

Prayers

Opening prayer

Forgive me for rushing, dear Lord, for there is too much to do and I can never get everything done. Bless me by Your Spirit, Lord God, for You can strengthen me for what lies ahead, and guide me through all life's complexities. Your support and presence is the most amazing blessing; how could I ever succeed without You? Thank You, Lord God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: CHRISTMAS

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to help you understand those things that have happened in your recent past, which trouble you. Let the Lord guide you into His answers for your problems

2. For your friends and family

Continue to bless your friends and family by looking ahead to what is happening and praying about things before they take place. See what a difference this can make!

3. For the church and its work

Thank God for the work done by your church and others, which change the lives of people for the better, whether spiritually or physically

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

At this time of year, people commonly think of the New Year with a certain degree of fatalism. Ask the Lord to show Himself in power within the world, even now.

Meditation

The heart is not defeated
When it rests in the freedom of our Lord,
And the truth of eternal peace has been installed within.

The mind is not dismayed
When it is satisfied by the Word of God
Which reveals the truth about our history to all humanity.

The spirit is not downcast
When it is constantly renewed, refreshed,
By the liberating touch of the wondrous gift of the Spirit.

The body is never useless
When it is committed to its loving Lord
To do the glorious things for which it has been made.

The soul is never conquered
When it is secured in Christ's salvation
And redeemed to take its place in God's amazing world!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Isaiah 52:1-6

¹ *Awake, awake,
Clothe yourself with strength, O Zion!
Cloth yourself with your beautiful garments,*

*O Jerusalem, city of the Holy One;
 for the uncircumcised and the unclean
 will never again come in to you.*
² *Shake the dust from yourself,
 Arise and be enthroned O Jerusalem;
 Free yourself from the chains around your neck,
 O captive daughter Zion!*
³ *Indeed, this is what the LORD says:
 You were sold for nothing,
 so you will be redeemed without money.*
⁴ *Indeed, this is what the Lord GOD says:
 Firstly, my people went to Egypt to live there;
 The in the end, the Assyrian oppressed them.*
⁵ *'Now, what have I here?' says the LORD,
 'my people have been taken for nothing
 Their rulers have been foolish, says the LORD,
 and my name was despised continually, all day.*
⁶ *Therefore my people will know my name;
 therefore in that day
 I am the One who will say; "here am I."*

Review

This is an extraordinarily powerful scripture with deeply moving words, and it hugely raises the stakes of Isaiah's vision of God and His self revelation. In addition, the prophetic nature of these verses and their description of the redemptive acts of God make them words to which a Christians can easily relate, perhaps more quickly than many of the previous texts in Isaiah's great Servant songs. We read about God's people who are spoken to by the Lord as Jerusalem (or Zion), and who receive a great call to awake and receive the Lord's gifts; new clothes and a new purity (52:1). In addition, she will find herself able to throw off the bondage of the past and claim her rightful dwelling place (52:2)! This passage then goes on to explain God's promise of redemption to Jerusalem (52:3), and the Lord reviews the history of oppression from which she is being redeemed (52:4,5) before announcing that the time has come for the Lord to reveal Himself (52:6)!

The suspense is almost unbearable as the whole prophetic saga draws ever closer to its climax, which we know is the revelation of God in the form of the Servant in Isaiah 53. Of course, we are not told what this revelation is, and we are not told how the redemption works or what price is paid, because this will come shortly. We are not told any details about the new Jerusalem (Zion) other than she was awakened from sleep, no longer the obstinate and defiant Israel of the past who became unclean because of sin and the rejection of God. Also, we know that what Isaiah did not explain is now explainable; we who have responded in faith to the Servant (Jesus) are His people, His new Jerusalem, His Zion, and His dwelling place on earth. Isaiah never saw this as we see it. He only prophesied in faith about a Jerusalem and a Zion made ready, and it is amazing that it speaks directly to us more than two and a half thousand years later!

Yet in order to understand this prophecy there are a few clues that help us open up the text. Firstly, verses 1 and 2 speak in terms familiar to the people of Israel and Judah, but not to us, about priesthood and kingship. The clothing in verse 1 represents priestly vestments. God lays them out for Jerusalem when she awakes, all ready for her; and just as Aaron received the holy vestments from Moses (Exodus 29) all she has to do is to put them on. Then, in the second verse, after the picture of turning away from the past, 'shake the dust from yourself', Jerusalem is told to 'get up' from her slumber and be enthroned as a king! She is to throw off the shackles of slavery and sit in authority by God's own edict!

You should be aware that many versions of the Bible will reveal this connection because they have badly translated the second line of verse 2, and I strongly urge you to read my explanation of this because it is essential to understand the kingly and priestly nature of this prophecy. If you read on in this study you will find that the theme of kings and priests continues (52:4,5), but we have to look carefully to find it. However, the New Testament speaks in many places about the role of God's people as Kings and Priests within the world (see 1 Cor 4:8, 1 Peter 2:5,9) and the book of Revelation describes our final destiny as rulers and priests within God's eternal Kingdom (Rev 1:6, 5:10 etc.)

Isaiah presents a wonderful picture of God's people, Jerusalem, awakened by the Lord from slumber and ready to receive a redemption (52:3) which she has done nothing to deserve throughout her history (52:4,5). Yet she is ready to receive the Lord's very own personal revelation; 'I am the One who will say "Here am I"' (5:6). Like Jerusalem, we too stand in receipt of His gracious gifts and await His revelation!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Priests (52:1)
- Kings (52:2)
- A free redemption (52:3)
- Explaining the past (52:4,5)
- The personal revelation (52:6)

Notes on the translation of the passage

- V1 **'clothe yourself with strength'** Some translations have; 'put on strength.' However, the Hebrew verb used here is the one used for putting on a garment, and this word is frequently used in the Old Testament as a sign of preparation for some action (just as a soldier puts on his armour before a battle).
- V1 **'City of the Holy One'** Most versions of the Bible have 'holy city'. However, the grammar of the phrase does not really say this, and my translation is closer to the true meaning.
- V2 **'Arise and be enthroned'** The Hebrew gives two commands, firstly and simply, 'get up' or 'arise' and then the next command means 'sit' or 'dwell' and sometimes 'enthroned'! Because of the context (see notes) I am of the opinion that Jerusalem is being told to walk away from bondage and rule as God intended in the world! Many other translations miss out the second command, giving just 'get up', which is in my opinion inadequate.
- V2 **'Free yourself from the chains on your neck.'** This is my interpretation of a passage of Hebrew that is not clear. It is certainly a command based on the word 'to loosen', which I have translated as 'free'. I have also interpreted as chains what the Hebrew describes as 'bonds' to be loosed from the neck.
- V3 **'You were sold for nothing'** The Hebrew word for nothing means 'without cause or reason' and also 'undeservedly' (see notes)
- V4 **'Firstly, my people went down to Egypt ... in the end'** The Hebrew word for 'firstly' refers to former events in time, and so many translations have 'long ago, my people went down to Egypt'. However, my translation here is equally valid, and it helps us understand the whole sentence, for the last line talks about what happened 'at the end' when the Assyrians oppressed them (see notes). Unfortunately, some translators change the meaning of the Hebrew for 'end' to infer that it means 'without reason', and this gives 'the Assyrians oppressed them without reason' (e.g. NRSV) and this means that the meaning of the sentence is changed if not lost.
- V5 **'my rulers have been foolish'** This translation is quite different from what you will find elsewhere, though I hope you will agree it makes sense! Most translators take the view that the verb in question means 'to howl' (or sing!), but there is reason to suggest it may be a more obscure form of a verb 'to play the fool'; hence my new translation.

We could become almost confused by the many allegories at play in this text, but it is essential to take hold of Isaiah's imagery that Jerusalem in this vision is a people. They are, for him, an imaginary people of God who are ready for the Lord's work, and they bear the name of Jerusalem and Zion because it is important for us to know that God is faithful to His people of past generations. There is much that is not explained, but it is clear that just as God's new people bear the name 'Jerusalem' and 'Zion', we bear the history of God's people going back to the forefathers. This includes the concept of priesthood which is clearly referred to in this passage.

Priests (52:1)

In Exodus 29, Moses brings together the great priestly vestment prepared for Aaron. The full description of them and their magnificence takes a number of chapters in Exodus, and they were regarded as the most complete expression of the purity of God. These vestments were reserved for one man, the high priest of Israel, and they were handed down through the generations within Aaron's priestly family (though we do not know what happened to them at the time of the Exile). In an Old Testament religious context, the wonderful expression 'clothed' came to represent the putting on of the things of God (see for example 'clothed with salvation' – 2 Chron 6:41 and Isaiah 61:10); though a few denote evil (e.g. Isaiah 14:19).

However, note that in Isaiah's prophecy, the garments of priesthood are put on not by one person or by any special leader within the people of God who make up Jerusalem. They are put on by Jerusalem herself! This is the reason why Peter speaks of God's people as a whole as being a 'royal priesthood' (1 Peter 2:5,9), and why people today speak about the church as being a 'priesthood of all believers'. All God's

people act as priests to the world, whether acting as individuals or together, depending on the circumstances.

Some may wonder whether this theme is compromised by Isaiah's phrase declaring that 'the uncircumcised and the unclean will never come in to you again.' (52:1) However, this is a declaration by God of the purity and cleanliness of His people Jerusalem, who put on the garments of priesthood. The fact was that during the life of the old Temple in Jerusalem, kings and priests who were concerned about politics more than faith in God had placed within the Temple profane objects of worship from other religions (see 2 Chron 32:4, 2 Kings 17:7f. etc.). The old Jerusalem and Zion had become polluted, but God's new Jerusalem would be clean and pure from the start.

Kings (52:2)

The notes for verse 2 help us understand what is going on in this verse, though the first phrase reminds us remarkably of the instructions Jesus gave His disciples for their missionary work. He said that when they were not received at any place, they were to 'shake the dust of that place from their feet' (Matt 10:14). The phrase may well have been used by Jesus not just to indicate rejection of ungodliness, but the proper effort required to move on into new work. Here in Isaiah 52, Jerusalem is told that the captivity and bondage in which she was held is now hers to put aside and she can move on, just as in a journey. The instruction is that she must stand and take her royal place in the Lord's scheme of things, and this requires the shaking off of the past.

There is a subtle word play in the text which is difficult for us to spot because it depends on the pronunciation of two Hebrew words. One word is the Hebrew for 'enthroned' ('shebi'), and the other is the word for 'captive' ('shebiyah'). It is utterly tragic that most translations simply do not refer to the first word, 'enthroned' in this passage, by missing out the word because it appears to instruct Jerusalem to 'sit down' just after she has been commanded to 'arise!' This noticeable word play in Hebrew confirms God's will that His people should live in kingly power and authority, and not in any bondage to an enemy or evil force, or in bondage to others. This, of itself, is a remarkable and unexpected point of teaching from this wonderful passage, indicating that God's people are to live in authority in the world, ruling on God's behalf and representing His rule on earth. This prophecy begins the teaching of the Kingdom of God on earth.

A free redemption (52:3)

The free redemption offered by the Lord in this remarkable verse is offered with no explanation. What extraordinary love must lie behind such an offer, and it is real! We cannot read this prophecy and find a complete theology of redemption because it is not here to be found. The Lord simply declares that what He does for people He does for them free of charge. Now, it is part of our Christian heritage to accept that Christ has 'paid the price' for our redemption; and because of this, Isaiah's prophecy of redemption without cost has created some confusion. The situation is this; in the Old Testament, redemption is almost invariably linked to money (see Judges 2:14, 1 Sam 19:5 etc.), so the question begged by this prophecy is this; if the payment for the redemption is not to be money, then what kind of redemption is God speaking about? A price will in fact be paid, and we will shortly read the story of this cost as paid by the Servant (Isaiah 53).

The real force of verse 3 however is to make it clear that we cannot influence what God will do. Who are we to 'look the proverbial "gift horse" in the mouth' and decide whether we will accept the gift of redemption on the basis of whether or not we understand it? If we accept the glorious love of God and are ready to receive the Lord's redemption, then we receive it with no strings and with our questions unanswered. We have it like this or not at all; we were 'sold for nothing, so you will be redeemed without money'. There is no earthly value or price attached to our salvation, only a heavenly one; this is the nature of God's love.

Explaining the past (52:4,5)

Verse 4 is often almost indecipherable in some translations, but after the introductory formula 'this is what the Lord God says' the brief prophecy is focussed around two words which, loosely translated, are 'beginning' and 'end'. The two lines of the stanza describe firstly the beginnings of God's people as a nation, leaving the land of Egypt and finding their national identity and their God in the deserts of Sinai and the Exodus journey to the Promised Land. The second line tells us about the end of God's people as Isaiah saw it, and this began with the Assyrian invasion of 720 BC and the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. True, the southern Kingdom survived another 120 years before being destroyed by Babylon (587BC), but in Isaiah's prophecies, the Assyrian and Babylon destructions are just one event, which bring the earthly Kingdom of God's people to an end.

However, what Isaiah's prophecy gives us in this brief scenario is a small but powerful analysis of the failure of God's people and the reasons why the old Kingdoms ended. The Lord says; 'their rulers have been foolish ... and my name has been despised continually' (52:4). We may not spot this quickly, but the two reasons for failure are the lack of wisdom amongst kings, and the apostasy (the abandonment of faith) of the priesthood who failed to honour God. It is interesting to see that kings and priests have cropped up here as

the 'villains' who have caused the failure of God's people, for the new Jerusalem (as we have seen above) consists of the appointment of new kings and priests!

The personal revelation (52:6)

So much of this passage has little reason or explanation, and this is because the prophecies of Isaiah are heading towards this revelation. Soon, we will read about the revelation of the Servant, and we should be aware that Isaiah 53, the famous chapter that describes the 'Suffering Servant', comes as the climax of today's prophecy and others. It is not just a scripture passage in a vacuum. The God who declares that He will reveal Himself saying 'here am I' (52:6) is the same God who revealed Himself to Moses (Exodus 3:6f.) and will also reveal Himself as the suffering Servant in the coming prophecies of Isaiah. The Servant is indeed God Himself come to bring redemption for His new people, Jerusalem.

Discipleship

Application

There are two features of this passage, firstly the amazing truth, clearly and plainly stated, that God's redemption is offered to us free. This is just one of the ways the Bible uses to express the fact that our salvation is undeserved, for God's love for us is unconditional and His on-going care for us is also unquestionable. This is the nature of our God. It is easy to take all this for granted, but as we live in a world in which you cannot get anything except for a price, and the idea that anyone might get something for nothing is frowned upon, the Christian understanding of redemption can be a problem for some. At least, our redemption is free in that we do not have to pay anything for it, and like Jerusalem in this prophecy, all we have to do is to arise, take our place, remove our shackles, and live as God intended. The price paid by God however is high, as we will find out, but it cannot be ignored.

The second great truth within this passage is the fact that God intends His people to rule like kings and represent Him like priests within His Kingdom here on earth. The church is the visible form of God's people on earth, so we seek to demonstrate our calling through our fellowship within the church. Certainly, we readily understand the idea of priesthood by which we represent the world to God, and God to the world; but what about kingship? This is more tricky, but none the less important. To be 'kings' within this world, we must accurately reflect the power and the authority of God, principally to stand for what is right and defeat what is evil. The only way that the New Testament tells us we can fulfil this calling is to be people who are guided by the Holy Spirit, who is God's presence with us in the world. In the Spirit, we have no authority except Christ's authority, and no rule except Christ's rule; but we should not forget that this is our calling as God's people together.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss what redemption means to you in your group. In general, what does 'payment' have to do with 'redemption', and why is it important?
2. How can God's people live as 'priests' within the world and fulfil Isaiah's prophecy. What New Testament texts help us understand this?
3. How can God's people live as 'kings' within the world and fulfil Isaiah's prophecy. What New Testament texts help us understand this?

Discipleship challenges

- *Take an opportunity to have a walk, or some other time alone, to think about what it means for you to be called as part of God's people, to rule as kings and witness and intercede as priests within this world. Let God speak to you about this.*
- *Pray for the old earthly Jerusalem, and pray for the New Jerusalem of God's people. Conclude by praying for the time when the Lord will resolve all things, when He comes again.*

Final Prayer

Help us, Lord God, in a world where there are so many beautiful things for us to appreciate, to understand that You lie behind all the beauty we see. Help us to look beyond the obvious and the immediate things of life to connect with the love, power and awesome majesty of Your presence, and look forward to the time when all things will be one with You in Your Kingdom: AMEN
