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Isaiah 50:4-11

Ninth Message

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THE SCHOOL FOR DISCIPLES (PART II): THE TRIAL THAT LIBERATES

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

We come now to the conclusion of the third Servant Song, from Isaiah 50:4-11. Last week we saw that the goal behind the education of the Servant was to learn how to speak: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of the disciples, To sustain (answer) the weary one with a word” (50:4a,b). The Lord God himself was the Servant’s tutor: “He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple” (50:4c,d).

We saw that there was only one course which the Servant had to take, and that was the course of rejection by his own flesh, by the people of Israel, and by her national leaders. But this rejection would enhance his intimacy with God, and would enable him to speak so as to “answer the weary one with a word.”

This morning we will seek to answer the question, “If rejection is the course, how do we get through it?” Rejection by your own flesh is extremely painful no matter what form it takes. Whether we are faced with cutting words that go straight to the heart, or just plain indifference, rejection creates a sense of low self-esteem, and can result in codependency on others.

While I was counseling one of our young mothers recently I discovered that some of the difficulties she was experiencing in her marriage went back to her rejection by her father. She had buried most of the pain, and learned how to survive with a low self-esteem, but this sense of rejection was affecting all of her relationships. She asked me what should she should do, and I suggested she write everything down. I reminded her that a third of the book of Psalms are psalms of lament, where the writers express their grief. “Why don’t you write about your grief and, hopefully, deal with it that way?” I asked her. This morning I will share with you what she wrote:

I was a young sweetpea
tender, vibrant, beautiful, rich in color
with fragrance as sweet as perfume
basking in the warmth of the desert sun.

Slowly the sun turns its warmth into harshness.
the environment turns on this gentle flower like a storm brewing,
the tormenting calm and silence burn within the heart of the flower

the thundering words cause an unbearable ache.
Then the rain comes;
all around,
the flower can only see cold,
cruel drops of rain;

Under its crushing weight,
The flower collapses to the ground
Lightning etches the hurt, the pain,
and loneliness into this fragile flower’s heart.

Almost dead, there remains less than a spark of life
more a spark of determination

fueled by anger, bitterness and hurt.
This flower revives, but not as before.

Now she is an obstinate freeway daisy
hardened by the environment,
determined never to be fragile again
but all the while longing for the sweet life of a sweetpea.

She has trouble reconciling
the desire of her heart within
to reality of the hardening outside appearance.

And when the environment becomes too harsh again
this seemingly tolerant flower becomes a voracious monster
gnarling, devouring all the harsh reality of her life.

Hoping somehow to make them go away
she returns to the tolerant flower, none the wiser
everyone else commenting on the useful purpose
of this freeway flower.

But now the disease is inside her,
eating her alive, slowly she falls to the ground,
weakened by the bitterness and hurt
no one noticing the passing of just another flower

Small gentle tears fall
That is when this vulnerable flower hears
the Lord Jesus Christ say,
For those tears I died.

How does the Servant get through the course? He does so by learning that when rejection comes, all the assets of God himself, everything that God is, are open to him. Like this young mother discovered, when earth’s rivers run dry, the heavens are opened.

The scene we are looking at this morning, written 700 years before the fact, is actually fulfilled in the court trial of Jesus. It takes place in three stages: First, the Servant makes his journey to court; second, he boldly invites all to cross-examine him; and third, the Judge issues his surprising decree from the bench. The trial that was intended to destroy the Servant instead liberates him in a transcendent way from all human relationships.

I. The journey to court: Unaffected by circumstances (50:7)

**For the Lord GOD helps Me,
Therefore, I am not disgraced;
Therefore, I have set My face like flint,
And I know that I shall not be ashamed. (NASB)**

Humiliation is one of the hardest things to bear in life. When we have been humiliated we carry in our spirit a sense of lasting shame. If we feel that a set-up is at hand, that we are going to be humiliated, we avoid it like the plague. But in this case the Father tells the Servant to go into the hardest of all circumstances, to subject himself

to a kangaroo court where everything is rigged, not to administer justice, but to abuse and humiliate him, and finally execute him on a tree. How can the Servant possibly undergo such humiliation and rejection? It is because he knows who he is, and he knows who God is. It is no different for us. It is merely a question of identity. Who are you, and who is God?

A. He knows who the Lord is: His personal help (50:7a)

**For the Lord GOD helps me,
Therefore, I am not disgraced;**

At his trial, Jesus lost all human support. The Sanhedrin and the Romans were arrayed against him; his disciples had fled. But then the heavens were opened and he discovered an infinite resource in God alone. Rejection enhances his relationship with the Lord, and also his own sense of worth. The Lord is his personal advocate.

If you have ever been to court, you will know that the whole outcome depends on which side the judge decides is right. I got a speeding ticket once when I was a student, and I decided to go to court with a long list of reasons why I should not be convicted. But when I saw the stern-faced judge rail on several other defendants I quickly accepted his offer to plead guilty. Years later I was in court again, this time on jury duty. When I entered the courtroom, to my surprise I discovered that the judge was my close friend. There was quite a different atmosphere about the courtroom for me that day. Knowing the judge has that kind of an effect.

Because of his relationship with the Judge, Jesus knows he will not be humiliated ultimately. (The word “humiliated” is from the same root in verse 6c, “I did not cover my face from humiliation and spitting.” He will give himself to humiliation knowing that ultimately he won’t be humiliated.)

B. He knows who he is: The Servant of the Lord (50:7b)

**Therefore, I have set My face like flint,
And I know that I shall not be ashamed.**

The Servant understands that his sufferings are from God, therefore he can submit to them and accept them fully. As the Servant, he has only one voice to respond to. This brings great liberty. He can submit to that voice contrary to all others. Thus he can set his face like flint (much like Jer 1:18 and Ezek 3:8f), as he did on his journey to Jerusalem (Mark 10:33; Luke 9:51). God the Father told him to go, and he went. The suffering he would undergo was from God—it was not arbitrary—thus it had meaning.

God wants us enslaved to no one. I love my wife because God tells me to love her. I love my children because God asks me to love them. I honor my parents for the same reason. In his book *Keep In Step With The Spirit*, J. I. Packer wrote,

All the Christian’s human involvements and commitments in this world must be consciously based on his awareness of having been separated from everything and everyone in creation to belong to his Creator alone. Ordered, costly, unstinting commitment for the Lord’s sake to spouse, children, parents, employers, employees, and all one’s other neighbors, on the basis of being radically detached from them all to belong to God-Father, Son and Spirit, and to no one else, is the unvarying shape of the authentically holy life.

The thing that destroys the soul is having different masters, and being pulled in many directions as a result. But God did not design this. Christians have one Master. This is why they can set their faces like flint to submit to his rule, even if that means suffering. “The

hardness (or power of resistance) derives from his acceptance of the blows and shameful treatment with which he meets. It is this complete acceptance, and it alone, that enables him to make his face hard as flint” (Claus Westermann).

Tom Hill, who worked at Discovery Publishing for 10 years, was a wonderful example of this kind of singlemindedness. Tom suffered from cystic fibrosis, asthma, and diabetes, yet he never complained. He had resigned himself to the suffering which God had designed for him. He was a beautiful fragrance of Christ, using the gifts which the Holy Spirit had bestowed upon him, during the years he worked in PBC. He had set his face like flint toward the cross, and he did not look back. Tom died in March of 1988. His friend, Dennis Chamberlain, whose wife had died some years earlier of cystic fibrosis, wrote a tribute to Tom, which he shared at his memorial service. I will quote just two of the verses:

I see him still,
his face a storm of resignation
and glintings of other powers;
my aged-in-the-oak friend,
companion in death.

In life and death he compelled us
to feel his fundamental contradiction;
weakness and strength...mEEK,
yet intractable. A man of opposites,
a life of God-made tensions.

That was Tom Hill—“a life of God-made tensions.”

Because God is the Servant’s personal help, and he is his Servant, Jesus is unaffected by the worst of circumstances.

II. Making his defense: Unaffected by intimidation (50:8-9)

**He who vindicates Me is near;
Who will contend with Me?
Let us stand up to each other;
Who has a case against Me?
Let him draw near to Me.
Behold the Lord GOD helps Me;
Who is he who condemns Me?
Behold, they will all wear out like a garment;
The moth will eat them.**

A. God is the vindicator of what is right (50:8)

The Servant knows that the earthly court was not the real court. He is not intimidated by his accusers, but rather is very bold as he faces them. In his sufferings, his spiritual eyes are opened to see the heavenly court and the nearness of the One Holy Judge.

We catch a similar instance of this in the life of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. During his trial the heavens were opened to him, and his eye captured his heavenly advocate near to him: “But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’” (Acts 7:55-56).

This closeness gives the Servant such boldness he invites all others to draw near him to conduct the legal proceedings. He asks, “Who will contend with me? Who has a case against me? Who is he who condemns me?” May God so open our spiritual eyes in the midst of our suffering to behold his glory!

I have a friend who has this kind of boldness. He has lived with a certain roommate for four years, and recently he heard this man castigating Christians for their wrong behavior. He confronted him and asked him, "In the four years we have been sharing this apartment has there been anything in my life that has discredited Christ or Christianity? You owe me an answer, because if I'm wrong, I'm in trouble, but if I'm right, you're in trouble!" What boldness! Examine me, he said to this man. This doesn't mean Christians live perfect lives; it merely means that our sails are set correctly, and we are willing to make things right.

B. God is the Judge of what is wrong (50:9)

On earth the Servant will receive no vindication, but he knows that not only will he be vindicated (in the resurrection), but that the Sovereign Lord will judge his enemies. He sees that their judgment is a quiet, slow, almost imperceptible process. Like the moth which slowly destroys a garment in a process invisible to the naked eye, judgment is absolutely sure. Because of this, the Servant expends no effort at his trial either in his own defense (he is silent) or in thwarting his accusers (John 18:5-11, 36; 19:11). He does not spend any of his resources in taking vengeance on his accusers. Christians need not try and vindicate themselves when they are falsely accused, because someone else will do the vindicating.

The Servant is free from shame, and from fear and intimidation because he knows that God will vindicate him.

III. The surprise decree from the bench: The tables are turned! (50:10-11)

Who is among you that fears the LORD,
That obeys the voice of His servant,
That walks in darkness and has no light?
Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.
Behold, all you who kindle a fire,
Who encircle yourselves with firebrands,
Walk in the light of your fire
And among the brands you have set ablaze.
This you will have from My hand;
And you will lie down in torment.

A. A warning to the accusers (50:11)

There are only two groups at this trial, those who oppose the Servant, and those who are enrolled in the school of the Servant as disciples. There are no fence-sitters present. The accusers come to try the Servant, but he is vindicated and instead they themselves are tried. We see this same spirit of boldness imparted to the disciples after the day of Pentecost. Peter, who once cowered in fear, is so bold before the Sanhedrin he exclaims to his accusers that he is not on trial, they are (Acts 4:7-13). To "kindle a fire" and "gird yourselves with firebrands" are metaphors to describe the actions of the wicked in opposing the righteous. These terms are especially used of slanderous speech. Like lighted arrows that are fired at the righteous, slander burns in the heart. This is what happened to Jesus during his trial. Similar expressions are found in the Psalms:

I must lie among those who breathe fire,
Even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows,
And their tongue a sharp word. (Ps 57:4)
Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips,
From a deceitful tongue...
Sharp arrows of the warrior,

With the burning coals of the broom tree. (Ps 120:2, 4)

God's command to those who "kindle a fire" is, "Walk in the light of your fire, And among the brands you have set ablaze." "Walk"—carry out your plan, fill out your works with abandon, in other words. This means that once they shoot their arrows at the righteous the arrows will turn around, light their path and burn them. God often uses the very tools of destruction which the wicked desire to use against the righteous and turns them instead upon the wicked.

Then, after they have "walked," "you will lie down in torment." The wicked will lie down (a metaphor for death) in a place of fiery torment. Notice again that humanity is divided into two categories, those who respond to the Servant and those who oppose him (much like Psalms 1 and 2). There is no third alternative! During World War II, Dr. C. Joad, writing for the British Broadcasting Corporation, said, "We have abolished the fear of God and instead we live in the constant fear of man. We have done away with the idea of a hell in the future and we have succeeded in turning our lives in this world into a living hell." What was true in 1940 is still true in 1990.

B. Encouragement to disciples (50:10)

Who is among you that fears the LORD,
That obeys the voice of His servant,
That walks in darkness and has no light?
Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.

The first thing which the Judge does in this courtroom drama is redefine what it means to be a true Jew. In the Old Testament, a Jew was known as "one who feared the Lord." What is true religion? "Fearing the Lord." And what is true religion now? God is saying that man cannot claim to fear the Lord anymore unless he obeys the voice of this Servant. Man must have a relationship with the Messiah. He is the way to the Father. These were the exact words of the Father to Israel at the baptism of Jesus, and repeated to the three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:5): "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" It is clear now that in order for Israel to be part of God's school of discipleship they must come through this Servant.

Then God asks of those who want to be disciples, those who fear the Lord and obey the voice of the Servant, "Are there some who walk in darkness and have no light in themselves?" A time will come when disciples will enter a dark tunnel and the light they have in themselves will go out.

But flowers need night's cool darkness,
The moonlight and the dew,
So Christ from one who loved it,
His shining oft withdrew. (Rutherford)

What God is saying is that the school that Jesus went to is the same school his disciples will attend. While he was hanging on the cross, Jesus cried out in despair, "Why have you forsaken me?" Darkness covered the land for three hours. This too will happen to you. But when it does, "Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God." Lean on nothing else but the Lord God. You can trust him. The God of the Servant will do for you what he did for the Servant: He will raise you from the dead.

I was at El Camino Hospital last Sunday, visiting Roberta Luce, wife of Charlie Luce, one of our elders. Charlie had just had a conference with the doctors, and he told me that he and Roberta had decided to forego surgery; she wanted to go home and be with the Lord. As I watched Charlie that day, I don't know if I could turn my

spouse over to the Lord like that. He told me she had said to him, "We have had 42 wonderful years together. I want to go home. You're 72, and it won't be long before you join me." In their dark hour, the Luces fully leaned on the Lord God. (Roberta died later that week.) That is the school of the disciples.

I read the rabbinical literature to see if the rabbis had anything to say about this text, and I found this fascinating piece by Judah Halevi:

God has a secret and wise design concerning us, which should be compared to the wisdom hidden in the seed which falls into the ground, where it undergoes an external transformation into earth, water and dirt, without leaving a trace for him who looks down upon it. It is, however, the seed itself which transforms earth and water into its own substance, carries it from one stage to another, until it refines the elements and transfers them into something like itself, casting off husks, leaves, etc. and allowing the pure core to appear, capable of bearing the Divine Influence... The nations merely serve to introduce and pave the way for the expected Messiah, who is the fruition, and they will all become His fruit. Then, if they acknowledge Him, they will become one tree. Then they will revere the origin which they formerly dispersed, as we have observed concerning the words: 'Behold, My servant prospers.'

The trial at which the enemy sought to destroy the Servant by shutting off all human support, becomes instead the trial that liberates him with a new boldness and a new peace.

I will end by reading another poem by the woman who wrote the lines which I quoted at the outset. This time she writes about the transforming power that is in Jesus Christ.

There I was, a seed, dry and lifeless,
blown by the winds of the cruel environment.
Helpless, sad, abandoned,
destined to live a life of worthlessness.

Then you came along, dear Lord, ...
You picked up this small, fragile, lifeless seed,
and place me in the dark, damp, tomb of a hole.
What's happening? I questioned.
Why are you doing this to me?
Before I knew it, the light was gone.
I felt abandoned, angry, hurt.
There was no one I could turn to
I was alone.
I felt the ache of my own emptiness.
Fear began to overwhelm me
like a ravenous worm searching a choice morsel.
Oh, the pain.
Oh, the never-ending tears of bitterness and anger.

I felt like I was dying
And with all my minuscule powers
I could not change it.
I felt life was going on without me.

Suddenly I felt a strange new sensation.
Warm and somehow comforting.
It penetrated the shell of my existence,
It reached to my innermost, deepest core.

It began healing, putting together, and putting right
things I thought would never be right again.
The wetness from my own tears seemed to change
in the presence of this warmth.

I began to feel different.
I began to get nourishment
that You had planned for me.
I couldn't believe that You cared enough for me
to have planned all this.

The shell that surrounded me,
seem to be loosening, disintegrating, separating from me.
There was something new and exciting in me.
I began to understand that this was not the end,
but just the beginning.

I had died to the world, to self,
and because of You,
Now, I'm going to live.

I felt my roots embracing the abundant nourishment
I felt new life, powerful enough to part the soil,
reach toward Him who created me.
How wonderful it was to be free of the old shell,
though it was still lurking near by.
The warmth of Your love now glowed inside me.
I realized how great was Your tenderness, compassion for me.
I realized the power of Your sacrifice.
With humble thankfulness, I praised my living God.
I finally broke through the deep darkness of my life
into Your glorious light.
And it was wonderful!

That is the school of disciples, the school which transforms hardened freeway daisies into transcendent and free new beings.

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