

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Isaiah 49:1-6

49 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."

The *Book of Isaiah*, which was written over seven centuries before Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, contains several prophecies of a Messiah that God would send one day to save mankind from their sins. It was said that this Messiah would come from Galilee, that he would arrive as a child and would usher in a new kingdom—a kingdom of God. He would open the eyes of the blind, unstop the ears of the deaf, enable those who are lame to walk and free prisoners from their chains. Most important of all, he would pay the penalty for the sins of mankind by atoning for them with his own death. But in order to do this he would have to go through great suffering. In Isaiah's words, he would be "...man

of sorrows and familiar with suffering” who would “...take up our infirmities and carry our sorrows.” He would be “...pierced for our transgressions...” so that “...by his wounds we will be healed.” “The punishment that brings us peace will be upon him” and he would “...pour his life out unto death” in order to “bear the sins of many.” Once again, the prophet’s words, which obviously refer to Jesus Christ, were uttered over seven centuries before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. They describe in excruciating detail how he would be scourged and crucified for the sins of mankind. In Isaiah’s words, “*His appearance will be...disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness.*” (Isaiah 52:14 – 53:12) Such prophecies could only have come from God because only God knows the future. If anyone thinks that they could have come from a human, I have a bridge I’d like to sell him.

In this evening’s Old Testament reading, this suffering servant of God—Jesus Christ—speaks in advance of his own coming. I’d like to take a close look at it so that we can see God’s marvelous hand at work in shaping human history. This will be an expository sermon, and I invite you to [take a Bible from the pew rack in front of you and] follow along. The passage is *Isaiah 49:1-6*.

“*Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations*” The passage starts out with a surprise: almost all of Isaiah’s prophecies are addressed to the Israelites, yet these words are addressed to “you islands...you distant nations.” These terms refer to the Gentiles, the goyim—all those who were not Israelites.

“*Before I was born the Lord called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name.*” The servant who speaks was called by God from eternity, from the beginning of time, and then given his name later when he was born into this world as the Babe of Bethlehem. “*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.*” By his own accounting, the servant is a weapon, a sword or arrow that would remain concealed until the time when God chooses to reveal him. And since he is a weapon, his job will involve fighting a battle and slaying the enemies of God and of God’s people.

In verse three we read: “*He said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.’*” Now the servant is addressed as “Israel.” He is told that that God’s splendor will be revealed to the world through him.

By virtue of the fact that the servant is called “Israel,” it is not surprising that the Jewish interpretation of this and the other servant passages is that the servant of God is Israel herself—in contemporary terms, the Jews. According to this interpretation, the Jewish people collectively serve God and reveal his splendor to the world in two ways: first, through their ongoing contributions to the welfare of humanity, and second, through their suffering throughout history on account of their religion. In the Jewish lexicon, the “chosen” in “chosen people” means chosen both for special blessing and special suffering. That they were chosen for special blessing is, they believe, demonstrable historically through their contributions to science, literature, medicine, philosophy, music and art. Since humanity has benefited enormously from the contributions of the Jews, the Lord’s splendor has been displayed to the world through them. This is the essence of what is called cultural Zionism today.

The special suffering of the Jews is prophesied in the next verse: *“But I said, ‘I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing Yet what is due me is in the Lord’s hand, and my reward is with my God.”* The special suffering of the Jews, they believe, is demonstrable in the anti-Semitism which pervades human history. From the savage oppression of the Greek Hellenists to the Roman Emperor Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews from Rome; from the forced conversions of the medieval church to the pogroms of the Russian Czars and Soviet dictators; from caricatures like Shakespeare’s Shylock and Dickens’ Fagin right up to the Holocaust, the Jewish people have suffered enormously at the hands of the gentiles . By being the sacrificial lambs through whose suffering man is forced to face up to his own barbarity, the Jews are a blessing to the rest of mankind. They remind us of our sinful natures and are the means through which God shows us the truth about ourselves.

It’s an utterly convincing argument—until you reach the next verse. *“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...”* This verse poses insurmountable difficulties for the argument that the servant is collective Israel—the Jews. First of all, the servant refers to himself as one who was formed in the womb. In the Bible, that kind of language is always used to describe an individual—never a nation. A nation isn’t “formed in the womb,” it is brought forth or “brought out” as, for example, God brought forth Israel out of Egypt. But more important, the servant says that God sent him to *“bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself.”* “Jacob,” of course, is simply another name for Israel: the prophets frequently refer to Israel as “Jacob.” In order to believe that collective Israel is the “suffering servant,” we must understand this verse to mean that “Israel will bring Israel back to God and Israel will gather Israel to Him.” This becomes a logical absurdity and is completely implausible in the context of *Old Testament* history: far from bringing herself back to God, Israel was forever wandering AWAY from God. In Isaiah’s words, *“We all, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way.”* (Isaiah 53:6) That was the reason God found it necessary to send prophet after prophet to show Israel the error of her ways and admonish her to turn back to God. If it were to be left to Israel to bring herself back to God, she would be in sad shape indeed. That’s why God would send his servant to bring her back to him. That is why, in the next verse, the servant says, *“I am honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength.”* The servant is honored; Israel could only flounder in disgrace.

And so the servant will be Israel in the sense that he will be an Israelite, yet he cannot be collective Israel. He will be a true Israelite in which there is nothing false, and he will be the axis upon which human history will turn. He will be the remnant who will return to shepherd God’s people. He will be Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, the suffering servant of God. He will be the Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world. He will be the Messiah, the Christ.

Which, of course is exactly what the final verse in this prophecy tells us: *“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 you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”* And so when Simeon the prophet holds the baby Jesus in his arms he says, *“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”* (Luke 2:29-32)

Savior of Israel, light to the Gentiles, Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—all there in the mouth of the prophet and written down three quarters of a millennium before the events they foretold came to pass.

Why is it that any reasonable person with an IQ above 60 would have trouble believing that such words must be inspired by God himself? No human being knows the future—we all know that. Yet the *Old Testament* is literally awash in prophecies like this—prophecies which tell the time and place of Jesus' coming, the things he would do when he came, and how he would die on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of mankind.

Today is Maundy or Holy Thursday, the day of the church year when we celebrate Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. When he said, *"Take, eat! This is my body given for you! Take, drink! This is the new testament in my blood, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins!"*

I've had some fun over the years asking people in Bible classes what they think the word "testament" actually means. Most people think it means something like "testimony" or "witness." But it doesn't. A "testament" is a will which specifies who will receive a person's property when he dies. Maybe you've heard the term "last will and testament." So when Jesus says, *"This is the new testament in my blood, poured out for you...."* He is bequeathing his body and blood to you—his heirs. When you come to the rail to partake in the Lord's Supper, you come to receive the body and blood of your Lord and Savior into your whole being—body, mind, soul and spirit. In the days of the early church, they referred to the bread and wine of communion as the "medicine of immortality." And indeed it is.

Lord as you will, come to us tonight in your body and blood.

Amen