



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

# **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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## **The Servant of God**

Isaiah 49:1-6, "Listen, O coastlands, to Me,  
And take heed, you peoples from afar!  
The LORD has called Me from the womb;  
From the matrix of My mother He has made mention of My name.  
2 And He has made My mouth like a sharp sword;  
In the shadow of His hand He has hidden Me,  
And made Me a polished shaft;  
In His quiver He has hidden Me."  
3 "And He said to me,

- 'You are My servant, O Israel,  
In whom I will be glorified.'
- 4 Then I said, 'I have labored in vain,  
I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain;  
Yet surely my just reward is with the LORD,  
And my work with my God.' "
- 5 "And now the LORD says,  
Who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant,  
To bring Jacob back to Him,  
So that Israel is gathered to Him  
(For I shall be glorious in the eyes of the LORD,  
And My God shall be My strength),
- 6 Indeed He says,  
'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant  
To raise up the tribes of Jacob,  
And to restore the preserved ones of Israel;  
I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles,  
That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.' "

One of the most comforting truths of Scripture is that God's will is coming to pass in and through all things. It truly is unthwartable (Psalm 115:3). As such, what we might consider to be a set-back obviously is not. The means as well as the end are according to the will of God.

We see this throughout God's word. Think of Joseph who spent years in slavery and then in prison. How many times must he have wondered, "*God, what are you doing?*" And yet by the end he could say this speaking to his brother's sinful actions of selling him into slavery:

Genesis 50:20, "And as for you, you meant evil against me, *but* God meant it [his entire ordeal] for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."

Then there is Paul who at one point in his life asked God to remove his "thorn in the flesh." God's answer was to affirm that the means as well as the end were part of God's plan. Habakkuk learned this (Habakkuk 3:16-19). Asaph affirmed it in Psalm 73. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said it (Daniel 3:17).

And so it was in God's work and will for the people of God during Isaiah's day. When we consider the nations of Israel and Judah, both of which went into exile in 722 BC and 586 BC respectively, it is hard not to be confused and wonder what God was doing at the time. If you were a child of God at the time, you'd think it was a huge set back! The nation was destroyed. The temple was ruined. The line of David was up for grabs. Yet at no time during the tumultuous era of the seventh and sixth centuries BC was God's plan not going forward, nor was God's will for the individual child of God not being carried out!

This is very clear in Isaiah 49. God's people are now in exile, suffering at the hands of the Babylonians and wondering what happened to God's will for His people. Yet the theme of Isaiah 40-55 emphasizes the sovereign and all-wise control of the Lord who rules in and through all things. There was no mistake; God's people were where God wanted them.

Isaiah 40:12-17, "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and marked off the heavens by the span, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance, and the hills in a pair of scales? Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and *who* gave Him understanding? And *who* taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge, and informed Him of the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. Even Lebanon is not enough to burn, nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before Him, they are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless."

With this in mind, we are going to take up one of the major themes of Isaiah 40-55- in fact it is the primary theme: The Servant of God! God was not asleep when Judah went into exile. Out of the dust and ashes of the ruined nation came the hope of a Servant who would shepherd God's people!

First, I want to look at the redemptive background of Isaiah 49. At the creation, God had a plan to rule over this world with Adam, Eve and their children. Genesis 1, 2 utilizes Kingdom language with the implication that God's original intention was to co-reign and co-rule with man over the kingdom of the world. Yet with the rebellion of Adam, the fall (Genesis 3) we not only lost our right to co-rule with God, but we now were subject to death. As such, God began a work of redemption and the restoration of man which is the focus and detail of Genesis 4 to Revelation 22. Notice the first gospel where God speaks to Satan.

Genesis 3:15, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He [Christ] shall bruise you on the head [a mortal wound], and you [Satan] shall bruise him on the heel [a flesh wound]."

This speaks of a Savior who would redeem God's people from their sin; and that Savior we know is Jesus, the Messiah! The rest of Scripture details His story!

Now years later, in the redeeming work of God, the Lord entered into a relationship with one man, Abraham (Genesis 12). Through the principle of "addition through subtraction," God limited the salvation of Genesis 3:15 to this family that in time the world might be saved. Listen to the promises God gave to Abraham.

- Abraham and his children would become a great nation, Genesis 12:2a.
- Accordingly, it not only was the adult that was special to God, but also their children,

Genesis 17:7.

- As God's people, they would be blessed and so protected by God, Genesis 12:2b-3a.
- Someday the fallen world/creation once again would be redeemed and restored to the people of God as their possession, Genesis 17:8.
- God's people were to be a servant of the Lord by which the blessing of Gen. 3:15 might come to the nations, Genesis 12:3b.

It is important to note that God's people continued to enjoy an unconditional relationship with God which the Lord deigned to uphold all by Himself. In other words, the redemption of Christ was/is unilateral and unconditional.

As glorious as this is, we're only at Genesis 12-17 in the outworking of God's redemptive plan!! Much more would be given to explain and educate God's people as to the nature, purpose, and function of their relationship with God (the rest of the Bible). However it is important to note that 400 years after Abraham, God organized His people into a nation/political kingdom which contained an element of conditionality to it: if as a political entity God's people proved faithful to God, their nation would remain. But if as a political entity they rebelled against God, their nation would be destroyed.

Leviticus 26:14-17, "But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, I, in turn, will do this to you: I will appoint over you a sudden terror, consumption and fever that shall waste away the eyes and cause the soul to pine away; also, you shall sow your seed uselessly, for your enemies shall eat it up. And I will set My face against you so that you shall be struck down before your enemies; and those who hate you shall rule over you, and you shall flee when no one is pursuing you."

We must understand that this passage (and the many like it) did not apply to the individual members of the people of God, but only God's people as a nation, a body politic. Individually they stood before God on the basis of the work of the Messiah (Genesis 3:15). Corporately as a body-politic they stood before God on the basis of their national obedience.

This begs the question, what happened?

In time, as a nation, they lived in folly, unbelief, and blindness and indulged in all manner of sin and rebellion! As such, they violated the national covenant and in time forfeited their sovereignty as a nation, which is the background of Isaiah 49.

Isaiah 40-55 was written to the people of God in exile because of their national rebellion. Yet and again, on account of the Abrahamic Covenant, they remained the people of God which means they continued to enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of a saving relationship with God, part of which was being A SERVANT TO THE NATIONS! In Isaiah 43, Isaiah speaking to the people of God about their calling says:

Isaiah 43:10, 12, "You are My... servant whom I have chosen, in order that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me... It is I who have declared and saved and proclaimed, and there was no strange *god* among you; so you are My witnesses,' declares the Lord, 'And I am God.'"

Do you see it? The exile wasn't a set-back. The nation was destroyed, yes! But the redemptive work of God continued with the God making His people a blessing to the world!

Isaiah 44:1-2, 8, "But now listen, O Jacob, My servant; and Israel, whom I have chosen: thus says the Lord who made you and formed you from the womb, who will help you, 'Do not fear, O Jacob My servant; and you Jeshurun whom I have chosen... Do not tremble and do not be afraid; have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any *other* Rock? I know of none.'"

Isaiah 45:4, 6, "For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen *one*, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor... that men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other."

Do you see? The eternal promise which God intended to make His people a blessing wasn't hindered or sidetracked because of the exile; God's purpose and will continued to be carried out in full! If anything, it was furthered for now God's people were dispersed abroad into many lands and so better able to be a blessing!

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7a, "Now these are the words of the letter which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon... 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, "Build houses and live *in them*; and plant gardens, and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf...'"

God's people remained the servant of the Lord called by God to be a blessing! Yet just as they failed as a nation to uphold the national covenant, so also they would fail as the servant of God. In fact, it is this theme that is most prominent in Isaiah 40-55. Notice, when Isaiah first introduced the nomenclature of "the servant of God," he linked the designation with God's people, Israel.

Isaiah 41:8, "But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of

Abraham My friend..."

Yet Israel as "the servant of God" would prove unfaithful as they dived headlong into sin. They did not see the sovereignty of God and the Lord's hand in and through all things. As such, they became a servant of fear, distrust, and worry.

Isaiah 42:18-20 (cf. vv. 18-25), "Hear, you deaf! And look, you blind, that you may see. Who is blind but My servant, or so deaf as My messenger whom I send? Who is so blind as he that is at peace *with* Me, or so blind as the servant of the Lord? You have seen many things, but you do not observe *them*; *your* ears are open, but none hears... [notice the result, v. 22...] But this is a people plundered and despoiled; all of them are trapped in caves, or are hidden away in prisons; they have become a prey with none to deliver *them*, and a spoil, with none to say, 'Give *them* back!'"

So, God would raise up another servant, "THE Servant of God," who not only would serve God perfectly, but also serve as a pattern/type for all who have been called as a servant.

Isaiah 49:3, "And He said to Me, 'You are My Servant, Israel...'"

If you take this passage by itself, the identification of this "Servant," who clearly is the Messiah (Isaiah 49:6-7, - as "Israel" is confusing. But if you step back from this passage and consider the context and flow of this section (Isaiah 40-55), it is recognized that the nomenclature indicates that this "Servant" was intended by God to replace Israel and serve as God intended Israel to be! Alec Motyer explains it this way:

God] has discerned that the nation-servant is unfit (42:18–25) indeed, so unfit that it can no longer claim the name (48:1–2). So, must the Lord admit defeat? No, he has prepared a worthy Israel! The Servant divinely shaped for the task and, as we shall soon discover (49:14–50:11), the only one worthy of the name. (Motyer, 1993, p. 360)

J. Oswalt further explains:

...it is important to note that the term *Israel* is used not so much as a name as it is a parallel term to *servant*. It is as though the Lord had said, 'You are my Israel, in whom I will be glorified.' Thus it is the function, not the identity, of Israel that is emphasized. This Servant is going to function as Israel. (Oswalt, 1986, p. 291)

And E. J. Young put it this way:

It is not merely a reference to the nation's ancestor, Jacob, nor necessarily to a second Israel... The emphasis rather is upon Israel as Israel should be. (Young, 1965, p. 270)

Now, having established that Christ is THE Servant of God, the Israel as God intended His people to be, in Isaiah 51-55 Isaiah exhorts God's people to follow the pattern of the Messiah and so

the service He laid down on behalf of God. In other words, in Christ's service we discover what our service must be! Accordingly in Isaiah 49, we have not only a description of the work of Christ, but also the pattern/rule for all Kingdom service! With that, consider with me the call of Christ and so the call of all would-be servants of God.

## Christ's Calling

This calling was intended for all peoples.

Isaiah 49:1, "Listen to Me, O island, and pay attention, you peoples from afar."

This is a surprising beginning to this description of The Servant of God. For we would expect that this Servant would come to deliver the household of God who were dispersed, in exile, in Babylon, notice those to whom this passage is written.

Isaiah 49:1, "Listen to Me, O islands."

From the perspective of those listening to this sermon, "islands" would not only have referenced the multiple islands of the Mediterranean, but also the Coastlands, all of which at the time were GENTILE nations!

Isaiah 49:1, "and pay attention, you peoples from afar."

This latter phrase modifies "islands" such that the Servant here is speaking not only to those identified as the people of God, but also to those Gentile peoples and lands far, far away. From this we see that the ministry of the Servant of God was- in keeping with the Abrahamic covenant- intended for ALL peoples, not just those of a Jewish heritage!

Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

When it comes to the dissemination of the Good News the passion must involve those not only of the household of faith (Jews), but also those far off (the Greek).

Matthew 28:18-20, "And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations [people groups]...'"

In fact we see in our text as well:

Isaiah 49:6b-7, "And now says the Lord, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, in order that Israel might be gathered to Him (for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and My God is My strength), He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the

preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Notice another passage describing the call of this Servant.

Isaiah 42:6-7, “I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, and those who dwell in darkness from the prison.”

Truly, the scope of Christ’s ministry as the Servant of God would be ALL Peoples, not just the ethnic Jew, the ceremonially clean, or translated to our culture: the likeable, the easy, the good looking, or the friendly. NO! Christ calls ALL men to submission, obedience, and so the service of the Lord! That is the Savior who you love... and that is the call to which you have been set apart in redemption!

## **Bibliography**

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## **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on October 21, 2012. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.