
Observations from Isaiah

LESSON XXXXIII : THE RIGHTEOUS OBEY THE SERVANT OF THE LORD (51:1-51:8)

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)
 - 1. Anticipation of Salvation (49:1-52:12)
 - a. Comfort through the Servant (49:1-13)
 - b. Zion not forgotten (49:14-50:3)
 - c. The Servant's confidence (50:4-9)
 - d. Obey the voice of his Servant (50:10-51:8)
 - (1) Light or darkness (50:10,11)
 - (2) The righteous listen to him (51:1-8)

(2) The righteous listen to him (51:1-8)

Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many. The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing. (NIV)

Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the LORD: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and I blessed him, and increased him. For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody. (KJV)

Hearken unto Me, ye pursuing righteousness, Seeking Jehovah, Look attentively unto the rock — ye have been hewn, And unto the hole of the pit — ye have been digged. Look attentively unto Abraham your father, And unto Sarah — she bringeth you forth, For — one — I have called him, And I bless him, and multiply him. For Jehovah hath comforted Zion, He hath comforted all her wastes, And He setteth her wilderness as Eden, And her desert as a garden of Jehovah, Joy, yea, gladness is found in her, Confession, and the voice of song. (YLT)

How this section is to be divided is disagreed upon among commentators. According to Oswalt the most accepted division is vv. 1-8, 9-16, and 17-23. Following Oswalt's division, we see that vv. 1-8 speaks of the expectations and encouragement of those who will listen to the Servant of 50:4-9.

COMFORT TO THOSE WHO TRUST IN GOD — *“The first strophe has as its purpose the encouragement of those who are seriously pursuing righteousness. These are persons who would be particularly prone to discouragement. Their compatriots whose hearts are hardened (cf. 46:12,13) will not be especially troubled by God’s apparent failure to keep his promises. After all, they never thought he would in the first place. But for those who do believe God, who are seeking him, hope deferred can be a hard trial. To them God offers his comfort, a comfort rooted in the evidence of history. God had taken Abraham when he was one, alone, and along with Sarah had made them into a great people. Now, although that people had been decimated and scattered, God could do the same again. If he could make a great people out of barren Sarah, surely he could restore a great people to barren Zion, turning her from a wilderness into the garden of the Lord.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] “The prophecy is addressed to those who are striving after the right kind of life and seeking Jehovah, and not turning from Him to make earthly things and themselves the object of their pursuit; for such only are in a condition by faith to regard that as possible, and in spirit to behold that as real, which seems impossible, and in spirit to behold that as real, which seems impossible to human understanding, because the very opposite is lying before the eye of the senses. Abraham and Sarah they are mentally to set before them, for they are types of the salvation to be anticipated now. Abraham is the rock whence the stones were hewn, of which the house of Jacob is composed; and Sarah with her maternal womb the hollow of the pit out of which Israel was brought to the light, just as peat is dug out of a pit, or copper out of a mine. The marriage of Abraham and Sarah was for a long time unfruitful; it was, as it were, out of hard stone that God raised up children to Himself in Abraham and Sarah. The rise of Israel was a miracle of divine power and grace.... This is what those who are now longing for salvation are to remember, strengthening themselves by means of the olden time in their faith in the future which so greatly resembles it.... As Sarah gave birth to Isaac after a long period of barrenness, so Zion, a second Sarah, will be surrounded by a joyous multitude of children after a long period of desolation.” [K&D, *Isaiah*]

ABRAHAM THE ‘ROCK’ — “The Jewish Midrash on v. 1 reads as follows: ‘When God looked on Abraham who was to appear, he said, Behold, I have found a rock on which I can build and base the world, therefore he called Abraham a rock.’ Cullmann has suggested that this passage and its midrashic interpretation may lie behind Matthew 16:18, with Peter — representing the apostles as the first Christian believers — paralleling Abraham’s place as father of the faithful, but for the new covenant. *Just as Abraham’s faith in God was a pattern for the OT community that succeeded him (and, of course, for Christians, too), so that of Peter and his fellow apostles in Christ would lead to the building of the church.*” [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

CONFIDENCE IN GOD’S UNCHANGING CHARACTER — “Where else in the ancient world are persons called on to reflect on a god’s involvement in unique, nonrepeatable elements in that people’s history, indeed in the lives of specific individuals in that history, in order to learn the realities of life? The answer is: nowhere.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] *The point here is we can rely upon our God because of His unchanging character. Why do we study the bible? Why are we looking at Isaiah? These are events which happened to a different people than us more than 2700 years ago. Why are we even interested in such matters? The answer to that question is that by looking at who God is and how God acts gives comfort and guidance to our lives today. God does not change; therefore we may trust Him to act consistently with His character. And we learn of that character by studying the scriptures in their historical context.*

Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail. (NIV)

Hearken unto me, my people; and give ear unto me, O my nation: for a law shall proceed from me, and I will make my judgment to rest for a light of the people. My righteousness is near; my salvation is gone forth, and mine arms shall judge the people; the isles shall wait upon me, and on mine arm shall they trust. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath: for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner: but my salvation shall be forever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished. (KJV)

Attend unto Me, O My people, And, O My nation, unto Me give ear. For a law from Me goeth out, And My judgment to the light, Peoples I do cause to rest. Near [is] My righteousness, Gone out hath My salvation and Mine arms, Peoples they judge, on Me isles do wait, Yea, on Mine arm they do wait with hope. Lift ye up to the heavens your eyes, And look attentively unto the earth beneath, For the heavens as smoke have vanished, And the earth as a garment weareth out, And its inhabitants as gnats do die, And My salvation is to the age, And My righteousness is not broken. (YLT)

“Here the address is made even more personal than in v. 1. Who are the people who pursue deliverance and seek the Lord? They are my people and my nation. *No matter what is past, no matter how they have sinned, if they are truly seeking God, he calls them his own. All his promises are theirs.*” [Oswalt, Isaiah]

THE BLESSING OF ISRAEL WILL RESULT IN THE BLESSING OF THE ENTIRE WORLD — The second part of v. 4 gives the reason why God’s people should listen to me (this is not clearly brought forth in the NIV; Oswalt translates v. 4 as follows: ‘*Listen to me, my people, and my nation give ear to me; for instruction will go forth from me, and my just rule as a light to the peoples I will reveal.*’). “Far from there being some question about God’s ability and willingness to save his own people from their sin, what he is about to do will be the means of the tôrâ, instruction, that they have received from God now reaching out to all the peoples of the world, just as stated in ch. 2. Because of what God will do for the children of Abraham, all the world will come into his light, to experience his just rule.... This is the fair, equitable, and blessed governing of a world by its Creator according to the purposes for which it was created.... *Should the world look forward in hopeful anticipation to the perfecting of human laws and human systems of government? Surely not! If the 20th century should have taught us anything, it should have taught us that the confident 19th-century claims of imminent human perfection were not only highly fallacious but ludicrous. Instead of looking to the light of which Isaiah spoke twenty-seven hundred years ago, however, we have been willing to settle, as humans have for five thousand years or more, for the trappings of personal pleasure, comfort, and security, while human civilization crashes down around us.*” [Oswalt, Isaiah]

THE MESSIAH WILL BE GOD INCARNATE — Note the connection here between what is being done and who is doing it. “This is what the prophet said earlier the Servant will do (42:1-4; 49:6), and before that what the Messiah would do (9:7; 11:4; 16:4b-5; see also 55:3-5). Now it is

God who does it. *This should say something about the identity of the Servant / Messiah.*” [Oswalt, Isaiah] *While this argument is not infallible, as believers in the incarnation of God in Christ and as believers in the trinity, we see here those beliefs as being the only rational explanation for what Isaiah is saying. How can Isaiah say God will bless Israel to bless the nations in one place, the Messiah in another place, and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant in another? Although there would be those who deny this, the best explanation is found within the Christian teaching of the trinity / incarnation: God the Son became flesh and walked among mankind to fulfill the promises given in the scriptures.*

THE ‘ARM’ OF THE LORD — *“Interestingly, it is for the arm of the Lord that the world hopes, that is, his delivering power. We long for someone who is both strong enough and good enough to rule ... in justice. Given the realities of human nature, order requires rule, and rule requires power. But power of what sort? Here is the truth God has been trying to get his people to hear throughout the book. It is the power of self-denial, the power of self-sacrifice, the power of innocence, the power of faithfulness, the power of holy love. This is the power for which all the world waits in breathless anticipation. Does it always know that it so waits? Hardly! Yet when the Servant / Messiah, the ‘arm of the Lord (33:2; 50:2; 51:9; 53:1), is revealed to them, there is frequently that immediate sense of recognition, that satisfying click of a key fitting a lock. of a vague memory suddenly coming to full consciousness.”* [Oswalt, Isaiah]

CONTRAST BETWEEN THE TEMPORARY AND THE PERMANENT — Isaiah makes a contrast between what is temporal and what is eternal. ‘*The islands will look to me and wait in hope for My arm*’ is contrasted with ‘*the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment.*’ “In words reminiscent of 8:21-22, he calls on them to look to the heavens and the earth. These are the places where the children of this world look for guidance and hope. There they find none, for the eternal heavens are no more eternal than smoke that whips away in the wind, and the solid earth is no more solid than a threadbare old garment eaten by moths. But even more disconcerting is the truth that we who live on the earth and under the heavens are no more permanent than they. *If we are inclined to question the permanency of God’s promises, what would we like to put in their place? Certainly nothing created! If we think creation is permanent (Gen 49:26; Ps 148:3-6), it is as nothing compared to the permanence of what God in his righteousness means to do for the salvation of the world (see also 40:6-8; Ps 102:26-27; 1 John 2:16-17).*” [Oswalt, Isaiah]

Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults. For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations. (NIV)

Hearken unto me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be ye afraid of their revilings. For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worm shall eat them like wool: but my righteousness shall be for ever, and my salvation from generation to generation. (KJV)

Hearken unto Me, ye who know righteousness, A people, in whose heart [is] My law, Fear ye not the reproach of men, And for their reviling be not affrighted, For as a garment eat them doth a moth, And as wool eat them doth a worm, And My righteousness is to the age, And My salvation to all generations. (YLT)

SALVATION BRINGS OBEDIENCE — These last few verses of this section speaks to those who truly know the Lord, those who has the *‘law in their hearts.’* **God’s word is internalized in their very being, a part of them. Christianity to them is not a once-a-week gathering but a daily obedient lifestyle.** “Not only is the language here that of 50:9 (and 51:6), but so is the idea. *Those who revile the Servant and accuse him of wrongdoing condemn themselves to a slow and certain destruction. Those who listen to (obey) the Servant may stand in the same relation to those who reproach them. By obeying him, they have come to partake of that righteousness which will be forever, and of that salvation which will be to every generation.*” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] “The first Servant Song shows that the Servant is the mediator of this divine justice (42:1). Here we see that the law, justice, righteousness, and salvation are all to be widely disseminated throughout the nations. This particular combination of terms certainly suggests that there is going to be a thorough reordering of human life among the nations on the basis of God’s own character, revealed in his law, expressed in his righteousness, and taking the form of salvation. Salvation and righteousness are clearly closely parallel ideas here, providing a background for the Pauline doctrine of salvation as righteousness (e.g., Rom 1:16-17).” [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

FEAR GOD, NOT MEN — The words are addressed to those who know from their own experience what righteousness is as a gift of grace, and as conduct in harmony with the plan of salvation, i.e., to the nation, which bears in its heart the law of God as the standard and impulse of its life, the church which not only has it as a letter outside itself, but as a vital power within (cf., Ps 40:9). None of these need to be afraid of men. Their despisers and blasphemers are men, whose pretended omnipotence, exaltation, and indestructibility, are an unnatural self-convicted lie. The double figure in v. 8, which forms a play upon words that cannot well be reproduced, affirms that *the smallest exertion of strength is quite sufficient to annihilate their sham greatness and sham power; and that long before they are actually destroyed, they carry the constantly increasing germ of it within themselves.*” [K&D, *Isaiah*]

“Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults.”

— Isaiah 51:7 NIV