



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## The Servant of God, Part 4

Isaiah 49:1-7, Listen to me, O coastlands,  
and give attention, you peoples from afar.  
The LORD called me from the womb,  
from the body of my mother he named my name.  
<sup>2</sup> 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.  
<sup>3</sup> And he said to me, "You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."  
<sup>4</sup> 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.”

- 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—
- 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.”
- 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:  
“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.”

What is the nature of Christianity: Striving or Abiding? The words *striving* and *abiding* are “buzz” words for what is known as the Keswick or the Higher Life movement. This movement pictures Christianity as a “let go and let God” experience. Here the Christian, through a second blessing which is separate from and so beyond conversion, enters into a special relationship with God; a relationship of total love, complete joy, and freedom from the struggle and difficulties of sin.

The Keswick Movement received its name in the 1800’s in England’s annual Keswick Convention, but has resurfaced in Christendom from time-to-time. Whether you realize it or not, you are familiar with this teaching for it pervades much of Christianity.

In the year, 2000, the book *The Prayer of Jabez* took Christianity and pop-culture by storm when it was first published. Listen to its claim.:

Are you ready to reach for the extraordinary? To ask God for the abundant blessings He longs to give you? Join Bruce Wilkinson to discover how the remarkable prayer of a little-known Bible hero can release God’s favor, power, and protection. You’ll see how one daily prayer can help you leave the past behind- and break through to the life you were meant to live. (Wilkinson, 2000, p. Back Cover)

Again, I ask the question: What is it that which characterizes Christianity: Striving or, according to *The Prayer of Jabez*, “Abiding?”

Isaiah 49 addresses the question of what characterizes Christianity. It contains the words of THE Servant of God, Jesus Christ, who as the “True Israel” (Isaiah 49:3) is the type or pattern for all servants of God. As such, this passage details the nature of all Kingdom ministry.

We now turn our focus to “The Reward” that accompanies Kingdom service. As we approach this passage it is imperative that we keep in mind the context of Isaiah 49:4.

From Isaiah 49:1-3, it is obvious that this Servant didn’t interact with the world as a nameless, faceless drone. Rather, all that we have seen as to His Calling, Tool, Preparation, and Purpose would have affected how He would have related to the world. Truly this Servant would have approached the world as one who had been:

- Called by God before the foundation of the world unto the ministry of God’s kingdom, Isaiah 49:1.
- Given the unstoppable ministry of the Word of God as His tool, Isaiah 49:2a.
- Specially prepared and equipped to fulfill His calling, Isaiah 49:2b.
- Set apart for the specific purpose of serving, suffering, and so glorifying God, Isaiah 49:3.

Isaiah 49:5-6, “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.’”

Now all of this would have set this Servant up for the expectation of great success when it came to His calling! God was behind Him:

- (1) Working in and through Him
- (2) Using His talents, background, gifts, and abilities for an eternal purpose and end. Think of it.

What do you get when you convince a person that God not only is behind them, but has ordained the end before the beginning? One gets men of destiny like, Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Patton, and Augustus Caesar; men who boldly went about their business and achieved great success knowing that God had ordained nothing less but their success!

Now, family of God, this gifting or calling is placed upon all servants of God. Just like the Servant, Jesus Christ, we are given this confidence is the fact that God has called us, equipped us, and commissioned us to be His vessels of honor. Consequently, we are assured of victory- for the Battle belongs to the Lord AND we are His servants! Look at the servants of Christ who

believed this:

- Joshua believed this and entered the Promised Land. He knew that he was a servant of God he could be, "...strong and courageous..." (Joshua 1:6, 9).
- Paul was bold because he knew that through all things God brought about His good pleasure (Romans 8:28)!
- This was the confidence of THE Servant of God, Jesus Christ, as He entered into His ministry.

Isaiah 49:4, "But I said, "I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity..."

In the context, this is a shocking statement. Again, following Isaiah 49:1-3 we would expect a statement of the Servant's success as He went about the work of God. Yet success was not something He immediately achieved. Evidently, it was a hard go, a long road, a difficult path which brought Him to a place of inner turmoil! Notice, the terms used are strong words!

- "I have toiled (יָגַע *yaga*) in vain<sup>1</sup> (רִיק *riq*)" Literally reads "I have laboriously worked for nothing!" The word *vain* references that which is without result or to no purpose, emptiness! It is in the emphatic position, which means that the stress is on it. Literally, "FOR NOTHING I have labored to the point of weariness."
- "I have spent (כָּלֵאתִי *kālâti*) my strength (כֹּחִי *kôahî*)" gives the idea of total exhaustion; of a weariness void of strength. Literally it reads, "I have grown weary..."
- "On nothing (תְּהוֹתֵי *têhûtêi*) and vanity (הֶבֶל *hebel*)" The word *nothing* is the same word used in Genesis 1 where it says that the earth was "formless."<sup>2</sup> The word for "vanity" is הֶבֶל (*hebel*) and refers to a person's breath or a vapor. Together the idea is that after all His labor and hardship, that which THE Servant had to show for His work was nothing more substantial than a breath, akin to the original state of the earth on the first day, "formless and void!"

Combined, this gives us a picture of a discouraged and downtrodden individual. NOTHING has He done, the vigor and strength of His youth have been wasted. He has poured out His strength to accomplish the work God had given Him, but the result was desolation and a vapor! *All that work... all that hardship... all that stress for this?*

Now, I don't know about you, I this passage leaves me with a question: In light of everything that we have seen in Isaiah 49:1-3, what could have happened to discourage this Servant?

The answer is that life in this present world discouraged this servant. As wonderful, glorious, and IMPORTANT as are the tools given in Isaiah 49:1-3, in our lives as servants of God, they do NOT guarantee worldly success. They guarantee kingdom success, but not the success which in this world turns heads, stands out, or makes people sit up and take notice.

- Joshua: No sooner did Joshua receive the promise that he would be successful, but that we find him on his face in tears and sorrow after the defeat at Ai, Joshua 7:6-9.
- Moses: When he was called by God he was told that he was God's chosen vessel to deliver Israel. And yet, how many times in his life do we see him discouraged and downcast? Numerous times!
- Peter: He was the apostle on whose confession Christ would build his church (Matthew 16)! Yet in Acts 12 we find him in a prison cell awaiting the same death that just befell his brother, James.
- Paul: He suffered so much in so little time (2 Corinthians 11:23-27)- all for what? Listen to the anguish in his voice:

1 Corinthians 4:10, 13, "We are fools for Christ's sake... we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now."

And yet all of this cannot compare to Christ. Christ, how could we accurately describe the humiliation and suffering of our Lord? I don't think we could! But realize at least that even though He is the Son of God:

- He was born in obscurity.
- In life, He had less wealth than a beggar.
- His followers were the despised and outcast of the world.
- After three years of exhausting work, He was rejected by all, even those closest to Him!
- And then He died alone!
- He died on a Roman Cross!
- He died bereft of everything and everyone; even God!
- In other words, He had nothing to show for His work!

It is easy to think of Christ in terms of His deity and reject that Christ ever suffered or struggled. Yet in His flesh this was not the case. He suffered and so was tempted in all ways as do we, yet without sin! Truly, from the perspective of the world, Christ was a complete and dismal failure! And though He was/is God, don't let that make you think He didn't feel it. Listen again to the place ministry brought even our Lord.

Isaiah 49:4, "But I said, 'I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity...'"

Christ truly was, "A Man of Sorrows!"

Don't be deceived into thinking that discouragement and disappointment should not be named in the vocabulary of Christians. You will have difficulty in this life.

John 16:33, "In the world you have tribulation..."

God also promises that in your war for holiness, "...you will not do the things that you please" (Galatians 5:17). Peter writing to the church world in his day said this: "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you..." (1 Peter 4:12). We read this of Habakkuk crying out, "How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, 'Violence!' Yet Thou dost not save..." (Habakkuk 1:2).

Isaiah 49:4 is not discordant with Isaiah 49:1-3. Both are true of the Servant of God. Truly, we have been called by a Sovereign God and so know that our work in the Lord is not in vain. Yet, the victory and glory will not be readily seen by us! Why is that? John Piper, speaking of the difficult calling of the preacher, gives the answer when he wrote this:

You can mark it down that if you are a preacher God will hide from you much of the fruit he causes in your ministry. You will see enough to be assured of his blessing, but not so much as to think you could live without it. For God aims to exalt himself, not the preacher. (Piper, 2005, p. 19)

Now as I say this, I realize this is not a popular message. It directly contradicts the preaching of many pulpits today. These pulpits proclaim the false gospel of...

- "Come to Jesus and everything will be O.K."
- "Accept Christ, live by faith, and you will have no problems."
- Pray a prayer and "break through to the life you were meant to live."

This is not to say one should not come to Christ, live by faith, or pray. But let me ask you some important questions:

In a church where this false-gospel is proclaimed and believed,

- What do you do when you are discouraged?
- Where do you go when you are failing?
- What do you do when you are feeling like Christ in our passage?...

Isaiah 49:4, "...I have toiled in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity..."

How do you cope when the Christian culture in which you live won't allow for struggling servants? Perhaps you:

- Chuck Christianity and say it's a sham.
- "Fake it till you make it."
- Get into "positive thinking" by looking on the brighter side of things.
- Console yourself with the areas in which you have been a success.

\*\*\*or\*\*\*

- Drown your five children and blame it on post-partum depression!

You may not know this, but a couple of years back when that lady in Texas killed her five children, obviously she had snapped! But listen, it didn't help that she attended a church which taught that this:

- "Christianity is not striving but abiding."
- "If you're struggling, you have to believe more; you have to claim the higher life."
- "God's will is not for you to suffer!"

What an empty message when the sin and misery of this life descends upon the child of God!  
What an empty message when ministry brings you to the confession of Christ, "I have toiled in vain; I have spent my strength on vanity and nothing!"

The message of "peace and safety" (1 Thessalonians 5:3) is a lie. God's word is quite clear when it comes to what we ought to expect as children of God... trial, struggle, warfare!

Philippians 1:29, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."

John 16:33, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation..."

Isaiah 49:4, "But I said, 'I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity...'"

Engage in ministry and it won't take long until you mouth these words in your marriage, parenting, ministry, and service in the Kingdom of God! If this is true (and it is), how then do we cope? Do we cope like this:

Let me tell you something you already know. The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place, and I don't care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. (Rocky Balboa (film), 2012)

This is especially true when it comes to the Servant of Christ! So what is there to console us, to enable us to get up when we're knocked down and keep going? Notice that which consoled Christ and so enabled Him to continue when all looked lost!

Christ gives us a twofold answer, God approves of Him!

Isaiah 49:4, "Yet surely [notice his confidence, "*Surely- without any question or doubt...*"]

the justice due to Me is with the Lord..."

The word for "justice" does not refer to being judged or of God pressing a case against the servant. Rather, it refers to the judgment of approval that God pronounces with regard to the servant (cf. Micah 7:9). It is, to use Scripture, the "well done thou good and faithful servant!" Hear the message God wants all of us to bank on in life.

- *Even in the midst of your sin and sadness, I delight in you!*
- *You are precious in My sight!*

What an incredible truth! For THE Servant of God, Jesus Christ, His consolation knew that God was His Father, that He approved of Him and so His labors, and that through it all, "the Holy One of Israel" loved Him just the same! And family of God, that is the consolation and comfort of ALL servants of God. No matter how bad you think you are OR how worthless you think you may be, God Delights in You! To the people of God about to go into exile, this is the word of Consolation God gave to them to be recalled by them in their suffering:

Zephaniah 3:16-17, "In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: 'Do not be afraid, O Zion; do not let your hands fall limp. The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.'"

Yes, the Lord's people were in exile because of their sin! Yet we must not conclude that God no longer loved them. Truly, "...whom the father loves, He disciplines!" Paul said this in Romans.

Romans 5:8-9, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him."

This passage contains a phenomenal comparison. What were you prior to salvation? You were a sinner deserving hell and the wrath of God. You were an enemy of God, a rebel! Yet what did God give you? Life! Salvation! Blessing!

O.K. now that you are saved, when you sin, what is the only logical conclusion we can draw about God's disposition towards us? *If He loved us when we were enemies, how much more now that we are His children?* Ministry and service in a fallen state is going to be hard! Yet you must know that through it all God is well-pleased with you!

I know that many have heard the story behind the song, *When Peace Like a River*. Years ago, Horatio Spafford received word that the ship on which his wife and children were travelling went down. His wife and children were gone! At this moment he no doubt felt that he had "toiled in vain!"

Now place yourself in the position of the one ministering to him. What would you say? How

would you console him? After years of faithfully serving His God, and yet suffering such a heavy blow from God's hand, how should he respond?

Should he, "Curse God and die?"- saying, *"Is this how you repay me?! Haven't I done so much for you?!"* Or would you say, "You better not cry or struggle or fall, you're a Christian! Claim the higher life. Pray the prayer of Jabez and '...unleash the power of God in your life'?"

Listen to that which consoled this saint (The Consolation of all Servants of God) wrote about his experience:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, "It is well, it is well with my soul."

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blest assurance control, that Christ has regarded my helpless estate, and has shed his own blood for my soul.

This is the consolation of the Servant in our text this morning! And it is the first consolation God gives to the Christian struggling under the weight of this world! Notice the second, that God will reward him!

## God Will Reward Him

April 49:4, "Yet surely the justice *due* to Me is with the Lord, and My reward with My God."

Notice what his reward was NOT. It was not fruit, success, awards, and the many other things we look for in our ministry. Rather, it was God! In this context, let's talk about "the reward" that is the consolation of all servants of Christ. Responding to Peter's declaration that he and the other disciples had sacrificed much for Christ, Jesus said this:

Matthew 19:28-29, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and [as the ultimate reward] shall inherit eternal life."

No matter how you "slice it," this passage describes the reward of Eternal Life as the CHIEF reward of all Christians. Truly, "eternal life" is more precious and more important in glory than co-reigning with Christ on twelve thrones, judging the earth with Christ, and the "many times as much" reward that Christ references here.

You say, "While I appreciate knowing at the end of my life when I die I'll go to glory, that doesn't do much for me in the here and now!" That is only because you don't understand the blessing that is yours when you entered "eternal life"!

John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.”

Based on this passage, what constitutes eternal life? Eternal Life is nothing less than a love-relationship with Christ.

John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee...”

The word for “know” here is γινώσκω (*ginōskō*) which is a relational term in the Bible.

Genesis 4:17, “Cain knew his wife and she conceived”

The word for “know” in the Septuagint is *ginosko*.

Amos 3:2, “You only have I chosen [lit. “known”<sup>3</sup>] among all the families of the earth.”

Where we read of Christ’s words to the reprobate on the last day,

Matthew 7:23, “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you...’”

This doesn't mean that Christ had no knowledge of these unbelievers. Rather it is that Christ did not have an intimate relationship with them as their Savior and Lord! So when John 17:3 equates eternal life (the Christian’s reward) with knowing Christ, we understand the essence of the Christian’s reward that it is a level of intimacy and communion with Christ.

- To labor fifty years on this earth for Christ is to grow in one’s capacity to love and enjoy the love of Christ.
- And thus, the reward awaiting all who deny themselves and live for Christ today, who forgo the passing pleasures of sin “looking for the reward” (Hebrews 11:25, 26), is a greater intimacy and communion with Christ both now and in the age to come!
- The ultimate reward of the five and two talent slaves was not more talents, but that glorious invitation, “...enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21, 23).
- Christ said these words to those who had suffered so much for Him, “He who overcomes shall inherit these things [the privileges of Heaven], and I will be his God and he will be My son” (Revelation 21:7).

That is the ultimate consolation for THE Servant of God; a deeper and more abiding relationship with God! So yes in this world you have tribulation- serve the Lord and

- You may suffer.
- You may go without.
- You will not have free access to the pleasures of sin.

- You will be inconvenienced.

But you will have as your consolation and joy the fellowship of an “ever present Lord!” In light of this, notice how this section closes:

Isaiah 49:7, “Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, *and* its Holy One [IOW, One who loves you, has your best interests in mind, and who cannot be thwarted], to the despised One, to the One abhorred by the nation, to the Servant of rulers [this is what we become in this world on account of Christ; yet behold the promise...], ‘Kings shall see and arise, princes shall also bow down [In the end we shall be most honored. Why? Three reasons...]; because of the Lord who is faithful [God will not let you down; He is able to be trusted!], the Holy One of Israel [again He is sovereign and transcendent and so His will cannot be opposed or thwarted] who has chosen You [who has selected you unto a high and holy calling which includes an eternal love relationship with the Lord].’”

With this before us, may God give us the grace to serve in the face of difficulty and heartache without growing weary!

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The words translated for vain in this verse (*riq, hebel*) are NOT the same as in Exodus 20:7.

<sup>2</sup> This word is a favorite of Isaiah (cf., 24:10; 29:21; 34:11; 40:17, 23; 41:29; 45:18, 19; 59:4). It is best translated as “desolation” and refers to a fruitless work.

<sup>3</sup> This doesn’t mean that God is limited when it comes to His knowledge of those on this earth- He is Omniscient. Rather, this means that of all the peoples of the earth, only with Israel did God enter into a special, intimate relationship!

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### **About the Preacher**

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