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Isaiah 49:1-6

Sixth Message

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DISILLUSIONED! THE SERVANT'S TESTIMONY TO THE NATIONS

SERIES: A NEW SERVANT, A NEW COVENANT, A NEW AGE

Have you ever been disillusioned in your walk of faith? I must confess that I have. But we must recognize that oftentimes we become disillusioned because we have a faulty understanding of the Scriptures; we claim promises that really are not promises.

One of the most painful and tragic examples in the history of the church of a faulty understanding of the Bible resulted in the Children's Crusade of the twelfth century. In 1212 a young French shepherd lad named Stephen claimed to have had a vision in which Christ appeared to him as a pilgrim and appealed to him to gather an army of children to rescue the holy places of Israel from the Turks. If they would obey, the Mediterranean Sea would part, and they would cross to the African continent on dry land, just like the occasion in the Old Testament when the children of Joshua crossed over the Red Sea. As news of the vision was carried afar, a great wave of enthusiasm built up all the way from Brittany to the Pyrenees. An army of 30,000 boys and girls was assembled. As they marched to the sea, they sang in faith, "We go to God, and seek for the holy cross beyond the sea." The poet, Charles Kingsley, wrote these lines,

The rich East blooms fragrant before us;
All Fairy-land beckons us forth,
We must follow the crane in her flight o'er the main,
From the posts and the moors of the North.

When the army of children reached Marseilles, in the south of France, however, the waters of the Mediterranean did not part, and 10,000 of them perished. Others went on to Genoa, in Italy, to sail the Adriatic, but the Alps took a tragic toll on their numbers. Hardship, death, and moral shipwreck reduced the army from 20,000 to 7,000. Others fell prey to slave traders who promised passage "for the sake of God and without price." The children were either shipwrecked on the island of San Pietro, off the coast of Sardinia, or they were sold into slavery in Africa. The Children's Crusade had become the slaughter of the innocents.

Everyone who reads and interprets the text of Scripture incorrectly will end up disillusioned.

But what happens if you read and interpret the text correctly and things still go utterly awry? Has that ever happened to you? This was the experience of the Servant, in the book of Isaiah. Today, in this remarkable text, the second Servant Song (49:1-6), we will examine the Servant's personal testimony concerning himself, and the role he would play in terms of his ministry.

Isaiah has been describing the nation of Israel. Occasionally, breaking through the text like a lightning flash, the prophet describes the coming One, the Ideal Servant, who will be the true Israel. He begins by saying,

Listen to Me, O islands,
And pay attention, you peoples from afar.

The Servant makes his plea to the farthest outposts of the earth, and beckons everyone to give full weight ("Listen to Me" = listen

with the intent to obey) to his testimony. These texts ought to serve as a model for evangelism, since they so clearly declare the testimony of the Son to the nations, and the process by which he came to understand his ministry. I love the personal testimonies of Christians. I love to enter, as it were, into the history of someone who is open to sharing his story, and how life's circumstances changed his thinking. This is what the Servant is doing here in this second Servant Song.

But, amazingly, we discover, right in the very heart of his testimony, that the Servant became utterly disillusioned. He had read the text, he understood who he was, and exactly what he was supposed to do, but as history was played out there was no evidence that he had the impact God declared he would have. Here is his assessment of his own ministry (49:4a): "But I said, 'I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity.'" Are you surprised to discover that this is the testimony of the Servant? This marvelous text will show us what we should do when, even after we have followed the instructions, things still go awry.

Our text has three parts. The Servant tells of his preparation for ministry (vv 1-2); then, the pain of his disillusionment (vsv 3-4); and finally, his new perspective on his ministry (vv 5-6).

I. The Servant's preparation for ministry (49:1-2)

A. His Calling: A Prophet (49:1)

Listen to Me, O islands
And pay attention, you peoples from afar.
From the womb the LORD called Me,
From the body of My mother He named Me.

The language used in these verses declare that this One will be the unique prophet of Israel: "From the womb the Lord called Me, From the body of My mother He named Me." It signifies that this Servant will have a ministry like the prophets of Israel, who were called to restore the nation to their God. Prophesying the birth of Jesus, the angel Gabriel said to Mary, "Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus" (Luke 1:31). Samuel, the first prophet in the Bible, was dedicated from his mother's womb to be a prophet. This verse is also reminiscent of the great prophet Jeremiah's calling (Jer 1:5f). Like Jeremiah, this Servant's entire life will be affected by this call, and he will lament his apparent failure (see Matt 23:34-35).

Verse 2 declares that the Servant is given gifts to fulfill his calling.

B. His Gift: Penetrating speech (49:2)

And He has made My mouth like a sharp sword;
In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me;
And He has also made Me a sharpened arrow,
He has hidden Me in His quiver.

The Servant will have the gift of effective preaching. He will not institute the kingdom of God by the sword or by military power, but will minister like the great prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, using the gift of preaching. His speech will be like a sharp sword (it will penetrate to the intentions of the heart), and it will be like a sharpened or polished arrow (it will cover a broad range). Jesus was tested many times in his ministry by adversaries who were seeking to trap him, but the Scripture says of him, “No one spoke like this one. He speaks not like the scribes or the Pharisees, but as one who has authority.” When he responded to disclose the motives of others, he laid bare their true intentions, yet he never became defiled by their vindictiveness and wickedness.

The Servant knew his calling and his ministry. Do you know yours? It is a marvelous thing in life to know your calling, because then you can focus on where you should concentrate your efforts. This is why Jesus could say, “Even if I bear testimony to myself it is true, because I know where I came from and where I am going.” In Mark 1, while he was praying to his Father, Peter interrupted him, saying that a crowd had gathered, seeking to be healed. But Jesus refused, and said he was going to travel elsewhere to preach, which was his true calling. Healing was secondary; it was merely meant to authenticate his preaching.

What made the Servant’s speech so effective? It was because he was hidden and prepared in secret: “In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me;...He has hidden Me in His quiver.” Under the silent, protective hand of God this Servant would be trained to speak in secret. For 30 years this arrow was hidden, and polished, thus making him more effective. God does his best work in the dark!

How different from what we do today! If anyone demonstrates any kind of giftedness today, he is immediately thrust in front of the TV cameras so that everyone can hear what he has to say. Have you noticed how hard it is for football players or baseball players to articulate their feelings or thoughts about a game they have just played in? A famous Bay Area baseball player has a telephone service which people call, and for a price they get to hear this man speak. But when they call the number, all they hear him talk about is what he ate that day, or where he went shopping. Speech, but no substance!

But not so with the Servant. He is hidden. This ought to encourage mothers. Motherhood is just about the last occupation left today where all the work is done in secret, offstage. Once the child goes on stage, as it were, it is too late for training. The mother teaches the child to pray and to speak in the privacy of the home. And this is what Jesus did with the twelve arrows he picked: He trained them in secret.

In 1972, while I was still an intern at this church, I accompanied Ray Stedman to a pastors’ conference, where he was to be one of the speakers. At lunch on the first day, a few hours before he was due to speak, Ray took a paper napkin and wrote out five points which he planned to share. Later, addressing the assembled pastors, he spoke on the necessity for discipleship in our present evil age. His speech uncovered the true priorities of Scripture, and laid bare the hearts of many present. I sat there, spellbound, listening to every word. I thought to myself, “But it only took him five minutes to prepare! Maybe preaching isn’t too difficult after all.” I prayed that day that I too would become a conference speaker.

I have done a little of that since then, and I have learned something: Ray’s words were not prepared in five minutes at the lunch table! What he took into the pulpit that day was the result of a life-

time of walking with God. From the time he was a teenager, in secret he had communicated with God. He had studied the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. He had read history and the sciences. And he had never forgotten anything that he read. When we installed computers at church, we realized that Ray hardly needed one to store the vast amount of data he has encoded on his “hard disc”—his photographic memory. All he was doing with the napkin that day was arranging in a few notes to himself the material in the “hard disc.” What had made him a great preacher was all those years of preparation when he was hidden in the quiver. I have given up my desire to be a conference speaker. Now my prayer is, “Hide me, O Lord, in the shadow of your wings. Teach me, hone me, in the quietness of your tent.”

The Servant will be called from the womb as the prophet of God, and he will be equipped with speech (powerful preaching) that will be effective in advancing the kingdom of heaven.

In the next verses, however, the Servant shares his disillusionment.

II. The Servant’s realization during his ministry (49:3-4)

A. Realization of a past promise: His task to be Israel (49:3)

And He said to Me, “You are My servant, Israel, In whom I will show My glory.”

The Servant here is recalling a promise which the Father made to him: He had a specific calling from God, and the Father was backing him. The same title was given to Israel (Isa 44:23) as the one through whom God would show his glory. When the text was written, Israel had been dismantled and exiled. But God in his faithfulness would send a Servant who would accomplish everything Israel was designed to be, and in the process create an Israel who would obey him from the heart, in the New Covenant.

There may be the idea here that the Servant would be what Israel was meant to be all along, and that he would reconstitute Israel as a nation around himself. Therefore, to be in the true Israel, one must be in Christ (Isa 44:23; 60:21; 61:3; Rom 2:28-29). Thus, Jesus appointed 12 apostles, out of whom would be created 12 new tribes of Israel. When the Servant stepped out on stage, he had expectations of glory, privilege and success. Even the angels said of him, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:31-33). Yet he was to become disillusioned.

B. Realization of his present failure: Rejection by Israel (49:4)

But I said, “I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity;”

Notice what the Servant says of himself, “But I said, ‘I have toiled in vain,’ ‘I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity.’” The Servant is brutally honest: He is disillusioned. God had promised him glory, and had promised that Israel would see that glory and return to God, but the promise was an empty one, it seemed.

When we become disillusioned, we tend to walk off the stage and stop talking to God. But we should not do this. Rather, we must be like the prophets, who poured out their honest feelings to God. Jeremiah did this. He called God a *wadi*, a dried-up river bed (Jer 15:14); one minute, it’s filled with water, the next, it’s dry. The Servant tells the Father that his promise seems vain.

When this text was written, Israel was in chaos, held captive in Babylon, dispersed among the nations. Then came the Servant, in whom God would display his glory. His mission was to regather Israel, so he gathered 12 apostles to create his church. But Israel rejected the Servant. That is why, just days before his crucifixion, Jesus cried, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt 23:37).

And what happened to the 12 apostles? They were scattered. Before the crucifixion, Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered'" (Matt 26:31). When this text was written, in 586 BC, Israel was scattered and in chaos. When Jesus created a new nation in the 12 apostles, at the end of his ministry they too were scattered. Nothing had changed. This is why Jesus honestly says, "I have toiled in vain." The Servant knew his calling, and he was prepared, but in the end, he had to confess, "All is vain."

He expresses himself even more strongly in the words, "I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity." All he sees is a *tohu* and a *hevel*. *Tohu* is the word used in Genesis 1:2 to describe the chaos on every hand before God began his creative work, before he brought order. And that is what the Servant saw—nothing but a *tohu*, a chaos, after he began his new order. Then he refers to his work as a *hevel*, a vapor—the very word which the Preacher in Ecclesiastes used to describe all of life. Everything was utterly transitory, a breath, a vapor. The Servant could not discern any order or meaning in what he had accomplished.

America's greatest theologian, Jonathan Edwards, gave his life to preaching. He prepared in secret, 13 hours a day, so that when he spoke, even in a monotone, which was his style, revival broke out in the form of the Great Awakening on the East Coast in the 1700's. After 25 years of faithful and fruitful ministry, however, Jonathan Edwards was dismissed by his church because he held that only those who were born again, not just churchgoers, should take communion. A *tohu* and a *hevel* were what he had to face at the end of his ministry.

This is what some parents have to deal with after a lifetime spent raising their children. Psalm 128 says of the man who fears the Lord, "Your wife shall be a fruitful vine, Within your house, your children like olive plants around your table." When you look at your home, however, it appears more like a war zone than the tranquil, fruitful scene pictured in the psalm.

This is what the Servant honestly shares in these verses.

But he doesn't end there

C. The realization of a future hope: The faithfulness of the God of Israel (49:4b)

**"Yet surely the justice due to Me is with the LORD,
And My reward with My God."**

The Servant is saying that, despite the fact that there was absolutely no visible evidence that his ministry had met with any success—that although he was called Israel he did not regather Israel—yet he is going to trust the God of Israel that he had accomplished what he was called to do, and he would be rewarded. Jesus' prayer in John 17 is taken from this text: "I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do. I manifested Thy

name to the men whom Thou gavest me out of the world...And now glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was" (John 17:4-6).

Jesus had to undergo the same process in his thinking as Abraham had when he offered Isaac on the altar of sacrifice. The Servant saw no visible results in his task to create a new nation, but the God of Israel whom he served was the God who brought life from the dead. This is what Abraham came to understand. If Isaac truly was the promised seed, then God would raise him from the dead. If the 12 apostles were the seed of the new nation, then God would raise it from the dead, and the Servant would see the fruits of his labor in the resurrection (Heb 12:2). This was the thought process which brought him to this point, and this was what allowed him to set his face like a flint and enter Jerusalem, to endure the agony of the cross, knowing his work was done. He trusted the God of Abraham, the God of Israel who brings life from the dead.

The Servant was called to be Israel, and his rejection by Israel caused him to believe that he had spent his strength in vain. But this in turn would cause him to strengthen his hope in God, who would vindicate his ministry.

Finally, the Servant shares the new perspective on his ministry that he gained from the Father. The opening words, "And now says the Lord," again shows that this song is a conversation between the Lord and his Servant. We are permitted to enter into the prayer life of the Servant as he wrestles with these issues.

III. The Servant's new perspective of his ministry (49:5-6)

A. The original task and privilege (49:5)

**And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be
His Servant,
To bring Jacob back to Him, in order that Israel might be gathered to Him
(For I am honored in the sight of the LORD,
And My God is My strength).**

The Servant repeats his original calling from God, to demonstrate that "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). God said it; it was going to come about. The task would be accomplished. This original mission was a supreme honor (5c), and the Servant is supplied with the resources of God himself to accomplish the task.

This suggests that though the Servant was rejected by the nation while he was on earth, this task would not be set aside; it would be accomplished in a new and greater way. Some theologians say that Jesus failed to fulfill "Plan A"—his mission to regather Israel—so now he is going to the Gentiles—"Plan B." But there never was a second plan. On the contrary, God's original and only plan would be fulfilled in a better and greater way than anyone ever imagined. This is why the Servant repeats his earlier words, "[He] formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, in order that Israel might be gathered to Him."

B. The new task: Greater privilege (49:6)

**He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant,
To raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones
of Israel;"**

How difficult a task was it to remake the nation? Ezekiel saw Israel as dead bones and graves (Ezek 37:1-14). It would require a miracle of resurrection to take the bones from the grave, and the wind of the

Holy Spirit to put sinews and flesh on them and breathe life into them again, so that Israel would have a heart that would respond to God. What a great task, and an honorable thing to accomplish!

Yet, God says that even this was too small a thing for his Servant.

**“I will also make You a light to the nations,
So that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”**

Following the cross and the resurrection, not only would the 12 tribes be regathered to sit at table in heaven, but people from every tribe and nation—Romanians, Indonesians, Australians, Colombians, people from right here in Silicon Valley—will sit next to the regathered Jews. It was too small a thing for this Servant to raise up just Israel alone; he is also the Light to the nations.

This one verse in the second Servant Song is amplified by the apostle Paul in chapters 9–11 of the book of Romans. Far from casting off his people, God is using their rejection to bring salvation to the nations. Through the conversion of the nations he shall restore Israel, using their own jealousy of the Gentiles to accomplish his purposes. And even though Paul knew the programme intimately, in his ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles he, too, was disillusioned. Together with representatives from the Gentile churches, he brought a love offering to the church in Jerusalem, hoping that when they saw this, the whole nation would see the work of the Servant. But we do not know if the money was even accepted. Paul died in obscurity, writing letters from his prison cell. The churches which he had founded were falling apart—a *tobu*, a chaos. But God was saying the same thing to the apostle that he had said to the Servant: “It is too small a thing that you should raise up believers in your generation: You will have Jews and Gentiles yet unborn who will read your letters thousands of years from now sitting at table with you, too.”

Thus the Servant gains a whole new perspective on his ministry. What looked like apparent failure will take on a new, transcendent significance through the resurrection.

We are all familiar with the great *Shema* of the Old Testament: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is your God, the Lord is one.” In the opening verse of this song, however, the Servant rewrites Old Testament theology:

**Listen to Me, O islands,
And pay attention, you peoples from afar.**

The words, “Listen to Me,” hearken back to the famous *Shema*. But now, with the coming of the Servant, the nations are included in the *Shema*, and the Servant is identified with the God of Israel: “Listen to Me”—listen to the Servant, in other words. He is claiming to have the same weight as Yahweh in the Old Testament! Now, however, rather than appealing to Israel, he appeals to the islands—“you people from afar.” All are now included in the *Shema*.

The last time this phrase, “people from afar,” was spoken, in Isaiah 5:26; 8:9, the words brought terror into the hearts of the Jews. Back then, the phrase was referring to the Assyrians, who were coming from afar to destroy the nation. But with this new Servant who was glorified in the resurrection, all things are new. Now people from afar are coming, not to destroy Israel, but to hear of the glory of the Servant. The *Shema* has been rewritten.

From the perspective of the cross, the ministry of the Servant looks empty, vain, and chaotic, but in the vindication of the resurrection came the birth of something new, a new dimension never before dreamed possible. From those 12 apostles come not just Israelites, but myriads from every tribe and tongue, to sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

What shall we say, then? If God shuts a door, and you become disillusioned, remember that he always opens a window. The door may shut out your earthly dreams, but the window will open you to the light of heaven.

If the Servant had to suffer apparent failure to accomplish his mission, can we expect anything different? Our disillusionment shall not be because we have claimed promises which are not really promises, as in the tragic Children’s Crusades, but because we have obeyed him. If God seems to slam the door on our earthly hopes, it is out of love, sweet child, for it is too small a thing for you to have only that. In the age to come, there will be that and much more.

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