

Pay attention to *who is speaking* in our text tonight!

There are three speakers in the dialogue: the LORD, the Servant, and Zion.
There are also two listeners: the coastlands and Israel.
But the whole of chapters 49-50 are related to us by the Servant.
He is the lead voice throughout these two chapters.
And we need to keep this straight as we hear this passage.

So hear the Word of the Lord from Isaiah 49-50.

(READ)

In Isaiah 41-48 we were introduced to Israel, my servant.

We saw that the nation of Israel as a whole is the Servant of the Lord
who is to bring the judgment of God upon the nations,
resulting in the salvation of God’s people and the destruction of the wicked.
The problem, though, is that the Servant is blind and deaf.
Israel does not hear what God is saying,
Jacob does not see what God is doing.
Therefore, God’s peace cannot come to Israel or the nations.

Israel, my servant – has failed.

Also, Isaiah 41 began with the words, “hear O coastlands” –
listen you nations to what God is doing.

Now once again, here in 49:1, God calls the coastlands to listen up.

There is a certain parallelism between chapters 44-48 and chapters 49-53.
Cyrus is the agent of liberation from Babylon,
but the Servant is the agent of the great redemption
which the return from exile points to.

While chapters 41-48 identify the Servant as Israel,
chapters 49-55 contrast the servant with Israel,
while still calling the Servant “Israel”!

This contrast between Israel and the Servant is seen here in chapters 49-50.

This section opens “Listen to me, O coastlands”–the same words as 41:1,
but whereas in chapter 41 it was God speaking,
now it is the Servant speaking.

The Servant is now the prophetic herald calling the nations to hear what God is saying.
After introducing himself in verses 1-4
the Servant’s message begins with three “thus says the Lord” (49:5, 7, 8)

and Zion's response: "but Zion said" (49:14-21)
followed with three more "thus says the Lord" (49:22, 25, 50:1),
concluding with the Servant's confession of and exhortation to faith (4-11)

As we've been seeing in chapters 41-48, the Servant needed to be redeemed.

But at the end of chapter 48, we discover that the redemption of the servant from Babylon
does not solve the problem.

The redemption from Babylon has no more power to change the people of God
than the redemption from Egypt did.

And so Yahweh, the Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel says,
"Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments!

Then your peace would have been like a river,
and your righteousness like the waves of the sea..."

But because the Servant is still blind and deaf,
"There is no peace for the wicked."

But now the Servant speaks.

1. Three Messages to My Servant (49:1-12)

*Listen to me, O coastlands,
and give attention, you peoples from afar.*

First the Servant relates his call.

He calls all the distant peoples to hear – to pay attention! –
because this message is not just for Israel.

And so the Servant declares:

*The LORD called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.*

This is what God had said of Israel, his servant, in 44:2.

"Thus says the LORD who made you,
who formed you from the womb and will help you."

The call of God's servant comes from the womb of his mother!

(think also back to Isaiah 7 – the "virgin shall conceive and bear a son...")

But also,

² *He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me away.*

This is what God had said of Israel in 41:15,
that Israel would be his instrument in judging the nations.

And in case that was not clear enough,

³ *And he said to me, “You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”^[a]*

So the Servant *is* Israel!

And Servant Israel recapitulates all that has been said of him in Isaiah 41-48,
including the problems!

(v4)

⁴ *But I said, “I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the LORD,
and my recompense with my God.”*

Servant Israel has failed to produce righteousness and does not have peace.

Yet still, Servant Israel’s hope is in the LORD.

But now (v5).

There they are again—those two most precious words in scripture.

(Yes, your translation may say “and now” but in Hebrew

the waw can mean either “and” or “but”--

and here the meaning plainly contrasts with the lament of verse 4)

a. Called: “A Light for the Nations” (v5-6)

⁵ *And now the LORD says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—*

But now the LORD says—but before saying what the LORD says,

the servant reminds us of his relationship to the LORD:

the LORD is the one who formed me from the womb to be his servant,

to bring Jacob back to him;

and that Israel might be gathered to him—

for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,

and my God has become my strength—

Wait!

The Servant is Israel—but he has been called and formed as the servant

To bring Jacob back!

That Israel might be gathered!

There is a contrast here between the Servant and Israel.

The Servant *is* Israel.

That has already been affirmed in verse 3.
But the Servant is also the one who restores Israel.

In other words, the Servant is the personification of Israel.
Israel will be embodied in the Servant.
In the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
the people of God found expression in the one man.
The covenant promise existed in one man.
So this is not something that is unimaginable to an Israelite.

And even more, this is not the message of the “but now”!
You might think that the message of an individual who will take on the persona of Israel,
who will restore Israel to be the true Servant of the LORD
who brings judgment to the nations—
You might think that this was worthy of a “but now”!
But that’s not the point here!
The message of the But NOW is found in verse 6.
Raising up the tribes of Jacob,
restoring the preserved of Israel,
is too light a thing.
That is too small a thing for my Servant.
My Servant has a bigger task.

⁶ *he says:*
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

I told Abraham that in his Seed, all the nations of the earth would be blessed!
That is what I am now doing!

This “but now” is the foundational message of the entire section of Isaiah 49-55.
The rest of the section is rooted in this “but now.”
Yes, the Servant *will* redeem Jacob,
but now he will also redeem the nations.

b. Chosen: “The Holy One of Israel Has Chosen You” (v7)

The LORD has a second message in verse 7.

⁷ *Thus says the LORD,*
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,

*to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation,
the servant of rulers:*

This is the first intimation that the Servant must suffer –
he will be abhorred – not by the Gentiles – but by *the nation* (singular).
He will be despised and abhorred *by Israel*.

But his message to his servant is that
*“Kings shall see and arise;
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”*

God’s chosen one will be afflicted –
but he will pass through those afflictions to eternal glory!
One day, every knee will bow to the Servant—every tongue will confess that he is Lord.

And so the LORD has a third message to his servant in verses 8-12:

c. Answered: “A Covenant to the People” (v8-12)

⁸ *Thus says the LORD:*

*“In a time of favor I have answered you;
in a day of salvation I have helped you;
I will keep you and give you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages,*

God declares that he is the one who answers and helps his Servant.

(Think of how Jesus called upon the Father throughout the gospels)

I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people,
(echoing the language of 42:6).

The Servant is the one who will bring Israel back from Exile.

Now wait a minute.

Didn’t we hear that this was what Cyrus would do?!

God said in chapters 44-46 that Cyrus would restore the people from Exile.

But don’t forget chapters 47-48.

The restoration from Exile in Babylon won’t work.

The Servant is still blind and deaf!

They are back in the land, but they still do not understand God’s purposes.

So when Isaiah says that the Servant will bring Israel back from Exile,

he is not talking about “Babylon”--

he is talking about the one who will bring Israel back

from their spiritual exile—from their rebellion against God.

For Isaiah, Babylon is a picture of the spiritual condition of Israel.
And while chapters 41-48 do refer to the restoration from historical Babylon,
chapters 49-55 refer to the restoration from the real Babylon—
the city of Man (which Isaiah spoke so forcefully about in chs 24-25).

I've been watching the Marvel Cinematic Universe unfold –
and it tells the story of Babylon well.
There is a never-ending supply of arch-villains –
Nebuchadnezzars, Neros, Hydras, Dreykofs –
and a bevy of flawed super-heroes.

The super-heroes are the good guys – mostly.
In that way they are like Cyrus –
they are powerful forces for good – mostly.

The only problem is that they are just as flawed as the rest of us.

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe,
there is no salvation.
There is no day when they can say:

*⁹ saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,'
to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.'
They shall feed along the ways;
on all bare heights shall be their pasture;
¹⁰ they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.
¹¹ And I will make all my mountains a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.*

No more hunger.
No more thirst.
No scorching wind – nor sun shall strike them.

As another heat-wave hits the west –
as another Covid variant spreads around the world –
we realize that we are running on a treadmill.

It's easy to think that nothing will ever change!
There's just an ever-changing cast of characters.
The old Avengers die off – and a new crop arise...

Same story.

Different characters.

(Or at least, a different actor playing the same character!)

But Isaiah tells us – hundreds of years *before* Jesus came –

that the Servant of the LORD is called – and chosen – and answered.

And because God has called and chose and answered his Servant –

therefore the Servant – our Lord Jesus Christ – has rescued *us*.

And when God does this – (v12):

¹² *Behold, these shall come from afar,
and behold, these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.”*

The nations will come to Zion!

This message of deliverance should cause the heavens and earth to shout for joy,
because God has comforted his people.

He has promised deliverance!

2. Three Messages to Bereaved Zion (49:13-50:3)

¹³ *Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!*

*For the LORD has comforted his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted.*

But Zion does not see.

Zion cannot hear.

Remember – when Isaiah says all this – Jerusalem was a beaten-down, backwater little city.

Zion has PTSD.

When she hears the message of salvation – that God will do this –

Zion cannot see it.

The trauma is so great – the misery and affliction is so deep –
that all Zion can say is

¹⁴ *But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me;
my Lord has forgotten me.”*

Do not despise Zion!

Certainly our God does not!

As verse 13 says, “the LORD will have compassion on his afflicted!”

And so the LORD declares:

¹⁵ *“Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.*

Can a woman forget her nursing child?
I know from personal experience that trying to get a nursing mother
away from her child for an *evening* is a challenge.
Getting her to forget the child?
Forget it.
But Yahweh says that it is far more likely for a nursing mother to forget her child,
than for him to forget Zion.

The LORD does not forget you!

¹⁶ *Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.*
¹⁷ *Your builders make haste;^[d]
your destroyers and those who laid you waste go out from you.*
¹⁸ *Lift up your eyes around and see;
they all gather, they come to you.*
*As I live, declares the LORD,
you shall put them all on as an ornament;
you shall bind them on as a bride does.*

Zion is engraved on the palms of his hands,
he cannot forget her walls.
And God promises that the nations will become ornamentation for his bride!

And when God does this:

¹⁹ *“Surely your waste and your desolate places
and your devastated land—
surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants,
and those who swallowed you up will be far away.*
²⁰ *The children of your bereavement
will yet say in your ears:
‘The place is too narrow for me;
make room for me to dwell in.’*
²¹ *Then you will say in your heart:
‘Who has borne me these?
I was bereaved and barren,*

*exiled and put away,
but who has brought up these?
Behold, I was left alone;
from where have these come?'"*

Her children were scattered to the ends of the earth.
But the day is coming when Zion will be filled with inhabitants.
Zion will overflow because there will not be enough room to hold her children!

How shall this be?
God now speaks three messages to Zion, paralleling the three messages to the Servant.

a. The Nations Will Restore Your Children (v22-23)

²² *Thus says the Lord GOD:
"Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations,
and raise my signal to the peoples;
and they shall bring your sons in their arms,^[e]
and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.
²³ Kings shall be your foster fathers,
and their queens your nursing mothers.
With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you,
and lick the dust of your feet.
Then you will know that I am the LORD;
those who wait for me shall not be put to shame."*

First, thus says the Lord GOD,
The nations will bring your children home to you.
Kings shall be your foster fathers (v23), and their queens your nursing mothers.
The nations will bow down before you and serve you.
Again, this is not just about the Restoration from Babylon.
This is equally about the conversion of Constantine,
the conversion of the Germanic tribes in the middle ages,
and the conversion of a 900,000 member tribe a few decades ago.

We're not just talking about when Jesus comes back...
we're talking about what Jesus is doing *right now* to bring all nations to himself!
In the midst of the affliction and troubles of this age –
Jesus is bringing the nations to himself!

b. Oppressors Will Be Overthrown (v24-26)

²⁴ *Can the prey be taken from the mighty,
or the captives of a tyrant^[f] be rescued?*

²⁵ *For thus says the LORD:*

*“Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken,
and the prey of the tyrant be rescued,
for I will contend with those who contend with you,
and I will save your children.*

²⁶ *I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh,
and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine.
Then all flesh shall know
that I am the LORD your Savior,
and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”*

The second message is that the oppressors will be overthrown.

The Avengers often rescue captives.

And in the second message to Zion the LORD declares
“Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued,
for I will contend with those who contend with you,
and I will save your children.

I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh,
and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine.

Then all flesh shall know that I am Yahweh your Savior and your Redeemer,
the Mighty One of Jacob.”

God has a long history of overthrowing oppressors.

He is the avenger – the one who contends with those who contend with you!

So why does he take so long?

This is the point of the third message to Zion:

c. The LORD’s Hand Is Not Shortened (50:1-3)

⁵⁰ *Thus says the LORD:*

*“Where is your mother's certificate of divorce,
with which I sent her away?*

*Or which of my creditors is it
to whom I have sold you?*

*Behold, for your iniquities you were sold,
and for your transgressions your mother was sent away.*

The third message to Zion in 50:1-3 reminds her of the true situation.

Why did God divorce Jerusalem, the mother of his people?

Why did God sell his people, into slavery?

“Behold, for your iniquities you were sold,
and for your transgressions your mother was sent away.”

The reason why we are in this mess is because of humanity’s sin!

Our first parents, being left to the freedom of their own will,
fell from the estate wherein they were created
by sinning against God.
We got ourselves into this mess.

The problem is that we are not able to get out of it!

Which is why God asks:

² *Why, when I came, was there no man;
why, when I called, was there no one to answer?*

If Israel is my Servant, the one who is to redeem the nations,
why did no one answer when I called?
why did no one spring to my side when I came?

These first two pairs of questions are not so comforting.
But the final two questions bring us to the point:

*Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem?
Or have I no power to deliver?
Behold, by my rebuke I dry up the sea,
I make the rivers a desert;
their fish stink for lack of water
and die of thirst.
³ I clothe the heavens with blackness
and make sackcloth their covering.”*

Remember who I am, O Zion.
When you are tempted to think that I have forgotten you,
remember who I am!
“Behold...”

Zion is just like all the cities of the world –
and truly, the church looks so much like the nations!

If the Servant was simply *Israel* – then we are doomed!

3. The Servant’s Message to Zion (50:4-11)

Okay –
We have heard God’s three messages to the Servant.
We have heard Zion’s complaint.
We have heard God’s three messages to Zion.

Now (v4) the Servant speaks again,
confessing his faith and calling Israel to hear and fear the Lord.

a. The Suffering Servant Sustains the Weary (v4-6)

⁴ *The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.*

“Come, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest!”
Surely, our Lord Jesus knows how to sustain with a word
the one who is weary!

*Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.*
⁵ *The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward.*

The Servant of the LORD will proclaim the Word of the Lord,
bringing life and sustenance to those who hear.
And why is the Servant able to speak such words?
Because “he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught.”
The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward.

Think of what Jesus says over and over in the gospel of John:
I speak only what I hear from my Father.
The Son does what he sees his Father doing.
Jesus is the Servant who sees what God is doing, who hears what God is saying.
In Jesus we have a Servant who is no longer blind and deaf!

And in Jesus we have a suffering Servant as well: (verse 6)

⁶ *I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting.*

But, as verses 7-9 point out – the Lord GOD vindicates his suffering servant!

b. The Lord GOD Vindicates His Suffering Servant (v7-9)

⁷ *But the Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;*

*therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.*

⁸ *He who vindicates me is near.*

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who is my adversary?

Let him come near to me.

⁹ *Behold, the Lord GOD helps me;*

who will declare me guilty?

Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;

the moth will eat them up.

The Servant knows that God will vindicate him because God is his helper.

This is the Servant's confession of faith.

God has given me a tongue to speak.

He has given me ears to hear.

He helps me and will vindicate me.

But then the Servant turns to you and asks:

c. So Fear the LORD and Obey the Voice of His Servant! (v10-11)

¹⁰ *Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the voice of his servant?*

*Let him who walks in darkness
and has no light*

*trust in the name of the LORD
and rely on his God.*

¹¹ *Behold, all you who kindle a fire,
who equip yourselves with burning torches!*

*Walk by the light of your fire,
and by the torches that you have kindled!*

*This you have from my hand:
you shall lie down in torment.*

Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant?

Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD
and rely on his God.

In order to understand this,

remember that Isaiah is speaking to an Israel that is headed for Exile.

Behold, all you who kindle a fire, who equip yourselves with burning torches!

Walk by the light of your fire, and by the torches that you have kindled!

This you have from my hand: you shall lie down in torment.

You are about to walk out into the darkness of this present age.
Where will you find your light?
Will you kindle your own torches?
Will you find your own path in the blackness before your feet?

The Servant has confessed his faith and confidence in Yahweh.
The LORD is my helper.
Who is your helper?
If you fear the LORD and obey the voice of His Servant Jesus,
then you must rely on God.
Notice that the Servant does not say that you will then walk in the light.
No, he says that you will walk in darkness (v10),
but that you can still trust the name of the LORD even in the darkness.
Don't worry about how well you can see.
That's not the point!
Those who kindle their own fire can see quite nicely!
But seeing by the light of this age will not save them from torment.

Isaiah's whole point is that Israel the Servant is blind and deaf.
Israel does not see what God is doing
Israel does not hear what God is saying.
Israel's only hope is for a Servant who is not blind and deaf.
For a Servant whose ear is open and whose eye sees.

Your hope is *not* that you will become seeing and hearing.
Your hope is that *Jesus* sees and hears.
Because if *Jesus* sees and hears, then he can teach those who are weary.
He can open the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf.

So don't try to light fires of your own.
Go to Jesus.
Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant?
Trust in the name of the LORD and rely on your God,
because he is the one who delivers you through Jesus Christ our Lord.