



Catalog No. 1659
Isaiah 49:7-13
3rd Message
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November 13, 2011

THE SECOND SERVANT SONG (PART 2): MORE THAN YOU COULD ASK OR THINK!

SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

What role does failure play in the kingdom of God? We live in a culture where there is no room for failure. In sports there is only one winner. For 99% of those who excel at athletics, their final experience will be one of loss and disappointment. There is only one survivor. In business, achieving success is like scaling Mt. Everest. The conditions are brutal, and if you ever lose your footing you could die. We corrupt the arts by turning them into arenas of competition where only one idol is left singing or dancing. Even in cooking shows where top chefs from around the world prepare incredible dishes, all but one is put on the chopping block and told, "Pack up your knives and go." In the world of academics, the definition of success has escalated from excelling in one area where you are gifted, to absolute perfection across the board. I have an Asian friend who explained to me the grading scale he grew up with. He said that A means AVERAGE; B is BAD, C is CATASTROPHE, and D is DON'T COME HOME! Ironically, in the kingdom of God getting a D can be the gateway to everything you ever dreamed.

Last week, in the first part of Isaiah's second song the servant gave his testimony before the nations. After he proudly spoke of his calling by God and impressive credentials, he testified that at the end of his ministry it seemed as if all he had labored for was for naught. "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing (*tobu*) and vanity (*hebel*)" (49:4). *Tobu* ("chaos") describes the *chaos* or *formlessness* of the primeval earth (Gen 1:2), and *hebel* ("vanity" - the theme word of Ecclesiastes) describes something as *ephemeral*, whether it is transient and fleeting, or empty of significance and meaning. Jesus gave his whole life to restore Israel's relationship with the Lord and what did he see as a result? Chaos and smoke!

The servant's honest appraisal of his failure becomes the turning point in his life. It is precisely at this moment, when he is most vulnerable, that he is given a new lens from God, and his *tobu* and *hebel* are suddenly transformed into "immeasurably more than all he could ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20). God's testimony regarding his servant has three movements. In the first he promises to vindicate his servant (v. 7); in the second, he announces the establishment of a New Covenant through the servant (v. 8); and in the third, he details the surpassing glory of the servant's New Covenant ministry (vv. 9-12).

I. The Servant Will be Vindicated (Isaiah 49:7)

This is what the LORD says—
the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—
to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
to the servant of rulers:
"Kings will see you and stand up,
princes will see and bow down,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."
(Isa 49:7 TNIV)

A. His initial reception on earth

While the servant gave voice to his discouragement and despair over his labors (that's two D's not one), the Lord speaks about the reception he received as a person. The Father not only acknowledges that his feelings of discouragement are legitimate, but that he is keenly aware that his pain goes deeper – touching the core of his identity and being. After years of announcing the good news of the arrival of God's kingdom, and bringing healing, cleansing and forgiveness to the people of Israel, Jesus made his climatic royal entrance into the city humbly, mounted on the foal of a donkey. Normally, when dignitaries arrived in Jerusalem, especially after a victory, there would be elaborate ceremonies within the temple precincts followed by generous hospitality. But when the servant-King entered the city, no one from Israel's ruling court welcomed him or even acknowledged his arrival. How do you think he felt?

The Lord doesn't hold back and goes right to heart of his pain. Rather than being honored and appreciated by the nation he came to serve, he was "*despised*." The word has the idea of treating someone with contempt because that individual has no value or significance. David brings the meaning home with the pitiful image of a "worm" in Psalm 22 – "But I am a worm, not a man, scorned by mankind and *despised* by the people" (Ps 22:6); Isaiah expands the imagery in chapter 53 – "He was *despised* and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces" (Isa 53:3).

"*Abhorred*" takes the idea of rejection to the extreme. With individuals it expresses a profound, shuddering revulsion for someone's character or values because they are utterly contrary to all that is good and honorable. Like a level 5 cancer, if you allowed them to coexist in the assembly of the righteous, it would endanger the very existence of the community. Jesus was not only disdained, he was treated like a malignant cancer that would destroy the nation.

It must have brought great comfort to the servant for the Father to articulate what was for him perhaps unspeakable. When a superior acknowledges that your wounds are legitimate and then takes the time to probe deeper into your heart, giving voice to emotions you hadn't been able to articulate, amazing things being to happen. Walls of protection are suddenly broken down, and we become open to see a new perspective that leads to healing.

Have you ever had someone do that for you? It is a rare occurrence in this valley where the pressure of competition and the drive to survive leaves no room for introspection or reflection on the larger purpose of our lives. Sadly, most of our young people have nowhere to go with their fears of failure. It is vital we give them a safe place to express their pain.

When I was college pastor at Stanford from 1978-1985, I noticed that every year the pressure on students to achieve increased. Their task was not to be curious, study hard and learn; their task was to

execute all their assignments flawlessly and prove academic mastery with ease, all the while excelling at a wide range of extracurricular activities. As the pressure grew, so did their stress, to the point where the students in my group were emotionally wound up. I had a young woman in the group who got into Stanford at 16. She was brilliant, passionate, and wanted to live life perfectly. By the end of her senior year she had achieved a superb grade average and applied to medical school to fulfill her dream of being a doctor. But she didn't get accepted. Following her rejection, she poured out her pain and wept, and from then on I called her "fertile tears," because her vulnerability gave everybody else permission to be honest about their pain. From that point our fellowship became rich with students sharing their authentic selves and caring for one another. It was then I concluded that my job as a pastor was not only to teach, but also to create space for people to delve beneath the surface and discover their voice to say what was really going on in their lives.

B. His ultimate reception: worship and adoration

So, God is empathetic, but *empathy* without action is *pathetic*. Whenever God's heart is moved, his will is stirred into action and with it all the resources of heaven.

Nothing touches a parent's heart and thrusts them to action more than a grievous wrong done to their son or daughter. God does not sit in passive silence when his servant suffers gross injustice. Yes, God will act and when he does, he will completely reverse the servant's fortunes. This once abhorrent, worthless slave will become one who is worshipped and adored. Presidents and prime ministers will receive spiritual insight and rise up off their thrones to bow down at the feet of the servant. In the words of Hannah,

He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor." (1 Sam 2:8)

C. The basis for the reversal: God's holy faithfulness

The basis for this historic reversal is God's holy faithfulness. As John Oswalt observes, "He is the Redeemer because he is Israel's *Holy One*. That is, he is able to redeem because of his transcendent power, and he wills to redeem because of his unearthly faithfulness and love." Though the Lord does not explain exactly *how* the servant will be vindicated, he does give him a vision of the impact his vindication would have upon the world.

II. A New Covenant will be Inaugurated (Isa 49:8ab)

This is what the Lord says:
"In the time of my favor I will answer you,
and in the day of salvation I will help you;
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,

Note the progression of the verbs coupled with "I/you" relationship:

I will *answer* you → I will *help* you → I will *keep* you → I will *make* you

There is a lot of love in this conversation. And it suggests that it is in the darkest of times, when we have been most vulnerable and honest about our failure, that we discover the deepest intimacy with God, "who comforts us in all our affliction" (2 Cor 1:4). The initiative the Father takes and the love the servant experiences from the Father are more than he could ask or think.

God promises to come to the aid of his servant and protect him through the terrible trauma he must endure. This decisive intervention was set in motion remarkably in answer to the servant's prayers. In chapter one of Isaiah, God said he would no longer hear Israel's prayers, because her hands were full of blood (1:15). Persistent, willful, shameful rebellion had created an impassable barrier between God and his people. He refused to play church.

With the servant's work, that is about to change. God has made him to be a new covenant, inaugurating a new epoch in history that unlocks God's favor and salvation to the world. By the end of the book, God not only hears our prayers, he answers them before they are spoken (65:24). The apostles identify "the time of favor" and "the day of salvation" with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Being privileged to live in the new age of grace, however, must not make us lax in our responsibilities. As Paul writes to the Corinthians,

As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor 6:1-2)

Though the covenant has been enacted, the benefits are not applied unless you become a follower of Jesus. As Alec Motyer observes, "the Servant is more than a covenant officiant or instigator; he is in his own person the Lord's covenant...it is only in him, in the union of personal relationship, that these blessings can be enjoyed."²

Given the fact that we have two confirming testimonies, and considering their holy character, we need to take heed to the words of Moses, quoted in the book of Hebrews:

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? (Heb 10:28-29)

III. The Surpassing Glory of the New Covenant (Isaiah 29:8c-12)

A. The Prophetic Lens: Memory and Metaphor

To comprehend the glory of the New Covenant, Isaiah compares the ministry of the servant with Israel's renowned leaders – Joshua, Moses and Solomon. This is typical of how the prophets trained Israel to envision their future. They instilled a prophetic imagination through *memory* and *metaphor*. The prophets ignited hope by evoking Israel's *memory* of God's wondrous acts of salvation. What God did in the past, he promises to do again, which means that there is *continuity* in salvation history. Israel's exiles were to envision a new exodus, a new and restored land, a new temple.

But there is also *discontinuity*. History is not an endless cycle of sheer repetition going nowhere. Under God's sovereign hand it is progressive and moving toward a great goal. Though the future will be like the past (*memory*), it will also have new dimensions and a greater quality about it that are so expansive it will be difficult to get one's mind around them. As Paul writes,

For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! (2 Cor 3:10-11)

To expand Israel's vision beyond her past, as glorious as it was, the prophets cast their visions in figures of speech (*metaphor*). They were

poets. It is important to understand this, because when Jesus came preaching about the kingdom of God, every Jew within earshot had an eschatology – a set of firm beliefs about when the kingdom was coming and what it would look like. Most of the Jews wanted a reconstruction of the old order, but Jesus said in effect, “You are all wrong, and I’m right, because you failed as poets!” They missed the whole program when Jesus was here because they didn’t read the figures correctly; they couldn’t expand their minds. Had they read the poets and the prophets correctly, they would have understood that there will be a new exodus defeating greater enemies than world powers, a new land without borders, and a new temple of living stones.

So Isaiah is going to give us a glimpse into the ever-expanding glory of the New Covenant by activating our memories concerning Joshua, Moses and Solomon. We will look just at Joshua this morning as a way to see in surprising detail precisely what, and for what greater purpose, the prophet wants us to remember.

B. A new and greater Joshua (8c)

First we learn that Jesus will be like Joshua,
**to restore the land
 and to reassign its desolate inheritances, (v. 8c)**

Joshua led Israel into the land of promise and dispossessed thirty-one kings in the process. Under his impeccable leadership Israel remained faithful throughout his entire lifetime. No other leader in Israel’s history did that.

Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel. (Josh 24:31)

Like Joshua, the servant will allot God’s people their inheritance by conquering their enemies. But he will be greater than Joshua, for Joshua could not provide them everlasting rest (Heb 4:8-10), because ultimately he could not defeat the real enemies of sin, death and the devil. Thus the land was never fully secure. But in Christ, we have obtained “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1 Pet 1:4 ESV), because Jesus *did* deal with sin, death and the devil.

Under Joshua’s leadership the Israelites possessed a land “flowing with milk and honey.” By contrast the servant will transform a desolation into a glorious new creation. The word “desolation” describes something that is so appalling and foul you can’t even look at it. Jesus is going to take this desolation and restore it. The verb “restore” is literally “raise up” and was used earlier by the prophet Isaiah to describe the resurrection of the body – “Your dead shall live, their bodies will *rise*” (Isa 26:19). Is this a hint that the land, like our bodies, must be raised from the dead to be our true inheritance? Nobody ever thinks that! We know that our bodies have to be born again from heaven, but what about the land? Is this what Abraham believed? God gave him the land of promise but Abraham was willing to be a stranger there because he knew that the “promised land” was only a shadow of the real promise, of a heavenly land where God’s people would dwell with him eternally. So Abraham was free to give up his right to the land of promise. The writer of the book of Hebrews spells it out for us convincingly:

By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and

builder is God...Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:10, 16)

In the Jewish-Palestinian struggle, if you are a true believer and somebody wants your land what do you do? What did Abraham do with Lot? He gave the land up, saying to Lot, “if you want the land to the right, I will give it to you.”

C. A new land without borders (Isa 54:3; Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13; 2 Pet 3:13)

Later, Isaiah tells the nation to shout for joy, for her new inheritance will be greater than she could have imagined, expanding way beyond the borders of Israel:

**For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,
 and your offspring will possess the nations
 and will people the desolate cities. (Isa 54:3 ESV)**

Instead of the expected “your seed will possess the *land of Israel*,” the prophet substitutes the word *goyim*, the nations. Is this a hint that in the New Covenant the land has no borders? Is this new Joshua going to expand the borders of the “Holy Land” to encompass the whole earth? Is the whole earth going to be holy? Is this the reason why the Lord can command his disciples after his resurrection, “Go make disciples of all nations?” Could Jesus give his Great Commission if the whole world was not his rightful possession? In the New Testament the only references to land encompass the entire earth. Jesus quotes Psalm 37, and like Isaiah, substitutes “the earth” for “the land.”

Blessed are the meek, for they will *inherit the earth*. (Matt 5:5)

When Paul speaks of the promise to Abraham, he substitutes “the world” for the land.

It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be *heir of the world*, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. (Rom 4:13)

And when Peter speaks of the future promise, he looks ahead to a whole new creation where heaven and earth are completely integrated.

But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to *a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells*. (2 Pet 3:13)

I’ll let you explore the hermeneutic on the rest of the text for yourself, so you can discover how the servant will be a greater Moses and a greater Solomon. You’ll need a healthy imagination, which requires both roots and wings, both memory and metaphor, to see as Jesus did and not get mired in the old order, constrained by old boundaries and a limited line of sight.

“**Roots and wings**,” the Spanish poet Juan Ramon writes, “**But let the wings take root and the roots fly.**”

IV. A Royal Wedding (Isa 54:4-10)

A. Love between the covenants (vv. 7-8)

Finally, I want to apply our hermeneutic to one more text, to see how the prophet describes the love of God for us in the New Covenant. In Isaiah 54:4-10, God reenacts the wedding ceremony with Israel, whom he had previously divorced. The stage is set as the couple comes together to take their wedding vows in a new covenant. The bride is extremely nervous because of her history of sin, wondering if God’s love can sustain this new arrangement because she knows her commitment cannot. Throughout a thousand

years of salvation history she has been a whore. As he takes his wedding vows, consider how he communicates his loyal-love to her.

“For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with deep compassion I will bring you back.
In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment,
but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,”
says the LORD your Redeemer. (vv. 7-8)

One of the poetic devices the prophets use to expand our understanding of a concept is comparison and contrast. It is a difficult thing to probe the dimensions of God’s love, so to help Israel expand the categories of her thinking, God compares his love in the New Covenant with the anger Israel experienced under the Old Covenant, first in terms of time: *a brief moment* (70 years of exile) versus *everlasting* (eternity); then in terms of emotional expression: *abandoned* versus deep compassion; surge of anger versus compassion.

B. *Memory: Love throughout history* (v. 9)

This is a powerful contrast. But it is not enough to fire their imaginations and make their hearts burn (Luke 24:32). It’s *memory* and *metaphor* to the rescue! You recall that the prophets ignited hope by evoking Israel’s memory of God’s wondrous acts of salvation. When the prophets needed to lift Israel out of despair, the most glorious event they would look to in order to rekindle Israel’s faith was the Exodus. God invades the greatest nation on earth, subdues it with ten devastating plagues, the Egyptian gods are in lying in the gutter, frogs, gnats and locusts are everywhere, the Nile is full of blood and Pharaoh begs Moses to take his people and go. He reneges on his promise and pursues them with his mighty chariots right to the edge of the sea. The sea parts, the Israelites cross on the dry ground and Pharaoh’s army ends up drowning in the sea – now that’s an event!

Now when God wants to compare his love in the New Covenant with some event in Israel’s salvation history, he begins flipping the pages of Israel’s history. He makes his way through the prophets, kings, then to King David, Judges, Joshua all the way back to the Exodus. But there is **no event** in Israel’s salvation history comparable to the permanency of his love in the New Covenant. For that, he has to go back to Israel’s pre-history with Noah:

“To me this is like the days of Noah,
when I swore that the waters of Noah
would never again cover the earth.
So now I have sworn not to be angry with you,
never to rebuke you again.” (v. 9)

Just as God swore that he would never destroy the earth by another flood until the end of history, so is his love in the New Covenant.

C. *Metaphor: Love beyond history* (v. 10)

Memory ignites the flame of hope, but it takes metaphor to fuel the fire white hot.

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed,
yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken
nor my covenant of peace be removed,”
says the LORD, who has compassion on you. (v. 10)

My love for you, says God, is going nowhere. It will outlast history and remain constant throughout the New Heavens and New Earth.

This is how God answers us when we are demoralized. He doesn’t say, “Don’t come home.” Instead he offers us the opportunity to redefine our question in light of what he has already done and what lies ahead (which promises to surpass anything we could ever imagine). He grafts us in to an eternal legacy, a lineage of saints who came before us and who challenge us to do our part by faith in our age, our moment, for something that lies beyond our age and our dreams.

At our men’s retreat this year, the speaker had us meditate on God’s faithfulness. My friend Ed found me afterwards and, with tears in his eyes, told me that as he reflected on and appreciated God’s faithfulness across the years of his life, God spoke to him in a way he rarely does. I asked him, “What did God say?” and Ed replied, “He said, ‘I’m not done. What makes you think I’m done?’” That is the glory of the New Covenant.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternacovenant, brought back from the dead our Lord, Jesus Christ, that great shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good and loving to do his will and may he work in us what is pleasing in him through Jesus Christ to him be the glory forever and ever, Amen

¹ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, Chapters 40-66 (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 294.

² J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, An Introduction and Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 391.

³ Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999), 6.