

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 13 April 2014

No. T0828

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Four songs of the Servant: The Sadness of the Servant

Last week, in this series on the "Four Songs of the Servant", we looked at "The Style of the Servant". Today our subject is "The Sadness of the Servant". It is found in Isaiah 49:1-9 which recently inspired this poem:

*'Twas from His mother's womb, blest God,
Jesus was called by You.
Your only Son had come to earth
To be a bondsman true.
A sharp sword, Lord, His mouth was made
His enemies to slay;
But in Your hand, He was well hid
'Till the appointed day.*

*The bow that was Your Spirit, Lord,
Was bent by You above.
This polished shaft, to earth You sent
To show us Your great love.
By Him You would be glorified
Though He would work in vain.
How sad the heart that did Your will!
How great His grief and pain!*

*Though Israel remained afar
You were this Servant's song.
A light to Gentiles, He was made
To turn them from all wrong!
This Servant, hated by His own,
Was chosen, Lord, by You.
Now, to this Man despised and scorned
Worship from kings is due.*

*How pleased You were, His cry to hear;
You kept Him by Your might.
A covenant You made Him, Lord,
Victorious from the fight.
'Tis He who sets the prisoner free
And darkness turns to light.
'Tis He who as a shepherd cares!
He is Your pure delight!*

(GE Stevens)

Unusually, Isaiah 49:1-9 begins with a call to the Gentile nations rather than to Israel. The Servant cries through Isaiah the prophet: "Listen, O isles, unto me; and hearken, ye people, from far; The LORD hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name" (Isaiah 49:1). It is not surprising that Isaiah was chosen to proclaim these words because the meaning of his name pinpoints the Person whom he represents. Isaiah means "Yahweh is salvation". The servant he represents here is none other than Jesus whose equivalent name in Hebrew "Jehoshua" means "Yahweh who saves". Therefore, these words of Isaiah are written in the spirit of Christ. In other words, Christ was speaking through the prophet. When the Servant says: "...From the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name" (Isaiah 49:1) He is showing that the LORD Himself had named Him before He was born. In Matthew 1:21 the angel of the LORD spoke to Joseph (who was to be His stepfather) and said of Mary: "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins." Also Mary herself was told the name of the Son she was to bear (Luke 1:31).

The fact that the LORD called His servant from the womb shows that the whole of His human existence was to be set apart to the service of God. The Apostle Paul, by the Spirit of God, puts it this way in Philippians 2:6-8: *"Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."* Not only was the Lord Jesus Christ called to be a Servant; but He was also born to die the most shameful of deaths for it is written in Deuteronomy 21:23: *"...He that is hanged is accursed of God."*

Initially, the service of the man called Jesus was restricted to the Jewish people. To them He preached the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 4:17). However, there was an indication that He would also bless the Gentiles when a Canaanite woman came to Him seeking help for her devil-possessed daughter. This incident is recorded in Matthew 15:21-28. Although He said, *"I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel"* (Matthew 15:24), He appreciated the greatness of this woman's faith and her daughter was healed.

In John 10:15-16 these words of Jesus are found: *"...As the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep which are not of this fold: those also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one flock, one shepherd"* (JN Darby translation). Here, the fold speaks of Israel's faithful while the "other sheep" are the believing among Gentiles. Jew and Gentile form one flock under one Shepherd. Hence, at the beginning of Isaiah 49 we find the Servant calling the Gentile nations to hear His word. The great commission that Jesus gave His disciples began this era in earnest. In Luke 24:46-47 we find these words of Jesus: *"Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."* This is later confirmed at His ascension in Acts 1:8 where Jesus said: *"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."*

Returning to Isaiah 49, the Servant states *"that [the LORD] hath made [His] mouth like a sharp sword"* (Isaiah 49:2) This shows that the Servant had the authority of God and was led by the Spirit of God because it is the word of God that is sharper than any two-edged sword. We read in Hebrews 4:12: *"For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."* We see this word in action when the Lord Jesus appears as King of kings and Lord of lords. Revelation 19:15 states: *"And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God."* In that day, He will subdue all nations by the power of His word and they will yield to His government.

The next portion in our main passage states: *"In the shadow of his hand hath he hid me..."* (Isaiah 49:2). Here the Servant is emphasising the secrecy and security that He had under the shadow of the LORD's hand. It reminds us that God waited until the time was right before presenting the Servant publicly to the people. So it may well speak of the first thirty-or-so years of His life. It was certainly true that He was hidden from view until He came into the world. It is written: *"But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons"* (Galatians 4:4-5). However, it may refer also to His present concealment in heaven until the day of His second advent. I personally lean towards the security and privacy of His upbringing before His public ministry because He later mentions His failure in restoring Israel to God. He will succeed in doing this in that future day when to Himself shall the gathering of the people be. Genesis 49:10 reads: *"The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be."* The name "Shiloh" meaning: "Abundant peace." The Lord Jesus is Shiloh. He is the Prince of Peace! (Isaiah 9:6) Today, Christians already have the privilege of gathering to Him. We read His words recorded in Matthew 18:20: *"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."* What an amazing privilege we have - to gather in the presence of the Son of God Himself!

The Servant is then described as a polished arrow. He states that the LORD made Him a polished shaft and hid Him in His quiver. In Isaiah 48:16 we read: *"And now the Lord GOD, and his Spirit, hath sent me."* In this little treasure of words we can see the Lord GOD as the archer; the Spirit as the bow; and the Servant as the polished shaft. He wasn't always a polished shaft. The LORD made Him one. It suggests that God prepared His Servant and kept Him close by (in His quiver) before sending Him forth. The word for "shaft" emphasises its piercing ability. No enemy of God could withstand the power of this arrow!

The LORD then addresses His Servant directly and calls Him *"Israel"* (Isaiah 49:3). How can the Lord Jesus Christ be called Israel? Well, in John 15:1 the Lord Jesus states that He is the true vine. He is saying that He is all that God had expected from the nation that had failed in its responsibilities. In Hosea 10:1 we read: *"Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself: according to the multitude of his fruit he hath increased the altars; according to the*

goodness of his land they have made goodly images." The Lord Jesus did the opposite. His life bore fruit for God. He glorified the Father in all that He said and did.

The meaning of the name "Israel" is given in Genesis 32:28 where we find it said: *"Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed."* So we may take the biblical meaning of the name to be "a victorious Prince with God". This has been fulfilled in the glorified Christ.

But what does the Servant say in response? Isaiah 49:4 supplies the answer: *"Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God."* The sadness of the Servant groans in these words. We could expect words like this from ourselves in the service of God; but it seems strange to hear them from the lips of the Perfect Servant. In order to see why He seems sad, we need to look at the next verse where we find the objective of His work: *"And now, saith the LORD that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him..."* (Isaiah 49:5)

The Lord Jesus as Servant had been given the task to bring rebellious Israel (called "Jacob" here) back to their God. The nation had, in general, refused Him (see John 1:11). He was despised and rejected by them (Isaiah 53:3). He was led as a lamb to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). At this, His first advent, He seemed to have failed in His mission. He also knew the consequences of this rejection for we read this lament in Luke 19:41-44 as He approached Jerusalem: *"And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation."*

In a day to come, there will be many a servant of God who will hear the words: *"...Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities"* (Luke 19:17). The future reward of any servant of God does not depend upon his success (for that must belong to the God who sent him). It depends upon his obedience and trustworthiness. There was no servant greater in obedience than the Lord Jesus. There was no servant more faithful than Christ. Therefore, we read the following assessment in the second half of Isaiah 49:5: *"...Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength."* This humble Servant of God is exalted. This apparently weak Servant of the LORD has God as His strength. It reminds us of the words of the ascended Christ spoken to the apostle Paul after he had prayed three times to have the thorn in his flesh removed: *"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul's words follow: *"Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me"* (2 Corinthians 12:9) In this manner, the truly dependent servant always has God as his strength! What a happy assurance this brings to the soul!

It is worthy of note that the Lord Jesus as the perfect Servant committed His work to God. He said: *"...Yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God"* (Isaiah 49:4). He knew that God would bring justice to His cause and reward the faithful work that He had done. He leaves the matter in the hands of the God who always knows best.

The Servant is then addressed by the LORD who says: *"It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth"* (Isaiah 49:6)

It would seem that the work the Servant had completed had set the foundation for the return of Israel to their God. Even though the Lord Jesus, as the Servant, had classed His work as not being fruitful, it had been! In a future day, Israel will be restored. Jerusalem will be the metropolis of the world. Christ will complete His work gloriously. So, the LORD in these words extends the service of Christ. The LORD would make Him a light to the Gentiles. This reminds us of the prophecy of Simeon who, holding the baby Jesus in his arms, said: *"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel"* (Luke 2:29-32).

Simeon had waited many years to see the Messiah. Like so many in the scriptures, the patience of his faith was rewarded. He went on to say to Mary, the child's mother: *"Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed"* (Luke 2:34-35). The Messiah had to suffer, bleed and die before these blessings could be achieved. Luke later quotes the resurrected Jesus speaking to the two disciples on the Emmaus road: *"O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself"* (Luke 24:25-27)

So in what sense do we see Jesus as a light? We read in 2 Corinthians 4:6: *“For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”* The knowledge of the glory of God is revealed in Jesus Christ. He has revealed who God is to both Jew and Gentile. Today, the spiritual barrier that separated these two companies has been removed and the faithful from both are found in the church of God under the name “Christians” (see Acts 11:26). The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 2:14: *“For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us...”*

In Isaiah 49:7, the holy LORD, the Redeemer of Israel speaks and reveals that the Servant who had been despised by man and abhorred by the nation of Israel is the very One whom kings would worship. Why? Because He was the LORD’S anointed. The LORD then addresses the Servant again and states: *“In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages; that thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places”* (Isaiah 49:8-9)

The acceptable time began with the divine favour revealed in the ministry of Christ for it is written: *“(...Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation)”* (2 Corinthians 6:2). The LORD heard the prayer of His Servant and, although He had to pass through agonies of suffering, yet the LORD was actively helping Him behind the scenes. He has indeed preserved His chosen One and made Him a covenant of the people. He is the guarantee of Israel’s future blessing. He is our guarantee of salvation today. The desolate heritages in Israel will once again blossom when the Lord Jesus Christ appears as King of kings and Lord of lords. Even this groaning earth that had been cursed by God shall rejoice in His blessing. For Christians today, there is also an inheritance. It is *“an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away which is reserved in heaven for [them]”* (1 Peter 1:4).

The Servant will call for Israel to *“Go forth!”* (Isaiah 49:9) and the many prophecies that speak of this scattered people being restored to their land will be fulfilled. They will be released from the prison of bondage in which the legality of the law had chained them. Furthermore, they will be delivered from the persecution of the Gentiles. Yet, in that day to come, the Gentiles, who dwelt in darkness, shall be given the knowledge of God by this Servant and come into the light of the Sun of Righteousness who has risen with healing in His wings (Malachi 4:2). Jew and Gentile will be blessed in that day when that prayer *“Thy kingdom come - Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven”* (Matthew 6:10) will be positively answered. Thankfully, we who have heard the gospel of grace in this current day have the opportunity to turn in repentance to God and in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ. By so doing, we know that we are saved **from** our sins and **for** glory and have eternal life. It seems appropriate then to finish this talk with these lines from the pen of Richard Holden (1828-1886):

*Lord of glory, we adore Thee,
Christ of God, ascended high;
Heart and soul we bow before Thee,
Glorious now beyond the sky;
Thee we worship, Thee we praise,
Excellent in all Thy ways.*

*Mighty King, with glory crownèd,
Rightful Heir and Lord of all:
Once rejected, scorned, disownèd,
E’en by those Thou cam’st to call:
Thee we honour, Thee adore,
Glorious now and evermore.*

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