

Prayer

Sovereign Lord, bring Your miraculous power to bear on the lives of those who need you most. Heal those who suffer, liberate those who are in bondage, raise up those who are dead in their sins and declare Your Good News for all humanity. May we be ready to hear Your Word and do Your will, O Lord: AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Internet Church

People across the world are starting up new ventures on the internet all the time. Pray for the Lord to bless those ventures of internet churches that freely share the Gospel.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for rest and sleep
- Pray for the people and government of Afghanistan
- Pray about the economic problems felt by your country

Meditation

Do not worry, the Lord will provide for you,
Whatever you do and wherever you go.

Do not stray, the Lord has shown you His path,
A safe route to follow, tried and tested.

Do not delay, the Lord calls you onwards,
There's no security if you stay where you are.

Do not sin, the Lord has warned you before,
Turn to Him if you have trouble, not to Satan.

Do not fear, the Lord will keep you secure,
He has bound all that frightens you.

Do not weep, the Lord has seen your distress,
The source of your pain has been covered.

Do not be fickle, the Lord will not change,
Be secure in the One who cares for you.

Bible Study - Isaiah 42:18-25

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| <p>¹⁸ Listen, you deaf;
you blind, look up and see!</p> | <p><i>his ears are open, but he does not listen.</i></p> |
| <p>¹⁹ Who is blind but my servant,
or deaf like my messenger whom I send?
Who is blind like one committed to me,
or blind like the servant of the LORD?</p> | <p>²¹ It pleased the LORD, for the sake of His justice,
to make His law great and glorious.</p> |
| <p>²⁰ Seeing many things, he does not pay attention;</p> | <p>²² But this is a people robbed and plundered,
all of them are trapped in holes and hidden in prisons;
they have become a prey without a deliverer;</p> |

Loot, with no one to say, 'Give it back!'

*They refused to walk in His ways,
and they would not obey His laws.*

²³ *Who among you will listen to this,
will attend and listen for the
future?*

²⁵ *So He poured out His wrath on him,
and the violence of war;
it set them on fire all around,
but they did not understand;
it consumed them,
but they did not take it to heart.*

²⁴ *Who gave up Jacob to be plundered,
and Israel to robbers?
Was it not the LORD,
against whom we sinned?*

Review

After the wonderful and uplifting message of the Lord announced by Isaiah in the previous chapters (since the beginning of chapter 40) this poem comes as a complete surprise. It is a relatively gloomy poem about God's first chosen servant, who is Israel, and the failure of Israel to do God's will. There is no way of reading this passage by which we can link it to the profoundly visionary poems immediately before it in the first part of Isaiah 42, in which 'My servant' is announced by God as the one to do His will. The first thing we must do is to understand a little more about the structure of these poems in Isaiah, and then we will begin to see why this poem is placed where it is in scripture.

The second half of Isaiah is a poem on a grand scale, as all who have followed this far will by now realise. The themes progressively unfold, as in any extensive work, but now we must look more closely at how this happens. The introduction to the second half of Isaiah is provided by Isaiah 40:1 - 42:17, and the theme is clear, the Lord is intent on saving His people and will do this, come what may. He will come in person to Jerusalem and in addition, He will send His Servant, His own messenger and agent to do His will properly and perfectly, as Israel, to date, has not done.

It is at this point that we are plagued by the inadequacies of the individual who itemised the chapters and verses of scripture, around a thousand years ago. The fact is that he did not have an adequate insight into the text, sufficient to know that at the end of verse 17 of Isaiah 42, there is a major break in the poem. Because Israel is referred to as the Lord's servant in the section we have read today (42:19), he simply placed it together with the rest of Isaiah's great poem about 'My Servant' in chapter 42! In fact, Isaiah has moved on to a different second stage of his great poem, lasting from 42:18 to 44:23, and it is a long poem in defence of God and His actions, justifying His actions including why He had to act unilaterally to declare 'My Servant' (42:1). Put another way, Isaiah began by writing about what the Lord would do before he fully explained why.

The first thing you notice as soon as you read this poem is that it talks about a failed 'servant of the Lord' (42:19). It is obvious that this cannot be the same 'Servant' as the one announced earlier in chapter 42 because the description of the one and the description of the other is totally different! This servant is blind and deaf and has failed to pay attention or listen despite the Lord's call to 'listen you deaf, you blind, look up and see!' (42:18) and neither, unfortunately, is this a description of a healing miracle of God. The more you read, the more you are led to accept that this poem is sadly about judgement.

There are many descriptions of Israel's failures in the writings of the prophets (see Amos 2:6-16 and Hosea 2:2-15), but the difference between these prophecies and what we find in this passage is characteristic of Isaiah. His talk about the blindness and deafness of Gods people links with the prophecy given him when he was called as a prophet; 'make the minds of this people dull and stop their ears and shut their eyes, so that they might not look ... and not listen ...' (6:10). In addition, Isaiah uses some key words (which we will look at

- *If you have the opportunity, try to find a Jewish person prepared to discuss with you their own view of these prophecies of Isaiah which mean so much to Christians. Do not be dogmatic, but seek in Christ's name, to learn.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, may we keep ourselves free from sin by being obedient to Your will, serving the people around us and seeking to honour You through all we do. Then, when we fall foul of evil's trickery, may we have the courage to come back for your forgiveness and help. Keep us on the narrow way, Lord Jesus; AMEN

later on) within the poem which tell us very clearly that God has given up on Israel. The second half of the poem (42:23-25) makes it clear that God had no option, despite His sending all manner of earthly signs to warn the people.

However, if we allow it, then the failure of the old servant Israel will teach us something about God's purposes for His new Servant!

Going Deeper

In this poem, the Lord summons His people, the blind and the deaf (42:18). After that, two sets of questions are put to the reader (42:19 and 42:23,24). These are followed by God's comments on the issues raised by the questions (42:20,21 and 42:24,25). By keeping this simple structure in mind, we will find our way through the details of what these poems say.

Notes on the text and translation

V18 *'... look and see' At the end of the verse, the Hebrew implies that the blind must look in order to see. It could be translated like this, but the poetry of the line would be lost.*

V19 *'who is blind like one committed to me' The Hebrew word for 'one committed to me' is not clear, because it appears like a name in other parts of the Old Testament, but the name of a person (it would be Meshullam) does not seem right here, and no translator agrees with this. Because the root Hebrew word is from 'shalom' the Hebrew for wholeness and completion, I have interpreted the word to refer to someone in a whole relationship with God, 'one committed to me'.*

V20 *'seeing many things, he does not pay attention' Most translations have 'seeing many things, he does not observe them'. But these translations do not do justice to what the text says here. The point of the contrast in this verse is that the individual does not do anything with what he sees; or in our words, he does not pay attention. Hence my translation.*

V23 *'will attend and listen for the future' There is no Hebrew word for 'future' in the general sense that we use the word; however, the Hebrew word here means something close to 'hereafter', but not in the sense of death, so the word 'future' fits best what is needed here.*

V25 *In this verse I have in common with many translators referred to the subjects of the sentences as 'them' or 'they', whereas you will find that others change between the singular 'he' and 'him' and the plural 'they' and 'them' as the text does in Hebrew. This is confusing, but it is because the subject of the poem at this point is God's servant Israel, and sometimes the poem address Israel in the singular as the servant, and sometimes in the plural as the people of Israel; but from our perspective in English, the subject is in fact the same, and is always Israel! So I have preferred to use 'them' and 'they' for clarity and understanding!*

The servant is disabled!

Isaiah knew from his earliest days as a prophet that God's people were fatally flawed by an inability to see and hear God. Indeed, in Isaiah's call (6:9-10) God told him that the more he spoke in prophecy the more the people would fail to understand; 'speak to this people; keep on listening but do not comprehend; keep on looking but do not understand ...' (6:9). This was originally a baffling prophecy, but the mysterious words stayed with Isaiah and coloured all his later prophecies. The main point about Isaiah is that not only did he accept this strange prophetic call but he asked what would come next (6:11) and was told by God, mysterious yet again, that God would accomplish His work after Israel and Judah had been

punished by war (6:12,13). Now an older man, Isaiah was able to find perspective on his call through writing down the visions and prophecies of the latter part of his book.

The questions ring out in verse 19; 'who is blind ... who is deaf ... who is blind ... who is blind?' It is puzzling why deafness is only mentioned once but blindness three times. The answer may be it places an emphasis on blindness, which is the major problem because blindness is 'non-comprehension' of God. To have not listened (deaf) is one thing, but to have failed to perceive and understand God's revelation goes further than physical blindness. Indeed, the spiritual blindness of 'servant Israel' is the problem, as is evident in verse 20: 'seeing many things, he does not pay attention ...'

The Lord had given everything 'servant Israel' needed in order to know Him; and supremely, He gave the law through Moses (42:21). We should not think of the law as mere regulations, as the word tempts us to do. It means God's guidance for living in His world, and the 'torah' (the exact word used in v21) includes the stories of Creation, as well as those of Abraham and the forefathers (as a 'standard' of how to live in covenant relationship with God). The Law, God's greatest gift to servant Israel, had been 'made great and glorious' (42:21) through the amazing Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, but servant Israel was now living like a nation of the world, and the simple but correct attitude of seeking God's will had been replaced by worldly ways. Isaiah had spent most of his life advising the kings of Israel, and he knew what he was talking about.

The result of servant Israel's self inflicted spiritual disablement was that the nations of Israel and Judah had become 'political footballs' kicked around by the emerging powerhouse empires of the Middle East; Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. There is hardly a chapter of 2 Kings or 2 Chronicles which does not have in it some reference to a king seeking help from one of these Empires or being held to ransom by them for money or land. Living in the world without God, servant Israel was like 'loot, with no-one to say "give it back!"'

The servant has been compromised!

The real trouble was that having had so much from God and having wandered away from Him, servant Israel had nowhere to go, and this, of course is a spiritual analysis. The remaining people of Israel in Isaiah's day were limited to those who lived in Jerusalem and the surrounding villages and towns. Most of these were of Judean origin, but representing other tribes as well through the presence of individuals from those tribes who had escaped to Jerusalem after the Assyrians overran the northern Kingdom of Israel. In Isaiah's last days, Assyria had disappeared (see Isaiah 36-39) after decimating almost the whole of Israel except Jerusalem herself, and in later years, Babylon would come and finish the Job, as Isaiah so poignantly hinted (Isaiah 39).

Against this backdrop, Isaiah's concluding prophecy becomes clear. First, the questions are asked; 'who ... will listen; who will attend ... to the future; who gave up Jacob ... and Israel? The answer to the first question was already clear; there was no one listening or attending to the future amongst the people of servant Israel, so the task of sorting out what would happen fell to the Lord. The answer to the second question was a sharp reminder to servant Israel of God's attempts over the previous centuries (42:25) to draw their attention. We instinctively dislike talk about God's wrath, but here in verse 25 the word means precisely the deep felt rejection of heartfelt love that drives the strongest of emotions. God had sought to catch servant Israel's attention through floods and droughts (see the story of Elijah – 1 Kings 17f.), violence and war (as in the Assyrian invasion – 2 Kings 15:19f.). It was as if the people had not noticed the spiritual fire set by the Lord and ignored it; a fire which was intended to get a reaction from servant Israel, but which through ignorance and failure to comprehend, would eventually consume her.

In the middle of this part of the poem, Isaiah includes as he does in most of his poems, a brief and succinct summary of the whole work. It is written almost like a confession of Isaiah himself, heartbroken (like Jesus and then Paul, centuries later) at the failure of his own people. 'Was it not the Lord against whom we sinned? But they refused to walk in His ways and they would not obey!' (42:24).

Application

In summary, God did choose His servant Israel and had a covenant agreement which conferred blessings on her to enable her to accomplish her task, but she did not. Isaiah's message describes this as the Old Testament, the old covenant and the old servant. The failure of this old process meant that God had to act to bring salvation to the world in a different way; building on what He had already done and introducing His new Servant, with a task to establish a new covenant, anticipating a New Testament!

Some people in the church disagree with what I now say, but I do believe that God's people, the Church, are as capable of rejecting God even today as were the people of the Old Testament; for we are all alike, as people. Today, the Church is successful in bringing salvation to the world because of Christ, not because of us or the church, and it is only insofar as we reflect and do the work of Christ that the Kingdom comes in our midst in power, and in a way which was impossible under the old covenant. Christ is all things to a Christian. Christ makes the difference, so it is wise that we look carefully at how and why our ancestors failed, even the Old Testament ones! The New Testament does say, after all, that the Old Testament is there for our teaching (2 Tim 3:16) and for our 'building up' as God's people. We must learn from this passage today.

One of the best things we can learn is that as people, we do have a tendency to be deaf and blind, but through Christ alone we may find how to break out of the spiritual blindness and deafness which afflicts us all in different ways. We will not break out of it through being religious, studying hard, or doing any good or proper thing in the life of the church; only through Christ can we escape the problems of God's people of old, and then everything else opens up before us; religious devotion, learning, good works and true worship. This is God's way under the New Covenant.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. To what extent is the church of God like the people of Israel of ancient times, and how does Jesus make a difference to you?
2. Does God show His wrath against His people today? If so, how?
3. How may we best share our faith with the people of God's old Covenant, the Jews, today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Although this is a rather dour part of the great prophecies of the second half of Isaiah, it is nevertheless important. Unless all of us learn from scripture the sharper lessons we will have difficulty in the practice of our faith. It is no good living a life of 'happy clappy' faith without facing the very real consequences of spiritual blindness. Christ is all in all.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Fast and pray for God's people throughout the world, especially those who face difficult and critical times and perhaps feel under judgement because of failure. Pray for new life in Christ to be the spiritual truth of God's people, and all they do.*