

“THE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST”

One thing that distinguishes Christianity from other religions has to do with the role that Christ plays in the Christian faith. Without Christ, there is no Christianity. The same cannot be said of the founders of other world religions. B.B. Warfield expressed it this way: “the founders of other religions point out the way to God while Christ presents Himself as the Way.” [*The Person and Work of Christ*, 319] And in the words of Herman Bavinck, “Christ is Christianity itself... [W]ithout his name, person and work, there is no Christianity left.” [cited in Warfield, 319] We are given insight into why this is the case in this chapter of Isaiah’s prophecy, which contains the third of the book’s four Servant songs. This passage tells us that *Christ obeys and suffers in our place in order to rescue us from the misery that we bring upon ourselves by our sin*. Were it not for the faithfulness of the Servant who speaks in these verses, there would be no gospel.

The Need for the Servant

This passage begins by talking about our sin and God’s power to save. As the chapter opens, the Lord is still responding to the complaint that Israel voiced in chapter 49, saying that God had forsaken them. God responds to this complaint by asking his exiled people two rhetorical questions: “Where is your mother’s

certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you?" By asking these questions, God points out the real reason for Israel's exile. They were not sent away because of any failing on God's part. The Lord is not like the middle-aged man who leaves his wife for a younger woman. He is not a God who has to sell his people into slavery in order to pay off his debts, as if he could have any creditors. The reason why Israel was sent into exile was because of their sin. God says, "for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away." Israel's sense of alienation from God was brought about by their own doing. They brought their misery upon themselves.

We see the same sort of thing in the world today. We see people reaping what they sow. And it is interesting that people often fail to realize that this is what is taking place. They fail to see that they have brought their difficulties upon themselves. Instead, they assign the blame to others, or to circumstances beyond their control. They may not claim to have behaved perfectly, but they hold themselves far less responsible for their situation than the other people or factors that are involved. For the most part, they see themselves more as a victim than as an offender. This is what Israel was doing when they responded to their exile by saying that God had forsaken them. They failed to see that they were only

reaping what they had sown. They should have been able to see this. It was obvious. But they did not see it. This should serve as a warning to us to not be too quick to think that there is no connection between our trials and our sin. Sometimes there is. Our heavenly Father disciplines us when we sin. He uses suffering, trials, and sometimes even temptation as a means of discipline, as a means of humbling us and working repentance in our hearts. But even when our trials are not a matter of discipline, they are never brought about because God has forsaken us. As the Lord said so emphatically in chapter 49, he never forgets his people. He has engraved us on the palms of his hands. Because of this, you can be confident that there is nothing in your life that is not working towards the fulfillment of God's gracious purposes for you.

In verse 2, God confronts Israel for being unresponsive to his call to repent. This further underscores that it is not God who has forsaken Israel, but Israel who has forsaken God. The Lord came to them with his message of warning, but there was no man who would listen to him. He called to them, but no one answered. Israel failed to listen to God. And that failure resulted in their exile. Their only hope is for the Lord to raise up another servant, a servant who will listen perfectly when God calls, a servant who will always do what God says. This sets the stage for what will be said in the Servant Song in verses 4-9.

In the remainder of verse 2 and verse 3, God reminds us of his power to save. Despite Israel's many transgressions and their resulting exile, God's hand is not too short to save his rebellious people. Israel was getting what they deserved. But the Lord did not leave them in their misery. This tells that there is no situation that is too difficult for God to overcome. There is no such thing as a hopeless case. The Lord has the power to dry up the sea. He can blot out the sun. No matter what kind of trouble you find yourself in, no matter what it was that brought that trouble about, your God is both willing and able to deliver you.

The Work of the Servant

This brings us to the second part of our passage, where the focus is upon the work of God's faithful Servant. As we come to verse 4, we can see that there is a change in the person speaking. The chapter began with the words: "Thus says the LORD." But verse 4 begins with someone saying: "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught." Obviously then, this is someone other than God. And he is identified for us in verse 10, where Isaiah tells us that it is the Lord's servant who has been speaking. As I have said previously in this sermon series, this Servant figure is Jesus Christ. Israel failed in her calling to be God's servant, but Jesus came as a descendant of Abraham and lived as the

perfect Servant of the Lord. And because of his faithfulness, he is able to sustain the one who is weary. And take note of how he does this. He sustains the weary by his word, by the gospel that he preaches to us. Jesus brings hope to bruised reeds by proclaiming the salvation that he has won for us.

There are two main components to the Servant's faithfulness in these verses: he listens to God and he endures suffering in faith. This points to the two aspects of Christ's atoning work, which are sometimes described as his active obedience and his passive obedience. The phrase "active obedience" refers to how Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law on our behalf. It is important to understand that it was just as necessary for our salvation for Christ to obey God's law in our place as it was for him to suffer in our place. Not only do we need someone to bear the punishment that we deserve; we also need someone to supply the righteousness that we lack. This is what the active obedience of Christ is about. And it is what the Servant is talking about in this passage when he says that God has awakened and opened his ear. He is ready and willing to hear and obey God's word. God's law is written on his heart, so that he wants to do what is pleasing to the Lord. The only man who perfectly fits this description is the one who is the Word made flesh: Jesus Christ. He came into the world to carry out his Father's will. He

was not rebellious in the least. He even went so far as to say “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” (Jn. 4:34)

As for the phrase “passive obedience,” this refers to how Jesus bore the punishment that we deserved by dying on the cross. This aspect of Christ’s atoning work was passive in the sense that it was not so much something that he did but something that he allowed to be done to him. Nevertheless, it is rightly called an act of obedience because he did it willingly, in perfect submission to the will of his Father. This is reflected in the Servant’s words in verse 6, where he says, “I gave my back to those who strike... I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting.” Jesus went to the cross willingly, and he was able to do so because he had perfect faith in his Father. He believed that God would help him. He trusted that God would not allow his enemies to triumph over him. He knew that the Lord would vindicate him at the proper time.

One of the things that might sound a little strange in this passage is the fact that the Servant says that he was taught. We find something very similar to this in Hebrews 5:8, where it says: “Although [Jesus] was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” (Hebrews 5:8) What does this mean? In what sense was Jesus “taught”? In what sense did he “learn obedience”? John Murray

offers a helpful explanation of this in his classic book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, from which I quote:

“[Jesus] was always holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. But there was the perfecting of development and growth in the course and path of his obedience -- he *learned* obedience. The heart and mind and will of our Lord had been moulded -- shall we not say forged? -- in the furnace of temptation and suffering. And it was in virtue of what he had learned in that experience of temptation and suffering that he was able, at the climactic point fixed by the arrangements of infallible wisdom and everlasting love, to be obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. It was only as having learned obedience in the path of inerrant and sinless discharge of the Father’s will that his heart and mind and will were framed to the point of being able freely and voluntarily to yield up his life in death upon the accursed tree.... It is obedience that enlisted all the resources of his perfect humanity, obedience that resided in his person and obedience of which he is ever the perfect embodiment... And we become the beneficiaries of it, indeed the

partakers of it, by union with him." [John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 22-24]

Jesus was taught obedience in the sense that he was a real human being, a human being who had to endure many tests, trials and temptations over the course of his lifetime. And through those experiences, his heart, mind and will were forged in the way of faithfulness. This is how he was made the perfect Savior.

Responding to the Servant

This brings us to the third part of the passage, where we are summoned to respond to the Servant's message. Verses 10-11 describe the two ways in which people respond to the Servant of the Lord. First, Isaiah asks, "Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant?" The Bible sometimes uses the concept of the fear of the Lord as another way of describing what it means to have true faith in the Lord. Those who truly place their trust in God will also fear him. And as this verse tells us, those who fear the Lord will listen to his Word and take its message to heart. The person who can hear God's Word without taking heed to what it says is someone who does not truly fear God.

In the second half of verse 10, Isaiah speaks of those who walk in darkness and have no light. Most of the time when the Bible uses this kind of imagery, it is referring to people who do not trust in the Lord. But this is not the case here, since Isaiah is talking about those who fear the Lord and listen to his Word. This tells us that there can be times in our lives as Christians when the Lord calls us to walk in darkness, times when we have no light. The Puritans called such times “desertions.” In speaking this way, they were not saying that there are times when God actually deserts his people, but that it can seem that way from our point of view. In his mysterious providence, the Lord sometimes uses seasons of apparent desertion to test our faith and force us to rely upon him alone.

In verse 11, Isaiah speaks of the other way in which people respond to the teaching of the Servant. Instead of relying on God, some choose to kindle their own fire and light their own torches as they look for a way through the darkness. This is a picture of those who are self-sufficient, those who see no need for Christ. God says that he allows such people to walk by the light of their fire and by the torches that they kindle. Think for a moment of all the people in this world who fall into this category. There are so many who think that they are doing just fine as they navigate a course through life according to their own wisdom. But the Lord says that in the end, they will meet their doom. Those who forsake the light

of God's Word and look elsewhere for comfort and guidance will miserably perish. And take note of what God says about the source of the torment that these people will one day experience. He says that it will come from his hand. In the end, the self-sufficient will be assigned to a place where God's wrath is fully manifested in all of its terror. The point is made very clear: if you will not look to the Lord to be your light, then you will be given over to eternal darkness.

How can you find comfort when you find yourself walking in darkness? How can you find help and hope during a period when you feel deserted by God? You find these things by remembering that Jesus knows exactly what you are going through. Jesus walked in the darkness too. He experienced desertion in the fullest possible sense when he died on the cross. And the faith that enabled him to persevere through that ordeal was not in vain. God did not abandon his holy One to the darkness of the grave. God vindicated him. And he will vindicate you too. If God is for you, who can be against you? God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. Jesus Christ is your righteous advocate. And even now he is interceding for you at God's right hand. You have no reason to doubt that God will bring you out of whatever periods of darkness

you face and bring you into his eternal light. As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Heb. 4:15-16)