

# The Servant Who is the LORD's Salvation

Isaiah 49:1-13 (text); Acts 13:44-49

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**B**eloved Congregation of Christ: In the Philippines, the word “servant” evokes a picture of one who works for a family for a very low wage. Many middle- and upper-income homes have “servant's quarters,” a room separate from the main house. A “domestic helper” is a servant who works for families overseas to make an income higher than local wages.

But the word “servant” is also used in a positive light. A government official is called a “public servant.” Over time, the word evolved into the more high-sounding “minister.” So a “Prime Minister” is merely a “First Servant.” In the New Testament, a “servant” can mean a “slave,” and often used in the sense of a “servant of Christ,” just as pastors often call themselves. In the Old Testament, the word used in our text for “servant,” can also mean “slave” or “bondservant,” a person who works for no pay, except for food and lodging. One can become so hopelessly indebted to another so that he voluntarily—and unlawfully—sells himself as a slave to the debt-holder (Lev 25:39-41), which is called today as “indentured servitude.”

In the Book of Isaiah, we meet a different kind of servant, the LORD's Servant, who has four songs, verses written in poetry. The first “Servant Song” in Isaiah 42:1-9 focused on the LORD's chosen Servant who brings justice to the nations. He is not only just, but he is also compassionate to the weak and oppressed. He comes to make old things new, both his people and his creation. In the second of four Servant songs in our text today, the servant of the LORD will restore Israel and save the nations. Who is this Servant? In verses 1 and 2, the Servant is described as an individual given a name by the LORD himself, and with a mouth like a sharp sword. Although the Servant is called “Israel” in verse 3, it cannot be Israel itself, because he is distinguished from the nation.

Israel was a rebellious and idolatrous people. As punishment for their sin, God sent the Babylonians to destroy their nation and take them as slaves in Babylon. How would God then be glorified in this rebellious nation, destroyed, captive and enslaved because of its unending rebellion and idolatry? The righteous and holy God cannot simply ignore sin.

The answer is in his chosen Servant. He will be sent on a mission of salvation—to save his people from sin. From eternity, God called the Servant on this mission. But the Servant is not the Persian King Cyrus who allowed Israel to return to the Promised Land. He is the salvation not only of Israel, but of all nations of the earth. This salvation will be worldwide, bringing indescribable joy to all creation and glory to the LORD.

## The Servant Called to Save

The Servant of the LORD demands all nations to listen to him, “*Listen to me, O coastlands ... you peoples from afar*” (verse 1). Those who would listen to the Servant's words will now come from lands far away, even those beyond the Mediterranean Sea bordering east of Israel.

On whose authority does the Servant speak? Only the LORD can command the nations with authority, “*Listen to me!*” (46:3; 48:12; 51:1; 55:2). In eternity past, the Trinitarian God called and named him (verse 1) and commissioned him to a task (Isa 48:16). Therefore, the Servant speaks with the same authority as the LORD, and everyone must listen up!

How will the LORD prepare and equip him for his calling? He will be given a mouth like a sharp-edged sword. Unlike King Cyrus, the Servant does not conquer with a sword, but with the sharp sword of his Word. He is kept safe, just like an arrow safe from the elements in the quiver. He is hidden in the quiver of the LORD, ready to be unsheathed to conquer. He triumphs with his Word from up close, like a sharp sword, and from afar, like a polished arrow.

But even when God prepared and equipped him thoroughly for his calling, he was rejected by Israel (verse 7). Because Israel continued in rebellion and unbelief, the Servant does not hide his disappointment and sorrow, confiding in the LORD. But even when facing extreme difficulties, he has confidence in the LORD, trusting that the LORD will surely reward his difficult labor (verse 4).

But this is not to say that the LORD and his Servant are failures. In fact, both of them know that Israel will not return to God. The Servant's ultimate calling is to bring salvation to all the unbelieving nations, a much wider and grander task. So, for the LORD, the Servant becomes “*a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth*” (verse 6). When it seemed that he failed in saving many people in Israel, he will be victorious in saving a preserved Jewish remnant. And in his enlarged mission, he will bring salvation to the whole world.

Therefore, the Servant cannot be the nation Israel, because he is distinct from Israel and called to serve Israel and the nations. A nation like Israel, full of ungodly rebels and idolaters, cannot be the Servant who would bring justice and salvation to the nations. Why then is the Servant called *Israel*? It is because he comes from Israel, just as Jacob was called “Israel,” which means “prince with God” (Gen 35:10). In fact, the Servant is the true, obedient, righteous Israel, not the rebellious Jews. He is the embodiment of the ideal Israel, what Israel should have been as the nation who should have displayed God's glory and beauty.

In the end, God will reward and vindicate his chosen Servant. A great reversal of status will take place when this despised, abhorred “*servant of rulers*” will become Ruler over earthly kings and princes who will bow and “*prostrate themselves*” at his feet and serve him (verse 7).

## **The Servant Saves the Nations**

In verses 1-6, the Servant speaks, but in this second part, verses 7-13, the LORD speaks. How would the Servant accomplish the salvation of the nations so that kings will worship him? The Lord will be faithful in helping him. In God's eternal purpose, the Servant was chosen and called from his mother's womb (verse 1). The success of his mission is certain because the one who will help him is the faithful, Holy One (verses 7-8).

The LORD answers the Servant's prayer “*in a time of favor.*” This recalls the Old Testament Jubilee year when all debts are forgiven, the land rested, and all slaves are restored. The LORD

answers the Servant's prayer in the day of salvation, when he saves his people from sin. The LORD will keep and protect him until his calling of salvation was accomplished. The LORD will give the Servant to the people as a covenant, for which he will be the Mediator between God and his people (verse 8; see also Isa 42:6-7).

Centuries before Isaiah's prophecy, the Jews were taken to Egypt, “the house of bondage,” where they became slaves of cruel masters. Isaiah says that Israel will again be taken captive as slaves in another foreign land, Babylon. But in verses 9-11, the LORD will again rescue them and bring them back to their Promised Land in a Second Exodus. He will free the prisoners languishing in dark dungeons and take them to a place where there is light (verse 9; Isa 42:7). In their journey back from Babylon, God will feed them, as he fed them during their Exodus from Egypt. The Servant will be their Shepherd, leading them to feed even in bare hills, because God could make barren deserts into green pastures. He will guide them to springs of water to satisfy their thirst. He will protect them from the hot wind and sun (verse 10; see also Isa 40:11). No high mountain and low valley will hinder them from returning to the Promised Land (verse 11; see also Isa 40:3-4).

It is clear that the Exodus from Egypt and Babylon are merely foreshadows of the Servant's mission of saving from sin a people from all the nations. The “*day of salvation*” has arrived with the coming of the Servant (verse 8). People from the four corners of the the earth “*shall come from afar ... from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene*” (verse 12). Most scholars agree that Syene refers to Egypt, and “afar” most probably refers to Babylon and Assyria (Isa 39:3). This is why Isaiah also has a prophecy where Egypt and Assyria will assemble together to worship God, “*In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria ... and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians* (Isa 19:23).

The Servant's light of salvation will truly reach not only a remnant from Israel, but also the Gentile nations, even to the end of the earth.

## **The Servant's Comfort Brings Joy**

Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6 prophesied that a child will be born to a virgin woman. Centuries later, an angel promised a Jewish virgin that she will bear a son, who will be called the Son of the Most High, and who will be sent to save his people from their sins (Luke 1:32; Matt 1:21). This Son would be “*a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel*” (Luke 2:32), fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy in verse 6. His name is Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man.

This Son will proclaim “*the day of salvation*” when he first came (2 Cor 6:2). He spoke with authority (Matt 7:28-29), and his Father commands everyone, “*Listen to him!*” (Mark 9:7). In these last days, God speaks, not through his prophets, but through his Servant-Son (Heb 1:1-2). His words pierced the people like a sword and an arrow, so they rejected and despised him, crucifying him on a cross. Even his disciples thought that his death meant that he has failed in his mission. But he knew that his sufferings were necessary for his mission (Acts 3:18).

The LORD indeed fulfilled his promise of just vengeance, giving him ultimate victory. On the third day after he was buried, he arose from his grave, and those who believed in him began preaching his gospel of salvation in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The Servant's Word has now become a conquering sword going out to all nations (Isa 11:4; Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12). His Word is now conquering hearts and minds—not nations and kingdoms—to save all kinds of peoples. He is now calling people out of their dark captivity to sin, death and Satan into his marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9). When he returns, the whole creation will worship and acknowledge his Kingship and Lordship (Phil 2:9-11). He will destroy unbelieving and rebellious nations with the sword of his mouth (Rev 1:16; 19:15), bringing glory to his Father's name (verse 3).

Now God continues to fulfill his other promise of salvation to all nations. So, Christ's completion of his task as the Servant of the LORD in bringing salvation to all nations inspires indescribable joy, both on earth and in heaven. When the Servant rescues them from their captivity to sin, there is great joy, thanksgiving and praise to God for his love, grace and mercy. Jesus himself prophesied that many people from all the nations of the earth will be joyfully feasting with him at the table in the kingdom of heaven (Matt 8:11).

As our Lord Jesus Christ brings us into our homeland, he will be our pillars of cloud and fire in our wilderness pilgrimage. He will feed us with spiritual manna from heaven and living water, so we will not ever hunger or thirst (John 4:13-14; 6:51). We will instead hunger and thirst for righteousness and be satisfied (Matt 5:6). No suffering, persecution, or affliction, temptation, or even death, will prevent him from leading us into paths of righteousness and restoration (Rom 8:38-39).

In verse 13, even the whole creation sings in joy because of Christ's victory over sin. Just as there is joyful singing after the first Servant Song (Isa 42:10-12), all heaven and earth exults, and even nature burst into song! This is joy unknown, *“Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth”* (Psa 98:8-9). The whole creation rejoices at the promise of salvation of all nations through the preaching of the gospel of Christ, *“The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands”* (Isa 55:12). Creation, which has groaned from the day that Adam sinned, will again be able to sing with joy when the day of redemption finally comes (Rom 8:19-21). Your witness to the world will not be in vain, because his Word shall *“shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it”* (Isa 55:11).

Not only earth rejoices, but also heaven. God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked, but instead has pleasure when he repents of sin (Ezk 18:23). When you believe and repent, all the hosts of heaven rejoice because they rejoice over one lost sheep that is found (Luke 15:7, 10). When someone you know repents of sin, all heaven and earth again sing for joy in praise of the LORD (Isa 44:23). Every single individual whom God has chosen is precious in his sight. Not one will be lost; all of his elect will receive eternal life (John 6:39-40). This is why in Acts 13:47-48, the Gentiles, who heard the gospel proclaimed by Paul as the fulfillment of this second Servant Song, *“began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord.”*

**D**ear friends: You who are followers of the Servant of the LORD are also called to bring the gospel of salvation to others—family, friends, officemates and classmates. As God called Christ to a mission of salvation, so Christ also calls you his chosen ones to the same task.

But like the Servant Christ, you will surely be some rejection, ridicule and even persecution because of the gospel. But your witness comes with the LORD's authority, and you are not laboring in vain (Isa 65:23). What could Christ have felt after endless unfruitful days of reasoning with the unbelieving Jews? Or after three years of teaching the twelve disciples, they still “didn't get it”? In the same way, you might become weary of this rejection and misunderstanding, together with all the sufferings and afflictions in living a life of faith. You might even think that you are a failure. But we follow Christ with confidence in his Father who called him and empowered him for his mission. Because in the end, God promises a great harvest of souls from all nations worshiping, praising, and glorifying God for his salvation (Matt 9:37-38; Rev 7:9).