

Our God Saves: Believe

The Servant for Restoration

Isaiah 49

Mark Vroegop

“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”” (Isa. 49:1–7).

When it comes to the practical Christian life, pastoral ministry, and church ministry, I think the words “and” and “both” are vital. Don’t get me wrong. I think the word “but” is also important. Who doesn’t love the beautiful contrast like we read last week in Ephesians 2?

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Eph. 2:4–5).

I find that the words “both” and “and” attempt to hold truths together over time. While there is certainly a time for “either-or” categories, it seems to me that most of the daily Christian life is deeply connected to this “both/and” dynamic. Let me give you a few examples:

- John describes the glory of Jesus as “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14)
- Pastoral ministry is described as a commitment to “prayer and the word” (Acts 6:4)
- The Bible tells us that life is hard and God is good (Rom. 8:18)
- Christians are invited to express their sorrow and to be filled with hope (1 Thess. 4:13)

Much of the Christian life is learning how to hold two things together that might not seem to go together at first. By the way, the same thing is true for our church. One of the things I deeply love

about our church is our commitment to live out this “both/and” in our church philosophy of ministry. A few examples:

- We think about outreach in terms of global and local and urban
- We have a growth strategy that includes groups and classes
- We work hard to make a big church feel small
- We talk about our church culture in terms of depth, care, creativity, and impact

It seems to me that this “both/and” dynamic is critical to the Christian life and church life. In other words, “both/and” is what the church is like. It’s what the Christian life is like. It’s what Jesus is like.

We see this dynamic in play in Isaiah 49. In fact, it’s one of the ways that God, through the prophet Isaiah, seeks to comfort the people of God. He highlights three contrasts that are full of hope. These relate both to their coming deliverer and their future deliverance. Those contrasts are: (1) weary and trusting, (2) despised and hopeful, and (3) forsaken and victorious.

These contrasts are embodied in Jesus and serve as an encouragement for those who follow him.

1) Weary & Trusting

In verses 1-6, we see Isaiah highlight “the servant” who experiences a deep weariness but who is called upon to trust in God’s purposes.

This section of Isaiah began in chapter 40 with, “Comfort, comfort my people.” It seeks to give the people of God a vision of what their deliverance from exile would look like. This entire section (40-55) is designed to call God’s people to believe.

Throughout this section, there’s a theme of a future “servant,” one who will fulfill God’s purposes that the people of Israel failed to embrace. The “servant of the Lord” will take on the role of a “New Israel” in accomplishing the plan of God on earth.

At the time, the people of Israel didn’t have a full understanding of this “servant.” Christians who live in the twenty-first century and who have the New Testament can see very clearly that Isaiah is talking about Jesus. With the historical 20/20 vision, it’s obvious. But it’s important to remember that the book of Isaiah is part of the foundation upon which the New Testament writers built their message regarding Jesus as the Messiah.

The most important verses in this section are verses 4 and 6.

“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’” (Isa. 49:4).

[H]e 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” (Isa. 49:6).

Do you hear the contrast? Verse 4 expresses weariness, almost a sense of pointlessness. While verse 6 highlights the global purpose of God. It's an incredible thought. It's a real thought.

Let's see what's around this weariness/trusting idea. In 49:1, we find a global invitation to listen to the truth which is going to be shared, and we also see a sense of a divinely ordained purpose: "[He] called me from the womb. . .he named my name." In verse 2, we see that his weapon will be his words. He's prophetic. In other words, the way that he will conquer is through a message.

That's a good reminder. Christianity advances through proclamation. That's why we talk about the "Good News." It's why John called Jesus "the Word" (John 1:1). The gospel message transforms people from the inside out. That's why we talk about building bridges of grace that can bear the weight of truth. Or when we say that "we don't do good just to do good; we do good for the sake of the gospel."

Notice how the servant is affirmed: "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified" (v. 3). This sounds similar to the divine approval of Jesus at his baptism (Matt. 3:13-17).

Then we find the weariness theme: "I've labored in vain; I've spent my strength for nothing and vanity." Commentator Alec Motyer sees this in the life of Jesus:

. . .Throughout the Gospels Jesus faced rejection, unbelief, prejudice and misunderstanding. He cried out, 'How long ...?' (Luke 9:41), was grieved by his disciples' failure to understand (Mark 8:21), and foresaw the falling away of the core group (Mark 14:27).¹

Jesus understood and felt the brokenness of the world, and yet he had great confidence in God's plan. In Isaiah 49:4, it sounds like this: "surely my right is with the Lord and my recompense with my God." Notice how these two thoughts are connected: "I'm weary" and "I'm trusting."

Trusting in God doesn't mean you necessarily stop being weary. It just changes how you think about the weariness. You see, sometimes our weariness comes from not being able to make sense of why things are so hard, painful, and seemingly pointless. And here we find a very helpful perspective to pursue faithfulness while lowering our expectation of being able to connect all the dots of what God is doing.

It's what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4.

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me (1 Cor. 4:1-4).

¹ J. Alec Motyer, [*Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 350.

And this perspective led him to a new level of freedom:

... When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (1 Cor. 4:12–13).

God has a plan, and it always involves some level of suffering. But look at the glorious outcome in verse 6: "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Oh church, let us not mind a little weariness. Let us not be surprised when hardship comes. Let us not be overcome with too much concern. Let us look to Jesus as our model for tear-filled trust. A friend of mine reminded me this week that strong winds remind us of the importance of deep roots.

2) Despised & Hopeful

The second contrast is between being externally despised but internally hopeful. About two years ago another friend gave me a line that really stuck with me (I think I've used it often over the last two years): "he had a joy that was out of reach of his opponents."

We see the servant described in ways that seem to conflict with one another. And I'm sure that this was confusing at the time when this was written. After all, don't you tend to think that success and effectiveness run parallel with popularity? That's the way the world works. But it's not the way God works.

In verse 7 we see the description: "one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers." Do you know what it means to be despised? It means to be judged, to be thought of lightly, to be devalued, and to be treated with contempt.

Some of you know what that's like because you've experienced it. Maybe you were looked down upon because of your ethnicity. Others of you have felt like an outsider in other ways—your age or your gender. You may be feeling it at work right now wondering how much longer you can be a faithful Christian and still keep your job. Sadly, our world is filled with plenty of contempt.

This reminds me of the words in John 1:11 - "*He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*"

But the message of the gospel is that God isn't hindered by the opinions of the world. Jesus said, "the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Luke 20:17). And in Isaiah 49, we see the promise in verse 7. Kings will see and arise to come and bow before this servant. But notice why:

Because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you (Isa. 49:7b).

God has good plans for his people and his servant. The opinions of people do not thwart his plans. Notice all the promises in verses 8-12:

- God himself is going to help his people, calling them to restoration (vv. 8-9)
- God will bless them and provide for them (vv. 9b-10)

- God will direct their paths from all over the known world (vv. 11-12)

All of these promises create an invitation to praise God for the comfort that he provides to his people. Verse 13 invites the entire created order to consider the gracious work of God on behalf of his people.

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted (Isa. 49:13).

Ray Ortlund says:

Isaiah's prophetic vision sweeps across the history of salvation. He sees God, through the covenant man Jesus Christ, restoring the ruins that sin has made of us. He sets us free from our self-imposed prisons. He leads us forward into a new way of life, caring for us moment by moment, providing for us fully, overcoming the obstacles, getting us all the way home to his eternal presence²

This is so hopeful and true. But it's especially important when you feel the "stink-eye" of contempt when you are unfairly treated for trying to be a faithful follower of Jesus. Those are the moments when hope is really tested.

Or to state it directly, if you were misunderstood by others but known by the Lord, would you be okay? If you were trashed by people but honored by the Lord, would you sing for joy? The servant of the Lord is that kind of person. And Isaiah wants us to embrace this conflicted path as central to the plan of God.

3) Forsaken & Victorious

It's fascinating to me that this text flips back to a negative theme. It would seem that after the crescendo of 49:13, something hopeful, exuberant, and triumphant should follow.

But that's not real life, is it? Isaiah shows us that the people of God struggle with cycles of doubt and despair. Faith, belief, and trust are not straight-line issues. We wrestle with moments of discouragement—sometimes the kind that is completely irrational in light of what God has already done in our lives.

Isaiah imagines the people of God saying, "The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me" (v. 14). It reminds me of the words of Jesus on the cross as he quoted Psalm 22 – "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1)

Notice how God responds to this? He offers the people of God rich assurances:

- Like a mother, God cannot forget or abandon his people (v. 15)

² Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, [*Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 328.

- The people of God are engraved on the palms of his hand (v. 16)
- God promises to take care of them and lead them to victory (vv. 17-19)
- They will look at their lives and be stunned at how God helped them (vv. 20-21)

Take note of the vivid imagery in verses 22-23 of victory! At the command of God, the nations shall carry them. People of power (kings and queens) will take care of them and even bow in submission (v. 23). And what is the point of all this?

“Then you will know that I am Lord; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame”
(49:23).

The confession of God’s people will be that it was the Lord who made them victorious. Their sense of being forsaken will be banished, and they will know that it was God who delivered them.

God promises to demonstrate his power—taking prey from the mighty and captives from a tyrant (v. 24-25). In other words, there’s no power on earth that can thwart the plan of God. He will enact true justice on all those who are guilty of oppression (v. 26). God is going to rescue his people and make everything right.

And what is the goal? Verse 26 shows us where all of this leads and the purpose of the servant of the Lord:

“Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (Isa. 49:26).

Understanding the world through the lens of a relationship with Jesus changes everything. It means that we know the trajectory of history. Eventually, Jesus is going to come back. The devil is going to be defeated. Sin will be eradicated. And we will see the full display of the glory of God upon the face of the earth. Everything is working toward that plan. And we’re closer to that day now than we’ve ever been.

In looking at the life of Jesus and the message of Isaiah, Christians can live in a world filled with challenging tensions.

Faithful Christianity doesn’t mean that you have all the answers or that everything is easy. That’s hardly the case. Rather, it means we look to Jesus as we live in a world with both:

1. Weary and trusting
2. Despised and hopeful
3. Feeling forsaken and victorious

We live by being faithful to the one who has been faithful to us.

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