Studies in Isaiah

Study 4

The Persistent Servant – Isaiah 49-50

Introduction

In Isaiah 40-48 we have seen God's plan of bringing His servants in exile back home to Palestine. Clearly this plan is now in the process of fulfilment with Cyrus on the move. This is the great deliverance.

But what of the more serious issue? How are failed servants fully restored by God so they can fulfil their calling to be a light to the nations?

There is no real peace (shalom) without restoration – 48:22

In chapters 49-50 we are told that "The Servant of the Lord" is going to do this. This is the greater deliverance.

This leads to confusion!

- Clearly in 40-48 the servant of the Lord is the Old Testament People of God – see especially 41:8-10 and 44:1-2
- In the job description of the Servant (42:1-9) it is the role of the Old Testament People of God, but they failed. (42:18-25)
- Since the Old Testament People of God can't fulfil the servant's task, someone has to be a servant to minister to them – an individual not a group! The People of God are servants but they need a 'Servant' to minister to them.

The second and third Servant Songs reveal to us more about this Person.

The Second Servant Song (49:1-6) [1st song 42:1-9]

1. The Servant is the one who is prepared by God.

2. He is the one who will live up to what it means to be Israel.

3. He is the one in whom hope wins the victory over despair in the end.

4. He has a task in relation to:

    a. The People of God

    b. The World

5. The Servant is the one who listens in order that he can speak. (50:4)

6. The Servant is the one who accepts suffering as the price of ministry. (50:5-6)

7. The Servant is the one who remains confident of God's vindication. (50:7-9)

8. The Servant's challenge to us (50:10-11)

Studies in Isaiah

Study 4

The Persistent Servant – Isaiah 49-50

Introduction

In Isaiah 40-48 we see God's plan to bring his servants in exile back home to Palestine. Clearly this plan is now in the process of fulfilment with Cyrus on the move. This is the great deliverance. But what of the more serious issue? How are failed servants to be fully restored by God so they can fulfil their calling to be a light to the nations?

There is no real peace (shalom) until there is restoration (48:22). In Isaiah 49-50 we are told that 'The Servant of the Lord' is going to do this. This is the greater deliverance.

This leads to some confusion!

- Clearly in 40-48 the Servant of the Lord is the Old Testament People of God – especially 41:8-10 and 44:1-2.
- In the job description of the Servant (42:1-9) it is the role of the Old Testament People of God, but they failed. (42:18-25)
- Since the Old Testament People of God cannot fulfil the Servant's task, someone has to be 'the Servant of the Lord' to the servants.
- So the People of God are servants, but they need a 'Servant' to minister to them – an individual not a group!

The second and third Servant Songs reveal to us more about this person. We read, ***"Listen to him"*** (49:1). This is the same call as in Mark 9:7, ***"Hear him"***.

The Second Servant Song (49:1-6) [The First Song is 42:1-9.]

Notice the pattern

A^{1} Song No. 2: the Servant's double task – to the servants and to the world

B^{1} Isaiah's comment on the song (49:7-13)

C^{1} the people's response – despondent and unresponsive (49:14-50:3)

A^{2} Song No. 3: the Servant is responsive, buoyant, obedient and suffering (50:4-9)

B^{2} Isaiah's comment (50:10-11)

C^{2} the people's response – challenged to respond (51:1-52:12)

A^{3} Song No. 4: the Servant is successful, sin-bearing and triumphant (52:13-53:12)

B^{3} Isaiah's comment: the people of the world invited (54:1-55:13)

C^{3} the people's response chapters 56-66

Notice that the tone of these songs is different from the First Song where the Servant's role was primarily to Israel and not to the nations.

Taking the Second and Third Servant Songs together we have the following insights concerning this Servant of Servants!

1. The Servant is the one who is prepared by God.
2. He is the one who will live up to what it means to be Israel.

3. He is the one in whom hope wins the victory over despair in the end.
4. He is the one with a task in relation to:
   a) the People of God
   b) the world
5. He is the one who listens in order that He can speak. (50:4)
6. He is the one who accepts suffering as the price of ministry. (50:5-6)
7. He is the one who remains confident of God's vindication. (50:7-9)

Finally, the Servant challenges us!

1. The Servant is one who is prepared by God.

"Yahweh called me before I was born. When I was still in my mother's womb He named my name." (49:1)

a. Notice the worldwide audience

- A summons for all peoples everywhere to listen
- Listen to Me – this is autobiographical.
- The phrase 'listen to Me' is only used in the Bible for listening to God.
- The Servant is addressing the world as if he was God!

b. The Servant's involvement with God goes back to before his birth

- Yahweh knew even then what role He had in mind.
- What often frustrates us in our planning is the OMF principle – the One More Factor that we are ignorant of, but if we knew it, it would possibly change everything!
- We do our best to anticipate problems, but we know from experience that unforeseen problems arise so we often have to modify and adapt our plans as we implement them.
- The art of management is problem-solving!

Not so for God! He has anticipated all problems. So His call to the Servant of the Lord is not to do a botched up job with a hastily revised scheme because of the failure of Israel.

It is the same in His dealings with us: no "accidents" happen to us! We sometimes have to draft people in to fill sudden gaps. I spent my first year in 'mission' in the garage working on VW vans! God knows from the beginning how He plans to use us and nothing is ever wasted.

c. The servant is prepared and sharpened and polished!

"He made my mouth like a sharp sword and hid me in His hand. He made me a polished arrow and concealed me in His quiver." (49:2)

- Note that the metaphors don't imply a message of comfort despite 40:1. We read, ***"He came to destroy the works of the evil one."*** (1 Jn. 3:8)
- The message must confront to be of any real comfort! He brings not peace but a sword!
- Sharp swords are effective.
- Polished arrows, rubbed free of imperfections that distort flight, are accurate and penetrative.
- Swords win victories close at hand.
- Arrows hit distant targets.

- 'Hidden in the hand'/'concealed in his quiver' speaks of personal preparation and care and also reservation for a chosen target. This also speaks of intimacy between God and His Servant.

2. The Servant is the one who will live up to what it means to be Israel.

He said to me, ***"You are My Servant. You are Israel. You are Him in whom I will display My splendour."*** (49:3)

Three descriptions of the Servant

a. ***"My Servant …."*** – No surprises here!

b. You are Israel!

- Israel was to be God's own possession – a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex. 19:5-6)
- Israel was supposed to be a people who love, trust, obey and serve the Living God.
- Israel was supposed to be open to God's blessing and keen to reflect Him to the world.
- But Israel (i.e. the people) had none of the characteristics of the real Israel.
- The Servant of the Lord is Israel – i.e. He has all the characteristics of the true Israel.
- Israel was an individual before it was a nation (Jacob).
- Israel the nation had forfeited the right to the name.
- Jacob received the name and with it the blessing and the responsibility of the Abrahamic promises!
- So the Servant of the Lord is the new Israel taking all the responsibilities of the Abrahamic promises. This is the foundation of missions.

c. ***"Display My splendour"*** occurs 13 times in the Old Testament. On all occasions except one the Lord "shows His beauty" by what He does for His people. Here we see the exception.

This is a unique thing said about a unique person! God is saying, *"In My servant I can display all My glory".* Aren't you really impressed by Him?" God is saying this to the People of God, to the world and to the "gods" (demonic forces). So God takes great pride in this Servant!

3. This Servant is the one in whom hope wins the victory over despair in the end.

"But I said, 'I have worked to no purpose. I have spent my strength to achieve absolutely nothing'." (49:4)

- There was the temptation to remain despondent and sink into depression.
- There was so little in the way of results leading to threatened futility!
- A key to ministry is the ability to argue with oneself under pressure.
- Doubts and agonies need to be expressed. It is neither necessary nor wise to bottle them up.
- They need to be examined critically and a balanced judgement formed.
- Did the Lord Jesus feel despondency?
- The darkness of Gethsemane doesn't fit the case because His distress sprang not from the past but from the impending future.
- There were many times when the Lord Jesus faced rejection and blind unbelief as well as prejudice and misunderstanding. The people and the disciples were caught up in the glamour of signs and wonders.
  - ✓ The Lord Jesus cried, ***"How long …..?"***. (Lk. 9:41)

- ✓ He sighed over their continuing failure to understand. (Mk. 8:21)
- ✓ He foresaw the falling away of the inner group. (Mk. 14:27)

- There was always the temptation to despair. ***"Yet my judgement is in Yahweh's hands. My reward is in God's hands."***
- The ***"yet"*** is calling attention to a contrary truth – arguing with self.
- The antidote to despondency is:
  - ✓ **The wisdom of God:** He will decide what is right for me. He called and appointed me. I rest in His wisdom.
  - ✓ **The power of God**: the reward is the 'outcome of work'. This is also in God's hands.
- So resting faith is the answer to despair.

So this "Servant" has a real human nature. He is tested like we are, proving Himself to be the author and perfecter of the way of faith. It is a real, personal faith that can always say, ***"My God"***. (49:4) This is enormously comforting to me and to all of us in the Muslim World! Sometimes we don't see big results. Perhaps we don't see hardly any results. The temptation to despondency is there. **Argue!**

4. The Servant has a task in relation to:

a. The People of God

b. The world

a. The First Task: the People of God

"But now this is the word of Yahweh who formed me in the womb to be His Servant; to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him, so that I am honoured in Yahweh's sight and My God is my strength." (49:5)

- The first task of the Servant is to bring back the Old Testament People of God to a living worship – a renewed, restored, revived people.
- Talking to himself, the Servant reminds himself of this.
- So in addition to **resting faith** the antidote to despondency is to **focus on the task**.
- So the Servant remembers He was fashioned for this one thing. Every experience of life from inception has been to increase His effectiveness.
- All evidence to the contrary is transient and not the ultimate reality. So despondency flies away and it is replaced by buoyancy.
- Before the Lord He is an honoured person in vocation, status, name and task.
- In essence, despondency arises through listening to ourselves and our self-assessment etc. instead of looking to God and:
  - ✓ remembering His Word
  - ✓ recalling His purposes
  - ✓ living according to our dignity in Him
  - ✓ rediscovering our source of power in Him

b. The Second Task – worldwide salvation

"I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring My salvation to the ends of the earth." (49:6)

- The implication is that, ***"A remnant will return to the Mighty God"***. (Is. 10:21)

- A supernaturally preserved company are to be brought back to God by the ministry of the Servant – Jews past and present.
- The Servant raises up those beneath the burden of sin and brings back those distanced and alienated from God.
- This was the task that nearly brought the Servant to despair.
- But the Lord says that this is, of itself, far below the capacity and dignity of His Servant.
- Therefore the Servant will accomplish what the servants failed to do – to be a light to the Gentiles (peoples) and to bring salvation to the whole world.

Note that the NIV translation is poor here. It shouldn't be, ***"That you may <u>bring</u> My salvation"***.
The Hebrew is clear: ***"That you may <u>be</u> My salvation."***

The servant is not <u>the agent</u> communicating salvation, but He is in His own person the salvation the world needs. In the same way, He <u>is</u> the light rather than he brings the light.

This is the end of the Second Song.

Moving to the Third Song (50:4-9) here are some general points:

- After the Second Song there are various comments to reassure the People of God.
- The Third Song, like the Second Song, is autobiographical. This is not so of the First Song.
- It is only from v. 10 can we see that the speaker is "the Servant".
- The distinctive feature of this song is to tell of the sufferings of the Servant and to stress the obedience factor that provoked those sufferings.
- The song has four parts each starting with, ***"The Lord God"***. (verses 4, 5, 7 and 9)

5. The Servant is the one who listens in order that he can speak (50:4)

- From the Second Song we know that the servant's words will be sharp, penetrating and confrontational.
- Behind this is the <u>daily discipline of hearing from the Lord</u>. In this the servant is the disciple par excellence!
- He wasn't endowed with an instant gift – an instructed tongue, but subjected Himself to the training procedures appropriate to all discipleship.
- This meant concentrating on the Word of the Lord (8:9-20) in order to learn how to sustain the weary with a word.
- The first mark of a disciple under instruction is an awakened ear ready to receive the Word of God.
- The sharpened sword and the polished arrow didn't happen automatically or all at once. They are products of prolonged attention.
- Discipleship is a matter of the discipline of a morning by morning appointment with God.
- The Servant didn't impose this discipline on Himself. He reveals his discipleship by responding to the Lord's discipline and regular approach to him!
- So the Servant is the second and true Adam who, when the Lord came and called, was responsive and unashamed!
- A tongue filled with the appropriate word for ministry is the product of an ear filled with the Word of God.
- Morning by morning this must be the standard curriculum of all disciples not just of the Servant.

6. The servant is one who accepts suffering as the price of ministry (50:5-6)

The Servant not only listened, He was obedient! This was a total response of the will and the deed. There was no hesitation at all. What was the consequence?

- It was the revelation of the suffering to come that was bravely faced and endured in obedience to the Lord God.

This suffering:

- ✓ was not because of wrongdoing – but due to costly obedience
- ✓ was not deserved, but was willingly accepted
- ✓ included flogging indicating gratuitous torture and personal humiliation

Who is the servant? Where there is this threefold suffering, there is the Servant.

7. The servant is the one who remains confident of God's vindication (50:7-9)

- Since God will help him, he is confident of the certainty of the outcome.
- He has a resolute determination to carry things through to success.
- His disgrace and shame go beyond embarrassment:
  - ✓ it is finding what you have said is true to be false.
  - ✓ it is expressing a hope that is not fulfilled.
  - ✓ it is acting with confidence which proves baseless.
- Then comes a picture of a law court and a trial. The Servant is on trial.
- No one can convict him. He has no stain on his record.
- He is vindicated. There is a verdict of innocence.
- The Lord is near. He is my Advocate on my side.

So the Servant is confident of the outcome, but he also knows what will happen to his accusers.

The fact that the Lord God is the willing advocate is proof of the Servant's righteousness and the rightness of his cause.

So what earthly contender could succeed? The opposition earthly or demonic is compared with:

- ✓ the internal transience of clothes that wear out
- ✓ the helplessness of inert materials when attacked by external predators – moths!
  See Romans 8:31-39.

8. The Servant's Challenge to us (50:10-11)

We are in the courtroom! Which side are we on? Is it the side of the Lord God and the servants or are we on the side of those moth-eaten worn out accusers? (v. 10)

The alternative is to be consumed by the fire you light! You either lean on God or lie down in torment!

The servant is <u>both</u> our mentor and our Saviour. Those who commit themselves to the Servant way will have a Servant's experience. It is normative because it was true of Him.

Suffering is not an indication of having missed the will of God. It is intrinsic to a life of obedience. The path of following often seems like walking in the dark, but beware of do-it-yourself remedies – the self-sufficient walk in the light we have made ourselves. Such people believe they need nothing other than what they can generate themselves. This leads to torment, grief, pain, displeasure and being under the curse of God.