

The Servant of Isaiah: The Servant Is Given a Large Task
Isaiah 49:1-7
February 24, 2015
3rd Wednesday in Lent

Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God." And now the Lord says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him – for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has become my strength – he 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." Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: "Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

The Servant prophecy we focus on tonight is remarkable. It conveys the mystery of Jesus and his office and work. It reveals the hiddenness, and the complexity of the work of Christ. It also speaks clearly, at least from our perspective in time, of the world-wide reach of the redemption which Jesus accomplished. It may not be the most familiar prophecy to your ear, but it highlights the wonder of the Gospel in a unique way. Our theme tonight is "The Servant Is Given a Large Task."

It is stated clearly in this prophecy that the Servant is called from the womb and named by God before His birth: *The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name* (Is 49:1 ESV). It wasn't just an accident of history. It was the fulfilling of a prophecy which brought the angel, Gabriel, to announce Christ's birth and to instruct Mary as to what she should name her child.

The Lord called him from the womb because he placed him there, to participate in every facet of our humanity, even those parts hidden from ordinary observation, as in the womb. The life and work of Jesus was in no way coincidental. He came from the first moment with the mission – one laid out in great detail here and in other prophecies.

We often talk about how the Word of God is the power, how it's our weapon in the battle against sin and Satan, and how it's the sword of the Lord. Here the prophet Isaiah makes the same point: *He made my mouth like a sharp sword* (Is 49:2 ESV). It wasn't the power of the miracles, or the power of his personality that won the day in the ministry of Jesus. It was the power of the Word, just as it is today.

This prophecy speaks in the same way as the author of Hebrews: *For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of*

spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12 ESV). John used similar language in the book of Revelation 1:16 which pictures Jesus as having a double-edged sword coming out His mouth.

Of course, until Jesus fulfilled the prophecy, no one was able to put the pieces together. It's as if God intended it to remain a secret until He sprung the surprise. Isaiah talked about how it would not be recognized by most people until it was accomplished: *In the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away* (Is 49:2 ESV). No one at the time fully understood the pieces of the prophecies, because God planned it that way.

God planned for the Servant to be the glory and summation of the chosen people of Israel. Jesus "recapitulated" the history of Israel in His life and ministry – that is he lived it all over again in a shortened form. But you already know that if you are familiar with this text.

God said that Jesus was to be Israel: *And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."* (Is 49:3 ESV). The big difference is that what Israel failed to do, and messed up, the Servant was to do correctly and show the true glory of God.

The prophecy even captures the sense that so many had when Jesus was taken to the cross, the sense that something had gone tragically wrong. However, it was the people who were wrong. The crucifixion was the plan of God from the beginning, just as the prophecy shows. But Isaiah captures that sense of how it looked, and perhaps how it may have felt for Jesus as He faced those long hours of His passion alone, abandoned and betrayed, falsely convicted and executed.

Surely that was part of the great suffering Jesus endured as He died for sins he never committed, on behalf of people who hated Him and friends who would not stand up for him. The prophet wrote: *But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God"* (Is 49:4 ESV). Abandoned and betrayed, and yet his trust was still in the Lord. And here it is, all of it in the prophecy.

Here also is where God reveals His plan to save the whole world. The Messiah of Israel, the Chosen People of old, is now charged with an even larger task and greater glory. He is to be the Savior of all men and women everywhere. That has always been the plan of God, of course, even though Israel did not see it.

The Gentiles had no expectation because they had never been told. The larger task of the Servant is comes in these words: *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* (Is 49:6 ESV).

The modern Christian is aware of the global goal of the Gospel, but the ancient world had no idea. Even though other prophecies spoke of it, Israel did not accept that their

Messiah was to be the Messiah of the entire world. They could have. They should have known, from the prophecy to Adam and Eve, to the covenant with Abraham, and onward, the salvation of God was clearly aimed at all nations, all people everywhere, but the world ignored that aspect of it, and so did ancient Israel.

The truth had been preserved only in the Scriptures and with prophets of Israel. Israel's national conceit was that they were the chosen ones, and no one else was included. But in this prophecy is the explicit word that the Servant of the Lord was to be a light to the nations and cause salvation to reach to the end of the earth.

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: "Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you" (Is 49:7 ESV).

Note how the Servant is also the Despised One, the One abhorred by the nation – the nation being Israel. This is Isaiah saying the same thing John said in his Gospel: *He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him* (Jn 1:11 ESV). The Savior, the Promised One, the eagerly awaited Redeemer, and yet despised and abhorred by the people who were chosen by him to his own.

Saving that crowd, the assigned task of the Servant, is too small a task, so the Servant is given a large task – to save men everywhere. God would have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (2 Tim 2:4). The promise to the Servant is that His work will have effect throughout the world. *Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you* (Is 49:7 ESV).

We have seen this prophecy fulfilled in history. Kings have arisen, and a king only rises in the presence of one who is superior to him. Princes have bowed down before our Savior. All of this happened by the plan and promise of God, laid out for us seven centuries before the time of Jesus by the prophet Isaiah.