

Isaiah Part 30: The mission of the Messiah

Isaiah 49 v 1 to 50 v 3

The Servant of the LORD (Isaiah 49 v 1 to 13)

Isaiah Chapters 49 to 55 include words of encouragement spoken to overcome the doubts, hesitations and difficulties that the message of the preceding chapters would have aroused in the minds of many. These chapters also contain three of the famous 'Servant' passages in which the mission, sufferings, and atoning death of the Messiah (the LORD's Servant) are described...

“Listen to me, O coastlands” (v 1) – these words come prophetically from the Messiah, the ‘Servant of the LORD’, who commands the coastlands – the distant lands of the Gentiles – to listen to him.

“The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name” – this was fulfilled in Micah 5 v 2, and in Luke 1 v 30, 31, where God, through Gabriel, declared the name of Jesus before his conception in Mary’s womb. “He made my mouth like a sharp sword” (v 2) – the words of the Messiah have power and authority (Revelation 1 v 16; 2 v 12). “In the shadow of his hand he hid me... in his quiver he hid me away” – these words may refer to Jesus’ ‘hidden years’, as he grew up in obscurity in Nazareth...

- The ‘Servant’ (Messiah) speaks to the “coastlands” (v 1), referring to the Gentile “nations” (v 6). What does he say about (a) his calling (v 1); (b) his equipping (v 2); (c) his initial lack of success and his attitude towards this (v 4); and the new ministry that God has given him to fulfil (v 5, 6)?
- Although this passage refers to Jesus Christ, Paul applies part of it to himself and Barnabas in Acts 13 v 47 – how can this be so? Do we also have a share in the Servant’s ministry? See John 20 v 21.
- Put yourself in the position of Israel in exile (v 7a), then consider the faith that declares the transformation announced by Isaiah in verses 7b to 13. What is the foundation for Isaiah’s confidence? With verse 7 see also Psalm 22 v 6; 27 to 29a.

“You are my servant, Israel” (v 3) – how can God speak of the Messiah as ‘Israel’? First, because the Messiah comes from Israel, and is a representative of the nation; second, because the Messiah fulfils the name ‘Israel’, which means ‘governed by God’. “I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD” (v 4) – these words can be set prophetically in the mouth of the Messiah, because Jesus must have been tempted by the discouraging thought that all his work was in vain and for nothing – see for example Luke 19 v 41 to 44 when Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Yet Jesus triumphed over such discouragement by declaring, “My recompense [is] with my God.”

“To bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him” (v 5) – an important aspect of the Messiah’s mission was to bring Israel back to God. This shows that ethnic Israel has an enduring place in God’s plan, and that plan will be fulfilled when all Israel will be saved (Romans 11 v 26). “It is too light a thing that you should... bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations” (v 6) – though part of the Messiah’s mission is directed towards Israel, he also has a mission to the Gentile ‘nations’. What will he do for them? Ensure that his “salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

“To one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation” (v 7) – God speaks to his Messiah and reveals that he will be one whom man despises, and whom his own nation abhors. This is a prophecy of the rejection of the Messiah – by mankind in general and by Israel specifically. “Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves” – yet ultimately the Messiah will receive the worship and honour he deserves, because God is faithful and has chosen him.

[MORE OVER...]

“Saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out’” (v 9) – Jesus’ ministry set people free from bondage and imprisonment: (i) Jesus set the demon possessed man free from the bondage of demonic torture (Mark 5 v 1 to 5); (ii) Jesus set the diseased free from the bondage of their infirmities (Luke 13 v 16); (iii) Jesus sets those in bondage to sin and the law free (John 8 v 33 to 36). “For he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them” (v 10) – in an immediate sense, this refers to God’s supply and sustaining of the exiles returning from Babylon to Judah. In the ultimate sense, it speaks of the provision of God for people as they return to him in the last days, as they shall come from afar. “And these from the land of Syene [or Sinim]” (v 12) – some identify this land with China: the idea is that God will bring back the captives from every conceivable place.

“Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people” (v 13) – it is assumed that the people God has comforted will praise him; here, God calls for creation itself to add their voices in praise for all the Messiah has done.

The restoration of Israel (Isaiah 49 v 14 to 26)

- How does God answer Zion’s doubts – (i) that the LORD has forsaken her (v 14); (ii) that her children have been taken from her (v 21); (iii) that Babylon was too strong to give up its prey (v 24)?

“Can a woman forget her nursing child” (v 15) – everyone knows that a woman will never forget her nursing child. Yet God says, “Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” – God’s affection for his people is greater than the devotion a woman has for her child! “Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (v 16) – this has beautiful fulfillment in the nail-scarred hands of Jesus, who told Thomas in a post-resurrection appearance, “See my hands” (John 20 v 7).

“They all gather, they come to you” (v 18) – God will bring back the exiled and captive sons of Zion to the land of Israel. God’s love and faithfulness for his people is also shown by his promise for their future: this promise was partially fulfilled in the historical return of the exiles from Babylon, but will be ultimately fulfilled in the regathering of Israel in the last days.

“I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these?” (v 21) – the great blessing of the returning sons of Zion – in both near and far fulfilment – will come as an astounding surprise. God’s blessing will seem to come from nowhere. “Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken” (v 25) – the mighty Babylon had taken Zion captive, but God will show his strength and love for Zion by giving to Babylon what Babylon had given to Zion, even though they thought it unlikely, as shown by verse 24: “Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?” This was true for Zion when freed from the Babylonian captivity; it is even more true for those set free from captivity to Satan.

Israel’s sin and its consequences (Isaiah 50 v 1 to 3)

“Where is your mother’s certificate of divorce?” (v 1) – God effectively says to Zion: ‘You say I have divorced you. Well then, produce the document. But there is none, because I have not divorced you! You will see that for your iniquities you have sold yourselves. It’s your own fault, and no one else’s.’ “Why, when I came, was there no man?” (v 2) – seeing that Zion’s troubles come from their own disobedience, where is the man who will stand up for Israel? “Is my hand shortened that it cannot redeem?” – God’s answer is ‘No!’ Despite Zion’s doubts, God’s power to deliver is beyond question...

Prayer – O Lord, as we read these verses, we are reminded that you are faithful and the Redeemer of Israel. We remember Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world – despised and rejected, yet crowned with glory and honour. We thank you that your love for us is greater than the devotion a woman has for her nursing child. We praise you that you have engraved us on the palms of your hands. Lord Jesus, as your Word says, we are your sheep, we hear your voice, you know us, and we follow you; and you give us eternal life, and we shall never perish, and no one will snatch us out of your hands... Amen.