

The Book of Isaiah, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 20: The Servant, a Light to the Nations

Isaiah 49:1–50:11

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The aim of this lesson is to bring the Servant of Isaiah into sharp focus as the Lord Jesus Christ, and to let His mission reshape the class's sense of calling. The second Servant Song (49:1–13) reveals that God's saving purpose was never confined to one nation; the Servant is a light to the nations so that salvation reaches the end of the earth, a purpose fulfilled in Christ and now carried by His church. Guard carefully against any reading that turns the restoration of Israel into a blueprint for modern political nationalism; the true Israel of God is made up of all, Jew and Gentile, who belong to Christ (Galatians 6:16; Romans 2:28–29).

At the same time, let the warmth of these chapters do its work. The Servant who labors and feels he has spent his strength in vain, the God who cannot forget His people any more than a mother can forget her nursing child, and the obedient Servant who sets his face like flint and is not put to shame: these are not abstractions. They speak directly to discouraged, forgotten-feeling believers and to a congregation deciding how seriously to take the Great Commission. The doctrinal climax (49:6 as fulfilled in Christ and the church's mission, and Q9 on the suffering Servant of 50:4–9) should both inform the head and move the heart.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Isaiah 49:1–3 the Servant is called from the womb, his mouth made like a sharp sword, and he is hidden in God's hand. What do these images tell us about how God prepares and equips the one He sends, and how do they point us toward the Lord Jesus?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah 49:1–3 opens the second Servant Song with a worldwide summons: Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. From the very first line the audience is not just Israel but the distant nations, a hint of where this song is heading. The Servant then speaks of his calling: The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. His mission is no afterthought; he was set apart before birth.

Two vivid images describe how God equips him. 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. The sword and arrow speak of the power of the Servant's word, which cuts and pierces. The hiddenness speaks of God's preparation and protection, the Servant kept ready until the appointed moment, like a chosen arrow drawn out at exactly the right time.

Verse 3 names him: You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified. This is a deep point. The Servant is called Israel, yet in the next verses he has a mission to Israel. He embodies what

Israel was always meant to be. The nation failed in its calling; the true Servant fulfills it. In the New Testament this comes to rest on Jesus, the faithful Israelite who succeeds where the nation faltered and gathers a new people to Himself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Servant is called and named before birth, underscoring that his mission is wholly God's initiative, a pattern fulfilled in Jesus, whose name and mission were announced before His birth (Luke 1:31-33).
- The mouth like a sharp sword points to the power of the Servant's word; compare the word of God as a sword in Hebrews 4:12 and Revelation 1:16.
- The Servant is called Israel because he embodies and fulfills Israel's true calling; this is one of the threads by which the New Testament identifies the true Israel of God with Christ and those in Him.
- God's hiddenness and preparation of the Servant remind us that God's timing is purposeful; the arrow is kept in the quiver until the right moment.

Discussion Prompts

- What do the images of a sharp sword and a polished arrow tell us about the Servant's word and ministry?
- Why is it significant that the Servant is called Israel and yet sent to Israel?
- How does knowing God prepares and times His work, hiding the arrow until the right moment, encourage you in seasons of waiting?

Question 2

Student Question:

The Servant in 49:4 confesses a feeling of having labored in vain even while trusting that his reward is with the Lord. When have you felt that your work for God was fruitless, and how do you keep serving faithfully when you cannot see the results?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah 49:4 is startling honesty from the Servant: But I said, I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity. The one called from the womb and equipped like a polished arrow openly admits a sense of futility. This is not unbelief; it is the real experience of faithful service that does not seem to bear fruit. It is the cry of every teacher, parent, and worker for God who has wondered if any of it mattered.

But the verse does not end there. Yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God. The Servant anchors not in visible results but in the unseen verdict of God. He hands his sense of fruitlessness to the One who keeps the true account. This is the secret of persevering faithfulness: trusting that God sees and rewards even when the harvest is hidden from our eyes.

When we read this in the light of Jesus, it gains depth. Our Lord's ministry looked, by every earthly measure, like failure at the cross; abandoned, mocked, executed. Yet His right was with

the Lord, and the resurrection vindicated everything. The Servant's confession teaches us to measure our service by God's verdict, not by appearances, and to keep going when we cannot see why.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithful service can genuinely feel fruitless; admitting that is not a lack of faith but an honest part of the believer's experience.
- The Servant entrusts his sense of futility to God, who keeps the true account; we are called to do the same rather than measuring our worth by visible results.
- Jesus' ministry appeared to end in failure at the cross yet was vindicated by God in the resurrection, the ultimate proof that God's verdict outweighs appearances.
- This guards against discouragement that leads to quitting; our recompense is with God (compare 1 Corinthians 15:58, your labor is not in vain in the Lord).

Discussion Prompts

- Have you ever felt, like the Servant, that you had spent your strength for nothing? What did you do with that feeling?
- What does it mean practically to say my recompense is with my God when you cannot see results?
- How does the cross and resurrection of Jesus speak to the way we measure success and failure in serving God?

Question 3

Student Question:

In Isaiah 49:5-6 God says it is too light a thing for the Servant only to restore Israel; he will be a light for the nations, that God's salvation may reach the end of the earth. How does this verse reveal that God's saving purpose was always meant to reach beyond one nation, and how is it fulfilled in Christ and the gospel rather than in a political restoration of national Israel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah 49:5-6 is the heart of the song and one of the great mission texts of the Bible. God restates the Servant's first task, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered. But then comes the enlargement: It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob. Restoring Israel, as glorious as that is, is too small a job for this Servant. God has something far larger in mind.

I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. Here is the worldwide gospel in a single sentence, spoken centuries before Christ. The Servant's reach is global. God's salvation is for the ends of the earth, not for one ethnic group alone. This was always the plan; it was never an emergency improvisation after Israel failed.

The New Testament seizes this verse directly. In Acts 13:46-48 Paul and Barnabas, turning to the Gentiles, quote it: I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the

ends of the earth. They understand the Servant's mission to be fulfilled in Christ and continued through those who preach Him. Simeon too, holding the infant Jesus, called Him a light for revelation to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32).

A clear doctrinal note is needed here. The restoration of Israel in these chapters finds its true fulfillment not in a political ingathering of modern national Israel, but in the salvation God brings to all nations through Christ. The true Israel of God is composed of all who belong to Christ by faith, Jew and Gentile alike (Romans 2:28–29; 9:6–8; Galatians 6:16). The light to the nations is the gospel, and the mission belongs now to the church.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's saving purpose was always meant to reach the ends of the earth; the worldwide mission is not a backup plan but God's original design, seen here long before Christ.
- Isaiah 49:6 is applied directly to the church's mission to the Gentiles in Acts 13:46–48, identifying the Servant's work with Christ and those who proclaim Him.
- The restoration of Israel finds its true fulfillment in the salvation brought to all nations through Christ, not in a political restoration of modern national Israel.
- The true Israel of God is made up of all who belong to Christ, Jew and Gentile (Romans 2:28–29; 9:6–8; Galatians 6:16), which guards against any nationalistic or premillennial reading.
- The light to the nations is now the mission of the Lord's church; this text obligates us to carry the gospel outward.

Discussion Prompts

- Read 49:6 and ask: what does it mean that restoring Israel was too light a thing for the Servant? How big is God's plan?
- How does Acts 13:46–48 show us the way the early church understood this verse?
- If the light to the nations is now the church's mission, what does that require of us as a congregation and as individuals?

Question 4

Student Question:

God's plan was always bigger than the people first thought. Where might your own vision of what God wants to do, in your life, your family, or your congregation, be too small, and what would it look like to think God's bigger thoughts?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah 49:7–12 expands the Servant's mission into a sweeping picture of salvation. God addresses the one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers, and promises that kings shall see and arise, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves. The one despised will be honored, because the Lord is faithful. This anticipates the pattern of Christ, humiliated then exalted.

Verse 8 is rich: In a time of favor I have answered you; in a day of salvation I have helped you. Paul quotes this in 2 Corinthians 6:2, declaring that now is the favorable time, now is the day of salvation. The day Isaiah foresaw has dawned in Christ. God gives the Servant as a covenant to the people, to establish the land and apportion the desolate heritages.

Verses 9–12 picture prisoners released and those in darkness told, Appear. They are shepherded along the way, fed on the heights, kept from hunger and heat, led by springs of water. People come from far away, from the north and the west, from the land of Syene. This is the great homecoming of the redeemed, gathered from every direction, a picture fulfilled as the gospel gathers people from all nations into Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Servant despised by people but honored by kings foreshadows the humiliation and exaltation of Christ (compare Philippians 2:8–11).
- Isaiah 49:8 is applied by Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:2 to the present gospel age: now is the day of salvation, which has dawned in Christ.
- The Servant is given as a covenant to the people, language that points to the new covenant established in Christ (compare Luke 22:20).
- The gathering of the redeemed from every direction is fulfilled as the gospel draws people of all nations into Christ, not in a geographic reassembling of a political nation.

Discussion Prompts

- How does the movement from despised to honored in verse 7 prepare us to understand the path of Jesus?
- Paul says now is the day of salvation. What urgency does that put on the way we live and share the gospel?
- What picture of the redeemed do verses 9–12 paint, and how is it fulfilled in the church gathered from all nations?

Question 5

Student Question:

In Isaiah 49:8–13 God promises to keep the Servant, to make him a covenant to the people, and to bring prisoners out of darkness, ending with heaven and earth breaking into song. What does this passage teach about the comprehensive nature of the salvation God brings through His Servant?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah 49:13 bursts into song: Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! The reason is given simply and powerfully: For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted. Creation itself is summoned to celebrate the salvation God brings. When God comforts His people, the response is not quiet relief but exuberant joy.

This single verse is a hinge. It caps the glorious promises of the Servant's mission with worship, and it sets up the contrast that follows immediately in verse 14, where Zion complains that God has forgotten her. The heavens are told to sing for joy in verse 13; God's people are told to stop doubting His love in verse 14. The two belong together.

There is a pastoral lesson in placing creation's song right before Zion's complaint. Sometimes the truth about God's compassion is shouting all around us, in the very fabric of creation, while our own hearts are stuck in the feeling that we have been forgotten. The call is to let the larger song correct the smaller fear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's salvation calls forth joy from all creation; worship is the fitting response to the comfort God brings to His people.
- God's comfort is specifically aimed at the afflicted; He has compassion on those who are hurting, not only on the strong.
- The placement of creation's joy right before Zion's complaint teaches us to let the larger truth of God's compassion correct our private fears.
- Genuine joy in God is not mere relief but exuberant, even cosmic, celebration of His goodness.

Discussion Prompts

- What would it look like for your own worship to match the exuberance Isaiah calls creation to in this verse?
- Why do you think this burst of joy is placed right before Zion's complaint that God has forgotten her?
- What has God done for you that, considered rightly, should move you to that kind of joy?

Question 6

Student Question:

Isaiah 49:13 calls creation itself to sing and break forth because God comforts His people. What has God done for you that, if you really stopped to consider it, would move you to that kind of joy, and what keeps you from that joy day to day?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah 49:14–16 contains one of the tenderest exchanges in the Bible. Zion voices the ache of the forgotten: The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me. This is the cry of God's people in exile, and it is the cry of every believer who has ever felt invisible to God. God does not scold the complaint; He answers it with overwhelming tenderness.

Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? The picture is the most instinctive love we know, a nursing mother for her baby. The bond is so deep that forgetting seems impossible. Yet God goes further: Even these may forget,

yet I will not forget you. Even the unthinkable failure of a mother's love cannot reach the failure God will never commit.

Then the climax: Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me. Not written, which can be erased, but engraved, cut in. God carries the image of His people permanently on His own hands. For Christians this image leaps forward to the nail-pierced hands of the crucified and risen Christ, where our names are, in the deepest sense, engraved forever. The God who could not forget us proved it at Calvary.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God invites and answers the honest cry of those who feel forgotten; He meets our doubt with tenderness rather than rebuke.
- God's love for His people surpasses even the deepest human bond, a nursing mother's love for her child, and never fails even when human love does.
- Engraved, not merely written, means God's commitment to His people is permanent and unerasable.
- For Christians the engraved palms point movingly to the pierced hands of the crucified Christ, where our redemption is secured forever.

Discussion Prompts

- When have you felt like Zion, certain that God had forgotten you? How does His answer here speak to that?
- Why does God compare His love to a nursing mother's, and then say His love is even greater?
- How does the image of being engraved on God's palms deepen when you think of the nail-pierced hands of Jesus?

Question 7

Student Question:

In Isaiah 49:14–16 Zion says the Lord has forgotten her, and God answers that even if a nursing mother could forget her child, He will not forget, for He has engraved His people on His palms. What does this passage reveal about the depth and permanence of God's love for His people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah 49:17–26 unfolds the reversal of Zion's fortunes. Her builders make haste; her destroyers depart. She is told to lift up her eyes and see her children gathering, coming to her, so many that the once-bereaved and barren city will marvel, Who has borne me these? The desolate place will be too crowded for its inhabitants. This is the language of stunning, joyful reversal.

God promises that kings shall be your foster fathers and queens your nursing mothers (verse 23), and that those who wait for the Lord shall not be put to shame. The nations that once oppressed will serve. This is fulfilled not in political conquest but in the way the gospel draws the nations to honor and serve the people of God in Christ, as the kingdom spreads.

Verses 24–26 answer the doubt, Can the prey be taken from the mighty? God declares that He will contend with those who contend with Zion and save her children; even the captives of the mighty will be freed. The chapter ends with the great purpose: all flesh shall know that I am the Lord your God, your Savior and your Redeemer. The rescue is real, and its goal is that the whole world will know who God is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God brings stunning reversals; the desolate and barren are filled, a pattern fulfilled spiritually as the gospel multiplies God's people from all nations.
- Those who wait for the Lord shall not be put to shame; patient trust in God is never finally disappointed.
- God Himself contends with those who oppress His people; the deliverance is His work, not ours.
- The ultimate goal of God's saving acts is that all flesh shall know He is the Lord, Savior, and Redeemer, fulfilled as the knowledge of God spreads through Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the image of a barren city suddenly crowded with children say about what God can do with seemingly hopeless situations?
- How is the promise that kings and queens will serve God's people fulfilled in the spread of the gospel rather than in political power?
- Why does God repeatedly say His goal is that all flesh shall know He is the Lord?

Question 8

Student Question:

Think of a time you felt forgotten or abandoned, by God or by people you trusted. How does God's promise that He has engraved you on the palms of His hands speak to that wound, and what does it ask you to believe about Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah 50:1–3 opens with God's pointed questions to His people. Where is the certificate of divorce, or to which of my creditors have I sold you? The implication is that God has not cast off His people permanently; their separation is the result of their own sins, not God's abandonment. Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away. The exile was the fruit of their own rebellion, not a failure of God's faithfulness.

God then asks why, when He came, there was no one, and why, when He called, there was no answer. Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver? The God who dries up the sea and clothes the heavens in darkness is fully able to save. The problem is never God's power or willingness; it is the people's failure to respond when He calls.

This sets a crucial frame for the third Servant Song that follows. The people are unresponsive and have brought trouble on themselves by their own sin, consistent with personal accountability, each one bearing the consequence of his own transgressions, as Ezekiel 18:20 teaches. Against that backdrop of human failure, the obedient Servant of verses 4–9 shines all the brighter.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God has not permanently divorced or sold His people; their separation results from their own sins, which underscores personal accountability rather than blaming God.
- The exile is the fruit of the people's own transgressions; each bears the consequence of his own sin (compare Ezekiel 18:20), not an inherited guilt.
- God's power and willingness to redeem are never in question; the failure lies in the people's unresponsiveness when He calls.
- This passage sets up the contrast between the unresponsive nation and the perfectly responsive Servant who follows.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it important that God says the people were sold for their own iniquities, not abandoned by Him?
- God asks, Is my hand shortened? Where are you tempted to doubt God's power to save or restore?
- How does human unresponsiveness in these verses set the stage for the obedient Servant who comes next?

Question 9

Student Question:

In Isaiah 50:4–9 the Servant gives his back to those who strike him and his cheeks to those who pull out the beard, hiding not his face from shame and spitting, yet says, The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced. How does this third Servant Song foreshadow the obedient suffering of Jesus, and what does it teach us about facing opposition without being put to shame because the Lord is our help?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah 50:4–9 is the third Servant Song, and it gives us the most personal portrait yet of the obedient, suffering Servant. It begins not with suffering but with listening: The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Servant's ministry of sustaining the weary flows out of a daily, attentive listening to God. He speaks because he first listens.

Then comes the suffering, accepted willingly: I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting (verse 6). This is

breathhtaking when laid beside the Gospels. The soldiers struck Jesus, spat on Him, mocked Him, and pulled at Him (Matthew 26:67; 27:30). The Servant does not resist or flee; he gives his back, he offers his cheeks. Obedience here means absorbing the blow rather than returning it.

Yet the Servant is not crushed in spirit, because of one settled conviction repeated through the song: The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame (verse 7). He who vindicates me is near (verse 8). The Servant can endure shame from people because he is sure of vindication from God. He sets his face like flint, immovable, because the Lord God is his helper.

This is the pattern Jesus walked, and it is the pattern He calls us to. We can face opposition, mockery, and even suffering for the Lord without being put to shame, not because the pain is small, but because the Lord God helps us and will vindicate us. The shame the world tries to pile on a faithful servant simply does not stick when God Himself is near to help. Peter draws on exactly this when he tells suffering Christians that they are following in the steps of the One who, when reviled, did not revile in return, but entrusted himself to him who judges justly (1 Peter 2:21–23).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Servant's ministry to the weary flows from daily listening; God wakens his ear morning by morning, a model of the spiritual life rooted in attentive obedience to God's word.
- Isaiah 50:6, the back given to strikers, the cheeks to those who pull the beard, the face not hidden from spitting, is strikingly fulfilled in the suffering of Jesus (Matthew 26:67; 27:30).
- The Servant willingly accepts suffering rather than retaliating, modeling the non-retaliation Jesus both lived and taught (compare 1 Peter 2:21–23).
- The Servant is not put to shame because the Lord God helps him; vindication comes from God, not from human approval.
- Setting the face like flint pictures resolute, settled obedience grounded in confidence that God is near to vindicate.
- This Servant Song points unmistakably to Christ and gives believers a pattern for enduring opposition without being disgraced.

Discussion Prompts

- Read 50:4 and ask: how does the Servant's listening morning by morning connect to his ability to sustain the weary? What does that say about our own walk?
- Lay 50:6 beside the Gospel accounts of Jesus' suffering. What strikes you about how closely they match?
- What does it mean to set your face like flint because the Lord God helps you, and where do you need that resolve right now?

Question 10

Student Question:

The Servant says, Morning by morning the Lord wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught (50:4–5). Name one specific way you sense the Lord teaching you through this lesson, and one step of obedient, listening trust you will take this week to follow Him as the Servant did.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Isaiah 50:10–11 closes the chapter with a sharp fork in the road, two ways of living set side by side. First, the way of trust: Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God. Notice that even in the dark, with no light to see by, the faithful path is to keep trusting and leaning on God. Faith is not the absence of darkness; it is reliance on God in the middle of it.

Second, the way of self-reliance: Behold, all you who kindle a fire, who equip yourselves with burning torches! Walk by the light of your fire and by the torches that you have kindled! These are people who refuse to wait on God's light and instead manufacture their own. They light their own torches, walk by their own glow, and try to find their own way.

The result is severe: This you have from my hand: you shall lie down in torment. The self-kindled fire ends in sorrow. The contrast is unmistakable. Will we trust God in the dark and obey the voice of His Servant, or will we strike our own matches and walk by our own light? The whole lesson presses toward this choice. To obey the voice of the Servant, for us, means to hear and follow the Lord Jesus, the Servant these songs foretold, responding to Him in obedient faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The faithful are called to trust God even when walking in darkness without light; faith means relying on God in the dark, not waiting until the way is clear.
- Obeying the voice of His servant means, in fulfillment, hearing and following the Lord Jesus, the Servant of these songs.
- Self-reliance is pictured as kindling your own fire and walking by your own torches, a refusal to wait on God's light that ends in torment.
- The chapter ends, like 48:22, with a real boundary: two ways, two outcomes; the call to trust is genuine and so is the warning.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to trust in the name of the Lord while walking in darkness with no light? When have you had to do that?
- What are the self-kindled torches people use today to avoid waiting on God, and why do they fail?
- If obeying the voice of the Servant means following Jesus, what is one specific way you will obey His voice this week?