

Isaiah Part 31: “Listen to me!”

Isaiah 50 v 4 to 51 v 16

The Servant of the LORD (Isaiah 50 v 4 to 11)

“The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught” (v 4) – the Messiah speaks prophetically again, explaining that God has given him the ability to speak wisely. But for what purpose? “To sustain with a word him who is weary.” What a wonderful and wise use of the tongue! “Morning by morning he awakens... my ear, to hear as those who are taught” – the Messiah speaks of his daily deep fellowship with God the Father. The Messiah could speak wisely because he listened to his Father.

“The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious” (v 5) – here the Messiah looks back to a custom described in Exodus 21 v 5 to 6, where a servant became a willing ‘bond-slave’ to his master. The sign was the ear opened by piercing by an awl, against the doorway of the master’s house. If after six years of servitude a servant wished to make a life-long commitment to his master –not motivated by obligation, but by devotion to the master – he could do so by this ceremony. Psalm 40 v 6 speaks of this taking place between the Father and the Son: Jesus was a perfect bond-slave to the Father (Philippians 2 v 7).

- What qualities are shown in this picture of the Servant of the LORD? See John 12 v 49; Matthew 26 v 67. From Jesus’ example and experience, what can we count on God to do for us, and on what conditions?

“I gave my back to those who strike... I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting” (v 6) – this prophecy describes in chilling detail the sufferings of the Messiah: Jesus was beaten on the back (Mark 15 v 15); he was beaten on the face (Luke 22 v 63 to 65); he was mocked and spat upon (Mark 15 v 19, 20). ‘I gave my back’ means that Jesus did this voluntarily: can we ever think that God does not care for us? “But the Lord GOD helps me” (v 7) – in the midst of all this suffering, humiliation, and pain, the Messiah has an unshakable confidence in God’s help. “Therefore, I have set my face like a flint” – despite knowing the agony awaiting him, the Messiah will have a steadfast determination to obey God and follow his way: nothing will turn him aside (see Luke 9 v 51). There are two kinds of courage – the courage of the moment that requires no previous thought, and a ‘planned’ courage of intent, which sees the difficulty ahead yet steadfastly marches towards it. Jesus could see the cross on the horizon, yet he still set his face like a flint.

“He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me?” (v 8) – this is the Messiah’s way of quoting Romans 8 v 31: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” He says it again: “Behold, the Lord GOD helps me; who will declare me guilty?” (v 9). The reason why Romans 8 v 31 applies to us is that it first applied to Jesus, and we are ‘in Christ’. If Jesus stands in the place of victory, then those in Christ stand there also.

“Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant?” (v 10) – now the Messiah speaks to his people and challenges them to fear the LORD and obey his servant, the Messiah himself. Jesus obeyed his Father; so here he calls others to obedience. “Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD” – this is a profound verse for those experiencing the ‘dark night of the soul’. Jesus guides us into the path of light: he tells us simply to trust and rely upon God.

“Behold, all you who kindle a fire” (v 11) – the ‘fire’ described in this verse is in contrast to the ‘light’ in v 10. This is like the profane fire of Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10 v 1). If we walk in the light of *that* fire and “by the torches that [we] have kindled”, then we shall have torment from God’s hand. This follows the Messiah’s exhortation to trust in the LORD, and not in our own efforts, which are like a profane fire.

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The LORD's comfort for Zion (Isaiah 51 v 1 to 16)

- What comfort and encouragement can we find in verses 1 to 6? What reassurances are given to those of us who are frightened by the hostility of others? See verses 7, 8, 12 to 16.

“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness” (v 1) – God speaks to his people, but his people have had trouble listening to him. So in verses 1 and 7 the exhortation is given: “Listen to me.”

“Look to the rock from which you were hewn... Look to Abraham your father” – God reminds his people to look at his works in days past. “For he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him (v 2) – Abraham was one man from a simple family; yet God called him and blessed him. Isaiah wanted God’s people not to be discouraged by their small numbers, but to realize that just as he did great things through Abraham and Sarah, he can do great things through them.

“For the Lord comforts Zion... and makes her wilderness like Eden... joy and gladness will be found in her” (v 3) – though these promises had a near fulfillment in the return from Babylon’s captivity, their ultimate fulfillment is in a regathered, blessed, and saved Israel in the Millennium. “I will set my justice for a light to the peoples” (v 4) – when God finally saves Israel, he will also shine forth his justice to all the world.

“For the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment” (v 6) – these phrases refer to Jesus’ Second Coming (Matthew 24 v 29; 2 Peter 3 v 10; Revelation 6 v 12 to 14). This is ultimately when God’s justice will be displayed – both to Israel, and to all nations (‘the peoples’). “But my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed” – those who dwell in the earth will be destroyed with the earth, but God’s righteousness and salvation will never be destroyed – they are more permanent than even the heavens and the earth. We don’t have to worry that God will change his character (‘my righteousness’) or his mind about us (‘my salvation’). This is something to listen to!

“Listen to me... fear not the reproach of man” (v 7) – knowing the permanence of the righteousness and salvation of the LORD, and the passing nature of the wicked (“the moth will eat them up like a garment”), we should listen to God, and not be afraid of men. “Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD” (v 9) – here the faithful believer calls out to God, looking to him for salvation. “Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?” – the name ‘Rahab’ means pride, and ever since the Garden of Eden, the serpent has been associated with Satan (Isaiah 14 v 13 to 15). This speaks in poetic terms of God’s victory over Satan, as it does also in Psalm 89 v 10.

“And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing” (v 11) – see also Isaiah 35 v 10. The word ‘redeemed’ (v 10) is related to the word גֹּאֵל (*go-el*), and refers to someone who has been rescued by the ‘go-el’ or ‘kinsman-redeemer’, that is, Jesus. “Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads... and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” –when we arrive at our destination, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes; there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain (Revelation 21 v 4).

“Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies” (v 12) – with such wonderful promises, and a God this mighty, we have no reason to fear man – who can never undo God’s plan for our lives. “[You] have forgotten the LORD, your Maker... and you fear continually” (v 13) – these two phrases go together: we will live in constant fear if we forget the LORD and his tender love and care for us. “I have... covered you in the shadow of my hand” (v 16) – see also Psalm 91 v 1.

Prayer – O Lord, as we read these verses, we are reminded that you are the one that comforts, and that you, O LORD, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth – you are our Maker.

Help us to listen to your voice day by day, and to remember that your righteousness will be forever, and your salvation to all generations. Help us to remember that you who have established the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth cover us in the shadow of your hand, for we are your people... Amen.