
Observations from Isaiah

LESSON XXXXI : GOD WILL NOT FORSAKE SINFUL ISRAEL (49:1-50:3)

General outline (from Oswalt's *Isaiah*):

- I. INTRODUCTION: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF GOD'S PEOPLE (1-5)
- II. A CALL TO SERVANTHOOD (6)
- III. BASIS FOR SERVANTHOOD: WHOM SHALL WE TRUST? (7-39)
- IV. THE VOCATION OF SERVANTHOOD (40-55)
 - A. MOTIVE FOR SERVANTHOOD: GRACE (40-48)
 - B. THE MEANS OF SERVANTHOOD: ATONEMENT (49-55)
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Zion not forgotten (49:14-50:3)

(1) Written on My hands (49:14-23)

But Zion said, The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me. Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me. Your sons hasten back, and those who laid you waste depart from you. Lift up your eyes and look around; all your sons gather and come to you. As surely as I live, declares the LORD, you will wear them all as ornaments; you will put them on, like a bride.

But Zion said, The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me. Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me. Thy children shall make haste; thy destroyers and they that made thee waste shall go forth of thee. Lift up thine eyes round about, and behold: all these gather themselves together, and come to thee. As I live, saith the LORD, thou shalt surely clothe thee with them all, as with an ornament, and bind them on

And Zion saith, 'Jehovah hath forsaken me, And my Lord hath forgotten me.' Forget doth a woman her suckling, The loved one — the son of her womb? Yea, these forget — but I — I forget not thee. Lo, on the palms of the hand I have graven thee, Thy walls [are] before Me continually. Hastened have those building thee, Those destroying thee, and laying thee waste, go out from thee. Lift up round about thine eyes and see, All of them have been gathered, They have come to thee. I live, an affirmation of Jehovah! Surely all of them as an ornament thou puttest on, And thou bindest them on like a bride.

Though you were ruined and made desolate and your land laid waste, now you will be too small for your people, and those who devoured you will be far away. The children born during your bereavement will yet say in your hearing, This place is too small for us; give us more space to live in. Then you will say in your heart, Who bore me these? I was bereaved and barren; I was exiled and rejected. Who brought these up? I was left all alone, but these — where have they come from? This is what the Sovereign LORD says: See, I will beckon to the Gentiles, I will lift up my banner to the peoples; they will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their shoulders. Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground; they will lick the dust at your feet. Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed. (NIV)

thee, as a bride doeth. For thy waste and thy desolate places, and the land of thy destruction, shall even now be too narrow by reason of the inhabitants, and they that swallowed thee up shall be far away. The children which thou shalt have, after thou hast lost the other, shall say again in thine ears, The place is too strait for me: give place to me that I may dwell. Then shalt thou say in thine heart, Who hath begotten me these, seeing I have lost my children, and am desolate, a captive, and removing to and fro? and who hath brought up these? Behold, I was left alone; these, where had they been? Thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard to the people: and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders. And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the LORD: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me. (KJV)

Because thy wastes, and thy desolate places, And the land of thy ruins, Surely now are straitened because of inhabitants, And far off have been those consuming thee. Again do the sons of thy bereavement say in thine ears: 'The place is too strait for me, Come nigh to me — and I dwell.' And thou hast said in thy heart: 'Who hath begotten for me — these? And I bereaved and gloomy, A captive, and turned aside, And these — who hath nourished? Lo, I — I was left by myself, these — whence [are] they? Thus said the Lord Jehovah: 'Lo, I lift up unto nations My hand, And unto peoples I raise up Mine ensign, And they have brought thy sons in the bosom, And thy daughters on the shoulder are carried. And kings have been thy nursing fathers, And their princesses thy nursing mothers; Face to the earth — they bow down to thee, And the dust of thy feet they lick up, And thou hast known that I [am] Jehovah, That those expecting Me are not ashamed. (YLT)

“The discussion of the Servant’s calling and work (49:1-13) is followed by a cry from Zion that it is all useless because God has put her away and has no more concern for her (49:14-50:3). This section is a reiteration of the concern voiced in 40:27. Here, as there, Zion is encouraged not to lose hope, but to continue to wait for the Lord (49:23). *In this section, however, God’s response is on a different level than it was in chs. 40-48. There God’s sovereign rule of nature and history provides the basis for calling Israel to have hope. God is able to deliver his people from the grip of the mightiest power on earth. But, as stated above on 49:1-8, it is not enough that God can deliver his people; does he want to? Has not their sin made them a stink in his nostrils? It is one thing to go back home; but it is quite another to go back to an offended, holy God. Here, then, the response is the unfailing love of God for his people Zion. Yes, he wants to restore them to*

himself. How could they ever imagine that his love was as changeable as theirs (cf. Hos 6:4)? If God has divorced his wife, Zion, he is able to take her back (Isa 50:1-3). She is not condemned to a life of barrenness. Instead, he will bring her children from all over the world (49:20-22; cf. 49:12). At the heart of the work of the Servant is eternal love, which lives to forgive, redeem, and restore.” [Oswalt, Isaiah]

This chapter focuses on children as a theme and is divided into two sections, vs. 14-23 and vs. 24-26. The first section teaches us that rather than forgetting about Zion, they are always before His mind. Although her husband has forsaken her and her children dead, and in her mind her life is over; but God will bring her children from all over the world if they would but trust Him. The second section answers a question raised in v23: is the love of God strong enough to defeat the tyrants holding the peoples of the world in bondage? The answer is a resounding yes, the love of God is strong enough to deliver.

ISRAEL’S CLAIM OF DESERTION AND GOD’S DENIAL — (v14-16) These verses contain an assertion from Israel that the Lord had indeed forsaken her, a claim the Lord denies. This is connected with the preceding verses speaking of God’s favor upon His Servant. The thought is, *“Sure, that’s fine for the Servant, but it really has nothing to do with me!”* God in turn replies *“Not so! You are involved in those promises.”* In v. 15 God uses the strongest images possible to illustrate His attachment to Israel. Natural instincts prohibits mothers from forsaking their children. But the Lord continues by saying that even if in rare cases a mother would forget her child, the Lord would never do so! *“God’s attachment is more than a mother’s. The prophet asks us to think of a mother’s attachment and then go one step further.... We must never allow our sense of God’s offended justice to obscure the truth from our eyes that he is love. Earthly love, as wonderful as it is, may cease, but his love has no limits whatsoever.”* [Oswalt, Isaiah] *“In reply to the complaining church, which knows that her home is in Zion-Jerusalem, and which has been kept so long away from her home, Jehovah sets forth His love, which is as inalienable as a mother’s love, yea, far greater than even maternal love.”* [K&D, Isaiah] Isaiah uses a second image to illustrate the same concept: our names are written on the palms of God! It would not be abnormal for a servant to have his master’s name written on the servant’s hand; here however is the servant’s name being written on the Master’s hand. Charles Wesley properly applied this to Christ in one of his songs: *“Arise, my soul, arise, shake off thy guilty fears, / The bleeding sacrifice in my behalf appears. / Before the throne my Surety stands; My name is written on his hands.”* The use of ‘walls’ in the last part of v16 is most probably a reference to the then-broken down walls of Jerusalem, destroyed when Babylon invaded Judah. *The point seems to be that God cares for them, He sees their needs and heartaches and is there for them.*

GOD WILL REBUILD THAT WHICH WAS DESTROYED — (v17,18) Following on the ‘walls’ in the previous verse, the Lord moves on to the fact that He will rebuild the walls and return those taken captive (a reference to the physical destruction by Babylon). *“Their ruins were the sign of the violation of the city and her abandonment by her husband. (This scenario explains Nehemiah’s horror when he learned that the walls were still in ruins, some 150 years after their destruction, Neh 1:3-4) God promises that the builders would come quickly and that those who had destroyed the city would go. This statement resembles those of Jeremiah, who after stating again and again that God would uproot and tear down Judah, in the end promised that God would plant and build her up (Jer. 24:6; 42:10). Destruction is never God’s intended last word.”* [Oswalt, Isaiah] The spiritual application for us is *God’s concern for us is more than a mental assent. He is able and will restore the years sin has destroyed.* The Lord says the same

thing through the prophet Joel: *“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten — the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm — my great army that I sent among you. You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed.”* (Joel 2:25,26).

GOD WILL ABUNDANTLY BLESS THOSE WITHOUT MERIT, NOT JUST IN SOME SMALL MEASURE — (v19-21)

The point of emphasis here given by Isaiah is the abundant measure in which the Lord will bless – as the old saying goes, *God does not use a thimble to bless; rather He uses a large shovel!* Though Jerusalem was destroyed (v19a, a reference to the destruction under the Babylonians) God will bring those back unto them in such large measure that the city itself will not be big enough to hold all those returning (v19b, 20b). Verse 21 pictures an elderly woman, beyond the age of childbearing, now surrounded by children. *One pictures Naomi holding the grandson by Ruth saying ‘Where did this come from?’ The image of Sarah bearing in her old age comes to mind as well. To those without hope, God is able to bring hope and life. “There is also a contrast with the emphasized I. I am incapable of having children, so where did these come from? I have been left all alone, so who gave me these? This point of Zion’s incapacity is important. Zion’s heirs are not the results of Zion’s ... worthiness. They are the gift of God. She did not bear them, nor did she rear them, so where did they come from? The fruitfulness and the grace of God. This theme runs straight through the Bible, from Sarah onward. In ourselves we are barren and bereaved, no more able to bring ourselves abundant life or eternal life onto this planet than we are able to give ourselves physical life. If abundant, eternal life is to be ours, it will be the gift of God, and we will look on in amazement, saying, ‘Where did that come from?’” [Oswalt, Isaiah] “The words that sound in the ears of Zion are now followed by the thought of astonishment and surprise, that rises up in her heart.... She sees herself suddenly surrounded by a great multitude of children, and yet she was robbed of children, and ... [was as] one who seemed utterly incapacitated for bearing children any more. She therefore asks, Who hath borne me these? She cannot believe that they are the children of her body, and her children’s children.... [T]hey went forth, as she thought to die in a foreign land, she cannot comprehend where they have been hitherto concealed, or where they have grown up into so numerous a people.” [K&D, Isaiah]*

THE MESSIAH WILL BE THE BANNER UNDER WHICH ALL WILL RALLY — (v22,23)

Isaiah says the Sovereign Lord will raise up a banner or ensign under which all the nations will rally. This thought is not new in Isaiah; in chapter 11:10,12 Isaiah states the Messiah will be the banner who will call nations unto Himself. *“The connection between that passage and this one, sandwiched as it is between two Servant passages, confirms that the Servant is indeed to be identified with the Messiah.* The same point is made again in 62:10, which states that an ensign is raised over the peoples to signal the coming of the one who will be salvation for Zion. The only other place where ‘ensign’ occurs in the book is in 13:2, which is of significance for this passage because it is the only other place in the Bible where ‘hand’ and ‘ensign’ parallel each other. There, as elsewhere, *it is a signal flag used to communicate God’s directions.* In that instance, it signals the destruction of proud Babylon. Clearly, much more than merely the return of the Babylonian exiles is in view here. This is a foretaste of the picture of chs. 60-66, which is itself a fulfillment of 2:1-5. *All the nations are flowing to Jerusalem to bow at her feet, yes, to beg mercy for the wrongs done, and yes, to bring back with apology those who had been dragged away, but also to try to learn something of this amazing God who has been able to life his people from barren widowhood to being the laughing grandmother of nations. Although the final consummation of*

this picture is yet to come, it has already occurred to a great extent in the Christian era. Kings and queens have bowed at the feet of the God of Zion, and have spent their wealth in his cause. From around the world Zion has found descendants from every race and people. God's promises are trustworthy." [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] "The prophecy now takes a step backward in the domain of the future, and describes the manner in which the children of Zion get back to their home.... The setting up of a standard (Isa 5:26; 11:12; 18:3, cf., 62:10) is a favorite figure with Isaiah, as well as swaying the hand. Jehovah gives a sign to the heathen nations with His hand, and points out to them the mark that they are to keep in view, with a signal pole which is set up. They understand it, and carry out His instructions, and bring Zion's sons and daughters thither, and that as a foster-father carries an infant in the bosom of his dress, or upon his arms, so that it reclines upon his shoulder." [K&D, *Isaiah*]

WHAT ARE WE TO LEARN FROM THIS? — *"What is Zion expected to learn from what God is going to do for her? Two things: He is the Lord, and those who wait for him are not disgraced by him.... To know him as Lord is to know that he has both the power to be able to keep his promises and the faithfulness to want to keep them. It is at this point of the Lord's identity that the experience of trouble often confuses us. All too often, such experiences convince us that God is either tyrannical, or inattentive to our concerns, or has failed us. We feel disgraced, or let down. The alternatives, that we have brought the trouble on ourselves, or that we are part of a larger picture involving a sinful world, rarely occur to us.... For one to wait on the Lord is to know that he will probably not act on one's own timetable, but that he will act."* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

(49:24-26)

Can plunder be taken from warriors, or captives rescued from the fierce? But this is what the LORD says: Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save. I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh; they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine. Then all mankind will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. (NIV)

Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captive delivered? But thus saith the LORD, Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered: for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children. And I will feed them that oppress thee with their own flesh; and they shall be drunken with their own blood, as with sweet wine: and all flesh shall know that I the LORD am thy Savior and thy Redeemer, the mighty One of Jacob. (KJV)

Is prey taken from the mighty? And the captive of the righteous delivered? For thus said Jehovah: Even the captive of the mighty is taken, And the prey of the terrible is delivered, And with thy striver I strive, and thy sons I save. And I have caused thine oppressors to eat their own flesh, And as new wine they drink their own blood, And known have all flesh that I, Jehovah, Thy saviour, and thy redeemer, [Am] the Mighty One of Jacob!' (YLT)

"This segment focuses on a question that seems to be linked to the assertions of vv. 22-23. There God promised to deliver Zion's children from all the nations of the earth where they were held captive, even to the extent of causing the kings and queens of those nations to bring home the captives and serve them. This provokes an incredulous response: Surely that is not possible (v.

24). In reply, God asserts in the strongest language that it is possible (vv. 25-26a), and that its accomplishment will have the effect of proving his nature and power to the whole world.”

[Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

GOD MAY WANT TO DELIVER BUT CAN HE? — Already mentioned before, God will not forsake His children but has them engraved on His hand. The question remains therefore, suppose He wants to deliver us but is He able? Has He the power to take away plunder from the fierce warriors? In the normal state of affairs, such a deliverance would be impossible but God is a powerful God. He is able to deliver us.

THE RESULT: GOD’S NATURE IS REVEALED TO THE WORLD — As above, God gives the reason for His actions. By delivering and blessing Zion, all mankind will see God as the Mighty Deliverer of Israel. *“Echoes of the Exodus constantly appear in this part of Isaiah. Those who read the question of v. 24 will certainly have recalled that this is exactly what God did when he delivered his people from Egypt, the house of bondage (v. 25). Moreover on that occasion not only did God make himself known to Israel but also to the Egyptians, and the greater redemption from oppression promised here will also lead to a wider recognition that God is — but this time by all mankind.”* [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

Zion not forgotten (49:14-50:3)

(2) The will and the power to deliver (50:1-3)

This is what the LORD says: Where is your mother’s certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you? Because of your sins you were sold; because of your transgressions your mother was sent away. When I came, why was there no one? When I called, why was there no one to answer? Was my arm too short to ransom you? Do I lack the strength to rescue you? By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea, I turn rivers into a desert; their fish rot for lack of water and die of thirst. I clothe the sky with darkness and make sackcloth its covering. (NIV)

Thus saith the LORD, Where is the bill of your mother’s divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away. Wherefore, when I came, was there no man? when I called, was there none to answer? Is my hand shortened at all, that it cannot redeem? or have I no power to deliver? behold, at my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a wilderness: their fish stinketh, because there is no water, and dieth for thirst. I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering. (KJV)

Thus said Jehovah: ‘Where [is] this — the bill of your mother’s divorce, Whom I sent away? Or to which of My creditors have I sold you? Lo, for your iniquities ye have been sold, And for your transgressions Hath your mother been sent away. Wherefore have I come, and there is no one? I called, and there is none answering, Hath My hand been at all short of redemption? And is there not in me power to deliver? Lo, by My rebuke I dry up a sea, I make rivers a wilderness, Their fish stinketh, for there is no water, And dieth with thirst. I clothe the heavens [with] blackness, And sackcloth I make their covering. (YLT)

“In the segment, God again addresses the claim that he has arbitrarily rejected his people, making their situation hopeless (cf. 40:27; 49:14). He declares that what happened to them was brought on them by their own rebellion (v. 1). Then he addresses a second issue: why does no one respond to

his invitation to believe in his grace and power (v. 2a)? Finally, he testifies to that power in language with apparent allusions to the exodus (vv. 2b-3). [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

WHO IS TO BLAME FOR THE CAPTIVITY? — in the last chapter we saw Israel make the claim the Lord had forsaken her (49:14). The Lord turns this around into a rhetorical question to Israel: *“What was the cause of your rejection? You were rejected not because of anything in Me but because of your own sins.”* “It was not He who had broken off the relation in which He stood to Zion; for the mother of Israel, whom Jehovah had betrothed to Himself, had no bill of divorce to show, with which Jehovah had put her away and thus renounced for ever the possibility of receiving her again (according to Deut 24:1-4), provided she should in the meantime have married another. Moreover, He had not yielded to outward constraint, and therefore given her up to a foreign power; for where was there one of His creditors (there is not anyone) to whom He would have been obliged to relinquish His sons, because unable to pay His debts, and in this way to discharge them? ... *Their present condition was indeed that of being sold and put away; but this was not the effect of despotic caprice, or the result of compulsion on the part of Jehovah. It was Israel itself that had broken off the relation in which it stood to Jehovah; they had been sold through their own faults, and ‘for your transgressions is your mother put away.’*” [K&D, *Isaiah*]

INSTEAD OF BLAMING GOD, COME BACK IN REPENTANCE AND FAITH — *“Instead of trying to fix the blame on God and resigning themselves to their hopeless situation, the people should be committing themselves to the power and grace of their Creator / Redeemer. This thought is expressed through a second question that God addresses to them. Why, when he had come to them, and called to them, had no one come forward to meet or answer his call? This is what they should be doing instead of blaming God. He is more than ready to help them, to restore them to himself, if they will only admit their guilt and receive the deliverance that his mighty hand has procured for them. Or do they still think, to shift to the other side of their argument, that though God may want to deliver them, he does not have the power to do so? ... God lacks neither the desire nor the power to deliver his people. The only issue is whether they will step forward in repentance and faith to meet him when he comes and answer him when he calls.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and
have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget, I will not forget you!”

— Isaiah 49:15 NIV