

My Translation: <sup>19</sup> People may say to you, 'Consult the mediums and the familiar spirits, who whisper and mutter; should a people not inquire of their gods and inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?' <sup>20</sup> about instruction and testimony?' Surely, those who speak in this way will have no hope of dawn. <sup>21</sup> Hard pressed and hungry, they will press on with this, but when they become hungry, they will become enraged. They will look upwards and find themselves cursed by their king and their gods; <sup>22</sup> or they will look down at the earth but see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. They will be driven into thick darkness.

NAB Translation: <sup>19</sup> And when they say to you, "Inquire of mediums and fortune-tellers (who chirp and mutter!); should not a people inquire of their gods, apply to the dead on behalf of the living?" <sup>20</sup> then this document will furnish its instruction. That kind of thing they will surely say. <sup>21</sup> He shall pass through it hard-pressed and hungry, and in his hunger he shall become enraged, and curse his king and his gods. He shall look upward, but there shall be strict darkness without any dawn; <sup>22</sup> He shall gaze at the earth, but there shall be distress and darkness, with the light blacked out by its clouds.

I could write a long piece about why I have translated the passage like this, but I believe that what Isaiah was attempting to say was that people who had abandoned the God they were brought up to believe in and chose spiritism and necromancy (contacting the dead), then they had by their own choice abandoned all hope. Such things were not of God, as it clearly says in Leviticus 19:31, and 20:6,27. People in such a state end up in rebellion against not just their own gods but their earthly authorities (kings) as well (8:21) because little will make sense. They are reduced to spiritual gloom of the deepest kind (8:22).

### Application

When explained like this, the last part of this passage does make sense, and we can see the truth of this around us even today. All manner of mysticism, and spirit worship are practiced today by people who have given up on what they perceive to be the church. That may be a form of condemnation of the church, but it is certainly condemnation for those who prefer to be bound by myths and legends rather than the truths of the God who has made the world and all things. All manner of cults and belief systems parade themselves for our interest today, and many Christians feel content to dabble; even in alternative therapies which have no intrinsic value by any scientific standard and are strongly linked to non-Christian belief systems about good and evil 'body forces', such as reflexology and acupuncture, for example. Playing about with spiritual things outside of the power and authority of the Holy Spirit will never help us, and may well entrap us in ungodliness, as Isaiah clearly perceived of the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

Against that backdrop, Isaiah stood firm. He both spoke out the truth of God's Word to the world and personally stood with his family for the truth of the ever living God. Even though he was one of only a few who continued to hold fast to the faith of his fathers, he stood firm.

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. Is it right for us to be worried when the meaning of the Hebrew text is complex, and different translations say different things?
2. Discuss the hope shown by Isaiah. What reasons did Isaiah have for his hope?
3. Does it matter whether you think that the mother of 'Immanuel' was Isaiah's wife?

### Discipleship

After reading this passage, you can pick up on either the positive or the negative aspects of the text. There is powerful encouragement within the stance of Isaiah, and powerful condemnation of the godlessness of others in his words. Discuss with a friend the way in which people today are tempted to involve themselves with spiritual cults or beliefs which are very different from Christian faith. Why do people follow such paths?

### Final Prayer

Glory be to You, O Lord, for You have sustained us throughout our lives and will continue to guide us into the future if we will stay walking in Your paths. Save us from the distractions of this world which draw us away from You, and stay close to us we pray: AMEN

### Prayer

We praise You, O God, for the presence of Your Holy Spirit deep within us; creating, sustaining, encouraging, uplifting and healing our souls in the midst of everything we experience. May we honour this work of the Holy Spirit, welcome His presence, and allow Him to guide our thoughts, actions and feelings. O God, may Your Spirit burst into life within us like a fire and alight on us like a dove. AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: The Environment

Pray today for the many initiatives being taken to help people manage the resources of the planet more efficiently; gas, electricity, water and fuel; may we all accept our responsibilities.

#### On-going Prayers

- Relief work in Burma and China
- Thanks for prayers answered
- Pray for the protection of loved ones

### Meditation

Where are You leading, Holy Spirit?

Take me on a journey which follows the steps of saints;  
Let me learn from their godly endurance and character,  
And through their powerful example, be filled with hope.

Where are You leading, Holy Spirit?

Take me to those places where I would not normally go;  
Let me learn from the wide variety of real human life,  
And better understand God's great mission to His world.

Where are You leading, Holy Spirit?

Take me deeper into the sacred truths of the Word of God;  
Let me learn that You have more to say than I can ever know,  
And discover the eternal truths upon which our world is built.

Where are You leading, Holy Spirit?

Take me on a journey which passes through time to glory;  
Let me glimpse with hope and joy our final aim and destiny,  
And live today because I trust in You completely for tomorrow.

### Bible Study - Isaiah 8:16-22

<sup>16</sup> Bind up the testimony; seal the instruction among my disciples. <sup>17</sup> I will wait for the LORD who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob, I will hope in Him.

<sup>18</sup> Look at me and the children the LORD has given me: we are signs and warnings for Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

<sup>19</sup> People may say to you, 'Consult the mediums and the familiar spirits, who whisper and mutter; should a people not inquire of their gods and inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?' <sup>20</sup> about instruction and testimony?' Surely, those who speak in this way will have no hope of dawn. <sup>21</sup> Hard pressed and hungry, they will press on with this, but when they become hungry, they will become enraged. They will look upwards and find themselves cursed by their king and their gods; <sup>22</sup> or they will look down at the earth but see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. They will be driven into thick darkness.

## Review

A passage of scripture such as this can seem impenetrable. However, we must be patient with ourselves and with Scripture, and piece together what can be known about such texts. Now, if you read this passage from other versions of the Bible, you will find them very different. At this point in Scripture, the Hebrew contains words that are so unique, it is almost impossible to verify their true meaning (from a literary point of view). It is therefore wise to trust traditional interpretations of the text, and not, as some do, to abandon such a difficult task and move on to other more readily understandable parts of Isaiah. By exploring what can be known about such passages there is much we can learn, and by working at them, we are challenged to rely upon the Holy Spirit, who will help us in our interpretation of scripture.

The whole passage appears to be part of a conversation between Isaiah and some of his followers. Firstly, he gives some instructions, which sound positive and full of hope for the future (8:16-18). But after this, Isaiah tells his followers about people so desperate they consult with mediums and spirits (8:19), and even the dead (necromancy)! These were the actions of people who were clearly lost and confused (8:20-22), but what does Isaiah's prophecy about them mean (8:21,22), and how does it fit into his prophecies at this point in the book?

In the full study (going deeper, click below), I will demonstrate some of these complexities and show how to interpret them helpfully, but we do not have to dig deep to notice some fascinating features of the reading. There are two halves to Isaiah words here; 8:16-18, and 8:19-22, and the first paragraph is optimistic and fascinating. Now, since Isaiah's confrontation with King Ahaz, Isaiah himself had become very angry (7:10f.), but he was convinced of the importance of his prophecy that God would soon act to bring judgement on the wickedness of the king and the people. He was also convinced that God's promise to be 'with us' (7:14 – 'Immanuel') was His way to defeat sin and evil, and see the restoration of Zion (see 2:1-4). This is why he said to those around him, 'Bind up the testimony; seal the instruction among my disciples'. Isaiah knew in his spirit that there was something important about this prophecy even if he was not fully aware that it would be eight hundred years before it would be fulfilled through Jesus Christ. He was also persuaded that if his prophecy was preserved, then the truth of it would become known only after the Assyrians had invaded the land (as we saw in yesterday's study). So with the prophecy bound and protected, Isaiah said confidently that he would 'wait for the Lord ... I will hope in Him.' (8:17).

By contrast, Isaiah then turned to paint a picture of what others in Judah and Jerusalem were doing during those days of instability, international threat and uncertainty. We often think of the people of Israel and Judah as being god-fearing citizens who were obedient to their God; but occasionally, we are given an astonishing glimpse into the real life of the times, and it is not what we might expect. Doubtless there were many godly people, but just as today, large numbers lived with no hope in God, and this became evident especially when the kingdoms were under threat. Here in Isaiah's words, we hear about people hooked on mysticism, and calling up the spirits of the dead; they were so spiritually deluded they did not know whether to look 'up' (8:21) or 'down' (8:22)! Isaiah said that such people were lost in their sinful ways as if in impenetrable, thick darkness.

The contrast between Isaiah's hope and the description of God's people is extraordinary, and we can see similar things amongst people today, sometimes even amongst God's people. However, we must not be diverted from the truth, which is that even in the midst of great worldly panic, God has a future planned for His people. Only His prophets know this, and we must watch for this.

### Going Deeper

All of this is not what we might expect of the Old Testament people of God; but it is very close to the Gospel message! That is why we must explore it further. There is more in the first section about Isaiah and his family which is quite revealing, and a full understanding of

what Isaiah said about the people of Israel in verses 19 to 22 requires some detailed, but fruitful exploration.

### ***The testimony of Isaiah***

We have already noted the fascinating reference to the recording of Isaiah's words in verse 16. Certainly, Isaiah appears to have had a number of people who might be called followers and his prophecies were valued and written down by them at an early stage. Now there is one feature of the book of Isaiah which I have not as yet commented upon, and it is central to our understanding of his prophecies. Isaiah wrote around the eighth century BC at the time of the Assyrian invasion of northern Israel and the siege of Jerusalem by King Sennacherib (see Isaiah 36-39). However, as the book progresses, these prophecies become increasingly intermingled with prophecies about Babylon, the eventual captor of Jerusalem, in 597 BC, a century and a half later. It is almost certain that Isaiah's prophecies were written down in his lifetime, and when Jerusalem was finally invaded a century or more after his death, people discovered that what he said previously was relevant to them, at this later critical period of Judah's history. This is why the second half of the book of Isaiah seems to apply to events which happened long after his death. His prophecies were so powerful that dedicated and godly people kept them, studied them, copied them out and used them. Our passage today is the first indication of this process.

The truly inspirational verse in our passage today is undoubtedly verse 17, in which Isaiah boldly declared his trust in God despite everything happening around him; in particular the evidence of corruption in high places and the possibility of invasion by the Assyrians. He used a phrase to describe what it felt like which could well have come from the Psalms; 'the Lord who is hiding His face ...' (8:17 see Ps 13:1, 27:9, 51:9, etc.). Yet Isaiah was full of confidence and peace, and the two phrases 'I will wait ... I will hope' combine two Hebrew words which express patience and confidence to show a quality of certain hope which is normally found only in the New Testament.

### ***Isaiah's family***

Verse 19 is fascinating; 'Look at me and the children the Lord has given me: we are signs and warnings ...' (8:19). Because of this verse, some believe that all the children mentioned in the previous chapters of Isaiah belonged to Isaiah; the first was 'Shear-jashub' (7:3f.), the second was 'Immanuel' which implies that the 'young woman' of 7:14 was Isaiah's already pregnant wife, and the third was 'Maher-shalal-hash-baz' (8:3), implying here that the 'prophetess' mentioned in 8:3 was Isaiah's wife. This is a rather controversial interpretation because of the feelings many people have about the issue of the 'virgin birth' and Immanuel. Personally, I am not convinced that we have a full picture of Isaiah's family, and I also believe that the 'virgin birth' is dealt with fully in the New Testament, and I am perfectly comfortable with the traditional view of it.

We are certain that Shear-jashub and Maher-shalal-hash-baz were Isaiah's sons, and their names were 'signs' which pointed to Isaiah's prophecies. Isaiah was not the only prophet who named his children as a way of making his prophecies known; Hosea did this (Hosea 1-3) as well. The practice sounds strange to us, but in ancient times, names were often given which related to events or circumstances of birth. As a prophet, Isaiah's whole life, including his family were integrated into his message.

### ***The life of godlessness***

It seems clear that the remaining verses of this passage are about the gloomy state of God's people without God. However, this is because I have translated this passage in this way, reading the somewhat complex Hebrew words from this point of view. People like it when scripture is 'exact' in meaning, and the process of translating the Hebrew nearly always makes this appear so. But this passage is quite enigmatic, and to illustrate this, I have written the text below side by side with another version, the New American Standard Version, so that you can see the problems we are faced with in this text: