

June 12 Lesson 2 (NIV)

GOD FORETELLS OF REDEMPTION

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 49:1-17

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 49:1-17

ISAIAH 49:1-13

¹ Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the LORD called me;
from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.
² He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
and concealed me in his quiver.
³ He said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."
⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing at all.
Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand,
and my reward is with my God."
⁵ And now the LORD says—
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD
and my God has been my strength—
⁶ he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."
⁷ This is what the LORD says—
the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—
to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
to the servant of rulers:

“Kings will see you and stand up,
princes will see and bow down,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

⁸ This is what the LORD says:

“In the time of my favor I will answer you,
and in the day of salvation I will help you;
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,
to restore the land
and to reassign its desolate inheritances,

⁹ to say to the captives, ‘Come out,’
and to those in darkness, ‘Be free!’

“They will feed beside the roads
and find pasture on every barren hill.

¹⁰ They will neither hunger nor thirst,
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them.

He who has compassion on them will guide them
and lead them beside springs of water.

¹¹ I will turn all my mountains into roads,
and my highways will be raised up.

¹² See, they will come from afar—
some from the north, some from the west,
some from the region of Aswan.”

¹³ Shout for joy, you heavens;
rejoice, you earth;
burst into song, you mountains!

For the LORD comforts his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

KEY VERSE

This is what the LORD says: “In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances,—Isaiah 49:8

PARTNERS IN A NEW CREATION

Unit 1: God Delivers and Restores

LESSONS 1–4

LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. The Right Time
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- I. Identity of the Servant (Isaiah 49:1–5)
 - A. Called by God (vv. 1–3)
Some Polishing Needed
 - B. Confident in God (vv. 4–5)
- II. The Lord's Plan (Isaiah 49:6–13)
 - A. Call to All (vv. 6–7)
The Most Segregated Hour?
 - B. Day of Salvation (vv. 8–12)
 - C. Call to Joy (v. 13)

Conclusion

- A. Speak and Sing
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

AswanAz-wawn.

Babylon*Bab*-uh-lun.

Gentiles*Jen*-tiles.

IsaiahEye-*zay*-uh.

Introduction

A. The Right Time

Young people are constantly in a state of impatiently waiting for “the right time,” which often feels like it will never come. They wait with eager anticipation for the day they can attain a learner’s permit as a step to having a driver’s license and maybe even a car. This taste of freedom may also come with new responsibilities as the new driver begins working and paying for gas and insurance. High school graduation looms large—and with it the need to successfully complete entrance exams, essays, and other prerequisites to begin college, trade school, or a chosen profession. Awaiting the right time (and the right person) to marry is also a source of anxious waiting. In all, young people desire to have the independence and freedom of adults—although whether they still want that when they also receive the responsibilities is open to debate!

Israel was also waiting impatiently, waiting for God to act (1 Peter 1:10–13). And while their freedom in him would certainly come with responsibilities, that day would also be one of great joy. All this would be accomplished through one servant eager to do God’s will.

B. Lesson Context

In the book of Isaiah, there are four poems about the Messiah (Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–7; 50:4–9 [or through 50:11]; and 52:13–53:12). They are called “Servant Poems” or “Servant Songs.” A fifth passage, Isaiah 61:1–4, is sometimes added to the list because its content is very similar to the others, even though the word *servant* is not used in it. Our text today is from the second Servant Song. It is more than a poem about a servant. It is a prophecy about the work of Jesus, the Messiah. It is he who is the servant in the Servant Poems.

This Servant Song begins and ends with an appeal, not only to Israel but also to the nations of the world. The last three verses of Isaiah 48 exhort the people to flee from Babylon, and assurance is given that God will care for them as they travel. What’s next?

I. Identity of the Servant

(ISAIAH 49:1–5)

A. Called by God (vv. 1–3)

1a. Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations:

The speaker—the servant—is not yet identified (see Isaiah 49:3, below). The exhortation to *listen* is a necessary precursor to receiving any news (example: Exodus 23:21–22). Though *hear this* means the same, their use together emphasizes that just hearing words will not be enough; the information must be believed and acted on. Without appropriate action, the act of listening remains unfulfilled. *Islands* and *you distant nations* refer first to scattered Israel but also to nations that are outside of God’s covenant people.

1b. Before I was born the LORD called me; from my mother’s womb he has spoken my name.

What could give a person more confidence in a calling than to know *the Lord called* that person from the *womb*? God’s plan is not haphazard or slapdash; it’s not being made up as humanity progresses, without an end in God’s mind. Rather, God knows his intentions for the servant even before his mother was aware she was pregnant (see Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 1:21)!

Shakespeare asked, “What’s in a name?” In the case of this servant, quite a lot! More important than revealing the *name* itself is the fact that God *has spoken* it. We’ve all experienced greeting someone who has clearly forgotten our name. It’s not an unforgivable error, but it can have the effect of making the unnamed person feel unknown, anonymous. But God knows each of our names, and he cares about each of us personally, intimately, in ways that are not possible for unnamed masses.

2a. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,

In context, the *sharpened sword* in a prophet’s *mouth* likely refers to the words God calls his servant to speak prophetically. God imbues these words with authority (see Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12). Although Jesus’ words bring peace when accepted, they also act to divide the righteous from the unrighteous (Matthew 10:34–39).

2b. in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.

The shadow of God—whether *his hand* or his wings—is one way to speak of the safety of being in God’s care (examples: Psalms 63:7; 91:1; Isaiah 51:16). Like *a polished arrow* God kept

the servant safe and at the ready so that when his task came, the servant would be perfectly able to accomplish his work. In conjunction with the image of the sword, this implies judgment to those who do not accept the words the servant speaks.

3. He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.”

The Lord names the speaker his *servant* (see Lesson Context). A few explanations can be given for why *Israel* is named. One view is that Jesus is the true Israel, and this is simply a figure of speech. Because Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s plan to bless all nations (Genesis 12:1–3), he represents the pinnacle of all the nation of Israel was meant to be. Another possibility is that God does speak here to the nation as the people *in whom I will display my splendor*. If this is this case, then Israel would be fulfilled in the church, which has taken up Israel’s spiritual mantle and carried the good news of the Messiah into all the world. And because the church is Christ’s body, empowered by the Spirit, ultimately the servant really *is* Jesus.

B. Confident in God (vv. 4–5)

4. But I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God.”

Is there any more discouraging feeling than to look at one’s work and feel that you *have labored in vain*? Because God’s definition of success is not a conventional, earthly definition, faithful servants can be discouraged. For instance, the prophet Jeremiah faithfully proclaimed what God wanted him to say (2 Chronicles 36:12). But from a human standpoint he failed—because Judah did not repent and went into captivity, and Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians (36:15–21).

Jesus also experienced discouragement: when the disciples experienced fear in place of faith (examples: Matthew 8:26; Luke 12:28), when his friends fled and betrayed him (Mark 14:43–72), and when he hung on a brutal cross to die in excruciating pain (Matthew 27:46; see Psalm 22). But Jesus had even more reason than Jeremiah for confidence that his work and the *reward* for his work were in God’s hands. Human understandings of Jesus’ work were nothing compared to knowing that the Father would reward his Son for his faithful ministry and sacrifice.

5. And now the LORD says—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength—

The womb recalls Isaiah 49:1b, while the servant’s future glory points back to 49:3. This repetition is one way Isaiah expressed the confidence the servant would feel; repetition of this nature is typical in Hebrew poetry. *My God has been my strength* represents a reversal of 49:4. Whereas the servant had felt that his strength was wasted, with God that strength would be renewed and sustained (Isaiah 12:2; 33:2; 40:29–31; etc.).

In this verse the words *Jacob* and *Israel* are used interchangeably, as they were in the book of Genesis. Sometimes the word *Israel* in the book of Isaiah means only the northern kingdom of that name, as distinct from the southern kingdom of Judah. At other times, however, the word *Israel* refers to all the Jewish people in both northern and southern kingdoms together. At this

time the servant could only anticipate gathering Israel together, and its redemption would glorify God's name.

II. The Lord's Plan (ISAIAH 49:6–13)

A. Call to All (vv. 6–7)

6a. he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept."

The last verses of the printed text primarily concern a gathering of God's people, but which one? Some scholars see this passage as further comments about the return from Babylon that took place after Persia's Cyrus the Great captured Babylon. Others think that the reference to the Gentiles in Isaiah 49:6b (below) is a strong reason to interpret it as referring to believers around the world who come to Christ during the church age. A third option is that this is a prophecy about a return of Jews to Israel in the millennium that is still in the future. These differences may be matters for discussion, but they should not evolve into dissension and division. The main thing is to remember that from Isaiah's perspective this is a prophecy involving the *servant* of the Lord. The fulfillment is certain.

Nothing in the history of *the tribes of Jacob* suggests that restoring the people would be *too small a thing*. The people struggled with faithfulness throughout their days in Egypt, the wilderness, and the promised land. Indeed, though *Israel* had been a united nation, idolatry contributed to their fracturing into the northern 10 tribes and southern 2. The way God speaks to the servant here suggests that not only Judah would be restored, but all the tribes. The 10 had been lost in Assyria or assimilated into people later called Samaritans for generations by this point. This was a huge task, easy only for the Lord to accomplish.

6b. "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

The affirmation is made that the Lord's plan was for the message of redemption in Christ to include *Gentiles* as well as the Jews (see Isaiah 49:3, above; also lesson 4). Paul and Barnabas cited this verse as a justification for their decision to turn to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46). Later Paul would write in Romans 1:16 that the gospel was to the Jews first, and then to the Gentiles. This salvation has a far reach, including the entire *earth*.

7a. This is what the LORD says—the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers:

What *the Lord* does flows from his character, and the titles attributed to God result from his actions. *The Redeemer ... of Israel* acted to free the people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 6:6; 15:13; etc.). God chose Israel as his special people, but whether they acted in holiness or not, God remained the *Holy One* (2 Kings 19:22).

God's titles here emphasize his power and majesty, fidelity to his promises, and his sole claim of holiness. This is the Lord who addressed *him who was despised and abhorred by the nation*. Being rejected by so many could make the *servant* wonder if God had also rejected him.

7b. “Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Effectively, the rejection of man and nation (Isaiah 49:7a) is here dismissed. Both *kings* and *princes* will heed the servant’s words. As with any success in ministry, it is not based on the charisma or magnetism or leadership qualities of the preacher or missionary. Success is not the result of ironclad apologetics or perfect servant ministry. The reason people respond with worship when hearing the gospel is because *the Lord ... is faithful*.

B. Day of Salvation (vv. 8–12)

8. This is what the LORD says: “In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances,

In the time of God’s favor and *the day of salvation* are parallel terms here. Both denote the time when God would hear his people and act again on their behalf. In the short term, this would be seen in the people’s return from Babylon. Ultimately, however, this day is fulfilled in Jesus. Paul quoted this assertion in 2 Corinthians 6:2 in reference to a person’s accepting the invitation of salvation in Christ. There is no bad time to accept the gift of salvation!

The promise is primarily to the servant, but it extends beyond that to include *a covenant for the people*. Though we might expect this was a promise made with Israel, context suggests instead that the nations are intended here. God would work in them to bring about his promise of restoring the people. *To restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances* once again should be read as parallel terms. This promise recalls the land distributions made by Joshua after Israel had completed the basic conquest of the land (Joshua 14:1). Judah had been left bereft after the exiles went to Babylon, but all that land would be reassigned and renewed.

9a. “to say to the captives, ‘Come out,’ and to those in darkness, ‘Be free!’

This concept directly relates to God’s role as redeemer (see Isaiah 49:7a, above). The imagery continues the idea that those who are oppressed or *in darkness* may shed their fears because God has chosen to rescue them (9:2).

9b. “They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill.

The imagery from here through Isaiah 49:11 (below) is of herds coming home. A shepherd would expect to find greener pastures in valleys, near flowing streams of waters. But the abundance God promises through the servant is so great that vegetation would grow even beside the busiest of *roads* and *on every barren hill* that otherwise might be desolate, rocky, and too harsh for pastureland. This last phrase is also noteworthy because idolatry was frequently associated with high places (examples: Leviticus 26:30; Numbers 33:52; Deuteronomy 12:2). But God’s promise is that his own faithful people will be able to eat safely in places that had previously been polluted by idolatrous practices. The entire creation is God’s, and he will reclaim it from the evil that has invaded it.

10. “They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water.

It’s easy to read these promises from a spiritual point of view, assuming that *hunger* and *thirst* are metaphors for the longing for God. Isaiah’s original audience, however, would have looked

forward to security against scarcity, especially following exile in Babylon. Protection from *heat* and *sun* might suggest that the people would not need to work through the noon hour, when conditions like heatstroke are more likely to occur. And there would be no search for water because the servant guides them *beside springs of water* (compare Psalm 23). Keeping with the imagery of herds returning home, there would be plenty to graze on and the heat would not sap their energy. Water would run plentifully.

Jesus fulfilled this verse both literally and figuratively (Luke 4:16–21; John 6:35). His encounter with the Samaritan woman speaks to his power over spiritual thirst (4:10, 13–14). And one need only look to the feeding of the 5,000 to realize that Jesus is more than capable of alleviating hunger (Matthew 14:13–21).

11. “I will turn all my mountains into roads, and my highways will be raised up.

A traveler approaching a mountain in ancient times had three options: go over it, go around it, or turn around. Going over might be the most direct route, but all sorts of dangers are found on the heights. But when the servant led the people, even in the *mountains* there would be a safe way across. The *highways* here likely refer to desert roads that would have been sunken; raising them made them less treacherous to follow.

12. “See, they will come from afar—some from the north, some from the west, some from the region of Aswan.”

Two directions are given as starting points for the pilgrims who make this journey *from afar*. This could imply the return of the 10 tribes of Israel that disappeared *north* into Assyria and the arrival of Gentiles from the Mediterranean to *the west*. The exiles in Babylon would return from the east. *The region of Aswan* likely refers to land near the southern border of Egypt, as suggested by a copy of Isaiah found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. So by explicit citation and by implication, all directions are covered; people will come from everywhere.

C. Call to Joy (v. 13)

13. Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

Shout, rejoice, and burst into song are parallel terms here. The repetition once again emphasizes that joyful song is the correct impulse following God’s works. In Hebrew thinking, the sky contained several layers of *heavens* (Deuteronomy 10:14; 1 Kings 8:27; etc.). These heavens rested on the *mountains* as a ceiling is supported by firm pillars; the *earth* sat beneath. Isaiah calls all creation to enter into praise when *the Lord* announces his intentions to comfort *his people* and *have compassion on his afflicted ones*. Paul picks up this theme, declaring that creation still suffers until God’s people are revealed (Romans 8:18–22).

Conclusion

A. Speak and Sing

At the right time, God sent Jesus to earth to offer salvation to all who accept him as Lord and Savior (Romans 5:6–8; Galatians 4:4–5). The call is to those who are in our families and communities and also in far distant villages we will never visit or even know exist. Our responsibility in the time of salvation is twofold: to proclaim the good news to all (Matthew 28:18–20) and to worship God with all creation. We are comforted, and we experience mercy. Therefore sing to God! And spread the good news throughout the earth.

B. Prayer

Lord, thank you for Isaiah’s prophecies and the ways that your Son, Jesus, fulfilled them. Make us people who call captives to freedom in Christ and whose faith in his care is unwavering. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The day of salvation is *now!*¹
