewal' before it, and other works of the Lord in our midst, the effect and usefulness of such work has been turned aside as people have continued to search for the latest bandwagon or phenomenon they think is God's path forward. People naturally gravitate towards the latest 'big idea' for the life of the church, but God only has one key idea, testified to in both the Old and New Testaments, and it is this; to grow! Isaiah went back in time to use an ancient and scriptural image of nomadic life (from the ancient books of Genesis and Exodus) to picture the amazing growth of God's people hundreds of years later! His method is worth our attention, but essentially, he could see the consistency of God in how He does His work, and he was therefore able to find inspiration for the future through the scriptural record of the past. This may not be a popular message today, but I believe it is a right one!

Equally important are the impressive and powerful statements by the Lord God in the second half of our passage, which speak of His firm intention to make a new covenant work after the failure of His first covenant relationship with Israel. The old covenant was intended to bring salvation to the whole world, but God knew that this would not happen, and had instead decided to act through His own Servant to bring about the worldwide access to salvation that He always intended for creation. Now that Isaiah has declared the great work of Redemption through the suffering of His Servant to the point of death, and indicated that death could not be the end for His beloved Servant (Isaiah 53), the extent of God's love and compassion is fully exposed.

How then, can we continue to be God's people without acknowledging this love of God? The Lord's compassion and love is basic to our salvation and redemption, and it lies at the heart of our experience of Him. Time and again, both as individuals and as God's people, we need to return to Him and respond to His love. This does not change; it is we who change and we must recognise this. Sometimes it may seem that in our humanity all things are against us, or that the world does not help us or benefit us, and we will quickly blame God and say we think He does not care about us. Subsequently, it is only when we accept that the problem is our own unfaithfulness, that we can find again our peace; the same 'covenant of peace' Isaiah spoke about in the last verse of our text. In addition, there are many who live in a perpetual state of searching for that peace because they will not let go of the idea that something of their difficult experience of life is somehow God's 'fault'. The joy of our text today begs us 'let go' of our sin and problems, and rejoice in His love.

Questions for groups

1. How does the church of God grow? What pictures or images can you think of which illustrate the organic growth of the church?

2. Is it wise to use the picture language of love and marriage today in a world in which these two things are severely misunderstood?
3. How can we make sure that we regularly return to the unconditional and faithful love of God, and let go of our sin and problems?

Discipleship challenges

- *Read back over Isaiah 53 after you have read Isaiah 54:1-10, and see whether this helps you understand it better. I suspect that it will, for too often, we ignore the connections that make scripture work! Honour God by making those connections.*
- *If you are driving somewhere or have the opportunity for a walk, use the time to dwell on the love of God for you, and ask the Lord to show you how He has loved you over the years, for He has loved us even when we have not known it!*

Final Prayer

Merciful Lord, I long to be a better person for You, living a life that shows more faith, and trusting in Your death and resurrection. Make me content to exercise my faith in every circumstance of my life; where I am, and with whom I live and work. So, trusting You, may I know Your peace, AMEN
