

The Mission of the Servant

Isaiah 49:1-7

Introduction

Sharing the Gospel: What is your go-to evangelistic move? E.E., F.A.I.T.H., Four Spiritual Laws, Romans Road, etc. What would happen if you die today? Don't pull a JW (doesn't look like life is going too well). What is the gospel? Where is it found? What is Scripture? Look at the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. ²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth" [Is 53:7-8] ³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news [gospel; εὐαγγελίζω] about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him (Acts 8:26-38). For this Philip and the Ethiopian, the gospel was as clearly laid out in Isaiah as it would be for us in Luke or Romans.

The Gospel According to Isaiah: If it's good enough for Philip, the Ethiopian, and the NT, then it's good enough for me. We can learn to read the Old Testament (i.e., Hebrew Bible) like Jesus and the apostles. Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to [the disciples on the road to Emmaus] in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27). Isaiah might be called the prophet for the New Testament (quoted more than twice as much as any other major prophet and more than all of the minor prophets combined). The second most quoted OT book (behind the Psalter and ahead of Deuteronomy). When the NT writers read Isaiah, they read it as Messianic Scripture, written to describe the coming Savior who would rescue and redeem the world.

- It is to our spiritual detriment when we neglect the Scriptures of Jesus and the apostles. It limits our understanding of God and his plan of salvation. We are missing out on God-ordained tools intended for our good and our growth when we neglect to read the Old Testament as a testimony pointing to the Messiah. It's like trying to make pizza with vegan cheese or skipping leg day, etc. It's limiting, incomplete.

The Suffering Servant: One of the largest books in the Bible, Isaiah is often divided into two major sections (chs. 1-39 and 40-66). These literary units have unique themes. The first (which we got into a little bit during Advent) talks a lot about the history of Israel, their sin and idolatry,

and the judgment that was coming because of their disobedience. Tucked inside were small glimmers of hope. Those glimmers of hope find fuller articulation in chapters 40-66. The punishment and absence of God give way to the promise of his presence and blessing. He is going to save not just Israel but the whole world as he restores creation in a new heaven and earth. Occupying a huge portion of this section are what's known as "the Servant Songs" (though they're really just poems). This "servant" is mentioned 20 times in approximately twelve chapters. He is a servant of God (i.e., "my servant" or "servant of the Lord"). His specific identity is somewhat unclear though his calling and characteristics are perfectly clear. More importantly, **Jesus saw himself as the Servant in Isaiah's songs.**

- For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).
- For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.' For what is written about me has its fulfillment" (Luke 22:37, cf. Is 53:12).
- Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known. 17 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope" (Matt 12:15-21 cf Is 42:1-4).
- Jesus is the servant who will bring a just and righteous order, he will establish a new covenant with God's people. He is a Davidic, kinglike person equipped with by the Spirit of God.

Isaiah 49: In the weeks leading to Easter we are looking at the good news of Christ through the prophecy of Isaiah, specifically these Servant songs. Today we'll look at the beginning of Isaiah 49. The people are worshipping idols only to find them dissatisfying and powerless. Idolatry is the worst sin because it displaces God. It tries to put something that is not God into the place of God (e.g., spouse, career, nationality, intelligence, money, power, etc.). They long for exile to end and that exile is not merely geographic and political but they are exiled in sin.

- The servant is coming to save us from our sins, displace our idols, and free us from exile to in our sins. In Is 49 **we see the blueprints of the Savior's mission and we find out just how good the news is.**

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."

Jesus came on a mission to restore his people and bring salvation to the nations.

1. The Preparation of the Servant (vv. 1-2)

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.

The Servant Speaks: Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar Christ calls everyone to listen. The command is universal (a theme in this section and in the OT). The promises of God have always extended to the whole world (e.g., Noah, Abraham, "all the nations will be blessed). In other servant songs God is speaking but here the servant is speaking. The Messiah, Jesus Christ, is addressing this message to the entire world.

Incarnation: The LORD called me from the womb He begins by teaching the doctrine of the incarnation. He is teaching that He will come to earth as a Man, born of a woman. The coming of Jesus wasn't a NT invention but the plan of God from the foundation of the world.

- Jesus received his name via a word from God while in his mother's womb (from the body of my mother he named my name).
- But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days (Micah 5:2).
- "What He was, He laid aside; what He was not, He assumed. He takes upon Himself the poverty of my flesh so that I may receive the riches of His divinity" (Gregory of Nazianzus). This is why Jesus, fully God, takes on full humanity. If he is anything less than God, he is not strong enough to save us. If he is anything less than man, then he cannot substitute himself on our behalf.
- If he's only 50% human then only 50% of us is saved. Some Frankenstein monster half-regenerate Christians. It's why a sheep can't permanently sacrifice for a person (a temporary respite at best).

Word is the Weapon: He describes the way God prepared him to come, the gifts he gave him. He made my mouth like a sharp sword... he made me a polished arrow. He describes his "mouth" as a sharp sword. The word is the weapon. No prophet has words that cut like this. The sword indicates short-range and the arrow long-range reach. The sword is sharp, showing that his words are effective. The arrow is polished, hinting that it is accurate. Not only does this perfectly describe Jesus, but it also validates his ministry. **Jesus isn't just another prophet in a long line of prophets, he is the true prophet, the one who doesn't just relay the words of God but, as God, is the word speaking to us.** For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow,

and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12). Jesus is the word of God who speaks the word of God.

Secret: In the shadow of his hand he hid me... in his quiver he hid me away. Prepared in secret and obscurity waiting for the right time. Jesus avoids the limelight. He often tells people **not** to tell others his true identity. His identity in Isaiah is revealed in the gospels *at just the right time* (e.g., Mosaic, the OT tells us about the Messiah, the NT reveals the Messiah is Jesus, it gives him a name; Tapestry, what we see (back) vs. what God is doing (front)).

At Just the Right Time: But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal 4:4-5). Jesus came at just the right time, in just the right place, to just the right people. God's timing for how and when he reveals his plans is always perfect. He never takes the cake out of the oven too early or too late. I imagine you, like me, often question God's timing. I'd urge you to trust it instead.

2. The Purpose of the Servant (vv. 3-6)

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."

The True Israel: And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." The servant is, somewhat strangely, called "Israel." Israel was the name given to Jacob and later became the name of his descendants, the nation of Israel. The nation was often called "God's son" (cf. Exod 4:22, Jer 31:9, Hos 11:1-4). Here, the name is again given to a person, God's servant. The servant fulfills the calling of the nation Israel to glorify God. The Messiah embodies all Israel should have been but failed to be. **Christ is the true Israel, he does what Israel should have done but failed to do.** The Israelites had failed to trust God for provision when Moses struck the rock out of anger. They had wandered in the wilderness because of their disobedience and God provided (yet they complained). Remember Jesus' testing in the wilderness (cf. Matt 4:1-11). Jesus goes to the wilderness and is tempted by Satan in a dramatic reenactment of the failures of Israel. In each instance (i.e., rock to bread, kingdoms of the world, temple fall), Jesus quotes Scripture from Deuteronomy to rebuff Satan's temptation.

- Where Israel proved her inability to live faithfully and trust God, Jesus, the son of God, is perfectly obedient and faithful. Jesus passed the test (e.g., Lori Laughlin college admission scandal). Jesus succeeds where all others fail. We "pass the test" on the merit of Christ alone. He is our perfect substitute who succeeds everywhere we fail.
- Therefore, when we trust him we can have salvation, we can be empowered for service, and we can develop humility. Only Jesus makes it possible for us to live in trust.

- This is the story of salvation: it is through faith that we are saved. God has declared us righteous in the death of Christ. We are saved through the gift of Christ. We are accepted on the merit of Christ.
- Build your life, stake your reputation, fight the good fight on the promise and work of Jesus Christ.
- Israel, in whom [God] will be glorified Christ makes this make sense. Christ is the one worthy to be called son. Christ is the one who can actually bring glory to God he deserves. In fact, Christ is the only one worthy. Nothing else can bear the weight of God's mission or our worship (e.g., relationship, money, power, job, etc.). We see the limitations of our power and control during the Coronavirus. We are much weaker than we think. We are much more fragile. This causes despair if our hope is in our own strength. When we put our hope in something other than Jesus it will let us down.

Apparent Failure: 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." Jesus' ministry was an "apparent failure" (i.e., labored in vain). He died a criminal's death. He could gather a crowd but couldn't get more than 12 dudes to stick around long (e.g., the first youth group). Jesus shows how we **trust God for the results even in the midst of apparent ministry failure.**

Confidence: 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— Jesus displayed full confidence in the plan of God. Rather than despair or be despondent, he demonstrated faith. "Faith that rests in the plan of God is the answer to anxiety and despair."

Light in the Darkness: I will make you as a light for the nations The gospel of Matthew is particularly concerned with the fulfillment of the promise that Jesus will come as the light to a dark land. In Matthew 4 the writer says, about Jesus' ministry to the Gentiles: so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned" (Matt 4:14-16).

- Elsewhere, Isaiah calls these "places of darkness" because by Isaiah's time it was populated primarily by non-Jews, and the few Jews remaining had difficulty holding onto their faith and traditions. The population was particularly mixed, open to the idolatry of the surrounding nations. Even by the time of Jesus, though more Jews had moved back, the area was culturally barely Jewish. It was surrounded by Gentile peoples and was looked down upon by many Jews because of Gentile cultural influences.
- It is in this, the least likely place, that the Messiah shows up. In the darkness, the light shines brighter. Is this why sinners respond, not religious? Is this why the rich, the religious are harder to reach? Is this why jailhouse and deathbed conversion might be more real than we want to imagine? In despised Galilee, the place where people live in

darkness, with no access to the knowledge of God, “the land of the shadow of death,” where the darkness is most dense, here, the light has dawned!

- And thus now we see the meaning of the prophecy: “the people who sit in darkness [in the lesser sense the Galileans; in the greater sense the whole world] have seen a great light [Jesus].
- What does it mean to be living in darkness? What does that sense of hopelessness feel like? E.g., Coronavirus has shattered the illusion of earthly hope. Your job, financial footing, community, health, are more fragile than you think.
- **But darkness is the greatest opportunity for light!**

Light to the Nations: 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.**” Jesus hasn’t come as a local mascot, a provincial deity, a limited savior. He is the God of all people, tribes, tongues, and nations. The purpose of Jesus was to shine the light of salvation **to the ends of the earth.**

- We have to be careful not to *limit* Jesus. He is more powerful than just being Israel’s national deity (e.g., It is too light a thing).
- We often limit Jesus. He is not just your therapist, your good luck charm, or “your truth.” He is **the way, the truth, and the life** come to bring salvation **to all who would place their faith in him.**
- **How have you limited Jesus?** When you limit Jesus you don’t worship him for who he really is. And, you don’t want a limited Jesus. **Yes, his power demands your complete submission but his power also provides for your complete salvation.**

3. See the Servant (v. 7)

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.”

Every Knee Will Bow: Many people, then and now, didn’t see Jesus, they missed him. But one day, at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10-11). Or as the Lord says in Isaiah: “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.”

They Missed the Messiah: In his earthly ministry, Jesus was deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers. He was hated for what he was (i.e., God became flesh). He was falsely accused, put through a sham trial, and executed by the state even though he was innocent. He was a servant. He was demeaned. He suffered (e.g., he had nowhere to lay his head). Despite all of the clear prophecies, the vast majority of people missed the messiah (e.g., Christmas music). We expect a conquering king and don’t realize that the king conquers through sacrifice. “We expect God to send in the tanks but instead he sends his son” (NT Wright).

- A group of tourists spent hours Saturday night looking for a missing woman only to find her among the search party. The group was traveling on a bus and stopped near a volcanic canyon to sight see. Soon, there was word of a missing passenger. The woman, who had changed clothes, didn't recognize the description of herself and joined in the search. But the search was called off at 3am when it became clear the missing woman was, in fact, accounted for and searching for herself.

Conclusion¹

Jesus came on a mission to restore his people and bring salvation to the nations.

Here's my simple plea: see Jesus. Look to him and live. Don't let misplaced expectations, anxiety, laziness, sin, or distractions blind you to the beauty of the good news of Jesus. In him is life and that life is the light of men.

¹ ⁸ Thus says the LORD: "In a time of favor I have answered you; in a **day of salvation** I have helped you; I will keep you and give you as a **covenant** to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, ⁹ saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' They shall feed along the ways; on all bare heights shall be their pasture; ¹⁰ they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. ¹¹ And I will make all my mountains a road, and my highways shall be raised up. ¹² Behold, these shall come from afar, and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene." ¹³ Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted. ¹⁴ But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me." ¹⁵ "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶ Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me. ¹⁷ Your builders make haste; your destroyers and those who laid you waste go out from you. ¹⁸ Lift up your eyes around and see; they all gather, they come to you. As I live, declares the LORD, you shall put them all on as an ornament; you shall bind them on as a bride does. ¹⁹ "Surely your waste and your desolate places and your devastated land— surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away. ²⁰ The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears: 'The place is too narrow for me; make room for me to dwell in.' ²¹ Then you will say in your heart: 'Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these? Behold, I was left alone; from where have these come?'" ²² Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples; and they shall bring your sons in their arms, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders. ²³ Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame." ²⁴ Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued? ²⁵ For thus says the LORD: "Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. ²⁶ I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob."