

Robert Vannoy, Major Prophets, Lecture 16

Isaiah, Servant of the Lord Theme Continued

8. Isaiah 49:1-12

Let's go on to Isaiah 49. This is, if you're keeping a list of these servant passages, number eight. This includes verses 1-9, but perhaps it should go on down to verse 12. Either way, this is one of the major passages on the Servant of the Lord. Beginning here with chapter 49 the servant theme becomes much more prominent. What we have seen up to this point is one major passage in chapter 42, but apart from that, the theme has been interjected in a verse or two here and there. But beginning with chapter 49 now it becomes much more emphasized, moving toward the climax in chapter 53.

I think it's quite clear that the servant is speaking in chapter 49, verses 1-9. Let's read that: "Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.' But I said, 'I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God.' And now the LORD says-- he who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength-- he says: 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.' This is what the LORD says-- the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel-- to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: 'Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.' This is what the LORD says: 'In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances, to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those

in darkness, “Be free!” They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill.””

General Remarks on Isaiah 49:1-9

I want to make some general remarks, and then we will go back and look at it more specifically. But here are some general remarks: I think it is quite clear the servant is speaking in verses 1-9. You have the use of the term “servant” in verses 3, 5, 6 and 7. “You are my servant, Israel”, in verse 3. Verse 5 has: “And now the LORD says-- he who formed me in the womb to be his servant.” Verse 6 says, “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant.” So that is verses 3, 5, 6, and then in 7: “To the servant of rulers,” in the middle of verse 7.

In chapter 49, verses 8 and 9, some of those phrases used in chapter 42, 6 and 7, are repeated: “I will make you for a covenant of the people.” That’s in 49:8 and also in 42:6. Go to 49:9, “To say to the captives, ‘Come out,’ to those in darkness, ‘Be free.’” That is similar to 42:7, “To free the captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.” So very similar things are said here to what we find in chapter 42. But then when you ask about the identity of the servant, this passage seems quite clear in verse 3: “He said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.’” Here it seems clearly to be said that the speaker is God’s servant in the sense of Israel.

Yet, when you get down to chapter 49, verses 5 and 6, it seems that the speaker is differentiated from Israel: “And now the LORD says-- he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength.” The “I” there is certainly distinct from Israel, and the servant is to bring Jacob to him. And when you get down to verse 6: “He says: ‘It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept.’” The servant is going to raise the tribes of Jacob, restore the preserved of Israel. So it seems very clear that the servant is distinguished from Israel in verses 5 and 6. In fact, you have three statements in those

two verses that indicate that the servant is the one who is to restore Israel.

How Can the Servant Both to Israel and Differentiated from Israel?

So the question arises then, how do we explain the fact that the servant is both called “Israel” and differentiated from Israel? How can you explain that? In verse 3 the servant is called “Israel,” yet in verses 5 and 6 you get three statements that differentiate the servant from Israel. That’s a difficult question. If you reflect on the previous passages, it would seem that Israel has been called to perform the work of the servant. Israel is to be a light to the Gentiles; Israel is to open blind eyes, bring prisoners out of prison, and so forth. Yet Israel can’t do that work because the same time we read that Israel is weak; Israel is sinful; Israel is in bondage, and Israel is rebellious. Because of that Israel has been sent into captivity. Nevertheless, the work is to be performed and the work is to be performed by Israel. So it seems, in an attempt to find some resolution here, that what is being said is that the one who is going to deliver Israel and that one ultimately is going to be the light for the Gentiles and to be a covenant for the people and to deliver the prisoners from darkness and so forth: That one is from Israel and also represents Israel.

It seems that the personal phrase is used that you find already here in chapter 49, but which becomes much clearer in chapter 50 as we go further. The personal phrases used of the servant suggest that the servant is an individual who will come out of Israel and who will represent Israel, yet he can be distinguished from the rest of Israel. That’s what’s beginning to come into focus in chapter 49. So you can read in verse 5 that “the LORD formed me in the womb”--right there you begin to think of an individualization--“to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength.” Begin to think in terms of the servant coming out of Israel, representing Israel, yet being distinguished, or distinct, from Israel.

Isaiah 49:1 Connection of the Servant and His Mother

Now, let's go back and look at more specific statements in these verses. The first verse is interesting: "Listen, O coasts, unto me, and hearken, ye people from afar! The LORD hath called me from the womb; from the body of my mother hath he made mention of my name." Now I'm reading from the King James. I think the NIV is somewhat unfortunate when they paraphrased it: "Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name." Now you compare that with "The LORD hath called me from the womb; from the body of my mother hath he made mention of my name." The Hebrew is very clear on that. Literally in the Hebrew: "the LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named me." That's the way the Hebrew reads. So you have reference to the mother in connection with the servant. Ordinarily in Scripture, people were spoken of as the seed of the father. You have that patriarchal sort of lineage. It's only rare that you have reference made to the mother. But here you have, I think, an important thread that begins to take shape. It really goes back to Genesis 3:15. It's the seed of the woman who ultimately will destroy the serpent. In Isaiah 7:14 it was: "The virgin shall conceive, and bear a son." Here that same kind of idea is at least suggested: "The LORD hath called me from the womb, from the body of my mother." All reference to the womb and the mother is eliminated in the way the NIV words it. But again it suggests an individualization of the servant: "The LORD hath called me from the womb, from the body of my mother."

Isaiah 49:2 Servant's Effectiveness and Protection

Verse 2 gives two ideas that are repeated in a synonymous parallelism. I think the two ideas are effectiveness and protection. You read: "He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword," and then in the parallelism: "and made me a polished shaft." You can divide that verse into four phrases. "He hath made my mouth like a sharp sword" would be the first. The second one would be: "In the shadow of his hand he hath hidden me."

The third, which goes back in parallel to the first: “And made me a polished shaft.” Then the fourth, which parallels the second: “In his quiver he hath hid me.” So you have “he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword” and “hath made me a polished shaft”. That refers to effectiveness. His mouth is like a sharp sword, and he is like a polished shaft. It references the successful progress of the work of the servant. The other thought is protection: “in the shadow of his hand he hath hidden me,” and “in his quiver he hath hidden me.” God has protected his servant even though all the forces of wickedness will try to destroy the work of the servant, but they will not succeed because God will protect his servant. So the servant is effective, and the servant is protected.

Isaiah 49:3-4 Servant Israel Individualized

Then chapter 49, verse 3, you have that identification: “He said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.’” That brings us verse 4 that was asked about: “But I said, ‘I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God.’”

The interpretation there is difficult. Some see the verse as referring to Israel, which in light of verse 3 is not surprising: “You are my servant, Israel”. So some see the verse as referring to Israel making a statement in verse 4, about her inability to fulfill the task assigned to her: “But I said, ‘I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.’”

But I think the problem with that is, the reason for the inability of Israel to fulfill the task of the servant, is really not so much that they toiled in vain, but it’s her sin. So I think it’s probably better to take verse 4 as the servant individualized, not as collective--the nation. But the servant individualized suggests that his own work appears to be a failure. “Then I said”--the servant individualized, speaking for himself--“I have labored to no purpose.” His work appears to be a failure. “I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God.” The thought is his work may appear to be a failure, but his judgment is with the LORD.

There is no reason for discouragement; he will be vindicated. It seems to me that those words fit very well with the words of Christ, ultimately the words of the servant individualized.

Isaiah 49:5-6 Servant Clearly Distinguished from Israel

Then you see in verses 5 and 6 the servant clearly distinguished from Israel: “And now the LORD says--he who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength--he says: ‘It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles.’”

In verse 5 the servant is to bring Jacob again to the LORD, and certainly the servant there is distinguished from Israel. But verse 6 takes that a step further. While the work of the servant in restoring the tribes of Jacob is of importance, it’s almost insignificant, in a certain sense, compared with the greater task of being a light to the Gentiles. “‘It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles’” - -to the nations--“‘that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.’” The servant is the one who is going to be the means of spreading the salvation of God and the gospel to the ends of the earth. It is a remarkable accomplishment that will come through the work of the servant.

Isaiah 49:7 Humiliation and Exaltation of the Servant

Isaiah 49, verse 7, speaks of the humiliation of the servant contrasted with his later exaltation. “This is what the LORD says-- the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel-- to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers.” There is the humiliation. But that is contrasted in the latter part of the verse “Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.” Now some try to explain that verse as referring to

Israel. They see the collective idea of the servant, Israel in exile, humiliated, despised, but later restored.

Isaiah 49:8-9 Things Beyond the Capacity of Israel to Fulfill

I don't think that really does justice to the statements of the verse, and particularly not to the things that are said in verses 8 and 9, the following two verses that are beyond the capacity of Israel to fulfill. It says in verses 8 and 9: "This is what the LORD says: 'In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances, to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!' They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill." When you move on into 8 and 9, it seems clear that he is talking about things that are beyond the capacity of Israel to fulfill. The same problem we had back there in chapter 42: how can Israel do these things when Israel is sinful? It's true, Israel has been humiliated, so you know in 7a, "To him whom man despises." Israel has been humiliated, but that was because of her sin, and that kind of humiliation could never lead to the accomplishments of verses 8 and 9. Now that whole theme is much more clearly developed when you get to the end of chapter 52 and on into 53.

Isaiah 49:10-11 Blessing to Those Who Follow the Servant

Chapter 49, verse 10, says: "They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water." Seems to me in verse 10 you have a description of the blessings that come to those who follow the servant as he leads them by springs of water. The description is of the blessings that come to those who follow the servant. Verse 11 continues that: "I will turn all my mountains into roads, and my highways will be raised up." It is similar, you remember, to the early part of chapter 40 when "every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill laid low."

Isaiah 49:12 Worldwide Return

Then chapter 49, verse 12: “Behold, these shall come from afar--and lo, those from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Sinim.” You have an indication of the remarkable extent of the work of the servant. When people will come from the north, west, and even from this land of Sinim. The NIV translates that “from the region of Aswan,” but there’s a text note. “Dead Sea Scrolls, Aswan; Masoretic Text, Sinim.” Look at your citations. I think I have a note there, page 34. This is taken from E. J. Young, page 294. “Some have sought to identify the word with the Sinites of Genesis 10:17, 1 Chronicles 1:15. Appeal has been made (Jerome) to the Wilderness of Sin. J. H. Michaelis (1775) suggested emending the text to *s^ewenim* and meaning the reference to Sin or Peleusium (Aswan) in southern Egypt. This seems to be supported by 1Q”—that’s the Qumran scroll—“which gives the consonants *swnyym*, possibly to be read *s^e-wa-niy-yim*.”

Why, however, is the district identified by the name of one of its cities and, in fact, not a particularly well-known city? More importantly, this forms no suitable contrast to the north and sea [west] of the preceding. It is a place too near at hand. Quite possibly, therefore, the reference is to a district to the east, so far away that it stands for a quarter of the earth. China may be that reference. The Arabic *tsin* may favor this. One cannot, however, be dogmatic. What is important is that a faraway district, a quarter of the earth, is intended, for the return to God in Christ will be worldwide.”

In other words, Young is suggesting that the implication of the verse is a worldwide extent of those who will be followers of the servant: “These shall come from afar-- lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Sinim.” But exactly what the identification of that is, is disputed and not clear. When you speak of “Sino-Soviet” relations, there’s that root that is applied to China.

Summary

The last verse is: “Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O

mountains! For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.” The exhortation is to the heavens and the earth to break forth into joy because of the salvation that the Lord brings to his people through the work of his servant.

3. Isaiah 50:4-11 Light to the Gentiles Theme

All right, that’s a major passage. There is a lot in Isaiah 49:1-12 about the servant. There seems to be that ambiguity that flows through these passages, and it moves towards an individualization. Here that individualization is not complete. Now you go back to 41:8: “Israel, you are my servant.” Then on to 43:10: “You are my witnesses, my servants.” It’s plural there referring to Israel. It seems in 49:1 already is moving toward individualizing.

General Remarks on Isaiah 50:4-9 Individualized Servant’s Sufferings

The next passage, is number 9 in the outline Isaiah 50:4-11. This is the third major servant passage. The first one was Isaiah 42:1-7, and second was 49:1-9. Isaiah 50:4-11 is the third major passage. In various places, particularly 42:6 and 7, and 49:6 we have read statements that say the servant is to be a light to the Gentiles. In 42:6 and 7, 49:6: there will be a light to the Gentiles. He is to deliver people from captivity, and set free those who are in bondage. So we have been told the servant is to do this. But up to this point we haven’t really been told how he is going to do it. Here’s where the explanation of how begins. It tells of the way in which he is going to accomplish these things.

The way, or the means, is really not what you might expect. It takes a surprise turn. First, let’s read chapter 50, verses 4 to 9, then I’ll make some general remarks and then more specific ones. “The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have

I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up. Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God. But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches: go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment.”

Now, here are some general remarks. I think you have a statement by the servant describing the suffering that he is to go through, and then the great justification that he will accomplish by it. Now, as we read the passage that describe these sufferings, which is a new idea, that’s a theme that has hardly been developed up to this point. The question again is: is this being spoken by the servant as an individual, or can it be taken as a description of the sufferings that Israel as a nation is undergoing in the exile. In chapter 49, that humiliation of the servant in the first part of verse 7, is that Israel, or is it the individualized servant? I think with chapter 50 you find the clear answer to that question: is this the nation or is it an individual?

You find a clear answer in verse 5: “The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back.” That’s the servant speaking. So the speaker says: I have not been rebellious, I have not turned away from doing the will of God. Then when you go on to verse 6, you read that he voluntarily underwent the suffering: “I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.” Now those statements in chapter 50, verses 5 and 6, are completely contradictory to the picture of Israel that’s contained in the previous chapters of this section of Isaiah where Israel is represented as a servant who is deaf, blind, and rebellious. If this is Israel speaking, how can Israel say, “I was not rebellious?”

Go back to Isaiah 42:19-24: Israel was sent into captivity for her sin. “Who is

blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD? Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned?" In chapter 43, verses 23 and 24: "You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses." In 48:8: "You have neither heard nor understood; from of old your ear has not been open. Well do I know how treacherous you are; you were called a rebel from birth."

Isaiah 50:4 Tongue of the Learned

So with that relatively close context for Israel, then to turn around and say, "I was not rebellious, I did not go away backward, or turn away from the task set before me," would be inconsistent with what is said in these other passages. So it seems to be clear that the speaker here in Isaiah 50 is not Israel in the sense of the nation, but the servant of the Lord—individualized--who takes the place of Israel and undergoes this suffering in their place.

So those are the general comments. Let's go back now and look at the specifics. In chapter 50, verse 4: "The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary." The passage begins with a statement about the teaching work of God's servant. God has given him the "tongue of the learned." Certainly that reminds us of statements in the gospel narratives, for example, John 7:46: "Never did man speak like this man!" When Jesus taught, he taught with authority. "The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary."

He spoke to those that were weary. Look at Matthew 11:28: "Come unto me all you that are weary and heavy laden, I will give you rest." In Isaiah 50:4b we read, "He awaketh morning by morning, he waketh mine ear to hear like the learned." It shows the close relationship of the servant to his Father. Jesus said in John 5:30 he spoke not of

himself, but that which the Father gave him. So here God wakens him morning by morning, wakening his ear to hear God's message.

Isaiah 50:5 Servant Is Not Rebellious

Then chapter 50 verse 5, I've already mentioned that: "The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back." I don't think any person but Christ himself could truly make that statement: I was not rebellious. Everyone else has failed God at some point or another. Yet this one was true to the work to which God calls him and could truly say: I was not rebellious.

Isaiah 50:6 Voluntary Suffering

Then chapter 50, verse 6: "I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting." This refers to the voluntary suffering of Christ. Certainly again that contrasts with the involuntary suffering that Israel went through as it went into exile. Israel didn't go into exile with a great deal of joy. She was forced into exile. Yet this one gives his back to the smiters, as Isaiah 53 says: "He went as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before his shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." He hid not his face from shame and spitting, but willingly offered himself.

Isaiah 50:7 Set His Face Like a Flint – No Shame

Well, I see my time is up. Let's look at chapter 50 verse 7, and then I'll stop. It says, "Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame." The servant declares that with the help of God he has set his face to perform the work God gave him. Interestingly, Luke 9:53 says of Jesus that he set his face to go up to Jerusalem. So knowing what would befall him, he did not shrink back from facing and doing that which was his task. "Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame."

Let's stop there and we'll look at verses 8 through 11 the beginning of the next hour and then get into Isaiah chapters 52 and 53.

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