

AM Isaiah 49:1-13 A Light for the Nations

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[0 : 00] Our reading from God's Word this morning is taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 49. And as you'll see in the service sheet, we're going to hear from the first half this morning and the second half this evening.

I'm actually only going to read up to verse 12 this morning because it seemed to me that verse 13 would fit better this evening, so apologies for that. But we will hear now from Psalm 49, the first 12 verses.

Hear the word of the Lord. 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.

[1 : 13] But I said I have laboured 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 Israel back to him, to bring Jacob back to him, sorry, and that Israel might be gathered to him.

I am honoured 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.

Thus says the Lord. In a time of favour, I have answered you. In a day of salvation, I have helped you.

[2 : 41] I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion to desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, come out.

To those who are in darkness, appear. They shall feed along the ways. On all the bare heights shall be their pasture.

They shall not hunger, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.

And I will make all my mountains a road. And my highways shall be raised up. Behold, these shall come from afar.

And behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Cyrene. May the Lord add his blessing to the reading of his word.

[3 : 46] As I mentioned, this Lord's Day, we're exploring Isaiah chapter 49 together. A prophecy formed of a number of very distinct parts. This morning we will, as it were, be considering parts 1 and 2.

The people of Israel's disbelief and rejection of God. And God's gracious love toward the Gentiles. And this evening we will consider parts 3 to 5.

And I hope that by the end you'll see how this prophecy came to be fulfilled. Both in the Lord Jesus and also in the church he left to follow him. Not to mention, of course, in the time of the people of Israel itself.

So what have we just heard? Well, if you haven't already, please do turn to Isaiah 49 again. And follow along as we explore the text. We do this for two reasons. First of all, so that you can keep me

right.

And you can make sure that what I'm saying is what's there. Because that is important. And also because it's useful for us all to refer to it. The text begins with some exciting words.

[4 : 54] Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. This shows us immediately that, unlike some of the other prophecies that God gave to his people, this message is not just for the people of Israel, but for the peoples of the world.

Compare it, if you will, with Isaiah chapter 40, verse 1. Comfort, comfort my people, says the Lord. The prophecy follows in a line of prophecies concerning the restoration of the kingdom. Beginning in Isaiah 45 with the declaration that post-exile, the nation of Israel would be built according to the decree of King Cyrus.

But this declaration is not just comfort, comfort my people, but listen to me, coastlands, give attention, you peoples from afar.

And so the first important thing to understand as we read this text, and this applies both morning and evening, is that it is spoken primarily by the Lord Jesus Christ himself, you know, through the prophecy.

[6 : 13] Now, I don't know about you, but I'm often uncomfortable with trying to find Jesus in every word of the Old Testament. While I know that the Old Testament certainly shows Christ, there are some parts where it's much easier to discern than others.

I wonder if you agree. But I think it's clear here that the servant of the Lord, as the chapter is helpfully entitled, refers to Jesus.

Of course, as a prophecy, it was written many centuries before Jesus was born. So it wasn't spoken by the man, Christ Jesus, but was instead used by God through Isaiah to show us what Jesus would be like, and indeed what he would do.

In this prophecy, Jesus, through the prophet, declares that he was born for this purpose. Verse 1b, The Lord called me from the womb. It's as though the Lord was saying, before I even came out of the womb, God had determined that I should hold this office.

The fulfillment of the prophecy is why Jesus came in the first place. It wasn't something that was a thrust upon him when he grew up.

[7 : 26] It wasn't a job he applied for post-college. The fulfillment of the prophecy was central to his incarnation. It was the only reason he was here. Before he was even born, he was set apart to do this job.

We can see another example of this in the Old Testament, where Elkanah and Hannah had a son, Samuel. 1 Samuel chapter 1, verse 11, where the barren Hannah made a tearful vow to the Lord as she prayed in the temple.

You might remember Eli thought that the poor girl was drunk as she was praying because her lips were moving, but no voice was heard. But she was not drunk, she was praying.

Praying, promising that if God gave her a son, she would offer the son back to him as a thank offering for his service. I will give him to the Lord all the days of my life, and no razor shall touch his head.

1 Samuel 1, verse 11. Therefore, once the child Samuel was born and weaned, she and her husband presented him at the temple to minister before the Lord, a boy clothed in a linen ephod.

[8 : 38] Chapter 2, verse 18. Now, I can't actually work out quite how old he would be, but I suspect he wouldn't be much older than some of the wee children in here today. But this was no rash decision.

She did not see the child grow up and decided that he would go to serve the Lord. Samuel didn't wind her up to the point that she just wanted him out of the house. It was pre-decided before his birth.

Now, of course, as Reformed Christians, this is nothing new to us, for we're all too aware of the doctrine of predestination, that God decided before the foundation of the world those to whom he would reveal himself and those to whom he wouldn't.

In the confession of faith, we hear all those whom God hath predestinated unto life and those only that he is pleased effectually to call. Not only was Christ born for the purposes explained throughout Isaiah 49, but as we continue throughout the passage, we can see in verse 2 that the Lord made his mouth like a sharp sword.

Jesus' weapons to accomplish his purposes were not the traditional weapons used to subjugate peoples or kingdoms or impose your will, but they were instead the truth of God's word.

[10:02] Now, we can see similar imagery in the book of Revelation. If you're able, turn with me to Revelation at chapter 19, at verse 15. We can read that from Jesus' mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.

From his mouth comes this sword, not from a sheath on his belt. Furthermore, returning my apologies to Isaiah 49, we can see that Jesus compares himself to a polished arrow.

Now, Jesus uses both sword and arrow to describe himself and his weaponry, showing that not only is he armed for, if you like, close combat with a sword, but also a long-distance weapon for his arrow.

His message, therefore, is not just for the people close at hand that he can reach with his sword, but for all those within an arrow's length.

And, you know, presumably that's a lot further than you and I could shoot an arrow. His message, his gospel, was not just for the people of Israel. And so, having described himself and shown how his weaponry enables him to reach both those nearby and those who are afar, Jesus declares, in verse 2, that in his quiver, God hid me away.

[11:30] Of course, you know that quivers are full of arrows. In Luke, chapter 2, verse 52, we find those immortal words a tantalizing look into the early life of Jesus.

This is Luke 2, as I say it, verse 52. It is really the only real insight we get into Jesus' life.

Sort of, when he was a teenager through to an adult, he was given his bar mitzvah in the temple, in Luke 2, verse 41. And then in verse 52, we read, And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature in favour with God and with man.

There's no real account of his teenage years, nor his, we assume, education in the temple, nor his taking up his father's trade in the workshop, In many ways, we could consider those years between Christ's infancy, with the exception of his bar mitzvah, and his adulthood.

Those years are, if you like, hidden years of Jesus, where he lived in obscurity. He was a polished shaft waiting to be drawn from the quiver of God.

[12:54] He was there, he was sharp, but at that point was not used. We don't know what Jesus did in that time. God has seen right and fit not to reveal it to us, but we do know that the Lord God kept him safe at a time when, let's face it, so many died in infancy and childhood, until such a time as his ministry began.

Returning to Isaiah, we now hear another voice in the prophecy. Until now, the voice has been that of Jesus, but in verse 3, we hear the Lord God, God the Father, speaking, you are my servant Israel, in whom I will be glorified.

Now this verse has caused much discussion among biblical scholars down through the centuries. Some people say that in referring to the servant as Israel, it proves that Jesus is not the subject of this prophecy.

They would say that the prophecy is referring to the Jews, to God's Old Testament chosen people. And in many ways, it is an understandable conclusion to draw.

After all, it was written for the Jews in a time of exile when they needed hope and where they needed restoration. However, verses 5 to 6 show that it is not a land that the prophet is talking about, but a person this person was formed from the womb to be his servant.

[14:35] And he has a mission to bring Jacob back to God. Jacob could not bring Jacob back to God. Jesus could bring Jacob back to God.

Therefore, many readers, Guzik and Calvin and various others, believe that the view that Israel is not describing, sorry, the people of Israel, the land of Jerusalem, but rather is referring to Jesus is the most satisfactory answer that we can draw.

However, we cannot escape the fact that the prophecy names the servant of God as Israel. What do we know of the name? Well, in Genesis chapter 22, we see that Jacob is renamed Israel by God.

and we know that later on the people of Israel were known as the people of Israel even though actually they were the people of a whole huge area.

Many, of course, in Jerusalem. Therefore, we can conclude that the name Israel can be applied to an individual and to a people without it being an issue for us. Therefore, in saying of Jesus, you are my people, my servant Israel, God the Father is showing that the prophecy applies not just to Jesus

but also to his people and that, friends, is the church, you and me.

[16:01] Now, this should not surprise us because we know that the church and, of course, by the church we mean the family of the elect people not the building is the bride of Christ.

John Calvin explained that in a word the Lord honors by this name the church which is the spouse of Christ just as a wife is honored by bearing the name and title of her husband.

I suppose you could think it through my surname is Topple, my wife's name is Jacqueline but you could legitimately say the Topples to describe both of us. Similarly, Jesus' name is Christ and his people are Christians, Christians.

At this time, of course, the name Christ was not known or used nor was Jesus so it's unsurprising that God didn't use those names so he described both his servant, his son, the Messiah and the people who live in and through him in one word, Israel, God's chosen people.

And yet, this nation, the church, is the one embodiment of what the nation, the physical nation of Israel failed to be, namely, the one in whom I will be glorified.

[17:22] We know from the Old Testament that time and time again, the people of Israel refused to walk in the Lord's ways. Time after time, they turned aside from his righteous judgments and decrees and went after their own wills.

God may have chosen the people but the people rarely chose God apart from when they needed help. This servant, spoken of in Isaiah 49, and the people incorporated into him, will be different. In Christ, God is glorified. In the church, we pray, God is glorified. And yet, the image is not one of undiluted joy because having named the servant as Israel and shown how through him the people would give him glory, see verse 3 for that, the servant cries out in complaint, I have laboured in vain.

I have spent my strength for nothing in vanity. Dear friends, I dare say you and I have known that feeling from time to time.

As our attempts to share the gospel or build the kingdom have fallen flat on their face, when the church building develops a leaky roof or faulty electrics, when a promising convert backslides and doesn't come to church again, at times like this, the temptation for us is to cry out to God, why?

[18:56] To declare, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing in vanity. this cry is the cry of the church incorporate in the servant.

It could so easily have been the cry of Jesus himself, were it not for the fact that he had that kind of unhindered relationship with God the Father that meant that such cries were not necessary.

However, as Christians, it is important for us that we remember that although our labours of the gospel may appear fruitless, the fruit is not always visible to the eyes of men.

None of us can see how the Lord is working in the hearts of the ungenerate, as it were, in the process of regeneration. None of us but the Lord can see the effects that our flailing words have had on somebody as we've tried to tell them about Jesus.

And yet, we can see the result once he's finished his work. In that in between period, however, when we can see no results from our labour, it is all too tempting to give up.

[20:12] But the servant in the prophecy doesn't. He doesn't turn away from God in cynical unbelief, and so nor should we. Calvin echoes this thought. He sums up the phrase, though my labour be unprofitable, and though I have almost exhausted my strength without doing any good, yet it is enough that God approves of my obedience.

Having considered that the nation of Israel is not the sum total of God's people, that is, the land of Israel is not the only nation that God is interested in, it's important for us to note that it does have an enduring part in his plan.

We can see this from verse 5, and now the Lord says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him.

This way of thinking is found in the New Testament as well, in Romans chapter 11 at verse 26, and in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, the deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob, and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.

One day, friends, we can trust, we can expect to see the people of Israel, our Jewish cousins, as it were, turn to Christ, and that is a very exciting prospect.

[21:49] Isaiah 49 at verse 5 is closely linked with verse 6, where we can read, 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 might reach to the end of the earth. The Lord Jesus Christ has a twin purpose, says the prophet Isaiah.

First of all, he will restore Jacob, that is, the people of Israel, to God. God's chosen people will once again choose the Lord and be in covenant with him, but also Jesus will unite the nations of the earth into the covenant as well.

Jesus is too great, his power is too infinite, and God's love for mankind is too strong to redeem only ethnic Israel. Instead, he has a calling to serve Israel and beyond.

We, of course, are the beneficiaries of this good news for, and I admit I'm making an assumption here, we are not Jewish converts to Christianity.

[23 : 04] We were born to Gentile, that is, non-Jewish parents. We did not undergo the rites and ceremonies of Judaism before pronouncing faith in Christ.

We are, therefore, Gentile converts to Christianity. If it wasn't for Jesus being a light for the nations, verse 6, we could not be incorporated into God's salvation plan.

The prophecy is fulfilled in those beautiful words of Simeon as he holds the newborn Jesus in his arms. Luke chapter 2, for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

This is why, to quote from Romans 10, in God there is no distinction between Jew or Greek, for the same Lord is the Lord of all.

It is why Paul took the gospel message to the Gentiles, even after some opposition from Peter. It is why converts to Christianity were not expected to go through Jewish customs before proceeding on to Christian ones, because the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is for all the nations.

[24 : 32] However, having considered this, the scene does turn darker. In verse 7, 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.

Here, the Lord God, thus says the Lord, is speaking directly to Jesus and his church, to one deeply despised, appalled by the nation, the servant of rulers, warning of horrible times to come.

We know from the life of Jesus how much he suffered for the gospel, for our salvation. We know from the lives of Christian martyrs down through the centuries, the lengths that mankind will go to, in order to expunge Christianity from the face of the earth.

We may know rejection in the world today, as more and more our land, formerly known as the land of the book, turns away from God and his righteous decrees. But a person who knew rejection and pain to a far greater degree was the Lord Jesus, on whose shoulders, we're told, in Isaiah chapter 9, were the governments of the world.

However, this prophecy continues by declaring that the darkness will not last forever. The second half of verse 7, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the peoples will one day realise that the suffering and patient endurance of Jesus, of whom the prophets speak, was actually a sign of great strength.

[26 : 37] the most exalted princes of the world, says Calvin, and from that we can take those beneath them as well, shall be aroused to perceive that the restoration of the nation is an illustrious work of God, and worthy of reverence.

The sufferings that the Christian endures will one day be noted by the people, will one day be seen as an example of God's strength and power.

The sufferings that we endure will one day be part of the method that God uses to turn others to Christ. And then turning from verses 8 to 12, we can see clearly how Jesus relates to us.

By referring to his servant as a covenant to the people, verse 8, we can know for certain that the servant subject of Isaiah 49 is the Lord Jesus, for he has been appointed, and I'm quoting here, to be the mediator of the covenant, because the Jews by their sins revolted from God who had made a covenant with them.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we see this spelled out for us, Hebrews 12, verses 22 to 24, but you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the word of Abel.

[28 : 23] The blood that Jesus Christ shed for us, for you and me, on the cross of Calvary, is the sign of this covenant he has. And whereas the blood of Abel cried out to the Lord in Genesis chapter 4, so too the spilled blood of Jesus calls out to the Lord, and this covenant is a promise, a

promise that God will establish the land.

He will say to the prisoners, come out, and that they shall neither hunger nor thirst. These are promises. promises. Now we know, of course, how Jesus in his ministry fulfilled many of these promises.

In Mark at chapter 5, we see how Jesus set the demon possessed free from the bondage of chains and demonic torture. While in Luke at chapter 13, we see how Jesus healed the sick and wounded and diseased, setting them free from the bondage of their sickness.

In Ephesians at chapter 4 and verse 8, we see how Jesus rescued the righteous from Hades and restored them to heaven. And in John 8 and Galatians 3, we see how those who are in bondage to sin and the law are set free by Jesus and him alone.

Remember the call in Matthew 11, come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

[30 : 02] This freedom, friends, is the promise of Jesus. And here, thousands of years ago and many centuries before his birth, we see it foretold.

So what? We've studied the first half of this text, and there may be some here who are still not sure why I'm preaching on it, why I've taken this down this path.

What can we learn from these words? Well, friends, if you take nothing else away from this morning, take this, that we can know for certain that while Jesus himself acknowledged that his first priority was to the lost sheep of the house of Israel in Matthew 15, Jesus' message is for all peoples and nations, even Dumfries.

Jesus conquered sin not by might or physical strength, but by his word, releasing people from burdens and imprisonments to sin as he did so.

This is his offer today. Are you sick or burdened? Are you in bondage to sin or to the law? Come unto me, all ye that are laboring and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

[31 : 28] In verse four, we saw how easy it is when we feel that our labors are not bearing fruit to give up. It is so easy to lose courage in the midst of our endeavors, and yet Christ exhorts and encourages us to strive earnestly until we rise victorious over this temptation.

Furthermore, we can take verse six as a promise in our lives. Don't forget that while the prophecy is speaking of the Lord Jesus, it is also speaking of his church, you and me.

Therefore, where we read of Christ's work in raising up the tribes of Jacob as a light for the nations, that God's salvation may reach to the ends of the earth, we can take heart, but in at least some small way, this involves you and me too.

However fruitless we feel that our endeavors may have been as a Christian or as a church, we can know for certain that the Lord will cause some fruit to spring from them, contrary to the expectations of men.

Dear friends, hundreds of years before his birth, Christ's ministry and purpose was set out through the prophet Isaiah. In his life, Christ fulfilled all of this, and in doing so, has won for us everlasting life through his blood.

[32 : 58] We can take encouragement from this, seeing that he is the covenant by which we are saved, and we can also be encouraged that the church, in his name, is part of God's gracious plan to not only bring his chosen people, Israel, to faith in Christ, but also to spread the light of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Let us pray. Grant, O God, that these lessons from your word may abide in our hearts and minds to bring forth fruit in our lives. Increase in us faith, hope, and love, with the careful keeping of your commandments, that we may be constant in our obedience, and grant, O most merciful Father, that when our life's labours are ended, we may find welcome and rest in that home eternal where your redeemed ever live to glorify you.

We ask this and all our prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.