

The Book of Isaiah

Lesson 20: The Servant, a Light to the Nations -- Isaiah 49:1-50:11

Have you ever felt that your hard work made no difference at all? You poured yourself out, you tried your best, and at the end of the day you looked at the result and thought, I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing. If you have ever stood in that discouraged place, you are standing where God's Servant stands at the start of Isaiah 49. The remarkable thing is what happens next. Right in the middle of that sense of futility, God hands the Servant a larger mission than he ever imagined.

Isaiah 49 and 50 give us the second and third of the great Servant Songs, those breathtaking poems that, read in the light of the New Testament, draw a portrait of Jesus long before Bethlehem. We meet a Servant called from the womb, with a mouth like a sharp sword, hidden in God's hand like a polished arrow. We hear God say something that ought to take our breath away: restoring Israel is too small a thing for this Servant. He is to be a light for the nations, that God's salvation may reach to the end of the earth. That is the gospel, sketched centuries in advance.

These chapters also hold one of the most tender pictures of God's love in all of Scripture. Zion, the people of God, feels abandoned. The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me. And God answers with a question that goes straight to the heart of every person who has ever felt forgotten: Can a woman forget her nursing child? He says even if a mother could forget, I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. The God who carries us also refuses to forget us.

Then in chapter 50 we watch the Servant set his face like flint. He gives his back to those who strike him and his cheeks to those who pull out the beard. He does not hide his face from disgrace and spitting. He is obedient, suffering, and unashamed, because the Lord God helps him. As we walk through these two chapters, watch the Servant come into focus, and remember that his mission, a light to the nations, is now the mission entrusted to the Lord's church.

Group Discussion: In Isaiah 49:6 God tells the Servant it is too light a thing merely to restore Israel; he must be a light for the nations so that salvation reaches the end of the earth. How does this verse shape the way we as a congregation think about the scope of our mission, and what would it mean for our group to take the reach of the gospel as seriously as God does?

Personal Reflection: Isaiah 49:15-16 promises that God will not forget you, that He has engraved you on the palms of His hands. When are you most tempted to feel forgotten by God, and how would living in the certainty of these verses change the way you face that season?

Read Isaiah 49:1-50:11

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Acts 13:46–48, Paul and Barnabas apply Isaiah 49:6, a light for the nations, directly to their mission to the Gentiles; Luke 2:29–32, Simeon calls the infant Jesus a light for revelation to the Gentiles, echoing the Servant Songs; Matthew 26:67 and 27:30, the soldiers strike, spit on, and mock Jesus, fulfilling Isaiah 50:6; Romans 8:31–39, Paul’s assurance that nothing can separate us from God’s love unfolds the comfort of Isaiah 49:15–16; 1 Peter 2:9–10, the church is God’s chosen people called out of darkness into light, carrying the Servant’s mission.

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