

The Servant's Mission in the World

Isaiah 49:1-6
SS Lesson for 01/23/11

Devotional Scripture: Luke 19:9-10

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Introduction

Overview and Approach to Lesson

The concept of the outline of the lesson came from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator. This week's lesson reviews the **Servant's Mission in the World**. The **study's aim** is to review the facts about the mission of God's Servant in the world. The **study's application** is to know that the Servant of God came to bring salvation to the world and to turn to the Servant so that we too will receive the salvation that He offers us.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Pay It Forward

The expression pay it forward originally was a financial phrase. A benevolent creditor would sometimes allow a debtor to discharge a debt by paying the owed sum "forward" to someone else who needed help rather than "back" to the creditor. Catherine Ryan Hyde titled a novel after this expression. Widespread attention came when the novel evolved into a motion picture in 2000. In this film, a boy accepts his teacher's challenge to develop and implement a plan to change the world. The boy's plan was simple. He would do something for three people who could not do that thing for themselves. If each of them, in turn, did the same for three additional people, who did the same for three more people and so forth, then this would trigger an avalanche of good deeds that would eventually bring healing to the world. This movie struck such a cord because many believe that those who routinely receive blessings should become people who extend such blessings to others. Yet it is important to note what it takes to make such a process work: it takes people who are willing (1) to extend kindness without being repaid and (2) to challenge the recipients of the kindness to go and do likewise. That second part is where the process would break down in our day, I suspect. There are many givers in our world and perhaps even more takers, but few seem to be willing to challenge others to be giving people. In today's lesson we learn that Israel's God has not only chosen Israel to be the recipient of his special favor, but that he also expected them to direct that favor toward others in turn.

Lesson Background

Today's passage in Isaiah 49, like chapters 45 and 48 from the two past weeks, is addressed to the Israelites after they have been beaten and bruised by the Babylonians. We remind ourselves, however, that the Babylonian captivity won't even begin until at least 95 years after Isaiah writes. When that captivity occurs, the people are beaten down not only physically but psychologically, as the book of Lamentations makes clear (also Psalm 137). It was obvious to everyone that Babylon was the stronger nation numerically, militarily, and territorially. Up to the point of today's lesson, God had assured the Israelites that he had not abandoned them, that he had not been defeated by Babylon's gods, and that he intended to restore them. In chapter 49, we hear partially from Israel's perspective and partially from God's perspective. One challenge to understanding today's passage is that Isaiah 49 is one of four chapters containing the so-called "Servant Songs" of that book. (The other songs are in chapters 42, 52, and 53.) What these songs have in common is that they all talk about the activity of a particular servant of God. The thing that is challenging about the Servant Songs is that it is not always clear who the servant is in each passage. Sometimes the reference clearly is to Israel. Sometimes the reference clearly is to an individual person. Identifying the servant is further complicated by the fact that Christians see Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of many of these passages. Yet this fact does not make the interpretive mystery go away. Here is not the place to discuss in detail all the possible interpretations of these passages or to try to solve the mystery fully.

From the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

After Saul of Tarsus was converted, a Jewish believer named Ananias was told to go to him with further instructions. He was told that Saul was a "chosen vessel, to bear [Christ's] name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Before long, the Jews plotted to murder Saul, making it

necessary for him to flee by night (verses 23-25). As Saul soon discovered, his Jewish brethren were less than enthusiastic about his newfound faith in Christ. A few years later, when Saul, now called Paul (Acts 13:9), embarked on his mission journeys, he failed to win many of his own countrymen to Christ. After Jews in Pisidia rejected the gospel, Paul declared, "Lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (verse 46). Besides what he had been told at his conversion, Paul also had scriptural authority for this decision. "For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldst be for salvation unto the ends of the earth" (verse 47). Paul was quoting from Isaiah 49:6, part of this week's lesson text. Israel was the chosen nation of God, but the people had failed miserably in meeting His holy and righteous requirements. Through Isaiah, God spoke of a Servant who was going to be the Messiah to the people of the world as revealed in the sufferings that He would endure. These sufferings brought the salvation that He gives us. The future that God offers us comes because of this salvation, which is free and available to everyone in the world. This section of Isaiah begins the second main division in the book and deals with the salvation that comes from the Suffering Servant. Our lesson this week explores the unique mission of the Servant in the world. Our lesson this week teaches us about the commissioning of this Servant of God. It is a portrayal of the mission of our Lord, and this is closely related to the work that He was to do on the cross. Our Scripture passage this week shows us that He is the Light for the Gentiles so that they might find salvation.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Called By God (Isa 49:1-3)

- 1 "Listen, O coastlands, to Me, And take heed, you peoples from afar! The Lord has called Me from the womb; From the matrix of My mother He has made mention of My name.
- 2 And He has made My mouth like a sharp sword; In the shadow of His hand He has hidden Me, And made Me a polished shaft; In His quiver He has hidden Me."
- 3 "And He said to me, 'You are My servant, O Israel, In whom I will be glorified.'

Called before being born (1)

Called by God who chose us before the creation (Eph 1:4-5)

4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—

Called according to God's purpose (Rom 8:28-29)

28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Called by grace (Rom 11:2-5)

2 God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah — how he appealed to God against Israel: 3 "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? 4 And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." 5 So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.

Called through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (2 Thess 2:13)

13 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

Called through God's predestination and justification (Rom 8:30)

30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Called to be sustained by God (2)

God sustains from birth (Ps 71:6)

6 From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you.

God sustains through a willing spirit (Ps 51:12)

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

God sustains because He will never forsake His own (Ps 55:22)

22 Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.

God sustains because He promised to do so (Ps 119:116)

116 Sustain me according to your promise, and I will live; do not let my hopes be dashed.

God sustains because He always finishes what He starts (Phil 1:6)

6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Called to glorify God (3)

Glorify God through unity (Rom 15:5-6)

5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Glorify God through living a godly life (1 Peter 2:12)

12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Glorify God through doing good works (Matt 5:16)

16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Glorify God in our bodies (1 Cor 6:20)

20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Glorify God through suffering for Christ (1 Peter 4:16)

16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

Strengthened By God (Isa 49:4-5)

4 Then I said, 'I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain; Yet surely my just reward is with the Lord, And my work with my God.'"

5 "And now the Lord says, Who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, So that Israel is gathered to Him (For I shall be glorious in the eyes of the Lord, And My God shall be My strength),

Strengthened for work (4)

Work with sincerity of heart and with all the ability that God provides (Eph 6:5-8)

5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. 6 Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, 8 because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

Work that God created us to do (Eph 2:10)

10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Work so that we can share with those in need (Eph 4:28)

28 He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

Work should be done prompted by love and produced by faith (1 Thess 1:3)

3 We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Work so we don't depend on others (1 Thess 4:11-12)

11 Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, 12 so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

Strengthened to serve (5)

Serve by helping God's people (Heb 6:10)

10 God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

Serve faithfully (1 Cor 4:1-2)

4 So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. 2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

Serve by being God's fellow worker (1 Cor 3:8-9)

8 The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.

Serve as serving God (Eph 6:7)

7 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men,

Serve by using the gifts God has provided (1 Peter 4:10)

10 Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

Witness For God (Isa 49:6)

6 Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.'

Witness about restoration (6)

Restoration that cannot be hindered by distance (Deut. 30:4)

4 Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back.

Restoration that proves God's grace (2 Chron. 30:9)

9 If you return to the Lord, then your brothers and your children will be shown compassion by their captors and will come back to this land, for the Lord your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him."

Restoration that is promised (Acts 3:21)

21 He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.

Restoration of the soul (Psalm 23:3)

3 he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Restoration of joy (Psalm 51:12)

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Restoration of God's pleasure (Psalm 85:4)

4 Restore us again, O God our Savior, and put away your displeasure toward us.

Witness about salvation (6)

Salvation through the gospel (Rom 1:16)

16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

Salvation through repentance (2 Cor 7:10)

10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

Salvation sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13)

13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,

Salvation through sanctification by the Holy Spirit (2 Thess 2:13)

13 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.

Salvation through the renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5)

5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

It must have been great news to the Israelites that their time of punishment would draw to an end. After decades of suffering and humiliation, they received a new lease on life. But with that new lease on life came a reminder of a larger purpose. We may compare this with a 30-year-old person who has lived selfishly for most of life before coming to the Lord. When Jesus delivers him or her from self-centeredness and grants forgiveness, it is tempting for the person to focus almost exclusively on being grateful to Jesus. The person may even meet weekly with fellow believers to express gratitude for God's deliverance. But to do only this is too small a thing for God's people. God does not set apart a people for himself merely to have them praise him for setting them apart. He set us apart so we may join his mission of proclaiming his reign to the entire world (Matthew 28:19, 20). What God requires is for us to be his hands and feet on this earth, to grant a dying world a life-giving glimpse of his eternal reign. To neglect this task is to neglect our reason to be. The church, like ancient Israel, exists for the world.

Concluding Thoughts from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

I sincerely hope you are enjoying this rich series of messianic prophecies from Isaiah as much as I am! They are an enduring testimony to the eternal plan of God to redeem His people, Jews and Gentiles, through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. In this week's golden text, God reveals His secret weapon! Our lesson text for this week is all about what the Apostle Paul referred to in his epistles as "the mystery" (Eph. 6:19). That mystery was an idea that was mostly hidden throughout the Old Testament but vaguely hinted at nevertheless in some passages of the prophets, especially Isaiah (cf. Isa. 11:10; 42:6, 22; 60:3, 5; 62:2; Mai. 1:11). The mystery of which Paul spoke is, of course, a mystery no longer to those who believe the gospel, and it is especially obvious if we are not of Jewish lineage. The mystery essentially focuses around the idea of God's eternal plan to redeem a special people for Himself not only from the Israelites but also from the Gentiles: out "of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues" (Rev. 7:9). Here in Isaiah 49, the preincarnate Christ is speaking of Himself. He calls out to all the peoples of the world to His message and mission, one spared for Him by God the Father (cf. verse 1). Christ describes Himself as God's secret weapon, an arrow of superlative characteristics, hidden away until the time is fully ripe. His speech will pierce "hearts like a finely honed blade (Isa. 49:2). He will glorify God as no one else can (cf. vs. 3). Then the scene shifts to one of frustration and disappointment in the midst of tenaciously maintained faithfulness to God (Isa. 49:4). Christ wonders if all His efforts are in vain, for from an earthly perspective it might very well seem that way. We can perhaps see this verse as a precursor to Jesus' intense struggles in the Garden of Gethsemane. Against all appearances, Jesus is determined to trust and to rely on His heavenly Father, completing the task assigned to Him in the face of overwhelming obstacles. Then God tells the Messiah an astonishing thing. The Father reveals that even though it might seem that Christ's mission to gather even the Jews has become an utter failure, in reality Messiah is the most glorious conqueror the world will ever see; God will yet make Him greater than ever (Isa. 49:5). In supreme confidence, God the Father assures Messiah of His unparalleled and complete success. It is as if God were telling Him, "This mission to merely gather the Jews back to Me is comparatively such a trifle! It is too small a task for the great intentions I have for You! "Besides bringing the Jews back to Me, I will also make You the beacon of my salvation for the whole world! You will not just save the Jews; You will save people from every nation

on earth! You, abhorred by Your own people whom You came to save, shall one day be worshiped by great kings!" Today we know this is true. Amen!

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. God has a divine plan and purpose for each of us even before we are born (Isa. 49:1; cf. Ps. 139:13-16; Eph. 2:8-10)
2. God desires to be glorified by the works of His servants (Isa. 49:2-3; I Cor. 10:31)
3. In the end it is God's verdict on our work, not our results, that matter (Isa. 49:4)
4. Glorious in the eyes of the Lord are those servants who work in His strength (vs. 5)
5. We should never underestimate God's love for the people of the world or His plans for using us to reach them (Isa. 49:6; cf. John 3:16)

Heart of the Lesson from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

"A poor little boy once heard his Sunday School teacher say Jesus was the light of the world. He took her remark quite literally. After class, the boy said to his teacher, 'If Jesus really is the light of the world, I wish He'd come hang out in my alley. It's awful dark where I live'" (www.elbourne.org). It is awfully dark where we live. The darkness is not related primarily to geography and location; it is intimately related to the spiritual condition of our world and culture (cf. Eph. 6:12; 1 Pet. 2:9). In this week's lesson text, we learn of the mission of God's Servant. The key to that mission was to bring the light of salvation to a spiritually dark and lost world.

The preparation of God's Servant (Isa. 49:1-4)

God's Servant wanted the inhabited world, including faraway islands and peoples, to listen to His testimony of how God had prepared Him for His mission. God not only gave Him a unique name but also conferred on Him the ability to speak penetrating words. As God's Servant fulfilled His exclusive mission, God also provided for His protection. He would bring glory to the One who had uniquely prepared Him. The response of God's Servant to His divine preparation was mixed. On one hand, He admitted an awareness of the difficulty of His work. On the other hand, He humbly submitted Himself to the One who had sovereignly prepared Him to fulfill His mission. God is still preparing individuals to accomplish His mission of sharing the gospel message with the world. Believers who have acknowledged and accepted God's call do so confidently, knowing that God has prepared them for the task.

The purposes of God's Servant (Isa. 49:5-6)

God's purposes for His Servant included restoration, glorification, and salvation. Ultimately, God would use His Servant to restore Israel to a right relationship with Himself. Even before that restoration occurred, the Servant would "be glorious in the eyes of the Lord"; He would persevere in accomplishing His mission, for He would carry it out in God's omnipotent strength. God then revealed that His Servant's mission would extend far beyond the nation of Israel. God's heart longed for His entire creation to know how much He wanted them to receive His salvation. In order to accomplish that task, God would use His Servant to be a light for the Gentiles and to bring God's salvation to the farthest ends of the earth. God longs for His entire creation to be restored to a right relationship with Him. In order to accomplish this mission of salvation, called servants must be prepared to take the light of the gospel to a spiritually dark and dead world (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4-6). In light of the missions thrust at the heart of this week's lesson text, it would be appropriate for the readers of this lesson to consider whether God is calling them into His service on the mission field. Would you be willing to consider the truth of Matthew 9:37-38 and earnestly seek the Lord of the harvest? Perhaps He wants you to become one of His prepared servants. Will you dedicate your life to the ministries of restoration, glorification, and salvation?