David Meiklejohn
21 September 2025

The Servant Speaks

Isaiah 49

Introduction

What's the difference between disappointment and discouragement? Disappointment is when something turns out to be worse than expected, or doesn't happen at all. We were disappointed when we had planned our first holiday abroad with our daughter. We had the tickets, the passports, the suitcases packed. And on the day we were due to leave she got chicken pox. That was a huge disappointment.

Discouragement is when you have put in the effort and it goes unappreciated. Or it doesn't go as well as you hoped. I made a cake for Claire's birthday once and it collapsed in the oven. That was both disappointing and discouraging.

Do you think Jesus was ever discouraged? We know he was tempted, he was hungry, he was hurt, he was mocked. He knew many of the emotions we go through in life. But was he ever discouraged? I think our passage today shows just that.

Context

Last time we were in chapter 39. Israel had been warned about the Assyrians and sure enough they had come in and taken the northern kingdom away. The Assyrians had approached Jerusalem, but Hezekiah's prayer prompted God to defend Judah and send the Assyrians back home. Hezekiah was the best king they had had, but he showed weakness when a visiting deputation from the Babylonian kingdom resulted in him showing all his riches to them. Isaiah prophesied that the Babylonians would come in and take Jerusalem, and we finished on a hugely disappointing note with Hezekiah appearing to be happy with this as it wouldn't happen in his lifetime.

Chapter 40 changes the scene and we're now in Babylon with the exiled nation of Judah. From 40 to 49 God encourages the exiles that they will return one day, that he will look after them, and that he is greater than the idols that their captors worship. In chapter 49 we start a new section where God reveals the amazing means of his rescue, and how it's much more than just a return to Jerusalem.

The Servant

v1-3 The Preparation of the Servant

The passage starts with a speaker asking for our attention. Who is it? He calls for the coastlands - the faraway lands - to listen. This is important news. Listen:

> *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."

[Isaiah 49 v 1-3]

He is named Israel. Is this the nation of Israel then? It can't be, as we'll see later, as he is being sent to save Israel, to bring them back. This is the Messiah. He is what the nation was supposed to be but failed to be, a representative for God, showing God's glory to all the nations. He tells us how he was called from the womb, he was named while still in his mother's belly. His words are like weapon, filled with power, and yet God has spent time preparing him and making him ready. Does this sound like anyone we know?

Jesus was named by the angel, while still in the womb. His words had power and authority. But he grew up quietly, hidden away until his time was come to be God's servant on the earth. And in his life he certainly glorified the Father.

v4 - The Servant's Discouragement

Verse 4, then, is a surprise:

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."

[Isaiah 49 v 4]

I'm sure we can all recognise the feeling when some effort we have made doesn't go as planned. That thing we made falls apart. Those people we invited don't come. That trip we planned gets cancelled. We all deal with disappointment and discouragement, but Jesus? Surely he did everything well, and he knew the outcomes ahead of time? How could he be disappointed?

And yet the verse expresses his deep disappointment. How does it feel to come to your people, the long-promised messiah, and to be rejected? The very people who had been waiting for a thousand years didn't recognise him. They saw his miracles, they heard his words, but "surely this is the carpenter's son".

How does the servant deal with this discouragement? His right is with the Lord. His recompense is with his God. There might be little or no response from the people he was sent

to, but he has done what the Father sent him to do, and he knows he has his Father's approval.

Do you ever feel you have a thankless task? No one sees your efforts, no one appreciates what you're doing. It's often the case in a church. The guy up the front gets the attention and the support team goes unnoticed. Learn to appreciate those folk. And if you're one of them, remember that even though people don't see you, the Lord sees you. He is your recompense.

v5-7 The Lord's Reassurance and Greater Plan

And the Lord doesn't just reassure the servant, he widens the scope of his work. Instead of just the nation of Israel, he is being sent to the whole world. Look at verse 6:

> *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."*
>
> *[Isaiah 49 v 6]*

I love the tone of this verse. The Father saying to the Son: "saving Israel is easy, I've got bigger plans in mind". And it's not just good news for the servant, it's good news for us. Because we are the nations, we are the end of the earth. This is the verse that tells us that God's plan of salvation is for the whole world, not just for the nation of Israel.

And then that discouragement, the rejection of his people, will be turned around. Instead of a servant, he will be seen as king of kings, princes will bow down, he is the chosen one of God. See 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."*
>
> *[Isaiah 49 v 7]*

The Servant's Work

The rest of our passage tells us about the work the servant, God's anointed one, is going to carry out. It starts out by continuing to address the servant.

v8-13 The Plan of Restoration

I think there are two fulfilments for this passage. Firstly it describes the rescue of the Israelites from Babylon, and the journey they will make as they travel back to Jerusalem, across the rough terrain. It describes how God will provide for them and make the way easier for them.

But secondly I think it also pictures the Messiah rescuing his people from sin, leading them through the rough terrain of the Christian life on our way to eternity. Notice how in verse 8 the father tells the servant he will be given as a covenant for the people. Not that he will make a covenant, but will be made a covenant.

Think about both these aspects as we read through these verses:

Thus says the Lord:
"In a time of favor I have answered you;
in a day of salvation I have helped you;
I will keep you and give you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages,
saying to the prisoners, 'Come out,'
to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.'
They shall feed along the ways;
on all bare heights shall be their pasture;
they shall not hunger or thirst,
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 Syene."
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.
[Isaiah 49 v 8-13]

Notice how the mountains, which are obstacles along the way, aren't the devil's mountains. They're God's mountains. We all face mountains in our walk, it can be an uphill struggle at times. But it's a struggle ordained by God to perfect us.

By the way, do you know what the name Israel means? It was given to Jacob when he wrestled with the angel. It means one who struggles with God.

v14 - Zion's Complaint

Now we turn to the second half of the passage. The Lord turns his attention to Zion. Now usually when he mentions Zion, Isaiah is talking about God's people, but here he really means the place, Mount Zion, Jerusalem, deserted since the Israelites were carried away by Babylon.

And Zion thinks it has been forgotten:

> *But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me;*
> *my Lord has forgotten me."*
> *[Isaiah 49 v 14]*

Did you ever get lost as a child? Lose sight of your parents in a big department store? That sense of disconnection is horrible. Separation from someone you love and rely on is just one of the worst things you can imagine. That's how Zion feels: its people have gone and its God has forgotten it.

v15-18 - Not Forgotten

Of course God hasn't forgotten his holy city. He compares himself to a mother with a baby. You would never forget your child. And even if that remote possibility came true, God says he is better than that. Zion is engraved on his hands. She is always on his mind. He cares about her walls, broken as they are, and reassures her that the builders are coming back to restore her. Her destroyers will leave and the people of God will return. He compares the returning Israelites to an ornament she will wear again.

v19-21 - Full to Overflowing

In fact the city won't just be filled with the remnant returning from Babylon. People will come from all over the world. So much so that the land will be too small for them, and the city will be amazed at what God has done:

> *"Surely your waste and your desolate places*
> *and your devastated land—*
> *surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants,*
> *and those who swallowed you up will be far away.*
> *The children of your bereavement*
> *will yet say in your ears:*
> *'The place is too narrow for me;*
> *make room for me to dwell in.'*

Then you will say in your heart:

'Who has borne me these?

I was bereaved and barren,

exiled and put away,

but who has brought up these?

Behold, I was left alone;

from where have these come?' "

[Isaiah 49 v 19-21]

And where have they come from? From all over the world. Because the children of God are no longer just the Jewish nation, but the adopted children that God has taken in through his Son, his Servant. We are the people of God and we will fill the land!

v22-23 - Reputation Restored

Not only will Zion be filled, but its reputation will be restored. V 22 and 23 tell us about those coming from the nations. Kings and Queens will bring them and will bow down. And God's message to those who were discouraged? Those who were forgotten? Those who felt separated? Look at verse 23:

Then you will know that I am the Lord;

those who wait for me shall not be put to shame."

[Isaiah 49 v 23b]

Is that you? Have you been waiting for the Lord? He says you will not be put to shame. Think of Simeon. He was literally waiting for the Messiah for most of his life. And finally he was rewarded as the Christ child was brought to the temple.

v24-26 - Mighty God takes Back his People

And don't think the enemy gets a choice in this rescue of God's people. If God is on your side he is stronger than any who tries to hold you against his will.

Can the prey be taken from the mighty,

or the captives of a tyrant be rescued?

For thus says the Lord:

"Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken,

and the prey of the tyrant be rescued,

for I will contend with those who contend with you,

and I will save your children.

I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh,

and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine.

Then all flesh shall know

that I am the Lord your Savior,

and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob."

[Isaiah 49 v 24-26]

ch50 v1-3 - Far from Forgotten

And finally God reminds them who he really is. His people haven't just thought they were forgotten, they thought they had been abandoned by a God who wasn't strong enough to reclaim them. God reminds them that they are in Babylon because of their sins, not because he has abandoned them. And he is the almighty God, well able to deal with his enemies. Look at how chapter 50 v 1-3 finishes off this section:

Thus says the LORD:

"Where is your mother's certificate of divorce,

with which I sent her away?

Or which of my creditors is it

to whom I have sold you?

Behold, for your iniquities you were sold,

and for your transgressions your mother was sent away.

Why, when I came, was there no man;

why, when I called, was there no one to answer?

Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem?

Or have I no power to deliver?

Behold, by my rebuke I dry up the sea,

I make the rivers a desert;

their fish stink for lack of water

and die of thirst.

I clothe the heavens with blackness

and make sackcloth their covering."

[Isaiah 50 v 1-3]

We serve a mighty God and can be thankful that he loves us.

Summary

Hopefully that helps fill out the picture of this chapter. You're going to hear more about God's servant in the coming weeks, and how he was to be the suffering servant.

Remember that Isaiah was writing here to a people who were just the remnant of their nation, captured and taken to a far land, feeling abandoned and forgotten, separated from the

city they loved and the God they should have followed better than they did. Maybe you feel a bit like that sometimes. God included you in the scope of his servant's work. He was sent to the nations, to be a saviour for the world, and no matter now desperate our situation might be, he is mighty to save.