

ISAIAH — LESSON SEVENTEEN

ISAIAH 49 - 51:8

SECTION TWO

THE SERVANT AND THE GLORY OF ZION (49-57)

In Section 1 (40-48), Isaiah dealt with the contest between Jehovah and the heathen idols; Cyrus, the anointed of Jehovah, who would deliver Israel from captivity; and the fall of Babylon. In doing so, he also expounded on the majesty of Jehovah and Israel's relationship to him as his servant and witness in the midst of a heathen world. These subjects now fade into the background and in this section Isaiah sets forth the character, mission, and achievement of the divine Servant, and the glory of redeemed Zion.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

THE SERVANT AND DESPONDENT ZION

Vv. 1-4 – Endowments for His Work

The first issue in this chapter is the identification of the speaker. There is a long list of suggestions from whom to choose: the Lord's servant, Israel; Deutero-Isaiah (chs. 40-55); Ideal Israel, realized in Jesus Christ; the faithful in Israel who reach their ideal in the Christ. (This choice requires as least two things: 1) the Servant of ch. 53 must be a person, and there must be a development in the Servant passages from a) the nation

to b) Israel within Israel (the few) to c) a person who can be none other than the Messiah).

The greatest number of commentators, especially conservative commentators, holds that the Servant is the Messiah. While the decision should not be made based upon the number lined up on each side, it seems rather clear that the speaker is in fact the Messiah. A study of the four primary passages that deal with the Servant indicates that *Servant* is not a collective noun, but is a reference to an individual, and that only the Messiah fulfills the prophecies. The second of the "Servant Songs (49:1-13), for example, presents the Servant as an individual with a worldwide mission of redemption.

Since the beginning of ch. 43 Israel alone has been addressed. Now that the mission of the Servant of Jehovah is to be treated of, all the world must be summoned to hear, for all of the world is directly interested. Isaiah could not have said this of himself, for his "call" took place when he was of mature age. But Christ was designated for his office from the womb (Luke 1:31-33). He was also still "in the womb of his mother" when the name of Jesus was given to him (Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:31) (1).

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says that "the Word of God" generally "is ... sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow" (Heb. 4:12). Christian experience testifies that this keen, searching, cutting power attaches in a special way to the sayings of Jesus, which pierce the heart as no other words can do, and rankle in the soul, which is quite unable to forget them. The imagery recurs in the Revelation of St. John (1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21). Not only has Jehovah provided weapons, he has provided protection --- "in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me." This may refer to keeping him safe from his enemies, reserving him until the fullness of time, or both. The polished shaft is a weapon keener than a sword. It is smoothed and polished to enable it to pierce more deeply. It is kept in God's quiver until the time came when it could be launched with most effect against the hearts of the ungodly (2).

Here the Servant is called "Israel." Does this mean that those who identify the Servant as one or something other than the Christ are correct? The answer is "no." First, the

following verse indicates otherwise. Second, “Israel” is not limited to the name of a nation. In fact it was first used as the name of a person. It is appropriately applied to the Messiah who represents everything that Israel, the nation, should be. Third, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* writes: “There are also passages in which the servant is differentiated from actual Israel and has a mission to Israel (Isa 49:1–9; 42:1–7; 50:4–10; 52:13–53:12). This servant must be identified with the Israel-servant, but he must also be distinguished from them, having a mission to them (as explicitly stated in 49:5–6; cf. 49:3).” Fourth, It was not unusual for the king of a nation to be known by the nation’s name. The Christ was to be and is the King of spiritual Israel. Isaiah had done so earlier with the King of Assyria (10:5). Addressing the King of Assyria he said, “Ho, Assyrian.” There is some disagreement as to whether that appellation relates to a particular king or all of Assyria’s kings, but either way it illustrates the use of a nation’s name applied to its king. Fifth, Israel personified is not the speaker in this passage, as indicated by the use of “I shall glorify myself” in close connection with “servant.” Sixth, Young argues that “[i]t is the servant character of Israel that brings glory to God. To be God’s servant is the highest privilege, and it is in performing the work of servant that God is glorified. This could hardly apply to the recalcitrant, sinful nation, for this nation was unable to be the true Israel. All that the prophet writes concerning Israel makes clear that they could not to be the true Israel. All that the prophet writes concerning Israel makes clear that they could not be what the Servant of the Lord should be. When the servant accomplishes his task, God is glorified; the empirical Israel could not accomplish that task; hence, whatever be the force of *Israel* here, it is not merely a designation of the nation.” Following other comments, he concludes, “Israel, therefore, is the Messiah conceived as the Head of His body, the true Church, although the emphasis at this point falls upon the members of the body.”

The Servant had momentarily desponded, seeing the small results of all his efforts to reclaim Israel, and had felt a natural human regret at so much labor apparently expended in vain; but his despondency had been soon checked by the thought that God would not suffer any “labor of love” to be wholly in vain, but would give it the recompense which it merited. The verse brings strongly out the true humanity of the

“Servant,” who feels as men naturally feel, but restrains himself, and does not allow his feelings to carry him away. Compare with this despondency the grief exhibited by our Lord on two occasions (Matt. 23:37; John 11:35), and the depression which extorted from him the memorable words, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” (Matt. 27:46).

Vv. 5-7 – The Enlarged Mission

Jehovah answered the Servant in what may have been an unexpected way. He had originally sent him “to bring Jacob again” and “that Israel be gathered unto him.” Now he adds to that charge that “[he] will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles.” The purpose was “that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth” (5-6). Unfortunately, the Servant will not be well received. Man will despise him; the nation will abhor him. He will be a servant of rulers; rulers will look upon him with the same disdain with which they look upon a servant who is far beneath them. But this will all change. The one despised will triumph. His victory will be so great that kings will have to admit that he is Jehovah’s Servant and Prophet; they will rise up and do him homage. Princes will recognize his greatness and bow before him in reverence. His victory is attributed to Jehovah’s power and faithfulness to his promises. This victory is seen in the coming of the Messiah.

Vv. 8-13 – Salvation and Succor

The Servant’s role included mediating God’s covenant with his people (8, cf. 42:6). He would also play a role in raising up the land, as well as proclaiming deliverance to the oppressed (9). To raise up the land is to extend it as far as possible, which would be “from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Psa. 72:8; Zech. 9:10) (8). He would also proclaim deliverance to the sinful and the oppressed. Like sheep, they would find ample pastureland and would not suffer from hunger, thirst, or heat. He would lead them and guide them in their steps. They would be gathered from everywhere in all directions (9-12).

Such blessings called for heaven and earth to rejoice and the mountains to break forth into singing. Jehovah had comforted his people (40:1) and had compassion upon his afflicted (13).

Vv. 14-21 – Zion’s Complaint and Amazement

Isaiah anticipated Zion’s complaints (14). Seventy years of exile had taken their toll, and the people struggled to believe that God cared about them anymore. They felt as abandoned and forgotten as they had on the day that Jerusalem fell (Lam. 5:22). God answered their complaint with rhetorical questions – the answers were evident. A nursing mother cannot forget her baby or fail to have compassion on her child. This applied to God’s care for his people. All the nursing mothers of Israel would forget their nursing child before God would forsake his people (15). Further, Jehovah had inscribed his people on his palms and constantly viewed their city walls (16).

Finally, Isaiah challenges the nation to look around it and see the day of salvation coming. Its children would return from everywhere and become its ornaments. Its enemies would be far away, and the nation would be astounded at the number of children (*i.e.*, citizens) it had in spite of its days of exile and affliction.

Vv. 22-26 – Jehovah’s Assurance to Zion

It is Jehovah himself who shall orchestrate Israel’s day of salvation (22). He would raise the standard to signal the procession home. Moreover, the day would come when foreign royalty would bow to Israel (23). The language is reminiscent of 2:1-4 the spoke of the nations flowing to Jerusalem to learn God’s ways in the last days.

God would defeat Israel’s oppressors even as he saved his own. In that day the entire world would know who reigned as God – the Savior, the Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob (24-26).

CHAPTER FIFTY

THE SERVANT AS A SUFFERING PROPEHT – A SOLILOQUY

In ch. 42 Isaiah contrasted God's ideal servant (42:1-9) with his currently wayward servant (42:18-20). He now rebukes God's people for their sins, and then introduces God's servant who describes his ministry in his own words.

VV. 1-3 – Rebuke to the Exiles for Thinking Themselves Rejected

Isaiah places the blame for the captivity squarely upon Israel, likening the exile to God's writing Israel a certificate of divorce for the unfaithfulness he had found in her (see Deut. 24:1-4). He is answering the charge of 49:14 by challenging them to produce a writing of divorcement that would establish their charge.¹ Neither has he sold her to clear debts. Such a thought is preposterous because it assumes that God has creditors to whom he owes a debt (1). God was more than able to save, but when he called no one responded. His hand was not shortened and his power was not diminished so that he could not save. He is almighty and can by one word dry up the sea and make the rivers a wilderness that stinks with dead fish. Therefore, God can annihilate the girdle of waters behind which Babylon fancies herself concealed (see Isa. 42:15; 44:27), and cover the empire, which is now enslaving and torturing Israel, with a sunless and starless night of destruction (Isa. 13:10). It follows from all this, that He has come with a gospel of deliverance from sin and punishment; but Israel has given no answer, has not received this message of salvation with faith, since faith is assent to the word of God (2-3).

1. It was different with the Northern Kingdom. It was destroyed (Amos 9:8), caused to cease (Hos. 1:4), given a bill of divorcement by Jehovah (Jer. 3:14). Therefore, the 10 Northern Tribes could never be taken back as Jehovah's wife, but from among them he could and would receive individuals (Jer. 3:8) after the disappearance of the ark of the covenant from the temple (Jer. 3:16), and Jerusalem would be called "the throne of Jehovah" (Jer. 3:17). By contrast, a bill of divorcement was never given to Judah.

Vv. 4-9 – The Servant’s Soliloquy

The servant now speaks for himself. He emphasizes three things: 1) his strength; 2) his suffering; and 3) his challenge.

He describes his strength in vv. 4-5. He had the tongue and ear of a disciple. He listened to the Lord, his master, who instructed him on what to say in every instance, especially to those who were weary. This included all people – The Jews were weary from being laden with sin; the Gentiles were weary from being laden with idolatry with its accompanying evils. He followed the Lord’s instruction with faithful obedience (see John 8:28; Psa. 40:8; Heb. 10:7, 9).

He describes his suffering in vv. 6-7. He was humiliated for God’s cause – beaten, mocked, spat upon. Even so, he remained steadfast to God’s will (*set his face like a flint*) because he knew the Lord would sustain him and ultimately vindicate him.

He describes his challenge in vv. 8-9. As he reflected on God’s protection and vindication, he found himself able to stand strong. Who could accuse him or bring charges against him? No not one. God was on his side. Paul uses similar language when he described the first standing of faithful children of God (see Rom. 8:31-39, esp. 33-34).

Vv. 10-11 – Light for Believers, Sorrow for Unbelievers

Two groups are now examined: 1) those who fear Jehovah and 2) those who “kindle a fire” (those who fear not Jehovah and walk in their own way). Those who trusted in Jehovah would find deliverance and help for every need. Light will shine in upon them, and their doubts will be resolved, and sufficient light will be granted them to direct their paths. Those who walked in their own way would find that the road lead to destruction. The persons intended are like those whose “tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity” (Jas. 3:6), and who by means of it are employed in “stirring up strife all the day long.” They are condemned to be scorched by the fire that they have themselves kindled, to be made wretched by the strife that they have themselves caused to spring up.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR PROSTRATE ZION (1)

Vv. 1-8 – Hearken! An Exhortation to the Faithful

This chapter begins with a look to the past, a look to the present, and a look to the future. The Lord has done great things in the past and will do great things for his people in the future, so they can trust him for the present.

Those who wanted to follow after righteousness could find solace from the past. Isaiah reminds them of their parents, Abraham and Sarah, and how from one they became many. God's hand was upon them from the beginning and he would not desert them now (vv. 1-3).

To establish that God would not leave them in the present, Isaiah described a future of blessings from God. Justice would come for all nations (4-5). Look to that which seems to you most stable and most certain to endure—the vast firmament of the heavens, and the solid earth beneath it, of which God “bears up the pillars” (Ps. 75:3). Both these, and man too, are in their nature perishable, and will (or may) vanish away and cease to be. But God, and his power to save, and his eternal law of right, can never pass away, but must endure for evermore. Let Israel be sure that the righteous purposes of God with respect to their own deliverance from Babylon, and to the conversion of the Gentiles, stand firm, and that they will most certainly be accomplished (6). Prophetic words such as these emphasize once more that God's desire to bring in the Gentiles was not exclusively a New Testament concept.

Isaiah does not here address those who “seek” righteousness, but those who “know” righteousness have the law of God in their hearts, and who fear not man or his

revilings. Their enemies' plans would come to nothing, but God's salvation and righteousness would last (7-8).

Surely we can learn from this teaching. How can we feel deserted or despondent in the present in light of what God has done for us in the past and what he has promised in the future for the faithful?