

The Calling of the Servant

Songs of the Servant

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We are today at the second part of a four-part series that's entitled "The Songs of the Servant" and we began last Wednesday to look together at four poems or songs as they are usually called in the second half of the prophecy of Isaiah and we have come to the second of these today in chapter 49 and the first seven verses, and you'll find these verses are printed on the order for today.

1 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. 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. 3 And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." 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." 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."

Last time when we began to look at these four poems or songs of the servant, I said that in the second half of the prophecy of Isaiah there seemed to be two different dimensions of divine activity. There is a political and a geographical dimension and in that dimension as Isaiah looks into the future, into the future that he himself has prophesied, most certainly come when God's people are exiled all over again, they are in a house of bondage, a land of servitude in Babylon and he sees that God's judgment is going to send them into the far country as he promised he would to Moses in the giving of the law if they turned away from him, and Isaiah sees that God is going to raise up somebody who

will be a political savior to them. His name is actually given to us in the prophecy, it is Cyrus, the great King of Persia, master of an extraordinary and powerful empire, and yet in the providence of God because he is sovereign over all things, God is going to take this pagan ruler and he is going to use him as a means of bringing his own people back to the Promised Land.

But Isaiah understand his own heart well enough. Remember, he is the one who in the presence of God felt himself to be undone, and although he was presumably the best preacher in Jerusalem, he said, "I'm a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." And he knew that physical political restoration is not the solution to the human problem. That's something of great importance for us to remember, isn't it? There is not a political solution to a moral problem. Governments can only guide and often they can forbid, but they have no power to change the human heart. So Isaiah sees, as I say in this double dimension of God's work, he sees another figure coming over the horizon of history, a more distant figure than Cyrus, one who is more difficult to identify than the King of Persia, and he will come and deliver God's people from their deepest bondage in their alienation from God, their rebellion against God, the tragedy of their sin and the moral mess of their lives, and he is called the servant of the Lord. The servant of the Lord.

Then this second song of the servant in which characteristically the servant himself is the main speaker, we are taught something about the calling of this servant that we should probably as we read through these words, perhaps this question crossed your mind, we should probably ask the question, "Who does Isaiah think this servant is?" And at a first glance, you might say, especially looking at verse 3, "Well, it's obvious this servant is the people of Israel." "The Lord said to me," this is the servant speaking, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But apparently it's not as straightforward as that because you'll notice that the poem goes on to say that the servant is called to bring Jacob back to the Lord and to gather Israel to him. So the servant is called Israel but he is clearly not national or political or even exiled Israel. He is a figure whom the Lord calls Israel who is actually going to come in order to rescue, preserve and save Israel. In other words, what's happening here is not only do we have these double dimensions of the Savior who is going to come, but we have a kind of double dimension within this passage itself in which Israel is going to be the Savior of Israel. So the question is, "Well, who then is this Israel who is going to save Israel?" And of course, the answer ultimately is going to be the Israel who will save Israel is the one who will be everything that God was picturing his Messiah would be as the Old Testament story unfolded.

Many of us in this room remember the days when you couldn't take out your cell phone and take a photograph, check the photograph. Notice, incidentally, how much shorter it takes wedding photographers to get through their photographs now that they can take photographs at 100 frames a minute, or whatever it is, and immediately see whether it's a good one or bad one. Remember the old days? You took the roll of film out the back of the camera, you went along, in our case for some reason, always chemists, pharmacists who did this, and somebody in some dark room turned your negative into the photograph. And I remember you always got the negatives back with the photographs, you remember,

and as a boy I was always much more interested in the negatives than I was in the photographs and trying to guess from the negatives, "Now, which way do you look at this? Who is who in this picture?" And in a sense that's a good illustration of the relationship between the way in which we are taught about the coming of Jesus in the Old Testament and the ways in which we are taught about the Lord Jesus in the New Testament.

The Old Testament provides us with a series of negatives and it's actually quite difficult to identify who the Redeemer is from the negatives, but one of those negatives is actually the whole history of God's people. Remember how Matthew sees the relationship this way: when Jesus is taken down as an infant into Egypt and then after a couple of years he is brought out of Egypt, Matthew says this took place to fulfill the prophecy of Hosea, "Out of Egypt I called my Son." Now, those words refer to the exodus, don't they? "Out of Egypt I called my Son." But, you see, Matthew has got the message. He sees the relationship between the old and the new. Perhaps you learned the great Augustine's line when you were a youngster, "The new is in the old concealed, the old is in the new revealed." And he saw that God was actually planting patterns in history that would provide pictures for God's people in those days of what God would do when he sent his Son, the Lord Jesus, really to be the Savior. And I think that's what Isaiah 49 is really all about. It's giving us a negative picture of the Lord Jesus, not always clear to us; there are some little bits in this passage that will make you think, "I wonder how that applies to the Lord Jesus?" But when you place the negative alongside the Gospel story, then you begin to see that Isaiah had this shadowy sense and picture of what God was going to do when he sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world.

And there are three things here that, I think, Isaiah is focusing our attention on. The first is this: it is the servant's lifetime of preparation. And that's beautifully expressed, isn't it, in verses 1 through 4, how the Lord called him from the womb. The second half of the first verse the servant speaks, "Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb." It's a beautiful reflection on what we find fulfilled in the Gospels, isn't it? That right from the moment of his conception, remember when Mary and Joseph were told, "Here is the name you are to give this child. He is being conceived in Mary through the work of the Holy Spirit and right from that moment, even as this child is in the womb, he is to be known as Jesus." God is saying his destiny... You know, our destiny gets settled in our lives, actually, nowadays usually when people are in their thirties. It used to be when people were in their twenties but that is no longer the case. Most young people only come together discovering who they really are in the beginnings of what's going to be their life destiny when they are in their thirties. But the servant's destiny was fixed by the Lord from the very beginning, from the very beginning, the Lord was preparing him for his future ministry.

And then in the early years of his life, indeed in the first 30 years of his life, the Lord was equipping him for that ministry. Do you notice how beautifully that is put? "He made my mouth like a sharp sword; he made me like a polished arrow." Now, that's probably, at least the way that language is used in the New Testament, that's probably a description of

Jesus' preaching. Remember how in the book of Revelation there is a sword comes out of his mouth and it's the sword of the word of God, and we know when we read the Gospels what a preacher he was. He knew God and when people heard him they said, "This is altogether different from everything that we have ever heard in our lives before. This man knows the Scriptures and he is able to apply them to our lives. We have never heard anything like this."

But do you notice what is combined with that? It's very interesting, isn't it? "He made my mouth like a sharp sword, but in the shadow of his hand he hid me." God has a sword up his sleeve. That's what he's saying. And then, "he made me a polished arrow, but in his quiver he hid me away." Can I put it this way? It seems very casual but it's very true: that the Lord God had his Son and his ministry up his sleeve for 30 years before, as it were, he pulled them out and said, "Now, Son, this is the time to go public." And this other imagery that's used, that the Lord Jesus is hidden in the heavenly Father's quiver, hidden away there in Nazareth. "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" What's the equivalent of that in South Carolina? "Can any good thing come out of there, that dump?" But you see it was precisely in that dump that the heavenly Father had hidden away his Son and for 30 years, and we will see more of this, God willing, next time. He had hidden him away until the right time.

Well, you can see how this applies to Jesus but then look at the words in verse 4 talking about a lifetime of preparation. How can these words possibly apply to Jesus? Look at verse 4 and see what they say. Is it at all possible that Jesus could ever have said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity"? But you remember on the evening of his crucifixion, he said that his soul was exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; and how he said to his disciples who had been with him three years, "Every single one of you is going to leave me. At the end of the day, it is going to appear that I have accomplished absolutely nothing." Absolutely nothing. Then, of course, on the cross, one thing to be deserted and to feel you have accomplished nothing in the lives of those you have taught for three years, then to cry out on the cross, "My God, you too? They have forsaken me, but you too?"

And that's exactly what you see in the negative. You look at the negative and you say, "How can this possibly be? What does this mean?" And then you look at those last few hours of our Savior's ministry and you see this is exactly what happened. But then look at how verse 4 ends, "yet." Yet. Yet. Yet. "Yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God." This isn't the end of the story, crying out, "My God, why have you also forsaken me?" But the end of the story is his cry on the cross, "Father, it is all finished now. Into your hands I commit my spirit."

So it's a whole lifetime of preparation and it's a lifetime of preparation, what is all this for? Well, it's a lifetime of preparation of the servant for the servant's ministry of restoration and that's in verses 5 and 6, isn't it? "And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant." You see, he's now looking back, as it were, on all this. He's looking back from the point of view of his ministry being fulfilled. "Now," he

says, "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."

Do you see what it's all about? It's about taking broken people and mending their lives. It's about taking exiles and bringing them home. This is the story of the prodigal son. The people were in the far country geographically and politically, and Cyrus was going to bring them to the homeland, but the people were also spiritually in the far country, far from the spiritual resources of the heavenly Father and the heavenly Father was raising up a Savior to bring people back from the far country to enjoy what it means to be a child again in the Father's home. And you remember how the prodigal son came back, don't you, rehearsing his speech, "The best I can hope for is to serve him, and then perhaps at the end of the day he may say to me, 'Now, you've done enough now. You can come back into the family.'" That's actually, my guess is that is what most people in the United States think the Christian Gospel is. If you do enough, at the end you will maybe be accepted into the family.

And you remember how the father ran down the hill, bringing incidentally, enormous public disgrace upon himself. They had a specific ceremony to deal with boys like this and those ceremonies were ceremonies calculated to shame prodigal sons. And even as the boy is beginning his speech, you can imagine it, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy. Make me one of your hired servants." The father squeezes the breath out of him and says, "This my son was lost and is found, was dead and is alive again." That's what this is all about.

But then you notice what is added here, isn't it so interesting? "For I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength," and then this, doing that for the chosen people, that small fry, Jesus is going to do that for the Gentiles. Jesus is going to do that for the Gentiles. Jesus is going to do that for people in Columbia, the ends of the earth. He's going to be the light to the nations, his salvation reaching to the end of the earth. You know, if you had been a contemporary of Jesus and somebody had mentioned Columbia, South Carolina to you, they would have said, "That's beyond the ends of the earth." Actually, they thought Scotland was beyond the ends of the earth, so who knows what they thought about South Carolina. And that's it, isn't it? It's because of this that you are here if you're a Christian, and it's because of this that it is possible for you to become a Christian if you are not a Christian, because of the servant's marvelous preparation and now his ministry of restoration.

Then the whole thing ends so beautifully by describing his destiny of exaltation. Preparation, restoration, and exaltation. "Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised," deeply despised, "abhorred by the nation." Isn't that exactly what happened? "His blood be upon our heads. We don't give a monkey's puzzle for him." That's what they were saying. "Take him away and crucify him!" And the slave of rulers, rulers like Caiaphas and Herod and Pontius Pilate, treated him like a slave. He was actually sold for the price of a slave, wasn't he? Ah, the negative, it all becomes clear. It seems so mysterious here but it all becomes clear in Jesus.

But look at the result of this. What is the result of all this humiliation? Well, it's by taking our humiliation before God that he is bringing us salvation, and because he has done that, God exalts him and he says this, "Kings shall see and arise." Now, you don't know very much about kings, you know everything about presidents, but kings don't arise. I once somewhat nervously went into the presence of Her Majesty the Queen. There were only two other people in the room, the lady-in-waiting who was waiting, as ladies-in-waiting do, and moi, who was more than a little nervous knowing that the Queen is only another human being. And she was sitting there. I didn't say to her, "Are you not going to get up and greet me?" Monarchs do not stand in the presence of ordinary mortals, but he is saying in the presence of the servant of the Lord, monarchs will be constrained to stand and the language will be reversed. Do you know what I said? Of course you know what I said. You are told to say what I said, "Your Majesty." I didn't believe the words were coming out my mouth. "Your Majesty." I didn't expect her to stand. But, you see, when the great ones of the earth are met by the Lord Jesus, they stand and they say to him, "Your Majesty," and "princes shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." That has literally happened, you know, hasn't it? When we know of monarchs on the earth who have bowed the knee to the Lord Jesus, called him Savior and Master and Lord and said to him, "Your Majesty."

So this is a marvelous magnificent description of who Jesus is and do you know what it really fits in within the New Testament? It fits in with that little walk on the road to Emmaus that the two had on the day of Jesus' resurrection when they were dispirited and they didn't even recognize that Jesus had joined them, and then when they recognized him, they remembered everything he had taught them about the Old Testament on the way from Jerusalem to Emmaus and they said, "You know, when we heard about that, it all became clear and our hearts burned within us." Our hearts burned within us. That's what happens when you see the colored picture and not just the negative of Jesus.

Well, there is more to come and, actually, I think it is even more wonderful what's to come if that's possible.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for these portraits of Jesus, for these songs that we can almost hear him singing about himself and think of him reflecting on them as he memorized them sitting there in the hills of Galilee and meditating in your presence about the calling and the cost of it that you had given to him. We thank you so much that he is not merely a political deliverer, that he doesn't just get us out of a mess, but he has come to be our Savior, calls us to trust him, to bow before him and to call him Lord. We thank you so much for all that he is to us through faith. We pray for your blessing on one another, on our own lives, our families, our Christian witness in this city and far beyond. Pray that you would watch over us in the rest of this week. In Jesus, our Savior's name. Amen.