

Prayers

Opening prayer

Father God, sometimes the smallest of things have a powerful effect upon us all, for good or for ill. Help us repent of those small sins which lead us astray, such as ill-timed or unkind words, selfish behaviour or persistent negativity. Lead us to repentance and forgive us we pray; set our hearts free, and give us the will to show love to others through small things; a word or two, a smile, or an outstretched hand to help which says 'I care'. In this way, may we become like You and bear fruit for Your Kingdom. We ask this in Jesus Christ; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: WATER

1. For yourself

Pray about your health. Pray for God's blessing on your body mind and spirit, and ask the Lord to keep you fit and well

2. For your friends and family

Pray that those you love might give God the glory for their health, and pray that they will all honour the God who has made them

3. For the church and its work

Pray that your own church might become a stream of 'living water', and the means whereby God is able to move amongst people in your neighbourhood

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

Pray about the need for international co-operation in the matter of water supply. Pray also for the engineering companies responsible for piping water. Pray for God's blessing on the genuine efforts of many to bring water to people throughout the world. It is a very 'political' subject.

Meditation

We weep when we have fallen short and let ourselves down;
We wish that we had learned our lessons long ago
When we cannot later put things right.

We weep when we have failed and let our loved ones down;
We wish that we had shown more love to them
Because they 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
That would have made a difference.

We weep when we have sinned and let our Saviour down;
We wish that we had kept a stronger, firmer grip
On the truths that Jesus taught us.

But do not fear.

Our weeping shows we know the penalties of waywardness;
For truly contrite tears can open heavenly doors
That lead to Him whose heart is love.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 37:30-38

³⁰ *'This will be the sign for you: You will eat this year what grows of itself, in the second year what comes from that; in the third year sow, reap, plant vineyards, and eat the fruit. ³¹ Then the remnant of the house of Judah who survived will increasingly take root downward, and bear fruit upward; ³² for a remnant will go out from Jerusalem, and a band of survivors from Mount Zion. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

³³ *'Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the King of Assyria: He will not come into this city, or shoot an arrow there, or confront it with a shield, or put up a siege ramp against it. ³⁴ He will return by the same way in which he came; and he will not come into this city, says the LORD. ³⁵ For I will cover this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.'*

³⁶ *Then the angel of the LORD set out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp; when the time came to rise in the morning, they were all dead bodies! ³⁷ Then King Sennacherib of Assyria set out to return home to Nineveh. ³⁸ Then it happened that as he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer killed him with the sword and fled to the land of Ararat; and his son Esar-haddon reigned after him.*

Review

These three paragraphs bring to an end the story of the attack on Jerusalem by Assyria. The first two conclude Isaiah's prophetic response to Hezekiah's prayer (37:16f.) and they reassure the King that the Lord was in control of all that happened during the invasion of Judah. With extraordinary but powerful brevity, the last paragraph tells us about the miraculous annihilation of the Assyrian army outside Jerusalem in 701BC. The Assyrian siege was life and death for the people of Jerusalem, and it is not surprising that this event stands at the very centre of Isaiah's prophecies. In those days, the defeat of Assyria was unthinkable, so the events described here (37:36-38) are nothing short of miraculous, and a dramatic proof, yet again, of the truth of Isaiah's prophecies.

It was Assyrian policy to defeat nations firstly by military means. But this was only the start, and in order to establish the empire and its culture, and destroy all other cultures that might prevail amongst occupied nations, their people were deported and scattered around the empire (e.g. see 37:1-13). In this way, the Assyrians made it extremely hard for the national identity of a conquered nation to be retained. In addition, the occupied lands were taken over by others, usually Assyrian loyalists who had earned the right to be given such lands for their personal benefit. The subsequent loss of any connection between a people's culture and the land meant that few cultures survived this aggressive Assyrian onslaught.

Against this background, Isaiah's prophetic response to Hezekiah is all the more understandable. Isaiah appeals to King Hezekiah to trust in God in the midst of this dire situation, and his faith will then be rewarded. God has indeed heard Hezekiah's prayer and he is willing to save His people because of the King's repentance, but it presents him with a challenge. The prophecy asks Hezekiah to believe that agriculture will once more be re-started in the regions of Judah around the city of Jerusalem. In the same way, Hezekiah is challenged to believe that the '*remnant of the house of Judah*' (37:31) will not be dispersed around the Assyrian empire, but become more firmly rooted, and '*bear fruit upward*' (37:31). Judah can survive because God had plans for His people, and this is formally sealed by a promise of God, '*the zeal of the Lord will do this*' (37:32).

The second part of Isaiah's prophecy turns our attention towards the King of Assyria. After all the bragging and boasting of the Commander in chief of the armies of Assyria, it is now time for such bragging to be silenced (38:33-35). God will not allow the King of Assyria to come into Jerusalem or do anything to attack her (37:33); the Lord says 'I will cover this city to save it ...' (37:35). This verse is particularly interesting because it is like a miniature theological 'manifesto' combining the authority of the Lord God to act in His world, His intent to save, His special love for Jerusalem the place of His dwelling, and His special relationship with the line of David. It does not take too much for us to find here a glimpse of the Gospel. The prophecy speaks of the eternal hope that God will not allow evil to invade His covenant plans for Israel and the salvation of '*Zion ... for the sake of my servant David*'; a phrase in which we see a prophecy of the Messiah.

The final defeat of the Assyrian army by the Angel of the Lord (37:36) comes as something of a shock; but whatever happened (and the description here is very sparse), the people of Isaiah's day regarded this as an answer to Hezekiah's prayer and the proof of Isaiah's prophecies. Against all odds, Isaiah and Hezekiah had trusted in the Lord and the impossible was achieved. Salvation would be won for those who placed their hope in God! But there is no doubt that the whole of Isaiah's prophecy here is a challenge to faith. If Hezekiah was willing to believe Isaiah's prophecy, then he would see the gods of this world in disarray (37:36-38)!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the text and translation
- The sign
- No invasion, only salvation!
- The defeat of the enemy!

Notes on the text and translation

V30 *In this verse two words for grain are used which have particular meaning. In the first years, the grain to be eaten is 'sapiach' which refers to grain spilt or 'remaining' on the land during the normal agricultural processes which grows in small amounts year on year if the land has not been properly tilled. In the second year 'shachis' is grain which is activated naturally in the soil after it has been tilled, but not sown.*

V31 *'will increasingly take root ...' Different versions treat this verb in various ways, often by saying 'will again take root'; but the Hebrew says 'they will add root downwards', and I feel that my translation better conveys the meaning of the text.*

V35 *'I will cover this city' Most translations have 'I will defend this city' which is a reasonable translation, however the word used comes from the word for 'cover', or 'protect', and it suggests a spiritual protection rather than straightforward 'defence'*

V36 *'when the time came to rise in the morning. The verb used in this sentence is interesting, because it is the one usually used to signify the early rise required for a journey. Some translations miss out this and say just 'early next morning ...' But were the army planning to leave, and if so, why?*

This passage is right at the heart of Isaiah, linking real historical events with the covenant purposes of God to bring salvation to His people. It is a reminder that the privilege of the salvation we enjoy today has been forged on the real experiences of people whose lives were very different to our own, but for whom God cared just as much. The Gospel of Jesus Christ did not just 'happen' at one time in history, it was born in the life and experience of people who have much to teach us.

The sign

It is not hard to imagine the deprivation of the land after a siege of an ancient city. Agricultural land would have been left in disarray at some point in the crop rotation when people left the countryside for the cities as soon as they heard of an approaching army. Immediately a siege was lifted however, they would be faced by the problem of restarting the agricultural processes again, and the advice given in Isaiah's prophecy probably reflects a common sense approach to the problem. After a siege, people needed food, so there was no ban on using the crop that could be gathered from whatever remained on the land (see notes on v30 above) in the first year. Work would have to be done on the land and seed crops gathered in the second year, again from what grew naturally, to begin the full agricultural cycle of sowing and reaping the following, third year (37:30).

There is some dispute amongst commentators about whether 'the sign' offered to Hezekiah constitutes the restart of agriculture alone or whether it includes the rest of the prophecy in verses 31 and 32. If it does, then the prophecy indicates that the true sign may be what happens as a consequence of the agricultural restart, which is that the 'remnant ... takes root' (37:31) in the land and becomes more firmly settled there. Clearly, however, Isaiah prophesied that Jerusalem would be saved and become again the centre and hub of the land of Judah for all who remained.

No invasion, only salvation!

The previous prophecies against the King of Assyria are summed up here in verses 33 to 35. He would not be able to mount an attack on Jerusalem because of God's special protection 'covering' the city (see 37:35). The word 'cover' is an interesting word which means 'to wrap a cloak around', and the verse implies that the Assyrians were not able to attack the city because of this covering of the Lord. However, it means more than

this. When a man took a wife he 'covered' her in his tent (for example, this idea lies behind what we read in Ruth chapter 3). In this way, God claims Jerusalem as His own, and makes a promise to protect her.

Later generations of Jewish people felt very deeply about this special relationship between God and Jerusalem, and also between God and the line of David. When later generations of Judeans were taken from Jerusalem and the city was destroyed, their belief in this special relationship drove people like Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah to attempt to rebuild Jerusalem, keeping in their minds a perfect and complete 'Zion' which they never quite managed to achieve by their earthly efforts after their return from Exile (530 BC onwards), and the special relationship with the line of David translated at the same time into the hope for a Messiah of David's line who would come to save the Lord's people.

It is important to remember that when Jesus came, He embodied both these hopes in Himself, firstly as the Messiah come to save the people, and secondly as the risen Christ, He sent His Holy Spirit to enable His disciples to be the Body of Christ, the new dwelling place of God on earth. Today we call this the Church, though I often reckon that if we called each other the Body of Christ more often we would take our churches more seriously and not defame it as much as some do! Nevertheless, we who are Jesus' disciples are His people and representatives here on earth, and although God is quite capable of going where He will in His earth, it is in His people where His authority has been accepted that His home is most like what the Bible calls 'Zion'.

The defeat of the enemy!

The report of the slaughter of the Assyrian army is brief and to the point; the angel of the Lord, acting as always in the Old Testament for God directly, 'struck down' a large number in the Assyrian camp; though it does not say whether this is the entire army. After failing in his campaign of 701, Sennacherib returned home and survived perhaps a decade or two (it is not certain) before being the victim of a court plot as described in Isaiah 37:38, and being succeeded by his son Esarhaddon.

The miraculous nature of the defeat of the army was extraordinary; the Hebrew report suggests that some who rose in the morning (as if going on a journey) found the bodies of the Assyrians all around, and whoever these people were, they had an amazing story to tell back in Jerusalem! Today, many people still find it hard to think of the Lord God as doing such things as destroying armies, but as elsewhere in the Old Testament, the people of Judah believed that God was involved in some way with everything that happened to them, whether good or bad. Their job was to try and understand what God was doing, and in this instance, their obvious conclusion was that God had saved them!

Unfortunately, people today become embroiled in arguments about whether it is morally right for God to do this or that or be involved in human wars, as if we are in a position to judge what is right or wrong in the world or influence God in what He decides to do for our benefit! Some will happily find an excuse to 'blame' God for being harsh on the poor Assyrian soldiers. But we cannot make that judgement. We do not know what awful deeds had been done by this army, and we are hardly in possession of the full facts. We have to give God the respect He is due as Creator of all things and accept that this is what He felt it necessary to do, for the good of all.

Discipleship

Application

Although we have read a passage of scripture which is about the defeat of an ancient king and the massacre of an army, we have also read about prophecy, faith and the Gospel. One of the important things which the Bible does is to help us see how God is involved in everything that happens to us, whether in the unpredictable or the predictable. In the first part of our text, God is to be found in the ordinary circumstances of life; within a 'sign' perceived through the natural consequences of re-establishing agriculture. In the second part of the passage, God acts directly in the world in order to prevent something from happening (the siege) and in saving those He has chosen. In the third paragraph, God is seen to be at work in a world shattering event which has no other logical explanation. All these three have something to teach us. God is to be found in the ordinary and everyday things of life, in his involvement with us, protecting us and saving us (for how else would we have faith), and lastly, He is involved in the wider world of international affairs which seem quite beyond us.

Bearing this in mind, it may be helpful for each of us to be prepared to find God at work in our world in each of these three ways. We are impoverished in our faith if we see God only in certain things which happen to us but not in others; for each of us, the balance may be skewed one way or the other and great passages of scripture remind us of the extent of God's involvement in everything around us. Isaiah the prophet was able

to see this and his prophecies draw constantly on an extensive appreciation of God's involvement in everything. We can learn much from him.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group whether you feel comfortable with the last part of this passage, and what you believe it says about God.
2. Why does Isaiah talk about a 'remnant' of Judah, and what could this mean in this passage?
3. Study verse 35 for yourself carefully and write down a list of the things it says about God's work of salvation in the world.

Discipleship challenges

- *As you go about your work today, ask yourself what God might be saying to you through the various things you see and experience. You may be surprised!*
- *Read through the newspapers about the 'wars and rumours of wars in our world today. What is God saying to our world through them today?*

Final Prayer

Speak simply to my soul, Lord Jesus, do not hold back the truth. Tell me where I have failed and need to repent, and tell me how I can be victorious and praise Your Name! Lead me into greater confidence in all that it means to be a servant of Yours in Your world; AMEN
