

The Servant's Mission In The World

Lesson Text: Isaiah 49:1-6 **Background Scripture:** Isaiah 49:1-6 **Devotional Reading:** 1 Peter 5:5

Isaiah 49:1–6

Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name. ² He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. ³ He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." ⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God." ⁵ And now the Lord says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength—⁶ he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

LESSON AIMS After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Describe the mission of God's servant in Isaiah 49.
2. Compare the mission of God's servant with the mission of the church.
3. Express his or her own personal mission statement in terms of this passage.

INTRODUCTION

After Saul of Tarsus was converted, a Jewish believer named Ananias was told to go to him with further instructions. He was told that Saul was a "*chosen vessel . . . to bear [Christ's] name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel*" (Acts 9:15). Before long, the Jews plotted to murder Saul, making it necessary for him to flee by night (vs. 23-25). As Saul soon discovered, his Jewish brethren were less than enthusiastic about his newfound faith in Christ.

A few years later, when Saul, now called Paul (Acts 13:9), embarked on his mission journeys, he failed to win many of his own countrymen to Christ. After Jews in Pisidia rejected the gospel, Paul declared, "*we now turn to the Gentiles*" (v. 46). Besides what he had been told at his conversion, Paul also had scriptural authority for this decision. "*For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth"*" (v. 47). Paul was quoting from Isaiah 49:6, part of this week's lesson text.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Today's passage in Isaiah 49, like chapters 45 and 48 from the two past weeks, is addressed to the Israelites after they have been beaten and bruised by the Babylonians. We remind ourselves, however, that the Babylonian captivity won't even begin until at least 95 years after Isaiah writes.

When that captivity occurs, the people are beaten down not only physically but psychologically, as the book of Lamentations makes clear (also Psalm 137). It was obvious to everyone that Babylon was the stronger nation. It dwarfed Judah numerically, militarily, and territorially. Up to

the point of today's lesson, God had assured the Israelites that He had not abandoned them, that He had not been defeated by Babylon's gods, and that He intended to restore them. In chapter 49, we hear partially from Israel's perspective and partially from God's perspective.

One challenge to understanding today's passage is that Isaiah 49 is one of four chapters containing the so-called "Servant Songs" of that book. (The other songs are in chapters 42, 52, and 53.) In the Servant Songs, the Servant himself has the task and mission "to bring Israel back" and "to gather" Israel unto himself (see vs. 5,6). Therefore, the Servant of the Lord cannot be totally equated with Israel in all respects. The terminology is all-inclusive of Israel; and yet, simultaneously, it is focused on the One representative of Israel in whom was embodied all of its hopes.

GOD'S SERVANT (Isaiah 49:1-4)

Without going into all of the reasons, most Christian scholars believe that the Servant in these chapters ultimately refers to Israel's Messiah, the Lord Jesus. Since the New Testament makes this connection (Luke 2:32), this is not just an attempt to read something into the Old Testament that is not already there. As might be expected, Jewish scholars do not agree with this interpretation.

1. What is the prevailing view among Christian scholars concerning the Servant?

That God called His Servant "*before I was born*" (Isa. 49:1) is reminiscent of both Jeremiah's prophetic call (Jer. 1:5) and Paul's apostolic call (Gal. 1:15). "But not only was this person divinely appointed before his birth to perform an unusually high task, he was also equipped with the requisite gifts to achieve his destined purpose" (Leupold).

Mention of the Servant being named from the womb also lends support to the view that the Servant is Christ. Although "Israel" was a divinely given name, it was not revealed until the third generation of Abraham's seed (Gen. 32:28; Gal. 3:8-16). In the case of Christ, however, the Angel Gabriel told Mary, "*You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.*" (Luke 1:31). Joseph was also told that the child's name would be Jesus (Matt. 1:21).

The "*islands*" (Isa. 49:1) refers to distant lands to which the Servant's message will be sent. We know that the Servant was to be a "*light to the Gentiles*" (v. 6).

2. What does the mention of being called "from the womb" suggest about the Servant (Isaiah 49:1)?

The servant's mouth is described "*like a sharpened sword*" (v. 2), a figure used elsewhere of Christ (Rev. 1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21). "The penetrating character of the Servant's message is likened to two sharp weapons" (Barker and Kohlenberger, eds., *The Bible Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Zondervan). "

The words which would come out of the mouth of the Messiah would be the instrument of his power, the words which would judge men and angels on the last day (John 12:48). That the Servant was hidden in the shadow of God's hand meant that God would protect and preserve

Him, though some have suggested that this meant that the Messiah would be hidden for a while and later revealed to the world.

The Servant is also depicted as *"a polished arrow"* (Isa. 49:2), that is, an arrow ready to be used to pierce the hearts of those who listen to Him. "Isaiah does not have in mind a war-making task for the Servant (the theme of chapters 56-66) but the warfare of the word. The sharpness of a sword is its effectiveness; a polished arrow is rubbed free from roughness or unevenness which might deflect its flight, hence its accuracy" (Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, InterVarsity).

"The ministry of the man in question apparently is calculated to wound men for their own good. His ministry to men may involve pain and suffering on their part" (Leupold).

3. How was the mouth of the Servant like "a sharpened sword" (v. 2)?

Since Israel is clearly identified as the Servant in Isaiah 49:3, some are quick to dismiss any view that sees this as anything other than a reference to the nation of Israel. To be sure, Israel was the servant nation of Yahweh. A study of how "Israel" is used throughout the Bible reveals that there are a number of different ways this name is employed (cf. Gen. 32:28; Exod. 1:1-4; Jer. 31:31; Hos. 8:14; Matt. 19:28; John 1:47; Rom. 9:6; 11:26; Gal. 6:16).

Verse three of today's lesson appears to follow smoothly from the previous one. However, the identity of the servant does seem to change here and in verse 4. The servant now seems to be identified as Israel.

The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 helps bring this into clearer focus. Christ "fulfilled the destiny that was assigned to the nation at large, to be the bearer of the message of divine truth to the nations, a task which Israel after the flesh executed but poorly" (Leupold).

Unlike the nation of Israel, which caused the name of the Lord to be profaned among the heathen (Ezek. 36:20-22), His Servant would cause God's name to be glorified (Isa. 49:3).

4. Since Israel is identified as the Servant in verses 3, how could this be applied to a person?

GOD'S STRENGTH AND COMMISSION (Isaiah 49:5)

Part of the Servant's ministry was to bring Jacob back to God. Since the Servant was Israel's Messiah, He had an important role to play regarding the nation's spiritual renewal. To be sure, there were Jews who followed Christ during His ministry and accepted the gospel when it was first preached (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:7). But for the most part, the Servant was rejected by Israel. That men reject the Lord does not thwart His eternal purposes.

Although *"despised and rejected of men"* (Isa. 53:3), the Servant would *"be honored in the eyes of the Lord"* (49:5). "He is, before the Lord, an honored person, in vocation, status, name and task" (Motyer).

Despite disappointing results from His labors, the Servant would find God to be His strength. What was true of the Servant must also be true of us. It is when we begin depending on our own strength, whether physical, financial, or intellectual, that failure is inevitable. *"Pride goes before*

destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." (Prov. 16:18). As Paul discovered with his *"thorn in the flesh"* (2 Cor. 12:7), God's grace is always sufficient (v. 9).

5. What was the Servant's "work" (v. 5)?

GOD'S SALVATION (Isaiah 49:6)

As mentioned in Isaiah 49:5, part of the Servant's mission was to bring Israel back to God. *"To restore up the tribes of Jacob"* (v. 6) meant to restore them. Remembering that the Israel of Isaiah's day had wandered away from the Lord is critical to understanding the relevance of this message to the people of his time.

The ultimate role of God's servant is not to restore Israel to the promised land. God's ultimate goal is to use His people Israel to be a blessing to all nations as God originally promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3). God restores Israel so Israel may be God's city on a hill, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5, 6). Israel loses sight of her mission throughout her long and trying history. When the Israelites are in the promised land, they want to be a nation like the nations. They want to have a king like the nations, a standing army like the nations, and a capital city with a religious shrine just like the nations (1 Samuel 8:5, 19, 20). "Becoming important" became Israel's obsession. When God calls His servant to restore Israel, God's goal is not to make Israel what Israel mistakenly tries to make herself. Rather, He calls Israel back to her original mission. He calls Israel to be apart from the nations in order to be a light to the nations.

So today's church should never think that her ultimate task is to gather weekly and conduct worship services. Rather, we gather weekly so God can shape us in such gatherings to continue His mission of shining the gospel light. Like ancient Israel, the church does not exist for her own sake, but for the sake of the world.

6. What was the ultimate role of God's servant (v. 6)?

What Do You Think?

In what ways might God's vision for our church be different from our own vision? Why is it important to ask this question?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Thinking locally versus thinking globally
- "Making disciples" versus "filling seats"

Besides the nation of Israel being a light to the world, Christ was the ultimate *"light of the world"* (John 8:12). As God's Servant, *"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."* (1 John 2:2). "He is not only to be the bearer of salvation, but in his own person is to be the Savior" (Leupold).

Even if we did not have this text telling us that the Servant's mission was to be a light to the whole world, there is ample evidence in the New Testament that the gospel was to be preached *"to the Jew first, and also to the Greek"* (Rom. 1:16). Each of the four Gospels has some form of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15,16; Luke 24:46-47; John 20:21). So as the Servant was to take *"salvation to the ends of the earth"* (Isa. 49:6), Christians are to be

"witnesses ... and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Since this divine directive has never been rescinded, we must ask, what am I doing to accomplish the Servant's mission in today's world?

7. How were both Israel and Christ the light to the Gentiles? How can we participate in the Servant's mission in our world?

CONCLUSION

For the World

It must have been great news to the Israelites that their time of punishment would draw to an end. After decades of suffering and humiliation, they received a new lease on life. But with that new lease on life came a reminder of a larger purpose. We may compare this with a 30-year-old person who has lived selfishly for most of life before coming to the Lord. When Jesus delivers him or her from self-centeredness and grants forgiveness, it is tempting for the person to focus almost exclusively on being grateful to Jesus. The person may even meet weekly with fellow believers to express gratitude for God's deliverance. But to do only this is too small a thing for God's people.

God does not set apart a people for himself merely to have them praise Him for setting them apart. He set us apart so we may join His mission of proclaiming His reign to the entire world (Matthew 28:19, 20). What God requires is for us to be His hands and feet on this earth, to grant a dying world a life-giving glimpse of His eternal reign. To neglect this task is to neglect our reason to be. The church, like ancient Israel, exists for the world.

PRAYER

Lord God, we thank You for giving us a mission that is bigger than ourselves. Help us be a people who live in such a way that the children of this world may catch a glimpse of the light of Your Son. We pray in His name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

It is too small a thing to be nothing more than recipients of God's salvation.