

Prayer

All praise be to You, Lord God; we bless You. We know we cannot offer You anything which we have not first received from You, but in honour of all you have done for us, we bless You with our words and our deeds, our thoughts and our emotions. May every part of our being praise and bless You holy name; thank You Lord: Alleluia!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Broken Families

Pray about the social pressures and conditions in your country which make it either attractive for men and women not to marry, or harder for them commit to marriage.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for those who are troubled and consider suicide*
- *Pray today for the ongoing civil strife in parts of Sri Lanka*
- *Give thanks for the gifts of life and joy and love.*

Meditation

(a prophecy)

Arrange church services in whatever style is appropriate.
But let Christ be at the centre, and not the world's agenda.

Use all kinds of music with which to praise and worship God;
But let the words you sing reflect the truth within God's Word.

Organise your church according to your commission;
But let the gifts of all be cherished and known and used.

Baptise people water, with love and joy and worship;
But let it speak of the grace of God and spiritual new birth.

Organise groups for prayer, fellowship and Bible study;
But let them not become merely private 'interest-groups'.

Allow your buildings to be used by people in the community;
But let the moral values of the Creator be your earthy guide

Live to the full as people and enjoy your fellowship in Christ;
But let there be no question about the Gospel imperative of love.

Bible Study - Isaiah 57:14-21

¹⁴ Now, I say,
'Build up, build up, prepare the way,
remove every obstacle from my
people's way.'

¹⁵ For this is what the one High and
Lifted Up says;
He who lives forever, whose name
is Holy:
I live in a high and holy place,

*with One who is crushed and lowly
in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly,
and to revive the heart of the
crushed.*

¹⁶ For I will not struggle forever,
And I will not always be angry;
for spirit would grow faint before me,
the breath of life I have made.

¹⁷ *I was angry because of the sin of his greed;
 I struck him, I hid and was angry;
 but he continued to go back to the ways of his heart.*

¹⁸ *I have seen his ways, but I will heal him;
 I will lead him and restore my compassion to him,*

¹⁹ *I will make the words for those who mourn to say.*

*"Peace, peace, to those far and near,"
 says the LORD;
 "I will heal them."
²⁰ *But the wicked are like the driven sea
 that cannot keep still;
 its waters throw up mire and mud.**

²¹ *There is no peace, says my God,
 for the wicked.*

Review

After yesterday's astonishing and extreme message conveying the incredulous anger of the Lord at those who turn away from His Servant, and His redemption and salvation, Isaiah's prophecy continues by swinging completely in the opposite direction! In this passage we find the most amazingly generous response of God to the human condition, seeking to 'remove every obstacle' that stands in the way between God and His people. Continuing with everything we have discovered about how to interpret Isaiah's prophecies after chapter 53 (the suffering Servant), we must be clear about who this text addresses. We can apply it to the people of Israel who returned from the exile if we wish, to gain historic insight into the journey of God's people as they tried to understand what it meant to expect the coming of the suffering Servant. It is better however, to apply it to God's people, the church, now that Jesus has fulfilled the work of the Servant.

In this light, therefore, it is possible to say that this passage comes as close as it is possible for an Old Testament prophecy to come to describing what we now call God's 'grace'. Yesterday we noted how people hear the Gospel and still prefer their own life and their own sins, turning away from Christ and the salvation and redemption open to them. This is the cause of great wrath on God's part as indicated in the extraordinary outburst of Isaiah 57:1-13. But we should be aware that although this outburst was extraordinary God did not reject those who rejected Him; He even offered to 'concede your righteous deeds' (57:12) but knew it would not persuade those in love with the world and their own pleasures to return to Him (57:13).

The fact is that after the work of the Servant, God constantly offers redemption and salvation through the Servant (Jesus), whatever the cost, and this extraordinary grace is what is now spelt out in detail in our text. Because these words of prophecy come from centuries before the time of Christ, we need to study them carefully in order to interpret them, but even as we begin to look at the text, its possibilities should excite us. Instead of a messenger calling on people to 'prepare the way' for God (as in Isaiah 40:3f.), it is God Himself who calls for obstacles to be removed from the pathway of those who want to come to Him (57:14)! Perhaps this is the inspiration for Jesus' trenchant words about the awfulness of those who place 'stumbling blocks' in the way of 'the least of these' (Matt 18:6) who wish to enter the Kingdom of God!

The prophecy nobly identifies God as 'High and Lofty', and living 'with One who is crushed and lowly in spirit' (57:15). We can now say that this is the Servant, Jesus, who was lowly and came to earth (Phil 2:5f.) and was crushed in death (Matt 27, Isaiah 53); and the prophecy gives us the glorious news that now the Servant lives with God on High, His work is to 'revive the spirit of the lowly ...!' The Lord is always willing to receive those lowly enough to know their need of Him!

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, the love You have shown for me is amazing. Keep me ever mindful of the cost of this love; the journey to Jerusalem, the sentence of death, the walk to Calvary and the nails in Yours hands. May I always know that resurrection power comes from Your sacrifice, Lord Jesus. AMEN

which is appropriate for the declaration of the Gospel, and even the verse 'to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the crushed' is full of potential for the appeal of the Gospel.

Surely the most significant passage is in verse 18 and 19, where this prophecy indicates a route towards God's peace, of healing, guidance and repentance (see above). The healing ministry reflects God's open heart to all people prepared to trust Him and show the smallest measure of faith by coming to Him, but the next step in evangelism is to lead those who have been so blessed to appreciate the Saviour who has blessed them. The evangelistic task is surely to guide and help people to a place where they encounter God for themselves and receive His peace; it is a privilege, yet few feel confident to learn or use the skills to do such a task. Lastly, when people have been led to the Lord, they need help to turn and repent of what was wrong in their lives previously and begin a new life which is indeed the 'Peace, peace' declared by the Lord.

Beyond this, however, all of us can surely recognise with relief that here in this passage is a reflection of the God of grace who we know is present in the Old Testament, but so often seems to be hidden. Here He is, working through and with the Servant, for the exclusive benefit of all people; and for that, we should all give thanks.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. If you were to write down a list of the attributes of God, what would it contain, and how would this compare with Isaiah 57:15?
2. Discuss in your group why it is that God decides He will no longer 'be angry' with people (57:16)?
3. Is 'peace' the obvious consequence of 'salvation'? If not, why not, and what is the purpose of salvation?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

It is a great relief to be able to write without having to delve into the intrigues of a passage such as we studied yesterday! However, we still find some rather difficult Hebrew here in this text. It took me a considerable amount of time and reading to come up with my own translation of verse 19, and I am aware that it is rather different to many other versions. However, I am convinced of the merit of it, and the consequent logic of the pattern of healing, guidance and repentance that produces peace. I hope you will find it makes sense of what is otherwise a rather obscure part of the text.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *In what ways does this passage of scripture challenge you to work with God to spread the Good News of God's love for all people? How can you play a part in this great activity of God?*
- *Pray for all who are driven and restless, being unsure about approaching God or coming to church (for example). Many wish to know more about faith, but few take the step of asking someone or coming to a church. How can you help make this step easier and remove 'obstacles'?*

God declares that He will not strive with people any longer. This means in effect that God will no longer run after those who choose their own way, as He chased Israel and sought fruitlessly to bring her back to Himself for centuries. Those who have made their minds up will go their own way, but for those who come to Him in humility, there is a rich reward. Verses 18 and 19 (despite a few problems with the text – see notes below) outline three gifts of salvation and redemption; God's healing, God's leading and God's help to repent and make peace. Though the prophecy ends with a divine 'sigh' because of human prevarication; 'the wicked are like the driven sea ... there is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked', the heart of this prophecy is surely a prophecy of the Gospel love of God.

Going Deeper

After introducing Himself in power and authority (57:14-15), God declares His intent to revive and to bring back the lowly and crushed (57:16,17). Then God's gracious promises unfold (57:18,19) with a magnificent promise of healing. Finally, God shows that He still has a heart for the wicked (57:20,21), longing for them to return to Him to find peace. The key word for the whole prophecy is probably 'peace'; for our Lord is a God of peace, and His ultimate objective is always to bring peace, but He can only give it to those who come to Him to receive it.

Notes on the text and translation

- V14 *'Now, I say ...' You will find most Bible versions have 'it will be said'. However, these versions do not account for the fact that the form of the verb used could in fact follow on from the previous verse, in which the Lord is speaking. In this case, it is right to say 'Now I say ...' thus making it explicit that the Lord is saying this, it is a new authoritative word from the Lord.*
- V14 *'remove every obstacle from my people's way ...' The Hebrew word for 'obstacle' ('micshul' – see also Lev. 19:14, Jer. 6:21 and Ezekiel 3:20) is very significant. When translated into Greek it means 'stumbling stone', and this is used by both Jesus and Paul to describe that which prevents people from coming into the Kingdom (see notes).*
- V15 *'with One who is crushed ...' The word used here is the same as that used in Isaiah 53 for the suffering Servant; 'he was crushed because of our wrongdoing ...' (53:5). It seems clear then from the context that Isaiah is speaking about the Servant.*
- V16 *'for spirit would grow faint before me.' This is an uncommon Hebrew expression, but it does refer to the spirit of created people, man and woman, 'God-breathed' into life itself.*
- V19 *'I will make the words for those who mourn to say.' The Hebrew says 'I will make the fruit of lips for his mourners'. It is almost impossible to understand what this might mean because it is most probably a colloquialism. However, the context of the prophecy suggests that this is the third work of God to heal His people, which is repentance (see study); but only the Lord can create such words within people. With this background, I have taken 'the fruit of lips' as referring poetically to 'words' said by 'those who mourn', which must be made by the Lord Himself in the heart of the believer. Most Bible versions struggle to make sense of this passage.*
- V20 *But the wicked ...' The Hebrew word for the wicked 'rashah' does not denote rebellion. Rebellion is the key characteristic of the sins which rejects the Lord, but wickedness is something God is able to forgive (see text).*

A Holy God of action! (57:14,15)

It is a great pity that most translations fudge the issue of who is speaking in verse 14. It is so powerful for us to hear that the Lord God is Himself intent upon the removal of all obstacles between us and Himself. Earlier, Isaiah's prophecies had famously called on a voice to announce a highway ready and prepared for the Lord (40:3f.), and whilst that passage reminds us of the ministry of John the Baptist, our passage here in Isaiah 57 reminds us of Jesus, and His desire that all should come to His Kingdom! There are frequent references in the various prophets (see notes above) to the removal of 'obstacles' or 'stumbling stones' (the same word), and even in the New Testament the term is taken up by Paul (Rom 9:32, 11:9f., 1 Cor 1:23). This reminds us that removing stumbling blocks is something we need to do even today; it may indeed be called an essential ministry of care.

If we were in any doubt about the importance of this passage, then verse 15 should make this clear, for God introduces Himself not with one, but four divine characteristics. We might have imagined that three would be superlative, so why four? It is not well known that 'four' represents 'completeness' in the way ancient people thought; think for example of the 'four corners of the earth', or to take a scriptural example, the four rivers flowing out of Eden (Gen 2:10) or the four living creatures representing God in Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1:5f. and there are many more examples). Here then, in verse 15, are four 'complete' attributes of the Lord God. Firstly He is 'high' in the sense that He lives in highest heaven, and secondly He is 'Lifted Up' in the sense of being held up by the praises of His people and the heavenly host. Thirdly, He is eternal, and 'lives forever', and fourthly, He is awesome and 'Holy'!

It is in the next line of verse 15 that we are introduced for the first time in Isaiah to the idea that after His death (see 53:12), the Servant lives with God in heaven; for the Lord God says, 'I live in a high and lofty place with One who is crushed and lowly in spirit ...'. The words for 'crushed' and 'lowly' both appear in Isaiah 53 as descriptions of the Servant, and so it is clear that our text describes the Servant as being like Christ, whom we speak about as 'sitting at the right hand of the Father on high' (e.g. see Acts 2:23). In a small way, we can see here something of what we now know to be the resurrection and ascension of Christ!

God's gracious intent (57:16,17)

Right at the end of verse 15, God's gracious intent is stated; 'to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the crushed.' Now that the Servant (Jesus) has done His work, this is the exclusive desire and purpose of God. He is ambitious for those who have no hope, He offers salvation to those who have made Him angry (57:17), and all those who turn to Him will receive His love.

In a fascinating comment, God says that it was surely impossible for Him to 'struggle forever' with humanity over the issue of redemption, and He had decided that He would 'not always be angry' with those who rejected Him (57:16). This sounds like a promise by God that He would not unleash His anger again; that is, the anger we read about in yesterday's passage! Just as when Noah survived the flood and the Lord God promised by covenant that He would never again destroy humanity from the face of the earth (Genesis 9:15), so after the Servant had done His work, He declares that He does not intend to pursue wrath. This text is His promise of love for all who will receive it, because as God observes, if He was continually angry with humanity, His anger might remove the 'spirit' and 'breath of life' from humanity (57:16 –lines 3 and 4); or as the prophet Malachi says 'who can stand the refiner's fire?' (Malachi 3:2).

Verse 17 reminds us of the awful history of the relationship between God and His people which had deteriorated out of control because of sin. God had punished Israel, withdrawn Himself (see also Hosea 3) and shown His anger through the prophets, but none of this

had made a difference. It was the precise nature of Isaiah's call (see Isaiah 6:9-13) which made Isaiah realise that things could not go back, God's people would not change, and a new work was needed by God if people were to be saved from sin and the world come to know God. This was the reason for the terrible yet effective work of the Servant.

God's threefold blessing (57:18,19)

In verses 18 and 19, the three means of restoration provided by the Servant are identified, and as we go through each one, we can see how they are all carefully matched to real human need. Firstly, 'I will heal him.' (57:18). One who has been punished, even 'hit' (see 57:17, meaning God's punishment of His people for their sins), needs healing. When the Servant took our sins on Himself, He came to know what it meant to be bruised and crushed of spirit and of body, and from this understanding comes God's desire to offer healing; through the Servant (the Saviour), He understands our suffering! The healing ministry of the church has always been an extension of the compassion and love of God through Jesus, who knew what it was like to suffer pain.

Secondly, the Lord says 'I will lead Him'. After healing, someone who has persistently wandered (57:17) needs guidance, and this is what the Lord offers. The text continues; 'I will lead him and restore my compassion to him.' This promise indicates the direction of the Lord's guidance, for God does not lead us firstly 'into ministry' or 'into service', but to a place where He can show us His compassion. His first concern for us when we are brought to salvation is our security!

Thirdly (and please read the accompanying notes above concerning the beginning of verse 19), the Lord will 'make the words' for those who 'mourn' to say; in other words, He will enable people to repent. Here, the one who mourns is the one receiving God's help, accepting his own state of neediness. It is only God who can 'make' or place in the heart of people those words of true repentance that make a difference, because our natural state is still to rebel against our God. However, if we allow Him to do this work in us and bring us to true repentance, then the reward which this prophecy speaks about next is ours! 'Peace, peace, to those far and near,' says the Lord! (57:19).

This is God's great shout of victory! The work is complete, and a soul has been 'healed' ('I will heal them' – 57:19), or in our words today, a soul has been 'saved'!

A sigh from the Lord (57:20,21)

It would feel good, we might think, for the prophecy to end here, on a note of great joy, and one summed up in a word which appears in different forms throughout this text, and that is 'peace'. Although we only see this word in English on a couple of occasions, it is the Hebrew word behind the words for 'restore' and 'revive' here in this text, and so when we read this in its original language, the concept of wholeness, completeness, peace and contentment pervades the passage. This indeed is God's peace, and we may enter into this peace through the grace and work of the Servant.

But the Lord cannot forget those who remain unsaved and without peace. Verses 20 and 21 remind us that the Lord's heart is still looking towards those who are wicked, who have turned to their own ways and rejected Him. They are restless, even if the Lord does not hound them, and even if they think they have found peace for themselves.

Application

The preacher can take a number of texts from this passage to use as the basis for a Gospel sermon. The words 'build up, prepare the way, remove every obstacle' (57:14) are themselves a good place to start, suggesting the prior involvement of God in all mission, and His grace working through the Servant to make a 'pathway' for the sinner to be saved. There is optimism within these early verses of our text, and a sense of the glory of God