

Light of the World

Isaiah 49:1-50:3

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We are in a new section of Isaiah that runs from Isaiah 49-Isaiah 55. This section lays out Yahweh's salvation and deliverance of His people through His chosen Servant. This morning's text covers the second of the Servant's Songs in Isaiah 49:1-13.

Do you ever despair over a situation(s)? Perhaps you become despondent as you get older. As a person ages, the tendency is to look back over life and only see your mistakes and have many regrets. These can be painful and even overwhelming memories. What happens is that people realize there is not enough time for them to make changes or repair the damage done. At this point, they have to live with the consequences.

Perhaps you just get down in the dumps over life and wonder if it is even worth the effort. It seems all of your efforts constantly fail, and all of your words fall on deaf ears. You begin to believe it has all been a waste of time.

Sometimes we become depressed because we simply look at the decisions we have made and wonder, "*What was I thinking?*" it can leave us feeling like complete failures, incompetent, and generally useless.

These are just a few general scenarios where we grieve how we may have wasted our lives. Most of us have experienced one of these scenarios at one time or another. All of us will be there at some point, so the question is:

"So, how should we respond to our depression, despair, and despondency? How should we respond when we are down in the dumps?"

In v. 4 of the Servant's Song, we learn that God's chosen Servant seemed to struggle with the fruitlessness of His labors. He sounds like He was despairing over the fruitlessness of His ministry to His people. Look in v. 4. In the first part of v. 4, the Servant lamented the ineffectiveness of His labor:

*But I myself said: I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and futility.*

Now the Servant in v. 4 is Jesus. Question: Does it surprise you that Jesus experienced the emotion of despondency? Remember, the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way we are except without sin. Think back to Jesus' crucifixion. Remember, He quoted the opening line of Psalm 22, which are words of despair:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Brothers and sisters, it ought to be comforting to us to know our Savior wrestled with the temptation to give in to despair.

What is even more comforting is that while He wrestled with despair, He didn't give in to it. Look at the end of v. 4:

*Yet my vindication is with the Lord,
and my reward is with my God.*

The end of v. 4, in the standard pattern of God-centered lament. Jesus took His despondency to the Lord in a lament and, at the end of His lament, confessed His faith in God. He professed that while His labors seemed to

be a waste of time, His confidence is not based on results but on His reward. God is His great reward, and that is enough.

So, how should we respond when despair and despondency wash over our hearts and minds like a tidal wave? Bottom line: Faith.

Verse 4 teaches us two things about our faith in God in times of despair and despondency. Faith looks back, and faith looks forward.

For us, on this side of the cross, our faith looks back at what the Suffering Servant, Jesus, has done to save us, and it looks forward to the future as we hope in Him for what He will do for us in the future.

Friends, despondency, despair, and depression only look back. When you are down in the dumps, all you do is look at what happened. All you can do is focus on your failure.

Despondency and despair anchor us in the past. They are like poisons you drink that work through your mind and make you believe that things will never change. They will kill hope if they can. They will cast dark clouds of hopelessness on your future.

However, it is faith in Jesus that changes everything. In other words, it is the gospel that changes everything. The gospel teaches us that Jesus was tempted to give in to despondency, despair, and depression, but He resisted.

I have three points: *The Servant's Call*, *The Servant's Commission*, and *The Servant's Compassion*. The first two points are in the Servant's Song in Isaiah 49:1-13. The Servant's Song will help us see how Jesus' *call* and *commission* helped Him overcome despair and despondency of His labors. The last point, *The Servant's Compassion*, is the application of the whole sermon and will build our assurance in our Savior so that when despair and despondency seek to overwhelm us, we have a plan of action.

I. The Servant's Call (Isaiah 49:1-7)

In vv. 1-3, we hear the Servant talking to the nations, not just the Jewish people. He is talking to anyone who will listen to His word. We hear Him using the words of Yahweh and telling the nations what Yahweh has called Him to do. Look in vv. 1-3:

*Coasts and islands, listen to me;
distant peoples, pay attention.
The Lord called me before I was born.
He named me while I was in my mother's womb.
² He made my words like a sharp sword;
he hid me in the shadow of his hand.
He made me like a sharpened arrow;
he hid me in his quiver.
³ He said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."*

In v. 1, we see the preciousness of the baby in the womb. Jesus was knit together by God in the womb. He was called and will be commissioned by God to save the nations.

Jesus' calling and commissioning are unique. There is no other birth that has made an impact on the world as His did. He changed everything.

Verse 1 reminds us of the sanctity of the life of the baby in the mother's womb. God knits together every life in the womb. Every life is precious. Every baby belongs to Him. He has a plan and a purpose for each life because each life is created in the image of God. Whether you are in the family of your biological parents or you have been adopted God loves you, and by His gracious providence, you are in the family that He has placed you so that you may come to know Jesus.

You may be in a family where life is easy, but you may be in a family that is dysfunctional and hard (like most people grow up in). The Savior's words are like sharp arrows to cut through the hardness of your heart. He knows how much misery it takes in your life to break through the deadness of your heart to cause you to turn to Him. So, don't blame Him or harden your heart to Him because of your situation. Instead, listen to Him.

Then in vv. 5-7, God speaks, and He reiterates the Servant's call:

*⁵ And now, says the Lord,
who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him
so that Israel might be gathered to him;
for I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
and my God is my strength—
⁶ he says, "It is not enough for you to be my servant
raising up the tribes of Jacob
and restoring the protected ones of Israel.
I will also make you a light for the nations,
to be my salvation to the ends of the earth."*

In vv. 5-6, Yahweh unpacks what the Servant said in vv. 1-4. He confirms His calling and says that He is light to the nations. God called Him to be the Light of the World.

The idea of Jesus being the Light of the World is what we celebrate at Christmas. We light candles at Advent to remember Jesus came as the Light of the World. He came not only to save Israel but to save the Gentiles as well.

Finally, v. 7 is an amazing verse:

*⁷ This is what the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel,
his Holy One, says to one who is despised,
to one abhorred by people, to a servant of rulers:
"Kings will see, princes will stand up,
and they will all bow down
because of the Lord, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel—and he has chosen you."*

God called Jesus to be the Light of the World. He is the Light that drives out the darkness of doubt, despair, despondency, and depression in our lives. He is the Light that shines forward to illuminate our future. He is the Light that walks with us on the road of life.

II. The Servant's Commission (Isaiah 49:8-13)

In vv. 8-13, Yahweh confirms the Servant's calling and assures Him that His commission will be successful. Listen to what God says in v. 8:

*I will answer you in a time of favor,
and I will help you in the day of salvation.
I will keep you, and I will appoint you
to be a covenant for the people.*

The salvation of God's people is never in question. Jesus was not wringing His hands, hoping it would all work. He may have been tempted to despair, but He didn't because He confidently put His faith in God.

By faith, Jesus knew God's favor was on Him. By faith, Jesus knew He was appointed to be our covenant. By faith, Jesus established the covenant in His blood.

Now, by faith, we symbolically feed on His body and blood in the Lord's Supper. By faith, we are reminded that the New Covenant is established by His blood. By faith, we know that we will never be spiritually hungry or thirsty because His Spirit fills us.

Next, v. 12 tells us that we, Gentiles, were far off from God, but we were brought into covenant with God by Jesus and His blood.

Finally, v. 13 closes out the song calling all creation to celebrate the salvation the Lord's Servant has achieved. He was called and commissioned to be the Light of the World. His success was never in doubt. It was always assured.

This leads us to our final point. Now what we need as we travel with our Savior, The Light of the World, is to be built up in our assurance.

III. The Servant's Compassion (Isaiah 49:14-50:3)

In Isaiah 49:14-50:3, the Lord gives four promises to assure that He will show His great mercy and compassion to us through His Servant work.

Promise #1: Jesus will never forget us (Isaiah 49:14-16):

¹⁴ *Zion says, "The Lord has abandoned me;
the Lord has forgotten me!"*

¹⁵ *"Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or lack compassion for the child of her womb?
Even if these forget, yet I will not forget you.*

¹⁶ *Look, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.*

In vv. 14-16, God hits us where it hurts. Often when we suffer, we are tempted to think God has forgotten us. We are tempted to say:

*"Why has the Lord allowed this to happen to me? Doesn't He care? Doesn't He
see how I am suffering? Has He forgotten me?"*

Have you ever said something like this? At some point, most of us have said something like this in our hearts.

The Lord goes right after our temptation to think this. First, He asks, *"Can a mother forget the baby who nurses at her breast and lack compassion for that tender child?"*

The question is a rhetorical one because the answer is so obvious—of course, not. The baby is nursing. How can a mother forget the baby at her breast?

The second example is an allusion to what Christ did for us on the cross. Jesus showed His great compassion for us by stretching out His hands and being nailed to a Roman cross.

The first promise should give us assurance of God's love. God has not forgotten us. The scar tissue on Jesus' hands continually reminds Him of His sacrifice for us and His love for us.

Promise #2: Jesus builds His church (Isaiah 49:17-23). Look in vv. 20-23b:

²⁰ *Yet as you listen, the children
that you have been deprived of will say,
'This place is too small for me;
make room for me so that I may settle.'*

²¹ *Then you will say within yourself,
'Who fathered these for me?
I was deprived of my children and unable to conceive,
exiled and wandering—but who brought them up?*

*See, I was left by myself—but these,
where did they come from?’*
²² *This is what the Lord God says:
Look, I will lift up my hand to the nations,
and raise my banner to the peoples.
They will bring your sons in their arms,
and your daughters will be carried on their shoulders . . .*
*[v. 23b] Then you will know that I am the Lord;
those who put their hope in me
will not be put to shame.*

In v. 18, the Bride refers to the church. What has happened is God has saved all of His people from all time. Now, they are gathered at the end of the age, and the Servant’s Bride (the church) looks around and is stunned to see all of Her children that God has given Her. She is in awe. She cannot believe so many children.

So, she asks: *Where did they all come from?* How were they brought into My family? It looked like I would have no children but low and behold—here they are, and they are more than I can even imagine.

So, how did this happen? Very simply, Yahweh lifted His hand to the nations and raised His banner, and they came. *The Servant is His Hand and His Banner. When He was raised up, they came to Him from the four corners of the earth.* God’s call is irresistible, and it always accomplishes its goal.

So, promise number 2 is that the Lord will build and increase His church by His word. So, when you look around at the state of the world and how Christ’s Bride is hated and persecuted, do not fret. God has raised His Servant on the cross for all people to see. He was buried, and then He was raised from the dead. Now all who look to Jesus will be saved. If you are not a Christian, Jesus is calling you to Himself. Turn away from your sin and look in faith to Jesus today.

Promise #3: The Lord will be victorious over the world (Isaiah 49:24-26). Look in vv. 25-26:

²⁵ *For this is what the Lord says:
“Even the captives of a mighty man will be taken,
and the prey of a tyrant will be delivered;
I will contend with the one who contends with you,
and I will save your children.*
²⁶ *I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh,
and they will be drunk with their own blood
as with sweet wine. Then all humanity will know
that I, the Lord, am your Savior,
and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”*

These verses are very graphic and somewhat hard to get our modern minds around but here goes. As God builds His church on His Son, the world will oppose it.

The more Christ’s church grows, the more opposition it encounters. But, here is the deal—God is not worried. As more and more people turn to Jesus, more and more governments will try to stop the growth of God’s Kingdom. However, the reality is—they can’t stop it. God has raised a banner. God has lifted His Hand, and He is drawing all of His children to Himself in spite of the world’s opposition to the gospel.

Verses 25-26 tell us that there is a future day coming when those who have rejected the good news and hated Christ’s church will receive the full penalty for their sin. In that future day that we call the *Day of the Lord*, Jesus will bring full and final justice on the world.

This is the ultimate and final victory of God's Servant. The victory was inaugurated when Jesus rose from the dead. However, it will not be ultimately fulfilled until the day Jesus returns to bring His people home.

When Jesus returns, He will be the Rider on the white horse from Revelation 19:11-16. He will trample the wine press of the wrath of God. He will set all things right. He will wipe away every tear from the eyes of His people and dispense eternal justice on those who oppressed His people. The scales of God's justice will be balanced because the victory will be final.

This is good news for Christ's suffering church, but it is bad news for those who have rejected Jesus and opposed His church. So, when the news of the world seems bad for God's people, remember there is a day coming when Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, will set all things right. Let the Light of the World shine His light on the future.

Promise #4: The Lord redeems His people by the power of His word (Isaiah 50:1-3). Let's slow down just a bit as we work through these final three verses. Isaiah uses some literary devices that make us scratch our heads (or at least they make me scratch my head).

Look at what He says in Isaiah 50:1-3:

*This is what the Lord says:
Where is your mother's divorce certificate
that I used to send her away?
Or to which of my creditors did I sell you?
Look, you were sold for your iniquities,
and your mother was sent away
because of your transgressions.*

In v. 1, God answers the accusations of the people in Babylon. First, they accused Yahweh of divorcing them and abandoning His covenant with them. Second, they accused Him of selling them into slavery.

These were rhetorical questions where the answer was obvious. He was assuring them that He had not divorced them. He asked where was the divorce certificate. There was not one for Judah.

The Northern Kingdom, Israel, He divorced. He abandoned them and sold them into slavery. However, He did not divorce Judah. There was no certificate of divorce issued. They may have accused God of divorcing them, but that was not what happened. Instead, their exile in Babylon was a structured separation designed to bring them to repentance and faith in Him.

The second accusation was that God had sold them into slavery in Babylon. This was not true either. They were not sold to pay a debt. God has no creditors. It was a ridiculous accusation. They were in Babylon because of the consequences of their sins, but it was not to pay a debt.

Then God continues to question His people. He questioned Judah's response to His word. Look in v. 2a:

²*Why was no one there when I came?
Why was there no one to answer when I called?
Is my arm too weak to redeem?
Or do I have no power to rescue?*

Now Yahweh asks two more rhetorical questions that indict them for their failure to obey His word. Verse 2a echoes God's question to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after they sinned. God called, and no one was there. No one answered Him until He pressed them.

Think about what God had been saying in the last few chapters. God was calling His people to listen to Him. Over and over, He used the phrase, "Listen to me." Here was their problem—they would not listen.

Then in the last two sentences, He asks with incredulity,

Is my arm too weak to redeem?

Or do I have no power to rescue?"

In other words, you just don't believe My word is powerful enough to save. As Jesus told His disciple, "*Oh, you of little faith.*"

Next, in vv. 2b-3, He let them know His word did not lack power:

*Look, I dry up the sea by my rebuke;
I turn the rivers into a wilderness;
their fish rot because of lack of water
and die of thirst. ³ I dress the heavens in black
and make sackcloth their covering.*

In other words, His word is just as powerful as it was in creation. Do not doubt the power of my word to save you. Only trust Me, says the Lord.

So, our last promise to build our assurance in God is that *He redeems His people by the power of His word.*

Now, let's apply this passage. First, just as Jesus is called and commissioned to be the Light of the World, likewise, we are to follow our Savior. Our calling and commission are to join our Savior to see the nations come to faith in Jesus. We are called and commissioned to take the gospel to our family, friends, and neighbors. Some of us are called to move to see the nations saved. We may move in our state or around the world, but we are called to fulfill Christ's Great Commission. Nothing drives out despondency and despair like sharing the light of the gospel with others.

Second, we are called to listen and obey God's word. This almost goes without saying, but it must be said. We are called and commissioned to be in God's word on a daily basis. By doing this, we are shaped into the image of Jesus. We are built up in our faith, and we know and believe in the power of the word of God so that when God says to us, "*Listen to me,*" we listen to Him. It is by listening to God's word that doubt, despair, and despondency are overcome in our hearts.

Lastly, the Servant's compassion gives us four promises to further drive out despair and despondency. When despair and despondency come in like a flood, we must preach these promises to hearts.

Remind yourself that you are the nail prints on Jesus' hands, and this means He will never forget you.

Remind yourself that the gates of Hell cannot prevail against Jesus' church. No matter what is going on in the world, Jesus is continually increasing His church.

Remind yourself that no matter how bad things look in the world, continually remind yourself that God wins! He will bring victory and justice. Jesus will wipe away every tear, and He will bring to justice all who opposed and mistreated His people.

Finally, remember that Jesus redeems us. He is the Word of God who gave Himself to move heaven and earth to save us. As Romans 8:37-39 says:

³⁷ No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Remember, Jesus, crucified our despondency and despair. Jesus scorned the shame of despondency and despair. He took them to the cross, and He nailed them there. Then He buried them and left them in the grave. Don't give life to dead things. Look to the One who conquered despondency, despair, and depression.