

A LIGHT FOR THE NATIONS

Isaiah 49:1–7

Key Verse: 49:6b

“I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

How do you see yourself? Do you feel pretty ordinary? Maybe even a bit useless? We all do sometimes. Do you have any idea of what your life is supposed to be about? Finding who we are and what we should be doing is so important. In today's passage we can find some answers. This is the second of the four servant songs in Isaiah. In the first song, God described his servant as the one who brings justice to the nations. He does so by caring for wounded and broken people, one at a time, so faithfully, setting them free from sin and Satan. In this second song, the servant himself shares what God has done for him. And God speaks to his servant. Through their words we want to learn more of the Servant of the Lord, Jesus. We also want to find how we can live as servants like him. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his words today.

First, “Listen to me, O coastlands” (1a). Read verse 1a. “Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar.” Usually it's God himself who says, “Listen to me.” God's servants always tell people to listen to God. But this servant says, “Listen to me.” No other servant ever said that! He's addressing the “coastlands” and “peoples from afar.” In other words, he wants people all over the world to know him. What does he want people to know, and why?

Second, “the LORD called me” (1b). Read verse 1b. “The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name.” He says it again: “And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant...” (5a) The prophet Jeremiah spoke of this same calling (Jer1:5). So did Paul (Gal1:15). In Jesus' case, before he was conceived, the angel told his mother Mary of God's purpose for him, and said his name would be Jesus (Lk1:30–32). His name meant his identity. It tells us the servant of the Lord has a keen sense of God's calling and of his identity in God. Calling is about God's sovereign will and purpose. And identity is a rock-solid foundation. This calling and identity gives this servant of the Lord the strength and direction to serve God. It's true for us, too.

Third, “a sharp sword, a polished arrow” (2). Read verse 2. “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.” Here the servant describes how God prepared him. Twice he says “he hid me.” Like these weapons, God protects and preserves his servant for just the right moment. The imagery suggests God is planning to use him in battle. What kind of battle? It’s not with people. It’s the spiritual battle against the devil, the battle to turn people back to God to receive his healing and life and hope, the battle against the sin and unbelief in our hearts.

In many ways it’s a battle in our way of thinking. Our thinking can be so affected by our sinful nature. God has just said to his people: “Because I know that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass...” (Isa48:4). All God’s prophets had to deal with their people’s stubborn pride and unbelief. In his time Paul also experienced this. He wrote: “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2Co10:5). It’s a battle for the mind. What are the weapons for this battle? Here, the sword and arrow are God’s word (Eph6:17).

It’s good to think more about this analogy. To be ready for use, a sword has to be “sharp” and an arrow “polished.” A dull sword can’t penetrate. An unpolished arrow will veer off course and miss its target. How does a sword get sharp? It’s put in a hot furnace, pounded with a hammer, then sharpened with a grindstone. It’s so intense! Look at verse 2 again. The servant says, “...he made my mouth like a sharpened sword.” Ouch! How does one’s mouth become like a sharpened sword? The servant is talking about the discipline to speak God’s word. The word itself is already a sharp, two-edged sword (Heb4:12). We just need the discipline to speak it properly. It’s not just the discipline to speak clearly, though that’s helpful, too. It’s the discipline to speak what God says. It’s so easy to say many useless words, to speak recklessly, or to gossip, complain and criticize. This is why the Bible warns us not to talk too much but keep a tight rein on our tongue.¹ We have a strong saying in English, “Watch your mouth!” But even if we try hard to do it, we fail. To change, we need to fill our minds and hearts with God’s words. During a personal struggle the prophet Jeremiah said, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy, and the delight of my heart.” Then God told him,

¹ Pr10:19; Jas1:26; 3:5ff.

“If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth...” (Jer15:16a,19).

Verse 2 is describing the Servant of the Lord, Jesus. He was the Son of God, but even he disciplined himself in what to say. He said: “For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak...What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me” (Jn12:49–50). It’s easy to speak based on emotions, common sense, or our own ideas, or to impress people. But the servant of the Lord listens carefully to God, then tells people what God told him. So Paul urges us to do our best to present ourselves to God and to “rightly handle” the word of truth (2Ti2:15). It’s how our mouth can become a sharpened sword of his word.

Let’s also think about the polished arrow. Even a straight arrow gets polished so that it can have the right aerodynamic to hit its intended target. This suggests another aspect of speaking God’s word: hitting the target. What’s the target? People. Just as we need to get to know what the Bible is really saying, we also need to get to know the people we’re teaching. Otherwise, our Bible teaching will likely miss the mark. It’s not about gathering information about them. It’s about getting to know people’s minds and hearts, their worldview, their way of thinking. It takes time. We need to get genuinely interested in people. But it’s so worth it. When we get to know people better, we can speak God’s word to them in a way that really gets at the problem.

Verse 2 summarizes the work of the servant: the ministry of the word. It’s what Jesus did throughout his ministry,² and it was the main focus of his apostles.³ It’s good to read Christian books and to deepen our fellowship with each other. But the ministry of God’s word is a means of grace that is most edifying (Ac20:32).

Fourth, “I have labored in vain” (3–4). The servant goes on to describe a brief conversation he has with the Lord. Read verse 3. “And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’” God is speaking here. Though this servant is just one person, God is going to make him the true Israel. This servant

² Lk4:22,31–32; 5:17; 6:6; 10:39; 13:10,22; 19:47; 20:1; 21:37

³ Ac2:42; 4:2; 5:25,42; 6:2,4; 15:35; 18:11; 20:20; 28:31

will succeed where the people of Israel failed. It's unusual for God to say that he's going to be glorified in him.⁴ It means God will display his beauty in his servant.

And how does the servant respond? Read verse 4a. "But I said, 'I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity...'" What's going on here? The servant is saying he poured out his labor and strength, but the results were disappointing. Isaiah could definitely relate to this servant. When God first called Isaiah, he told him that through his ministry very few people would understand, turn and be healed.⁵ The servant of the Lord would endure this same hostility against himself (Heb12:3). John 12:37 concludes of Jesus' ministry, "Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him..." In every time and place, people's stubborn unbelief can make ministry so discouraging.

But the servant says more. Read verse 4b. "...yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God." In Hebrew, the word "right" is literally "justice." The poor results were not the servant's fault. He is sure God will bring him his own just reward. The servant adds in verse 5b, "...for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength..." Clearly, God doesn't respond to his servant based only on the visible fruit of how people respond to him. God sees and knows his servant and honors and strengthens his servant. Having God's honor and God's strength is the only way to overcome discouragement. All servants of the Lord really need this faith.

Fifth, "I will make you as a light for the nations" (5–6). At this moment, what does God say to his servant? Read verse 6. "...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.'" In the first servant song God already said he would give his servant as "a light for the nations" (42:6); now he repeats it. Here God says, "It is too light a thing." This servant has been called and so well prepared by God. So his ministry has to be much broader than just Israel. It needs to include the whole world. And this has always been God's purpose.⁶ So in this book, Isaiah repeatedly mentions how God's Messiah will bless "the nations."⁷

⁴ 44:23; 49:3

⁵ 6:9–10; cf. 42:18,20; 44:18

⁶ Ge12:3b; Ex19:6

⁷ 11:10; 42:1; 52:10,15; 60:3; 61:11; 62:2; 66:18

In Acts, God began gospel work in Jerusalem. Their fellowship was so beautiful (Ac2:42–47). But soon, persecution came, and God began to scatter his people to all Judea and Samaria (Ac8:1). Then God changed an unlikely enemy named Saul into Apostle Paul (Ac9:1–19) and sent him to the Gentile world (Ac13:2–3). On his first missionary journey, Paul tried to share the good news of Jesus with Jews first. But they became filled with jealousy, contradicted what he was saying, and reviled him. So Paul turned to the Gentiles. It was at that very moment that Paul read from Isaiah 49:6: “For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth’” (Ac13:45–47). In every generation people reject God’s servants. Still God cares about the whole world. He wants us all to live like salt and light in the world (Mt5:13–16). He wants us all to catch his vision for the world. He wants us to get out there and talk to people, especially those who’ve never heard about Jesus (Ro15:20–21). But we all are naturally self-centered. We care most about ourselves, our family, maybe our ministry. We become so narrow-minded. So sometimes God uses hardships to get us to turn outward, and forward.

In this servant song God’s servant experienced rejection. But God planned to make him a light for the nations (6). In this book, Isaiah repeats the word “light” 30 times, far more than any other Old Testament author. What is this “light”? Light represents hope. Darkness is despair. People may be rebellious, but eventually they get tired of living in darkness. Isaiah predicts that when the Messiah comes, people living in darkness will see “a great light” (9:2). Through his Messiah, God promises to bring his “light to the peoples” (51:4–5). Isaiah tells us that when we truly repent and receive the Messiah, our light will break forth like the dawn, and our light will rise in the darkness (58:7–10). He says, “Arise, shine, for your light has come...And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising (60:1,3). When the light of his servant Jesus shines within us, it’s so appealing to all peoples of all nations. Have we received his light? Is it shining?

God adds in verse 6b, “...that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” This phrase parallels his light. Isaiah repeats the word “salvation” another 28 times. As a prophet, he repeatedly warns of God’s judgment on sin, both in his people and in the world. But he also shares the heart of God who wants to save

all peoples of all nations. In fact, in Hebrew verse 6 literally says the servant himself is God's salvation. Isaiah repeats there is no other savior but him.⁸ Why is that?

Sixth, "to one deeply despised" (7). Let's read the last verse of this song, verse 7. "Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers: 'Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.'" Here Isaiah gives us a brief glimpse of the servant's suffering. Speaking to his servant, God calls him "one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers." The servant of the Lord will be so humiliated and helpless, even treated as an abomination. The next two servant songs will describe this further. But he is the servant of the Lord, the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel. This awesome God will use his servant's suffering powerfully. Even kings and princes will fall down before him. Through his suffering he becomes the only Savior of all people.

Read verse 6b again. "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." May God help us to welcome his Servant Jesus as our light. May God help us see his greater purpose for our lives to use us as his servants for the world. And may God help us learn from our Lord Jesus, the Servant, what we need to live as his servants in our time.

⁸ 43:11; 45:21