



## **Draw Near, Lament and Listen**

### **Isaiah 49:1-6, 20-22**

In the first message (Isaiah 40:1-11) of our series, “Comfort O Comfort My People,” God gave voice to his unshakable commitment to rescue his people from exile and, in so doing, set the stage for the salvation of the whole world. It will be nothing short of a new creation—a new heavens and a new earth. That is “good news” indeed, but what do we do in the meantime, especially now when the whole world lives under siege in the jaws of a pandemic? Thursday the numbers worldwide totaled over 15.5 million cases and more than 600,000 deaths. How do we bring the good news of Isaiah’s announcement of “comfort” from heaven to earth? When the world is in pain, the calling of God’s people is to draw near to God, lament and listen. Tom Wright exhorts us,

In a time of acute crisis, when death sneaks into houses and shops, when you may feel healthy yourself but you may be carrying the virus without knowing it, when every stranger on the street is a threat, when we go around in masks, when churches are shut and people are dying with nobody to pray with by their bedside — this is a time for lament... The initial calling of the church, first and foremost, is to take our place humbly among the mourners.<sup>1</sup>

Lament is the biblical response to the agony of living in a fallen world that is subject to terrible plagues, gross injustices, and natural disasters. To lament is to give voice that the way things are not the way God intends them to be, especially in terms of our relationship to God and to one another. “Grief after all, is part of love. Not to grieve, not to lament, is to slam the door on the same place in the innermost heart from which love itself comes.”<sup>2</sup> It is no accident that lament comprises approximately one third of the Hebrew psalter. Joy has the last word, but lament makes up a significant part of our journey and must be recovered for deepening our devotion to Christ.

As a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, Jesus was not exempt from lament. From Gethsemane to the cross the psalms of lament were his lifeline:

**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Ps 22:1)**

**Into you hand I commit my spirit. (Ps 31:5)**

**He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken. (Ps 34:20)**

If we embrace the biblical pattern of lament in its bold honesty and audacious trust as Israel's poets and prophets did, we will discover hidden treasures of God's presence that surpass understanding.

In Isaiah 40-55, the prophet proclaims that from the ashes of exile there will emerge a bright future for God's people. It will not come as expected, but through an anonymous servant, whom the New Testament writers identify as Jesus. This servant will take on Israel's role for the nation and the world. The servant's life and ministry are poetically displayed in four songs (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-9; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12), each building in beauty and intensity. Today, in the 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 he recounts his call and preparation for ministry (vv. 1-2); in the second, we 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).

## **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 ESV)**

The servant takes the world's stage and surprisingly makes his initial appeal, not to Israel, but to the "coastlands" and "peoples from afar." This is not what we would have expected after God summoned them to court in chapter 41 and 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 tongue lashing, one would expect God's holy hammer to fall and crush them. But rather than destroying them with their idols, God extends grace. In chapter 42, we learn that the servant's work has liberated them from their blindness, so that "the coastlands wait expectantly for his

teaching” (42:4). 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 resumé is impressive. His sacred call was implanted in 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 an afterthought, but a decisive, groundbreaking decision made in the holy court. It is so significant the Lord makes sure 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 is given the gift of speech. He will not institute the kingdom of God by the sword or by military might, but like the great prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, he will be empowered with 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.

**For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)**

While this weapon would be extremely effective in God’s hands, it was also kept hidden 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. 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.

Reading the gospels, it is unmistakably clear how sharp this sword was. Not one of Jesus' opponents, including the devil, was able to withstand his penetrating words. Though he was tested countless times in his ministry by adversaries who were seeking to trap him, the Scriptures say 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)

Having shared his calling and preparation for ministry, the servant gives testimony on how it played out in his ministry.

## **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)**

The servant testifies that it was God's decree that set him apart to take on Israel's historic role to the nations. 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—to be alive with God's Spirit filling, energizing, empowering a person so that he or she can serve and love others with their whole heart.

At Jesus' baptism, God publicly confirmed 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) In the years that followed, Jesus demonstrated who he was in relationship to the father, and by implication, what God had intended Israel to be to the world. Jesus' great hope was that the nation would repent of her idolatrous ways and follow his “way” of being Israel. That was the calling, purpose and goal from which he never deviated, but in the end, he has little to show for his efforts.

### **B. Lament at the end of his ministry (v. 4)**

**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 as if everything has been for naught. The nation rejected him, and his disciples had fled in fear after his arrest. Given the extreme disconnect between God’s promises 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.

The servant does not hold back or downplay his feelings. 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 denotes his supreme effort, utterly spending (*kalah*) himself until there was nothing left and becoming physically and emotionally exhausted (*yaga’*) as a result. 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, his word brought order out of chaos. He did not create it to be chaotic wasteland (Isa 45:18), but at the end of the servant’s ministry, that is exactly what he sees. It is a *tohu* with no order, structure or shape. The second term, *hebel*, is the theme word of Ecclesiastes. “Vanity of vanities,” says the preacher. *Hebel* describes something as ephemeral, whether it is transient and fleeting, or empty of meaning and significance. Jesus gave his whole life to restore Israel and at the end of his ministry, 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 a road that seemed to be a dead end? 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 an unborn son or a daughter, just days before delivery. Students slave away for years, racking up good grades and extracurricular activities at great personal cost, then don’t get into their top-choice universities. Parents raise their children in the church, guiding them through the Gospel and demonstrating a faithful walk at home, then grieve when a beloved son or daughter falls away. And how many people have dedicated years of their time, energy and savings to building a small business, only to lose it during this pandemic?

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 the city came into view, he wept over it, 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 wings to protect them from the blaze. In the aftermath you have one dead hen, but the chicks are spared. Jesus, knowing that judgment was coming, 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 are 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 often 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 waiver, but is strengthened. For he knows that God is under covenantal 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’ullah* - “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 expression “and now,” indicates a fresh turn in the official life of the person. The expression “and now,” which follows, evidently indicates a fresh turn in the official life of the person speaking here.”

C. F. Keil and Delitzsch F., *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. 10 vols.; (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), paragraph 26810.<sup>3</sup>

First, the Lord eagerly reassures his servant that his gifts and calling are irrevocable, and that his efforts were not in vain. God is not going to scrap his original calling of restoring Israel to himself. For the servant to have given his life for a cause that was doomed, would be dishonoring to the one that 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. From a human perspective, its revelation has just been progressive.

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 insignificant and unworthy of all the servant was capable of. God expands the servant's horizon to see beyond Israel to the whole world. The servant had served the Lord with the expectation of restoring the people of Israel to their original calling. But now, he learns that what appeared to be a dismal failure, will bring forth 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.” (Isa 49:15)**

He backs up his commitment of love with a promise that would stir the heart of

any parent who 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, the promise 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.

#### **IV. Without the Wardrobe there is no Narnia**

When Andrew White, the Vicar of Baghdad, was doing his doctoral work at Magdalen College, Cambridge, he had the honor of staying in the exact room that C. S. Lewis stayed in. In his latest book *Hidden Treasures, Secret Riches, Experiencing Solitude as a Place of Divine Encounter*, he explains,

It was a longstanding tradition for students to sign their names in the wardrobes, and each day as I opened my wardrobe, I would see the signature of C. S. Lewis...I am an admirer of C. S. Lewis' work...As most will know, the basic plot of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* follows four English children who are relocated to the large old country house of an old professor following a wartime evacuation. The youngest child, Lucy, visits a mystery land called Narnia via an old magical wardrobe that they discover in a spare room. Lucy's three siblings are with her on her third visit and, as the adventure unfolds, they find themselves in an epic drama to save Narnia and preserve their own lives.



As I was writing this chapter, I heard the Holy Spirit say these simple words. **“Without the wardrobe, there is no Narnia.”**...If you remove the secret place from your life and despise the place of solitude with God, you are depriving yourself of a great, dramatic, supernatural adventure with Him...had the children of the novel not been intentional about entering that which appeared to be the dull, boring unfamiliar place, they would have deprived themselves of joyful entry into the limitless reality of adventure that awaited them the other side of the wardrobe.<sup>4</sup>

As White goes on to explain, World War II was a time of fear, death, restriction and displacement. Anyone entering the wardrobe for the first time would expect to be shut in someplace dark and claustrophobic. A place of confinement, not adventure and encounter. I suspect that for many of us, these last four months of sheltering in place have felt similarly confining. How marvelous then, that in a season when we can't encounter people, we can encounter God! Indeed, this may be the optimum time to find your own wardrobe and step inside. When we are surrounded by distractions, by the hustle and bustle of the normal world, we don't give God our attention, and there is no silence for him to speak into. The pandemic has given us a head start by stripping away so many of our normal distractions. Instead of finding new ones to fill the void, lean into the quiet and solitude. Find your own wardrobe. Maybe it's a quiet corner of your home, or maybe it's out in nature. For Jesus it was a cave overlooking the Sea of Galilee, which he would escape to be alone before sunrise. Enter it, call upon God's name, and give voice to your pain and frustrations. And then listen.

As we lament, we can be confident that God's plan of salvation has not gone off the rails. This pandemic caught the world off guard, but it didn't catch God off guard. How do we know? God is sovereign and faithful to the end. The word that lifted the servant's spirits and strengthened his resolve is alive and able to lift us up today, reminding us that no matter our circumstances, we are an integral part of God's progressively unfolding plan of salvation and the greatest treasures are found in the darkness.

**I will give you the treasures of darkness  
and hidden treasures in secret places,  
that you may know that it is I, the LORD,  
the God of Israel, who call you by your name. (Isa 45:3)**

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2020), 53

<sup>2</sup> Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 53.

<sup>3</sup> C. F. Keil and Delitzsch F., *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. 10 vols.; (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), paragraph 26810.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew White, *Hidden Treasures, Secret Riches, Experiencing Solitude as a Place of Divine Encounter* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2020), 53-54.