

“GOD’S DEAF AND BLIND SERVANT”

The more we study biblical history, church history, and even our own personal histories, the more we understand why salvation has to be entirely the work of God. We cannot make any contribution towards our salvation. This is why we cannot say, as the Roman Catholic Church says in one of the canons of the Council of Trent, that our good works, though performed by the grace of God, merit eternal life. [Canon 32] That teaching is really no different than what we see in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector when the Pharisee thanks God for the good works that he performs. By thanking God, the Pharisee was admitting that his good works were performed by God’s grace. But in the larger context of the parable, it is clear that he also saw his works as meritorious. He trusted in himself for his righteousness, which is why Jesus said that it was the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who went home justified.

The biblical picture of salvation leaves absolutely no room for human boasting. As we are told in the passage we just read, salvation is about God leading the blind on a path that they could neither find nor navigate by their own efforts. It is about God taking a people who have repeatedly turned a deaf ear to the words of his law and ransoming them to be his very own. Salvation is the work of the Lord from start to finish. And for this reason, it elicits a response of

heartfelt and enduring praise from all who experience it. This is what we see in the passage that we are studying today. These verses tell us that *God is to be praised because of how he displays his power and his patience in saving those who are spiritually deaf and blind.* As we study this passage today, we will consider this theme under three headings: God's praise; God's power; and God's patience.

### **God's Praise**

Our first point has to do with God's praise. This is the focus of verses 10-12. As we begin our study of these verses, we need to look back at something that was said in verse 9, at the end of Isaiah's first Servant Song. In that verse, God said, "new things I now declare." The phrase "new things" refers to the salvation that God would accomplish in Christ in the fullness of time. In today's sermon text, the opening verses offer a response to this announcement of "new things," as all the earth is summoned to sing to the Lord a "new song."

When the Bible speaks of singing a "new song," it is not talking about composing new songs for use in the church's worship. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with that, as long as those who compose the songs pay careful attention to the biblical principles that apply to the use of music in worship and as long as they exercise careful discernment with regard to the

musical forms that they employ. Still, this is not what the Bible means when it speaks of singing a new song. Instead, it has to do with how God's people are to respond to his great work of redemption once it has reached its point of fulfillment. The mission of the servant of the Lord, prophesied in the first part of this chapter, is an unprecedented and unparalleled work. And for this reason, it needs to be celebrated in a special manner. The "new song" is a song that praises God for the new things that he will accomplish in the fullness of redemptive history. In the words of commentator E.J. Young, "these are songs such as have never been heard on earth; songs that are fitting to celebrate the wonders of the new age when the Servant of the Lord performs his matchless work of redemption." [vol. 3, 125]

The emphasis in the opening part of our passage is upon the fact that this new song is to be sung in all the earth. It to be is sung in the coastlands and in the desert. It is to be sung by nations who were previously bitter rivals to the people of Israel. It is to be shouted from the mountain tops. The new song is a worldwide song because of what was said in the first part of chapter 42: the Lord's servant will establish justice *in the earth*; he will be a light *for the nations*. Jesus came into the world in order to bring the blessing of salvation to all the peoples of the world.

I want to call your attention to two other things that this passage has to say about the praise that the nations are to render to the Lord. First, we are told that the people should “sing for joy.” This is a picture of people who cannot help but lift up their voices in song when they begin to think about all that God has done for them. Worship is not in any sense a burden to them. It is their source of deepest joy. Christian worship should be marked by true joy -- not the kind of joy that people exhibit at a concert or a sporting event, but a serious joy, a joy that is founded upon something immeasurably profound, something that never fails to amaze us. More than anyone else on the face of the earth, Christians have a reason to sing. There is no honor in this world that is greater than being a member of the church of Jesus Christ. We should sing our songs of praise in a manner that shows that we truly believe this to be true.

Second, these verses tell us that the redeemed of the Lord should “declare his praise.” That is, we should be making his greatness known to the people of this world. The gospel is not something that we are to keep to ourselves. We are to let it shine forth to others. We see an example of this in Psalm 51, David’s great penitential psalm, where he prays, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. *Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.*” David asks for mercy, but he also says that he will

respond to God's grace by pointing others to the Lord. The joy of salvation is given in order that we might share it with others. Who is there in your life who needs to know this joy? Let your light shine before them, and pray that the Lord would open their eyes to see his truth.

### God's Power

This brings us to the second part of our passage, where the emphasis is upon God's power. In verse 13, the Lord is described as a man of war. He goes out with zeal as he prepares to meet his foes. He is not threatened by the mighty forces that are aligned against his kingdom. He goes into battle fully confident that he will obtain the victory. We sang about this earlier in today's worship service:

*Thou wast their rock, their fortress and their might;*

*thou, Lord, their Captain in the well-fought fight;*

*thou, in the darkness drear, their one true light.*

We are in a fight. There are terrifying forces in this world that are seeking to destroy the church of Jesus Christ and each of its members. The enemies of God

will stop at nothing as they try to ruin God's work of redemption. Your faith is under constant assault. If the battle depended upon you, you would not stand a chance. Thankfully, though, it doesn't depend upon you. You have a Champion. Your God is a mighty warrior. He laughs at those who set themselves against him. He will deliver you from all of your foes.

That being said, God only brings this deliverance about in his appointed time. This is what he means when he says in verse 14, "For a long time I have held my peace; I have kept still and restrained myself." In his perfect wisdom, God knows when it is the right time for him to act. He knows that if he were to pull the weeds out of his field too soon he might uproot some of the wheat as well. Or, to employ the metaphor that is used here, God is like a woman in labor, who knows that she has to wait until the time is right before she starts to push. But when it is time, she summons up all of her strength to bring her child into the world. So it is with the Lord's great work of redemption. When the time is right, he works with astonishing power to bring about his saving purposes.

Notice how this salvation is described in verses 15-16. Mountains and hills are laid waste. Vegetation is dried up. Rivers and pools dry up so that they begin to look like islands. The blind are led on a path that they didn't even know existed. Darkness is turned into light. The rough places are turned into level

ground. In all of these things, the common denominator is that the Lord brings about a great reversal. This is one way of describing salvation. It is the great reversal. God brings life to those who were dead. He declares the unjust to be just. He makes the unholy to be holy. By describing salvation in this way, the Bible shows us that it is a work of such great magnitude that it can only be accomplished by God.

The Lord says that he does not forsake the blind. He brings them into the way of salvation. He extends his grace to them. But he also says that those who trust in idols will be put to shame. This reminds us that judgment is the flip-side of salvation. As God brings salvation to the lost, he also brings judgment upon those who place their trust in the things of this world instead of in him. In Jesus' words, he came into the world in order "that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." (Jn. 9:39)

### **God's Patience**

This brings us to the third part of our passage, where we see God's patience on brilliant display. Actually, we are not told until the next chapter that the Lord is going to deal patiently with the rebellious people that he describes in verses 18-25. Here the focus is upon how Israel refused to submit to God's law and how

he disciplined them for their rebellion. Nevertheless, when we consider their stubborn refusal to listen and realize that they are the very ones to whom the Lord will say in the next chapter, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine”, we certainly do get a glimpse of the astounding patience that God shows towards his wayward people.

The first thing to note as we begin to look at this last part of our passage is the fact that God refers to his people as “my servant.” This is clearly a different servant than the one who was described in the first part of the chapter, in Isaiah’s first of four “Servant Songs.” In that passage, the Lord’s servant is Christ as the head of the body of God’s covenant people. But in our text, the Lord’s servant is not the head but the members of the body, the people of Israel.

God describes his servant as both blind and deaf. The people of Israel were just as blind as the Gentiles whose salvation is described in verse 16. They were also deaf, because they had been given God’s special revelation and refused to listen to it. It is a serious sin to possess God’s Word and ignore it, but that is what we see the people of Israel doing again and again in the Old Testament. And we see the same thing happening throughout church history, even into the present day. Many branches of the church have refused to listen to what the Lord says in his Word, as have many of the individuals who profess faith in

Christ. There are many who hear God's Word but never get around to truly applying it to their lives. This is what God is talking about when he says that his servant "sees many things, but does not observe them," and that "his ears are open, but he does not hear." Our Lord wants us to act upon the things that he shows us in his Word. He wants us to not only be hearers of his Word, but doers also. Is this the case in your life?

God also refers to Israel as his messenger. Like the church, Israel was given a commission. They were to be a source of blessing to all the peoples of the world. They were to be a kingdom of priests, interceding with God on behalf of the world. But their refusal to listen to God's Word made them a worthless messenger. The same is true of any church that refuses to listen to God's Word. A church may feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take in refugees, and provide all kinds of relief to people who are suffering, but if it refuses to listen to what the Lord has revealed in the Scriptures, it does not have anything to offer the people of this sin-sick world that the world itself cannot already offer them.

Because of Israel's refusal to listen to God's Word, he gave them over to looters and plunderers. This is a reference to Judah's fall to Babylon in the sixth century. God allowed Babylon to destroy the temple and carry his people off into captivity because of their sin. God disciplined his people for their sin. Yet this

was still not enough to open their blind eyes. As it says in verse 25, although the Lord poured the heat of his anger on his servant, the servant did not understand and did not take it to heart. Israel understood that they were in trouble. They knew that they were suffering. They knew that they needed relief. But they did not understand what their real problem was.

The same thing can happen to us when we experience trouble in our lives. The Lord sometimes uses trials to discipline us. But we often find it difficult to look at our trials that way. We have a tendency to think of ourselves as innocent sufferers, as those who deserve better. Now, it is true that there can be times when our suffering does not really have any direct connection to our sin. We know this from the story of Job. But there are other times when there is some kind of connection, times when the Lord is using the suffering that we are experiencing to discipline and correct us. We need to remember that this is a good thing. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, "God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?... he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." (Heb. 12:7, 10-11) We need to be mindful of this, or else we will be like the people of Israel as they are described in this

passage. We will not understand, and we will not take the Lord's discipline to heart.

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God saves sinners. He saves those who are spiritually blind: those who are blind because they are living in the darkness of this fallen world; and those who are blind because they have refused to see what God has set before them in his Word. This is the point that is being made in this text. And it is a point that we always need to be reminded of, because it is so hard for us to believe. Listen to how Martyn Lloyd-Jones drives this home:

“We tend to regard certain people as being ‘beyond hope’, and assume that they must of necessity continue in their grooves as they are and die unrepentant and unredeemed. We just shake our heads over them and express our sorrow. We have talked to them and tried to persuade them... Everything that human agency can possibly do has been tried and has failed. We cannot get them to come our way, so we feel that their case is hopeless and desperate. Ah! what lack of faith all that reveals!... If you and I are to save men and women, then indeed the case is hopeless. All

our efforts will most certainly fail. But that is not our gospel. It is Jesus Christ who saves! There is no limit to what he can do!... He creates anew. His power is endless. Do not give up hope for any sinner. Pray to God to save them. Let not any conversion astonish you; be astonished, rather, that anyone should possibly remain unconverted." [Murray, vol. 1, 227]

God is in the business of doing new things, surprising things, things that would never get done were it not for his powerful and patient working. He leads the blind in a way that they could never know on their own. He extends his grace to those who repeatedly refuse to listen to his Word. Never stop being amazed at God's glorious display of patience and power as he continues to bring stubborn, rebellious people like you and me into the estate of salvation. Never stop singing the new song that the Lord has placed upon your lips.