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Lent Day 19: The Servant Israel

3-4 minutes

Isaiah 49:1-6 (ESV)

*Listen to me, O coastlands,
and give attention, you peoples from afar.
The Lord called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.
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.
And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the Lord,
and my recompense with my God."
And now the Lord says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him —
for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength —*

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.”*

How do we know God is good? Isaiah 49 begins as a letter sent out to all nations (v. 1, “the coastlands ... and peoples from afar”), but it is being read and heard by the people of Israel. Therefore, the writer is essentially talking to everybody. The Jews had been taken into exile and longed to be brought back and they wondered where that salvation would come from. Isaiah makes the wondrous claim that “the servant” (v. 3), who has been prepared for this very hour, will be the one who brings the people back, but the manner would not be through military might, but through the power of his mouth (v. 2). That is, what he says and does will bring real salvation, not just physical deliverance.

The twist comes in the fact that this mysterious servant is named Israel (v. 3) — and while he is a person, he is the ideal person who embodies all the characteristics the nation of Israel should have had. For this text we need to remember that the nation of Israel was meant to have been a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12), a command they never fulfilled. Who will do so? This man would have to be perfect to be the ideal version of Israel, and then save not just the Jews — for God to be really glorified (v. 3), he will also have to be “a light to all nations” (v. 6).

We know God is good because he saw his own wayward people and all the rest of the world and brought them back into relationship with him (v. 5). How? Our translation says in v. 6, “that

my salvation may reach the ends of the earth,” but the Hebrew grammar reads more plainly, “to be my salvation to the ends of the earth.” Jesus as the servant is not merely the means to God’s salvation but he **is** that salvation — through his death and life.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, suffering servant and Redeemer, you have brought us back into relationship with you by being our salvation, purchasing us with your life, ransoming us from certain death. Give us hearts of flesh, warmed by the truths of your goodness found in the certainty of your love for us through your death and resurrection. In Christ’s Name, Amen.

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