

God's Agent for Salvation...The Servant
Isaiah 49:1- 50:11
by Dellena Ludwig

The life of a servant in the 1800's was governed by many rules and expectations. According to Google, their demeanor was expected to be one of silence and avoiding eye contact. They were never to speak unless they were spoken to and keep all household experiences absolutely private. Their workday began before the family woke in the morning and continued after the family went to bed at night.

Most of us don't have any real experience about servitude, except perhaps in the employee/employer relationship. We may have paid lawn keepers or house cleaners, but their value is determined by their talent in doing their work, not in their being "seen and not heard" as Victorian Era servants were judged.

However, The Servant revealed in Isaiah was much more than the silent, obedient workers of the past. As our study of Isaiah continues, the Scriptures reveal The Servant of God, more and more. While our consideration of Isaiah chapters 49 and 50 reveal more of these details about God's Agent, we will see that Isaiah's description of The Servant parallels the life of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. This lesson will examine:

- A. Preparation of the Servant (Isaiah 49:1-5a)
- B. Purpose of the Servant (Isaiah 49: 5b-7)
- C. Process of the Servant (Isaiah 49:8-13)
- D. Promise of the Servant (Isaiah 49: 14-26)
- E. Power of the Servant (Isaiah 50:1-11)

The first point revealed about this special Agent of God is that His calling as a Servant came before He was born. "Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name." [Isaiah 49:1] There were few children in Scripture who were called by God to serve Him, before they were born. Samuel was a gift from God used to guide Israel as a prophet. He heard God's calling as a young boy from his bed near the tabernacle and responded to be God's servant in the priesthood and before the kings of Israel.

John The Baptist, was appointed to serve God before he was born. His calling was to prepare the hearts of Israel to be ready for the coming of Messiah, through the repentance of their sins.

But this special Servant about whom Isaiah spoke, received special preparation that John never received.

His words were prepared before his birth. Isaiah described the teaching of The Servant. "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." [Isaiah 49:2]

Contrary to the Victorian restraints on their servants, which required that they never speak unless spoken to, God's Servant would speak with power and precision. Jesus exhibited this preparation in His words.

When Jesus preached, His audience was awed. "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law." [Matthew 7:28,29]

Even those who didn't believe Jesus was God's Servant and tried to trick Him with debate and challenging questions experienced His arrow-point responses. In Matthew chapter 22 several groups of religious leaders tried to trick Jesus publicly to discredit Him before the people. But in the end, "No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions." [Matthew 22:46]

The Servant was also prepared to serve the Lord with His focus on serving Israel. Verse five of Isaiah 49 proclaimed the mission the Servant. "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..." [Isaiah 49:5a]

As Jesus taught and led His disciples to preach the gospel of the kingdom, He repeatedly reminded them that they should be spreading the good news first to the Jews. It was only later in His ministry, when Israel's leaders repeatedly rejected His message, that Jesus also began to pivot His ministry. The purpose of His ministry would turn to include the whole world.

In the second half of verse 5 and into verse 6 we see this pivot. "for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has been my strength – 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.'" [Isaiah 49:5b,6]

Not only would The Servant of the Lord preach God's message to the Jews and Gentiles, His compensation was from God alone. During Jesus' lifetime, many would reject the Lord's offer of the kingdom. But some believed. Some Jews and some Gentiles were saved through their faith in their Savior. Jesus prayed to the Father during His high priestly prayer that God would keep those precious followers from the evil one.

During His 33 years walking on the earth, Jesus was not honored or given praise or money for all He did. In fact, Israel's religious leaders hated Him and sent Him to be crucified. But this rejection was also prophesied about The Servant.

"This is what the Lord says – the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel – to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." [Isaiah 49:7]

The Lord God declared that although His Servant would not be treated with honor but would be despised and abhorred by "the nation" (by Israel), one day all kings and princes will recognize Him as Lord. When He will return in power at the end of the age, every knee will bow before Him. He will reign as King over all kings. The honor of the world will finally be given to The Servant of the Lord God.

However, in the near future, the Servant of the Lord would accomplish God's process of restoring Israel. Although His physical presence and work of salvation were still in their future, The Servant of Israel would shine His favor on His people to restore them to the land of their inheritance. He called them, "say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'" [Isaiah 49:8,9]

The Servant had been working to move king Cyrus to allow the Jews to be free to return to Jerusalem. God promised, "See, they will come from afar – some from the north, some from the west, some from the region of Aswan." [Isaiah 49:12]

That returning remnant would shout for joy. "For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones." [Isaiah 49:13] But the restoration of Israel would not be easy. Their

exile would be 70 years before it could happen. They would return to Jerusalem to find it was devastated and their work would only just begin.

The people would fear God had totally forgotten them. “But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.’ [Isaiah 49:14] But forgetting Israel is impossible for God. “See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.” [Isaiah 49:16]

The Lord God had chosen Israel to be His special people. He had trained them by giving them the Law; He gave them an inheritance, dividing the Promised Land among the descendants of Israel; He fought for them, driving out the evil nations before them; He preserved them even in exile to Assyria and Babylon.

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.” [Isaiah 49:15,16] This rhetorical question about a mother forgetting the baby she is nursing, emphasized the deep care God has for His people.

But imagine looking into the palms of the hand of the Lord and seeing that He had actually engraved your name on them! Every time He lifted His hand to help His children; every time He reached out to touch a broken heart; every time He stooped to hold the hand of the weary, He is reminded of His people, because they are engraved on the palm of His hand.

And this intimate marking goes two ways. Those who have turned their back on The Servant as their Messiah will one day recognize Him by the marks on His hands. Zechariah expanded this prophecy. “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child. and grieve bitterly for Him as one grieves for a first-born son.” [Zechariah 12:10]

One day all of Israel will see clearly that the King of Kings, who saved them from destruction, bears the marks of the sacrificial Lamb. These marks killed Him, but He rose to come again to gather all people to Himself with those nail-pierced hands.

Now, God would bring them back into their inheritance again. “Lift up your eyes and look around; all your children gather and come to you.” [Isaiah 49:18] The promise of the restored land ranged far beyond the return of exiles allowed by Cyrus.

Isaiah 49:19-20 stated a vision of the land being out-grown. “Though you were ruined and made desolate and your land laid waste, now you will be too small for your people, and those who devoured you will be far away. The children born during your bereavement will yet say in your hearing, ‘this place is too small for us; give us more space to live in.’” [Isaiah 49:19,20]

When Israel first returned from their exile, they were few in number. Ezra recorded the names, numbers and families of the exiles who left Persia to return to Jerusalem. “The whole company numbered 42,360, besides their 7,337 male and female slaves.” [Ezra 2:64] My math totals their number as just under 50,000.

Such a small number that showed up to begin to rebuild the ruined temple may have felt discouraging. But their challenge was to rebuild first the temple, which they did. Then, Nehemiah came with some reinforcements and challenged them to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

The numbers of those living in and around Jerusalem still showed plenty of room. In fact, Nehemiah had to draw lots to encourage people to live inside the city walls, because the people migrated toward their ancestral lands first. It wasn't for generations that Jerusalem was truly filled with people. And then it was again emptied by the persecution of the Romans in 70 A.D.

So, although so many of Isaiah's prophecies about The Servant were displayed as fulfillment in the life of Christ, these prophecies about needing more room are only now being fulfilled. The population of Israel today is growing, and now settlements are being requested on the fringes of their allotted territory.

Yet this prophecy can also point to a time that contains the return of even more children of Israel in the future. God promised Israel, "Then you will say in your heart, 'Who bore me these? I was bereaved and barren; I was exiled and rejected. Who brought these up? I was left alone, but these – where have they come from?'" [Isaiah 49:21]

Although the return of the Jews from exile was largely engaged by the people from the tribe of Judah, there were many more Jews that had assimilated into their captor's communities. The people from eleven more tribes did not return.

Even in our lifetimes, we recognize that there are people of Jewish heritage that live scattered in the nations of the world, who have never yet lived in the nation of Israel.

However, one day God will remedy that situation. "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'See, I will beckon to the nations, I will lift up my banner to the peoples; they will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their hips. Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers...'" [Isaiah 49:22,23a]

The promise of The Servant will encompass all the nations of the earth. "They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground; they will lick the dust at your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who hope in me will not be disappointed." [Isaiah 49:23b]

While many Jews from Europe and other countries of the world have come to make Israel their home, after World War II, this prophecy has not yet been filled on this scope. The promise of The Servant seems to refer to the thousand-year reign of Messiah, expanded upon by many of God's prophets.

Zechariah prophecies about terrible plagues and panic in those days. "Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles." [Zechariah 14:16]

Ezekiel speaks of the same terrible battle against Jerusalem but also shows that God will save Israel. "Then they will know that I am the Lord their God, for though I sent them into exile among the nations, I will gather them to their own land, not leaving any behind." [Ezekiel 39:28]

The Promise of The Servant includes revival of the next generation. "'Can plunder be taken from warriors, or captives be rescued from the fierce?' But this is what the Lord says: 'Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save.'" [Isaiah 49:24,25]

Yes, the Holy One of Israel would allow this captivity and exile into Babylon. Yes, He would allow them to be oppressed so they would forsake their idol worship. But He would call out a remnant to

come back to Jerusalem. He would have them rebuild the temple and reinstate their worship of Jehovah. God would finally establish them as His people and be their King.

It must have been hard for Judah to comprehend these promises from their perspective of pre-captivity, or even when their captivity under Babylon had begun. Instead of seeing a beautiful, restored nation, they saw only the ravages of war. They felt abandoned by God.

However, in chapter 50 God gave through Isaiah a new vision of the might and power of The Servant, that would surmount the devastation His wrath allowed. Judah felt God had abandoned them. But God reminded them He had not divorced Israel but sent them away because of their sins.

God had no creditors who might demand that His children work off any debt. Rather “Because of your sins you were sold; because of your transgressions your mother was sent away.” [Isaiah 50:1b] It was Israel’s sins that got them into this mess.

However, God is powerful and mighty. He challenges Israel to remember. “Was my arm too short to deliver you? Do I lack the strength to rescue you? By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea, I turn rivers into a desert; their fish rot for lack of water and die of thirst. I clothe the heavens with darkness and make sackcloth its covering.” [Isaiah 50:2,3]

Judah well knew the sins of their people. If idolatry wasn’t blatantly decorating every street corner, it was hidden in the secret places of their homes.

But The Servant would take on their sins as His own for their sake. “I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.” [Isaiah 50:6]

As the servants of long ago dedicated their lives to service, The Servant of Israel’s future would give Himself to take the punishment for mankind’s sins upon Himself. His strength was not dependent on their acceptance of His sacrifice.

Rather, The Servant would willingly sacrifice Himself to His enemies to be obedient to His Lord. “Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore, I have set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.” [Isaiah 50:7]

When Jesus faced the false accusations that led to His crucifixion, He didn’t challenge any of those lies. He knew He was innocent of all sin. He rested on the assurance that the Father would vindicate Him. Isaiah offered such a confidence: “It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who will condemn me?” [Isaiah 50:9a]

The innocent Man, Jesus, willingly took on the sins of the world so that those who accept His finished work on the cross would have eternal life in Him. He gave a light to all who were mired in the darkness of their own disobedience.

“Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God.” [Isaiah 50:10]

Isaiah concludes chapter 50 with the justified ends that would befall those who refused the Light of the World. Rather than salvation and restoration, “This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment.” [Isaiah 50:11b]

The Servant was promised in God's Word to come to save and redeem Israel. After He subdued all of Israel's enemies, "Then all mankind will know that I, the Lord am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob." [Isaiah 49:26]

The Servant was completely obedient to the Lord God Almighty in His life and purpose. He willingly took the beatings and humiliation poured on Him so that He might be the willing sacrifice for all our sins; all of Israel's sins; all of humanities sins and then offer eternal life in His kingdom.

God's Agent faithfully fulfilled all of the promises recorded about Him. The Servant was meek. He didn't boast about Himself. He spoke only as His Father told Him to speak and in powerful humility offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Let us admit, as Isaiah did, "The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary." [Isaiah 50:4a] He is The Servant God has sent to save the world. We have learned His story. Let us use the tongues He has given us to spread the hope of salvation He offers to the world.