

"God's Agent for Salvation ... His Servant"  
Isaiah 49-50

Memory Verse:

"The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary." Isaiah 50:4 (NIV)

This week's lesson covers 2 of the 4 Servant Songs of Isaiah of Chapters 42-53.

- 1<sup>st</sup> Song – The Chosen Servant (42:1-4)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Song – The Mission of the Servant (49:1-6)
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Song – The Steadfast Obedient Servant (50:4-9)
- 4<sup>th</sup> Song – The Suffering Servant (52:12-53:13)

Overall Outline:

Chapter 49 –

- The Servant and His Mission (49:1-7)
- Liberation by Salvation (49:8-13)
- Three Things About God (49:14-26)

Chapter 50 –

- Exiled But Not Abandoned (50:1-3)
- A Steadfast Obedient Servant (50:4-8)
- Listening to God or Yourself (50:10,11)

The Gospel of God is the message of salvation intended for the whole world. This week Isaiah is telling the exiled Israelites about their liberation:

- Who is going to do it,
- How he's going to do it,
- And their choice in the matter.

Have you ever thought of yourself as living in exile or captivity? Maybe you are living in a land far from your birth and your family, such as my husband. Perhaps you are living in a lifestyle or standard that is vastly different from your parents and grandparents. Maybe your family and your life were drastically changed by hardship or tragedy? Are you feeling separated or disassociated from all you knew as a child? Do you struggle to teach your children or grandchildren of what life used to be like for you?

To clarify for the sake of our discussion, "captivity" is defined as the condition of being imprisoned, confined or enslaved. "Exile" is defined as living away from one's native country, whether it is enforced or self-imposed.

Exile and captivity can take many forms; it's not simply a question of location or a physical state. You may be living in an emotional or spiritual exile. Either way, this lesson is for you. God wants you to know and understand that you are not abandoned, and that He has provided a way for your restoration. However, only you can make the choice to remain in exile or to follow Him.

Let's pray ....

Chapter 49:1-7 is the second of Isaiah's Servant Songs. It addresses the mission in which God's calls his Servant from before his birth.

*"Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name. ... He said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.'" (49:1,3)*

In the royal terminology of the ancient Near East "servant" meant something like "trusted envoy" or "confidential representative." This prophetic commissioning narrative was not talking about a single person's experience with God. This testimony was meant to be Israel's witness. Israel, who at that time was pinning away in exile, complaining about her fate, was supposed to be presenting her credentials as God's royal representative to the far-off lands. She was supposed to be glorifying God and showing off his royal splendor to the nations. The called one of Israel complained that the task was too great and that God's power was too small. Imagine that? The exiles could only resign themselves to the world God created as a nation lost in defeat. God wanted more than that from them. He wanted action and for them to "Flee from the Babylonians" (48:20).

From last week's lesson and Chapter 48, God commands Israel to,

**"Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a should of joy, proclaim it" (48:20).**

There comes a moment when each one of us must decide. Will we settle down in the Babylon of this world, or venture out into the redemption of

Christ? As in the exodus out of Egypt, God is calling us to the adventure of faith.

However, God had a solution to send a servant, which was nothing new to God. He planned for this since before there was an Israel. **The servant of the Lord**, set apart from birth and uniquely equipped for his mission, is a prophet.

- He is the voice of God on earth, and he demands a hearing from the entire world.
- His word is a sharp sword.
- He himself is a polished arrow.
- He is a dread weapon in the hand of God.
- But he compels the attention of the world by God's improbable gospel strategies.
- Hidden until the time is right, he emerges in history to conquer, not by military might or cultural imperialism, but by the force of truth.

We know this is Jesus!

Now this is going to sound like a big riddle. God sought to use the servant to bring Jacob (or Israel) back to him. But how could servant Israel bring nation Israel back to him? God used the servant to turn Israel away from her sins. But if the servant was Israel, as in **vs. 3**, then the prophet has divided Israel into two groups – the servant and the sinner. Not all Israel was Israel, or the people of God. Israel by birth was not the Israel of God. Israel the servant had a mission to Israel the sinner. The commission as royal representative of God was not automatic for every Israelite. It came to those who were willing to quit complaining and to accept the assignment.

The astonishing element of the servant's commission remained to be revealed. The exile had not narrowed the scope of servant Israel's commission. Rather, it presented opportunity for widening that scope. What a shock when the prophet revealed what the new responsibilities meant! Israel was to be a light for the Gentiles. She was to get out of her mourning clothes, dress in royal regalia, and present herself as God's ambassador with full credentials at the foreign courts. Imagine that!

The desperate situation of God's people was no cause for complaint. It presented a chance to carry out a calling. God wanted to save the ends of

the earth. He commissioned Israel to be the servant who would carry out the commission.

It might seem like the impossible dream for an exiled people so despised to achieve the position described for servant Israel. But the Holy One was also the Redeemer, faithful to his promises and purposes. He had chosen Israel, and she could not fail.

The Israel of vs. 3 is the Messiah, the servant who embodies all that historic Israel should have been. He is the Israel in whom God will be glorified. It is clear that we can't make sense of the Old Testament without Christ. He is the one on whom all the lines converge. All the persons, events and institutions of the Old Testament, including the nation of Israel, find their truest meaning in Christ. The Old Testament points beyond itself, both because of the stories of human failure it tells, and also because the figures moving through the pages of the Old Testament were only meant to prepare for something greater. The incompleteness of the Old Testament demands resolution, or a breakthrough. On every page it cries out for Christ, so we shouldn't be surprised when the Old Testament uses the name of Israel for the Messiah. In fact, we should expect it because the whole Bible is all about Christ.

**Vs. 4** reveals something of the psychology of Messiah, Jesus Christ, the very center of God's purpose unfolding in history, struggled at times with feelings of failure. "I have labored in vain." Does that surprise us? It shouldn't. His earthly mission 2,000 years ago did not come across as one continual triumph. Unlike the human conquerors strutting across the stage of history, adored by the envious, Jesus was despised and rejected.

But unlike historic Israel, this true Israel did not turn away from God in cynical unbelief. In all his setbacks he trusted God: "Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God." Jesus saw the joy set before him, he clung to it by faith, and that faith preserved him in his arduous mission.

Far from failing to renew historic Israel, Christ has been given an even greater task. He is the divinely appointed Savior of the whole world.

Christ's strategy is not to overwhelm the arrogance of the world with even more formidable arrogance, like every other conqueror, but to empty himself and take the form of a servant. This is our godly example.

And this is Isaiah's point - Christ approaches us unlike a Cyrus, fuming with rage, cracking the whip, jerking our chain; but he approaches us as a servant (Matt 11:28-30). He is more than a servant, but not above servanthood. His meekness is so real that he can be misunderstood and "deeply despised", as Isaiah puts it. But God has resolved that even the great ones of this earth, kings and princes, will put their pride away to honor the servant of The Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:11). **This is the way of God – first humiliation, then vindication.**

Salvation:

The primary saving event in the Old Testament was the exodus from Egypt. Moses' calm answer called the Israelites to "stand firm and you will see the deliverance The Lord will bring you today" (Exodus 14:13). Similarly the period of the judges can be described as a time when the Israelites "were in great distress.. Then The Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders" (Judges 2:15-16). The same scenario occurs in the Psalms with individuals rather than with the nation. God brings salvation in his own way, not through human resources that would give people reason for pride (Job 40:14). Israel thus learns, "Do not say, I'll pay you back for this wrong! Wait for The Lord and he will deliver you" (Prov. 20:22).

Isaiah's goal for Israel was to see God as their salvation, to trust and not be afraid. The reality was that they forgot God their Savior. The book operates in this **tension between a people who have forgotten and a God who wants to be their salvation.** He points to the day when Israel will once again call to The Lord and once again "he will send them a savior and defender, and he will rescue them" (19:20).

- Why is salvation needed and why does it come?
- How does salvation come?
- What does salvation include?
- Who can be saved?
- When does salvation come?

Why is salvation needed?

- Not because of any shortcomings in God (59:1)
- Because "your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (59:2)
- Because God has a purpose: "All mankind will know that I, The Lord, am your Savior" (49:26)

### How does salvation come?

- "In repentance and rest is your salvation; in quietness and trust is your strength." (30:15)
- God gave the invitation to salvation, but to experience salvation, Israel had to trust him rather than seeking their own actions.

### What does salvation include?

- For Israel after judgment, salvation meant to see Jerusalem again and celebrate God's festivals there with God ruling as the Mighty One (33:21-22)
- God will establish peace and righteousness to replace violence (60:18, 62:1)

### Who can be saved?

- Isaiah stunned Israel here....
- Through Isaiah God issued a universal invitation: "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth" (45:22)

### When does salvation come?

- God promised Israel that "my salvation will not be delayed" (46:13); it is "on the way" (51:5)

With salvation the tension between the people and God would be resolved. The people would no longer forget their Savior; they would trust in him and experience his salvation from all sources of trouble. Then "Israel will be saved by The Lord with an everlasting salvation" (45:17).

The true worth of the servant of The Lord shines forth in his influence on people. They joyfully flock to him from around the world.

*"Behold, these shall come from afar,  
and behold, these from the north and from the west,  
and these from the land of Egypt (Syene)." (Isaiah 49:12)*

View this against the backdrop of Cyrus liberating the Jewish exiles in the 6th century B.C. That event fills Isaiah's mental landscape because his prophetic eye discerns in it how Jesus saves us today. Isaiah perceives in the historic liberation of God's people by Cyrus a model of a greater liberation by the servant of The Lord in this age of gospel fulfillment.

Think of what Christ is worth to us. He is "a covenant to the people" (49:8). In other words, he is himself the very embodiment of God's pledge of grace to us. He is how God pours out favor upon us and how we are bound to God

in return. From the beginning, God has given himself to us through covenants, which are formal agreements we can depend on (such as Genesis 15). God is not ad-libbing his way along. He has a plan. He is not casual in his dealings with us. He is a serious person who takes us seriously, but who also knows how weak our faith is. He knows we need the strong assurance that he has given himself to us by oath. This is the way of God. And now Isaiah shows us that **Christ is himself God's covenant with weak people who have failed to keep their end of the bargain.**

Isaiah's prophetic vision sweeps across the history of salvation. He sees God, through the covenant man Jesus Christ, restoring the ruins that sin has made of us. He sets us free from our self-imposed prisons. He leads us forward into a new way of life, caring for us moment by moment, providing for us fully, and overcoming the obstacles, getting us all the way home to his eternal presence (Rev 7:9-17).

And this liberation gathers not only the Jews of ancient Babylon, not just the isolated straggler along the way, but the masses of people from all over the world as history rushes toward the End. Can you see what Isaiah sees? God is doing something new and constructive and lasting in our messy human scene, and anyone can be a part of it. God is out to prove how kind he can be through Jesus Christ. And there is room there even for you ....

***But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me;  
my Lord has forgotten me." (49:14)***

What a letdown! The prophet has just told us that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. But then we look around at our problems and mumble, "No the Lord has forsaken me. He has forgotten me." The people of God, even as they're being carried in the everlasting arms toward Heaven, can be gloomy, sour, and impossible to please. How hard it is for some Christians to be happy!

How exasperating! What should be done to hearts impervious to such goodness? What does God do? He goes on and on, proving himself as no one less than God.

Isaiah argues this point by reminding us of **three things about God:**

- **The mindful Lord**
- **The triumphant Lord**
- **The powerful Lord**

As the mindful Lord, God has not forgotten us; it is we who forget him.

*"Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;  
Your walls are continually before me." (vs.16)*

God is addressing Zion. In Isaiah's culture, a city was thought of in the feminine gender. In our terms today, the images can relate to the church and her members. God is saying that he will never abandon his family. Never! His love is more mindful than even the love of a tenderly nursing mother.

The imagery of vs. 16 suggests a vision of God spreading out his hands before us, so that we can see our very names engraved there. Have we thought through how profoundly we're loved by God? If his assurances do not move us, what more are we holding out for? Isn't the love of God enough?

As the triumphant Lord, Isaiah is displaying the endless love of God to all who are slow to believe what the prophets have spoken (Luke 24:25).

The prestige given to the growing church of the latter days is the willing expression of spiritual indebtedness. As history draws closer to the return of Christ, gospel breakthroughs will accelerate. Middle walls of partition will break down, and new bonds of spiritual affection will bring former enemies together as one in Christ, filling the Mother Church with many happy children. Far from religious bondage, the gospel-driven triumph of the church is God himself putting an end to long-standing oppressions. The victory of Christ will be so glorious that all flesh will admit God has stepped into history with a mighty salvation.

Isaiah is heaping assurance upon assurance because when God's people are too demoralized to believe his promises of grace, they need more grace. That is when our God is the powerful Lord.

As we move into Chapter 50 and the third of the Servant Songs, God is challenging his exiled people to think (50:1,2). Israel is considered the bride, as the church is in the New Testament. The people feel abandoned. They had been disciplined - but not abandoned. So God says:

- "Okay, pull your mother's divorce certificate out of the file. What does it say?
- What are the charges there?
- Was it my failure as a husband that ruined the marriage, or was it your mother's?
- Is it really fair to me; is it even helpful to you, for you to keep blaming me for your captivity in Babylon?

What explains their exile is not the failure of God. When we are under God's discipline, we never have a reason to find fault with him.

God presses the point.

- In his many approaches to his people and his many offers of help, why was there no clear and glad answer from them?
- When his outstretched hand provided everything helpful, relevant, and encouraging, why was his hand not grasped?
- Is his hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or has he no power to deliver?

He is the powerful Lord. If we aren't experiencing that power, it isn't because of weakness or reluctance in him. God is both ready and willing to meet us with saving power, if only we'll stop hanging back in reluctance and fault-finding and step forward in eagerness of repentance and faith.

The faith God wants to find in us is childlike, uncomplicated by our calculating grudges against God. How could it be otherwise? Isaiah has shown us that we are mere children in God's family, loved beyond calculation. And if God is our Father, isn't the greatness of his love enough for our faith to become simple?

If Isaiah's vision of God is true, and it is, why do we cling to our resentments and anger? Isn't this a way of passing the buck and excusing our own passivity? Doesn't that reluctance bind us further to what we are? But God has given his servant Jesus Christ as a light for the nations and a covenant to the people. He loves you more than you love yourself. Can you let go of your self-pity and rest in his mighty arms?

Question:

Why do we have ears on the outside of our heads? Why not on the inside? It's because we're not supposed to listen to ourselves. We're supposed to listen to God. But do we truly understand what it means to listen to God?

Did you know that the words "listen" and "silent" contain the same letters? And you cannot listen unless you are silent. Some of us talk our way through life way too much.

God encounters us meaningfully through words - words that illuminate, words that last, words that clarify our confusion. **Malcolm Muggeridge in his book *Christ and the Media* said,**

"The Christian faith has come to us in words, not images; I find the passage in the first chapter of the Gospel of John - the Word becoming flesh, and dwelling among us full of grace and truth - one of the most beautiful and profound things ever written. If it had come to us in images instead of words, it would not have lived as it has."

If God's way of getting through to us is the word, then we need to learn what it means to listen. The third of Isaiah's four Servant Songs is about listening. The nation of Israel had a hearing problem, and it was their undoing. But the servant of The Lord was a good listener. He had an ear constantly open to God.

The one who fears The Lord also listens obediently to the servant. All who seek righteousness are good listeners. Dr. Isaiah is calling us in for a hearing check. He wants us to retune our ears so we can hear the word of God again. That alone is how we escape our fantasies and enter into reality with God. Everything pivots on how bravely we're willing to listen to the servant.

For this lesson, Isaiah shows us the sustaining ministry of the servant of The Lord. He describes the servant as a suffering scholar defended by God with four characteristics:

- The learned servant (vs. 4)
- The suffering servant (vs. 5,6)
- The confident servant (vs. 7,8)
- The vindicated servant (vs. 9)

What does "the Lord God" do with all his power? He sends us encouragement through his servant? Sovereign love is the true motive behind the whole drama of redemption.

Isaiah presents Messiah to us as a well-taught disciple, a learned person, a scholar who has given himself devotedly to the word of God. That is unlike Cyrus and other conquerors. The servant of The Lord is given "the tongue of those who are taught," "an instructed tongue." The point is that the servant of The Lord is well-schooled in the ways of God. Jesus Christ does not just love; he is competent. He is wise enough to know how to help weak people. When everyone else fails us, he can "sustain with a word him who is weary" - weary with sin, and weary with life. As we listen to the gospel, we find that Jesus is a wonderful counselor.

Isaiah also presents the servant of The Lord as a sufferer. Christ's learning and his suffering went together (Hebrews 5:8)

It was with an open ear that Christ became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. He didn't suffer as a secondary result of his commitments; he chose the way of suffering. He gave his back to those who strike and his cheeks to those who pull out the beard. He walked into opposition with eyes wide-open. There was no place Jesus wouldn't go, nothing he wouldn't do, to care for weary people with the truth of God's grace. Those who hated God, even as they thought they honored him, were threatened by such radical love and tormented Jesus for it. The worldly human heart naturally responds to truth, not with honest inquiry or even rational rebuttal, but with shrieking, spitting hatred, as Isaiah foresaw. In such a world as this, the *Word-who-became-flesh* had to suffer. And so will we, if we listen to him with the openness of heart that will set our feet in his path.

**Martin Luther** was given an instructed tongue to sustain many weary people, and his sufferings were essential to his competence. Luther wrote:

*"For as soon as God's Word becomes known through you, the devil will afflict you, and make a real [theologian] of you, and will teach you by his temptations to seek and to love God's Word. For I myself ... owe my [opponents] many thanks for so beating, pressing and frightening me through the devil's raging that they have turned me into a fairly good theologian, driving me to the goal I should have never reached."*

One reason we see widespread breakdowns in our own wisdom and even integrity today is that we seem to have forgotten that God calls us to follow Christ into suffering. What sustains us is not selfish predictability but the unchanging word of The Lord. That's what we need above all else and, in the end, all we have to offer others. Isaiah shows us the servant of The Lord suffering. And the servant was not rebellious; he did not turn back. When we turn away from God-ordained hardship, we are rebelling against God and diminishing our own capacity to breathe life into others.

Now Isaiah challenges us to follow the servant with trust like his. It is our choice to follow the servant's voice or our own. The person listening to the voice of Christ "walks in darkness," without a glimmer of light around him (vs. **50:10**). Why is that? We might be in the darkness because we are obeying God. But here's a great truth: Faith offsets darkness. Darkness is what faith is for, because it's there that we "trust in the name of The Lord."

When nothing else in our experience makes sense, when we have no visible path forward and everything seems to be closing in around us, what should we do? We should take our stand on the revealed character of God and keep going in his will, one step at a time. The bare word of God has the power to

stabilize our panicky hearts. In this simple, profound way, our lives will declare that God is a good Savior. And it's how we show that we are really listening to Christ.

But, there's a problem here. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). How is that consistent with Isaiah 50:10? The "darkness" in Isaiah 50:10 is not the same as the "darkness" in John 8:12. The darkness of Isaiah is the **courageous, hard path of obedience to The Lord**, while the darkness of John is **abandonment by God, with his face turned away and leading to eternal death**.

But setting the two verses side by side is helpful. It suggests that walking through a dark season in this life, faithful to Christ, has more light to it than walking in the shining brilliance of our own brainstorm. It suggests that the **darkness of obedience** is better than the **light of disobedience**. God did not promise that we would never be confused and distraught; he did promise that he would never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Even when we can't see him, he does surround us and guard us and lead us forward. We can expect moments in this pilgrimage when the only way into **"the light of life" of John 8:12 is the "walking in darkness" of Isaiah 50:10**. And which would we rather have - the "darkness" of faithful obedience leading to our vindication, or the "light" of self-will leading to endless miseries? This is the question of our existence.

Listening to Christ rather than to ourselves is a startling way to live - and that is our choice! No one likes darkness, and there are so many "lights" out there to live by. That's the other side of the contrast in **vs. 11**. People light their own fires, to use Isaiah's metaphor. They have their own ideas to live by. Why listen to Christ when there are plausible, and certainly easier ways to live? There are people whose lives are not set apart from the convenient, soft ways of the world. Why? Because they don't feel in their hearts that Christ can be counted on when it matters. They are making their own way. But remember the drawback to that approach to life:

***"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."***  
***Proverbs 16:25***

Let me share with you an analogy. ... <Matt's lessons: 1) You focus!, and 2) Your choice!

- 5 years ago my life met a turning point ... breast cancer
- I was the family support person... family stress and crisis
- During treatment, how can I not repeat this experience?
- Became brutally honest with myself about risk factors

- Hired a trainer ... hunky body-builder!
- Hand gesture meaning "You focus!"
- Treadmill ... pushups ... Your choice!

Something earlier in this lecture bears repeating. ...

If Isaiah's vision of God is true, and it is, why do we cling to our resentments and excuses to live the way He has commanded us? God has given his servant Jesus Christ as a light for the nations and a covenant to the people.

YOU ...

    need to FOCUS ...

        on HIM! ...

            No matter the crisis or captivity or exile in your life ...

                It's your choice. ...

He loves you more than you love yourself. It's more than time to let go of your-SELF and rest in HIS mighty arms.