

"ISRAEL, GOD'S SERVANT"

In the preceding chapters, Israel has been reminded again and again of their spiritual bankruptcy. God told them that they are far from righteousness, that they were rebels before birth, that their failure to pay attention to his commandments resulted in their forfeiture of his blessing of peace. Then, at the end of chapter 48, where God assured his people that he would deliver them from their exile in Babylon, he reminded them yet again of their need for spiritual deliverance by declaring that "There is no peace...for the wicked." The return from exile would bring about a change in their geography, but not a change in their hearts.

God's declaration of Israel's spiritual bankruptcy is the verdict that he pronounces over every one of us when we are evaluated on the basis of our performance of his law. None of us measures up to God's standards. Left to ourselves, we cannot lay claim to the peace that God promises to those who keep his commandments. But in the passage that we are studying today, we find a glorious declaration of good news. In these verses, the Lord announces the greater deliverance that he provides for his people, a deliverance that extends beyond the nation of Israel to all the peoples of the earth. *In this second of Isaiah's*

four "Servant Songs," we are told about the mission of Jesus Christ as the true Israel, the true Servant of the Lord.

The Identity of the Servant

The first thing that we will consider as we study this passage is what it tells us about the identity of the Servant of the Lord. The chapter begins with the Servant commanding the peoples of distant lands to listen to what he is about to say. He says, "Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar." The Servant's words here are almost exactly the same as the words of the Lord when he addressed the nations back at the beginning of chapter 41. That passage began with God saying, "Listen to me in silence, O coastlands." (Isaiah 41:1) The fact that the Servant addresses the world in the same way that God does tells us that he has the same authority as God. At the same time, the Servant repeatedly refers to God as someone who is distinct from him. He speaks of God in the third person. He addresses the nations in the same way that God addresses them, yet he has an identity that is distinct and separate from that of the Lord. This can only be explained by the doctrine of the Trinity, which tells us that we must not confound the three persons of the Godhead nor divide the substance of the one true God. The Servant in this passage is Jesus Christ, God

the Son. The Son is fully God, but he is also distinct from God the Father and God the Holy Spirit as far as his person is concerned. In the words of the Athanasian Creed, “the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and yet they are not three Gods, but one God.”

The Servant says that the Lord called him from the womb and named his name from the body of his mother. This does not mean that Jesus was brought into being when he was born as a man. He was made man, but before his birth he eternally existed as the second person of the Trinity. The Servant’s words here have to do with the fact that he was set apart for his office as the one true Mediator between God and man when he took on our flesh and blood. Calvin explains it this way: “Christ was clothed with our flesh by the appointment of the Father, in order that he might fulfill the office of Redeemer, to which he had been appointed.”

The other thing that we learn about the Servant’s identity in the opening verses of this chapter has to do with his humanity. In verse 3, the Lord says to him, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” The Servant is called Israel, yet he is also distinct from Israel. This is made clear in verse 5, where we are told that the Servant’s mission is to bring unfaithful Israel back to the Lord. God created Israel for the sake of his glory. But Israel failed to glorify

God. By giving Jesus the name "Israel," God testifies to Israel's failure to live up to what it means to be God's covenant people. But the story does not end there. In Jesus Christ, God has provided "a true and worthy Israel" [Motyer, 386], an Israel who truly glorifies him.

The words spoken by the Lord in verse 3 apply not only to Jesus but also to everyone who belongs to him. Christ is the Head of his church, the true Israel, and as such he contains in himself all of the members of his body. As Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal. 3:26-27) If you belong to Jesus Christ, then you are a part of the body to which the Lord says, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

How the Servant's Mission Is Accomplished

This brings us to the second point that we need to consider as we study this passage: how the Servant's mission is accomplished. In verse 2, the Servant says that the Lord made his mouth like a sharp sword. This tells us that Jesus does not establish his kingdom as the princes of this world establish their kingdoms. He rules by the power of his word. His kingdom does not advance by political

power, or by cultural influence, or by innovative strategies. It advances by the faithful preaching of the gospel.

In likening himself to a polished arrow, the Servant is saying that his Word has the power to subdue not only those who are close at hand but also those who are far off. A sword is used to fight enemies who are close by, but an arrow can strike at those who are far away. So it is with the preaching of the gospel. It subdues people of all lands, both near and far, to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation. Yet in verse 4, the Servant expresses a sense of futility over the work to which he has been called. He says, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." This points to the fact that the preaching of the gospel does not always seem to be very effective. Many people hear the gospel, but comparatively few repent and believe. It is easy for us to get discouraged about this, especially here in northern New England, where the spiritual soil often seems hopelessly rocky. But this passage reminds us that the fruit of the preaching of the gospel is not always visible to our eyes. There are times when it may seem like our faithful witness is in vain, but that is not the case. The Lord will not allow his gospel to be ultimately unproductive. Nothing can hinder Jesus from executing his office as the Lord's Servant. Nothing can prevent him from gathering in every individual

who has been appointed to eternal life. Jesus is working through his church, including this church, to restore unfaithful saints and to bring in new ones. Pray for this to happen here in the Lakes Region. Pray for the Lord to use our witness to draw unchurched people to Christ. Pray that God would use us to bring Roman Catholics, and liberal Protestants, and evangelicals who are being fed a diet of spiritual junk food back to the true gospel.

The Extent of the Servant's Mission

The next thing that we see in this passage has to do with the extent of the Servant's mission. In verse 6, the Lord 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." This is a prophecy of the mission to the Gentiles, the fulfillment of the promise that God gave Abraham when he said to him, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:3) Passages such as these remind us that God's purposes for Israel were never limited to Israel. From the very beginning, it was his plan to work through Israel to bring salvation to all the peoples of the earth. And this is precisely what he has done in Jesus, the true son of Abraham. This is why Paul could say to both

Jewish and Gentile Christians “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Galatians 3:29)

The prophecy made in verse 6 confronts dispensationalism, a way of interpreting the Bible made popular through the *Scofield Bible* and the *Left Behind* novels. Dispensationalism says that the Old Testament never predicts the church, and it maintains that God has a purpose for ethnic Israel that is separate from his purpose for the church. But verse 6 makes it clear that it was God’s plan all along for the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles. The Gentiles share in the same light and salvation that the remnant of Israel enjoys through the Servant’s faithful ministry. The church is not separate from ethnic Israel. It is the fulfillment of Israel. This is why Paul can refer to the church as “the Israel of God” at the end of his letter to the Galatians, a letter in which he repeatedly emphasizes that in Christ there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile.

The Servant Guarantees the Security of God’s Pilgrim People

The next point for us to consider as we make our way through this passage is how the Servant’s faithfulness guarantees the security of God’s pilgrim people. In verse 8, God says that he will give Christ “as a covenant to the people.” This speaks to the role that Christ fulfills for us in the covenant of grace. Jesus was set

apart by God to serve as our Mediator in the covenant of grace. This is why he can be called by the name "Israel." He is the covenant representative for all who are a part of spiritual Israel. While we fall miserably short of the glory to which God calls us, Christ stands in our place and secures God's blessing for all who look to him in faith.

In verses 9-12, the Lord describes the application of Christ's work as covenant mediator, as the elect from every nation are brought out of their exile and into Christ's kingdom. By using this imagery to describe our salvation, God reminds us of our plight. Christ came into the world in order to set us free from the prison of sin. He came in order to bring us out of the darkness and into the light. But this salvation is only promised to those who acknowledge their condition. As Calvin puts it, "liberty is not promised to any but those who acknowledge that they are captives, and light and salvation are not promised to any but those who acknowledge that they are plunged in darkness."

The imagery in these verses recalls Israel's deliverance at the time of the exodus from Egypt, especially their time in the wilderness. This teaches us something about what it means for us to live in this world as God's redeemed people. Like Israel in the wilderness, we are a pilgrim people. We have not yet entered into our inheritance in Christ's kingdom. Our days in this world are

days of sojourning, days of pilgrimage. And the world in which we sojourn is a wilderness, a world of ruin and desolation, a world that has been subjected to futility as a result of sin. But in these verses, we are given three assurances about our sojourn through this life.

First, God promises us that he will provide for us. We will feed along the ways and find pasture on the bare heights. Our Lord is not lacking in resources. Even when earthly means fail, he is able to provide us with all that we need.

Second, God promises to protect us. Neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike us. Our God rules over everything in this world. Not a hair can fall from our heads apart from his will. We cannot even be tempted apart from his will. God is a mighty fortress for those who trust in him. We have nothing to fear, not even if the earth should give way, not even if the mountains should be moved into the heart of the sea.

Third, God promises to guide us. He leads us by springs of water. We are not on our own in the wilderness. Just as the Lord was with the exodus generation, leading them through the wilderness by the pillar of cloud and pillar of smoke, so also does he travel along with us. Because of this, none of the obstacles or troubles that we face on our pilgrimage will be able to prevent us from entering into the inheritance that Christ has won for us. Our God makes mountains into a

road. He gathers his people from afar. No matter how hard or how long your pilgrimage is, he will bring you home.

The Response of the Redeemed

In the last verse of our passage, all the earth is summoned to join the redeemed in rejoicing over the great salvation that the Lord has secured for his people through his Servant. Isaiah says, "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." (Isaiah 49:13) The only proper response to God's goodness to us in Christ is to sing for joy. This brings to mind the verses that we sang earlier in the service:

Let us love and sing and wonder,

Let us praise the Savior's name!

He has hushed the Law's loud thunder,

He has quenched mount Sinai's flame:

He has washed us with His blood,

He has brought us nigh to God.

As that hymn by John Newton so clearly reminds us, our salvation is entirely God's doing. We have not done anything to deserve it. All that we can do is celebrate what God has done for us in Christ. And doing so is vital for our faith, because giving thanks is one of the principle ways in which we stir up our faith in what God has promised. The more we express our heartfelt gratitude for what God has promised us in Christ, the more powerfully will these glorious promises affect our hearts.

By using the names "Israel" and "servant" to refer to both Christ and Christ's church, God shows us that the only way we can receive his covenant blessings is by being united to Jesus by faith. The only way we can participate in the blessings that Christ has secured for us is by having fellowship with him. Calvin puts it this way: "Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed... The Lord Jesus never gives anyone the enjoyment of his benefits except by giving himself." [*Institutes* 3.11.10; 3.16.1]

The faith that we have in Christ does far more than connect us to the salvation that Jesus secured for us. It connects us to Jesus himself. Thanks be to God.