

Explore the Bible: God Comforts

October 19, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible Lesson for Nov. 8 focuses on Isaiah 49:1-13.*

The riches of Isaiah are difficult to exhaust. There is a reason this prophetic book is one of the most frequently cited Old Testament books in the New Testament. Just one distinctive feature is Isaiah's four "servant songs."

Four distinct passages in Isaiah, called "songs" for their poetic language, are about an unidentified "servant of the Lord" (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-7; 52:13-53:12). Much ink has been spilled in attempts to identify this "servant." Is it the prophet himself? Is it the nation of Israel? Is it some future messianic figure? Christians traditionally have understood the "servant" from the servant songs to be Jesus Christ.

Our passage today, Isaiah 49:1-13, begins with one of these "servant songs." Who is this servant? What role does he play in God's work? What is the connection between the servant and the rest of our passage?

The Servant of the Lord

Verses 1-6 describe the servant of the Lord. The passage particularly emphasizes the prenatal calling of the servant. "Before I was born the Lord called me; from my mother's womb he has spoken my name... he who formed me in the womb to be his servant" (49:1, 5).

This servant's purpose is to "regather" Israel, to go out and reconstitute the people of God and bring them back to the Lord in repentance and reconciliation (49:5-6). But that's not all—the servant also will be "a light for the Gentiles, that [God's] salvation may reach to the ends of the earth" (49:6).

Intense debate surrounds the identity of this servant. On one hand, Isaiah seems to identify the servant *as* Israel (49:3). Yet in multiple other places, Isaiah clearly distinguishes between Israel and the servant (49:5-6).

In the *NIV Application Commentary* on Isaiah, John Oswalt notes that “the language is far too sweeping to be applied to any ordinary human,” so the servant likely is not the prophet Isaiah himself, either (p. 547). Instead, Oswalt argues the servant “will be ‘Israel’ as Israel was meant to be” (p. 547).

And who is this servant? As Christians, we believe him to be Jesus Christ. Jesus himself personifies the “true Israel” in the New Testament (Matthew 2:13-15; cf. Hosea 11:1). Jesus himself, as a faithful Jew, perfectly embodies the ideals of Israel while also reconstituting the 12 tribes of Israel (Matthew 10:1-4) and being “a light for the Gentiles” (Acts 26:23).

“Despised and abhorred by the nation...”

Although the servant song ends at verse 6, verse 7 makes a reference back to the servant and highlights another characteristic of the servant—being “despised and abhorred by the nation,” with “the nation” being Israel.

The latter two servant songs (Isaiah 50:4-7; 52:13-53:12) put an even greater emphasis on the servant suffering and being rejected by his own people. However, God will not abandon his servant; God will vindicate him (49:7; 50:7; 53:12). After Christ’s suffering on the cross, God vindicated him by raising him from the dead and seating him at the right hand of the Father.

Suffering and rejection is a central element of Christ’s own Messiahship. Christ suffers and dies, despite being innocent of any wrongdoing, in order

to make atonement for the sins of Israel and the sins of the whole world (Luke 22:36-38; Acts 8:32-35; 1 Peter 2:19-25).

The Restoration of Israel

The latter part of today's passage (Isaiah 49:8-13) focuses upon the salvation and restoration of Israel. Even though the people of God are exiled in Babylon and dispersed throughout the world, God has not abandoned them and will not leave them behind.

God will regather his people, breaking them out of captivity and bringing them home. This promise of salvation (49:8-12) leads into a rapturous eruption of praise and joy: "Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones" (49:13).

But how will this prophecy be fulfilled? The New Testament asserts this prophecy is being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Writing to the (predominantly Gentile) church at Corinth, Paul cites Isaiah 49:8 to describe the salvation granted to all people in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 6:1-2). Paul's inclusion of Gentiles in the promise of Isaiah 49:8 recalls Isaiah 49:6.

However, in pointing out Gentiles' inclusion in God's promises to Israel, we must be careful not to lapse into a kind of harsh supersessionist theology in which Gentiles simply *replace* Israel. Such theology is the stuff of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

No, the New Testament is clear that God has *expanded* Israel, not replaced it. Paul warns Gentile believers to not be haughty or prideful about being "grafted in" to Israel (Romans 11:17-24). Our salvation is an enormous privilege, not a ground for boasting—let alone ground for ethnic hatred and genocide! The mercy of God humbles all who would receive it.

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