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Isaiah 49:1-6

2nd Message

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# THE SECOND SERVANT SONG (PART 1): WAS IT ALL FOR NOTHING?

*SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

One of the most meaningful ways we connect with the Lord in worship is hearing testimonies of how people have come to faith in Christ, or seen the Lord work in remarkable and unexpected ways. Stories have a way of capturing and moving us in ways that propositional truth cannot because they elicit our empathy by drawing us into the human dilemma of perplexity and pain. Rather than giving us pat answers or abstract doctrine to address the dilemma, the storyteller invites us as traveling companions to witness the wondrous way God worked to grant them a new perspective that transformed their world and turned their night into day. No matter how old I get, hearing stories rooted in God's kingdom never gets old, for it seems as if each one is custom made, unfolding new dimensions of God's infinite grace.

Did you ever wonder what it would be like if Jesus could give his testimony? What would you expect him to say about his story as God's servant? What form of speech would he use? What were his expectations as a human being? Do you wonder if he ever experienced any surprises or disappointments along the way? Was there a learning curve? Did he ever become disillusioned with his task or give up hope of restoring Israel? Or do you think he just sailed through life, blazing his trail to Jerusalem John Wayne style – the unstoppable cowboy from Galilee?

Today, Isaiah's second servant song, we have the privilege of hearing from the servant himself as he takes the public stage to give his testimony before the nations. Our text has three movements – in the first we hear him speak about his call and preparation for ministry (vv. 1-2); in the second, we are amazed to hear his lament, giving voice to his apparent failure at the end of his ministry (vv. 3-4); and in the third, he details the new perspective he achieved having heard from the Lord (vv. 5-6). On a practical level, the servant's testimony becomes a paradigm of our spiritual journey.

## I. The Servant's Calling and Preparation (Isaiah 49:1-2)

### A. The servant's call to ministry

**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. (Isa 49:1-2  
ESV)**

The servant takes the world's stage and makes his initial appeal, surprisingly, not to Israel but to the "coastlands" and "peoples from afar." This is not what we would have expected, especially after they were summoned to court in chapter 41 and confounded by the Lord, who utterly humiliated them for their trust in man-made idols – "you [idols] are less than nothing and you can do nothing; those who choose you are detestable" (41:24). After that divine whipping, one would expect God's holy hammer to fall and crush them. But rather than destroying them with their idols, God extends grace, and in chapter 42 we learn that the work of the servant has liberated

them from their blindness, so that "the coastlands wait expectantly for his teaching."

Trusting in that promise, the servant beckons those far off to pay close attention to his testimony, for he is about to reveal unprecedented things in God's plan of salvation that affect them directly.

The servant's resume is impressive, covering his entire life span. His sacred call was built right into his DNA while he was yet in his mother's womb. The language is reminiscent of Samuel and Jeremiah, and suggests that his ministry will be like the great prophets of Israel, who were called to restore the people of Israel to their God. To be set apart from the womb indicates that the servant's vocation is not a secondary thing or an afterthought, but a decisive, groundbreaking decision made in the holy court. It is so significant the Lord makes sure that his name is one that will never be forgotten.

Prophesying the birth of Jesus, the angel Gabriel said to Mary, "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus" (Luke 1:31).

### B. The servant's gifts and preparation for ministry

**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. (v. 2)**

Exercising leadership on an international scale demands extraordinary gifts coupled with rigorous preparation. To accomplish his task, the servant will be given the gift of speech. He will not institute the kingdom of God by the sword or by military power, but like the great prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, he will be empowered with the gift of powerful preaching. His speech will be an effective weapon in the hands of God. Like a sharp sword at close range, it will be able to cut through layers of flesh and penetrate to the bone, exposing the motives and intentions of the human heart. Furthermore, like a polished arrow, it will be able to strike a lethal blow from great distances.

While this weapon would be extremely effective in God's hands, it was also kept hidden (the sword by "the shadow of the hand," and the arrow in "his quiver") until the right time. The image of being hidden may suggest why the weapon was so effective. Under the secret, protective hand of God the servant would be trained to speak. You can't train on the day of battle, for then it is too late. For thirty years Jesus was hidden in God's quiver, day after day being sharpened and polished as he meditated and memorized the Hebrew Scriptures.

When we read the gospels it is unmistakably clear how sharp this sword was. Not one of Jesus' opponents, including the devil, was able to stand up against his penetrating words. Jesus was tested countless times in his ministry by adversaries who were seeking to trap him, but the Scripture says of him –

“No one ever spoke like this man.” (John 7:46)

“And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.” (Mark 1:22)

“And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent.” (Luke 20:26)

The match up is so one sided, it is comic.

If any of us had a brain tumor, none of us would dare submit ourselves to an inexperienced doctor with insufficient training in medicine. Yet, when it comes to the immortal soul, I'm amazed how many intelligent people freely submit themselves to self-proclaimed religious gurus, with little or no theological training.

Having shared his calling and preparation for ministry, the servant gives testimony as to how it played out in his ministry. It's one thing for a surgeon to commend his abilities with a diploma from a top rate medical school, it's quite another to evoke confidence with a proven track record of 4,000 operations, not to mention new life-saving procedures and cures he discovered along the way.

## II. The Servant's Lament (Isaiah 49:3-4)

### A. Confirmation at the beginning of his ministry

And he said to me, “You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” (v. 3)

Perhaps the greatest difference between leadership in the world and that of the kingdom of God is that in the world, leadership is free for the taking and seized by individuals who claw their way to the top. Like a shootout at the OK Coral, when the smoke clears the office is given to the last man or woman standing. In God's kingdom “no one takes the office for himself” (Heb 5:4). In Israel no legitimate prophet, priest or king was self-designated (though her history is littered with countless casualties from those who usurped an office), and the same is true in the church. There are no self-appointed leaders – pastors, prophets, missionaries, deacons, or elders. They are selected by divine gift, impeccable character and a proven track record that is recognized by the congregation.

Thus it is crucial that the servant establish that his call and vocation did not originate in himself, neither through good motives nor selfish ambition. It had to originate by divine decree from God's holy court and be confirmed on earth through legitimate channels.

The servant testifies that it was God's decree that set him apart to take on Israel's historic role to the nations. This is why he is named Israel. (This explains why there is confusion about the identity of the servant). He is called to do what Israel had long failed to do, to be faithful to God's covenants so that the world might see what it means to be fully human – being fully alive with God's Spirit filling, energizing, empowering a person so that he or she is able to serve and love others with their whole heart.

A bold claim indeed. However, just because an individual claims that he or she was authorized by God doesn't compel someone to believe it. The matter must be confirmed by two or three witnesses. What was decreed in heaven must be recognized and confirmed on earth. This is why the ministry of John the Baptist was so important. Prophets were kingmakers. Just as David could not take office without Samuel's anointing, so Jesus could not take office without prophetic sanction. As Israel's last prophet, John anointed Israel's final and greatest king. At his baptism, God reconfirmed his choice of the Servant:

And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:10-11)

Throughout Jesus' ministry this is what he was doing from Galilee to Jerusalem. He was demonstrating who he was in relationship to the father, and by implication, what God had intended Israel to be to the world, hoping that the nation would repent of her idolatrous ways and follow Jesus in his way of being Israel. That was his calling, purpose and goal from which he never deviated, but in the end, he had little to show for his efforts.

### B. Lament at the end of his ministry

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.” (v. 4)

At the end of his arduous and faithful labors, it appears for all practical purposes as if everything has been for naught. Given the extreme disconnect between the promises of God and reality, the servant gives voice to his lament before God. This is what he learned from the Psalms and it becomes the turning point in his testimony.

Lament is the proper biblical response to the tension we feel deep in our souls when the promises of God seem to be utterly contradicted by the reality we experience in our everyday lives. Sometimes we feel tension because we are interpreting God's promises incorrectly, but many times our interpretation is correct, yet life does not seem to unfold in a way that even comes close to what God promised and we become deeply disoriented. Our normal categories don't function and we feel displaced, dismayed, distraught, abandoned and sometimes even betrayed.

When we feel this tension, our normal response is to do one of three things. We deny the disorientation to preserve the old order, pretending that we don't see the discrepancy between reality and the promises of God. Or, we make mention of our pain but quickly move to praise, quoting verses such as “God causes all things to work together for good” (Rom 8:28) but all the while burying the pain under layers of bravado and wishful thinking. Or, if we've been stuffing down our pain for a long time, we either vent our emotions privately to a counselor (but never publicly in worship), or sadly, many simply give up the faith entirely.

The biblical response to disorientation is the gift of lament. To lament is to turn yourself toward God in complete trust and articulate the tensions in your soul with utter honesty (“O God...”). This is not venting anger; this is letting God in to know how you really feel so he can take you to a deeper understanding of himself and your situation. And just like the psalmist, as you give voice to your disorientation, God grants you a new insight, confidence or orientation, awakening truth in your intellect and integrating it fully with your emotions (“But God...”).

The servant does not hold back or downplay how he feels. He is brutally honest, communicating a boatload of pain and emotion with a minimum of words. It was not as if he lacked focus or was halfhearted in his commitment. His choice of verbs demonstrates his supreme effort – he utterly spent (*kalab*) himself until there was nothing left – and the physical and emotional exhaustion that result – labored (*yaga*) connotes “to be weary, exhausted.”

And what does he see for all his efforts? It is nothing but a *tohu* and a *hebel*. The terms are not without significance. *Tohu* is common in the vocabulary of creation. In Genesis 1:2 it describes the chaos or formlessness of the primeval earth. When God created the world he did not create it to be a chaotic wasteland (Isa 45:18), but at the end of the servant's ministry, that is exactly what he sees. A *tohu* with no order, shape or form. The second term, *hebel*, is the theme word of Ecclesiastes—"Vanity of vanity," says the preacher. It describes something as ephemeral, whether it is transient and fleeting, or empty of significance and meaning. Jesus gave his whole life to restore Israel and what does he see as a result? Chaos and smoke!

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever given yourself to God's call and promises and only to be led down what seemed to be a dead end road? You take your wedding vows by faith and a decade later it goes up in smoke. On more than one occasion I have had close friends lose a son or a daughter just days before delivery. In one case it was twins. You prepare yourselves for nine months to be parents, but you drive from the hospital to the cemetery instead of home to the nursery.

At the climax of his ministry, Jesus made his final pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was received by crowds shouting praises – "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Luke 19:38). It was a royal welcome, but Jesus had an altogether different point of view. As Jerusalem came into view, he wept over the city, for he knew they had missed the day of their visitation.

**"How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matt 23:37).**

When a fire consumes a barn, the mother hen gathers her brood under her wings to protect them from the blaze. In the aftermath you have one dead hen, but the chicks have been spared. Jesus, knowing that judgment was at hand, longed to gather the Jews under his wings of protection and die in their place. But they resisted his message to the bitter end and refused to come home. It makes us wonder how Jesus got through it. Apart from his prayer in Gethsemane, Jesus' internal wrestling with God is not given to us in the gospels. For that we must turn to the prophet Isaiah and the Psalms.

Typical of lament psalms, once the poet articulates the tensions within his soul, he is given an insight by God's spirit that turns his lament into confidence. As the servant articulates his pain over his apparent failure, his trust in God doesn't waver but is strengthened because he knows that God is under legal obligation to vindicate his work, although he has no idea what that will look like. Though the servant receives no earthly reward for his labors, he looks to God for his ultimate wage (*pe'ullab*—"wage, reward, payment"). What a God we serve!

In a climactic moment, God grants the servant a new and greater perspective on his vocation.

### III. The Servant's New and Greater Perspective (Isaiah 49:5-6)

#### A. The original task and privilege confirmed

And now the LORD says,  
 he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,  
 to bring Jacob back to him;  
 and that Israel might be gathered to him—  
 for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,

and my God has become my strength— (v. 5)

The Lord's response is first to reassure his servant that his gifts and calling were irrevocable, and his efforts were not in vain. God has not deviated from his original plan and is not going to scrap his intention to restore Israel to himself. For the servant to have given his life for a cause that was doomed would be dishonoring to the one God loves and strengthens. This is theologically significant, for it prevents us from believing that the church is a Plan B replacement for God's original plan of salvation. No, there has only been one plan, though from a human standpoint its revelation has been progressive through the ages.

Next comes the surprising, earth shattering announcement of the significance of his work.

#### B. The new task and greater privilege 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."** (v. 6)

The task of raising up the tribes of Jacob from the dead and bringing back those who survived captivity was, in God's estimation, a task that was utterly insignificant and unworthy of all the servant was capable of. From his original expectations, God expands the servant's horizon to see beyond Israel to the whole world. The servant served the Lord with the expectation of restoring the family of Israel to its rightful place, but then through what appeared to be dismal failure, he learns that his work of reconciliation has created a worldwide family.

In Isaiah 53 the servant dies unmarried with no physical seed, yet God says, "He will see his seed" (v. 10). One of the most beautiful images comes at the end of chapter 49, after Zion complains that the Lord has forgotten her and left her childless and forsaken. God responds with,

**"Can a woman forget her nursing child,  
 that she should have no compassion on the son of her  
 womb?  
 Even these may forget,  
 yet I will not forget you" (49:15)**

He backs up his commitment of love with a promise that would stir the heart of any parent who that has lost a child:

**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?"**

**Thus says the Lord GOD:  
 "Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations,  
 and raise my signal to the peoples;  
 and they shall bring your sons in their bosom,  
 and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders."  
 (Isa 49:20-22)**

Though the relationship between the failure of Israel to respond to the gospel and its acceptance among gentiles remains a mystery until Paul's explanation in Romans, this new lens is enough to renew the servant's hope and strengthen his resolve to go to the grave knowing God will be faithful to what he has promised and more besides.

This is the servant's testimony. What a testimony! Why would you follow anyone else? This is a God who takes our deepest sorrow and loss, and not only promises complete restoration in the age to come, but makes it the channel for life beyond measure in the present age.

This week is the 36th anniversary of my son's death. David was born with an enzyme deficiency and lived but nine days. We grieved deeply, but my faith was not shaken. Children die. But I was convinced God would never require a second child. The odds were only one in four of our enzyme deficiency occurring, which gave us a one in sixteen odds of it happening twice in a row. My theology was fixed – God is sovereign, God is good, the odds are good, and we already gave our firstborn to God – it can never happen again. Two months later Emily was pregnant again.

An amniocentesis gave us great news – we were going to be the parents of a healthy little girl. Jessica Dawn was born that November, but after three days she developed similar signs to David's. Three days later Jessica died. I was crushed. Like the servant, all our labors for children seemed to go up in smoke. I was in desperate need of new perspective.

As a follower of Jesus, I knew with confidence that Emily and I would meet them on the horizon in the resurrection. But three decades later, I can now also say with joy in my heart, that the pain of losing two children has increased my capacity to love others and appreciate the gifts of life in ways nothing else could have. After Jessica died, I learned that we don't have a right to be parents; children are a pure gift of God. By one of God's miracles we were able to adopt Rebecca Noelle, who was born just two weeks after Jessica died. She dried our tears. I used to say, "After losing two children, every diaper is a privilege." Emily conceived again and we prayed for nine months, not knowing if our little girl would live or die. On October 31, 1978 Jennifer Dawn was born and came to stay. A healthy little girl; a dream come true. Overjoyed I thought, God did for us what he did for Job, we had two children in heaven and two on earth. With no expectations of a third, God gave us Katie Louise and I became speechless with praise, having no theological categories for God's gracious gift. Now, beyond any of our expectations, Emily and I have become grandparents of four wonderful grandchildren.

But there is more. As Isaiah prophesied, out of our bereavement came numerous other children who, to our great surprise, were added to the fold. In the twenty-three years I've been ministering in Romania, I have been overwhelmed by the scores of children (who were close in age to David and Jessica) with whom we bonded as spiritual sons and daughters. The saying is true,

**"Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)**

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