

# Catholic Scripture Study

## The Book of ISAIAH – Chapter 49:1-13

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**Memory Verse: Isaiah 40: 30-31**

*[30] Even youths shall faint and grow weary,  
and young men shall fall exhausted;  
[31] but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their  
strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not grow weary,  
they shall walk and not grow faint.*

## Week 22 - The Servant of the Lord (2)

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### I. INTRODUCTION

#### A. Overview (Chapters 49-55)

Chapter 49 marks the start of the second section of the second part of Isaiah. The first section (chapters 41-48) dealt with the release of the Jews from exile in Babylon by Cyrus, King of Persia, on the orders of the Lord.

This second section (49-55) tells of the restoration of Zion and the renewal of the people.

**Note:** Almost all the oracles here presuppose that Babylon has fallen and that the exiles have returned home (although neither event is explicitly referred to).

#### B. A More Serious Captivity

But there is a second problem confronting both God and His people. What is to be done about the sin that got the people into this dilemma (exile in Babylon) in the first place?

God has declared repeatedly that the people of Israel are his chosen servants. But how can this be?

- How can these sinful people ever serve a just and holy God?

God cannot simply ignore their sin, so what is to be done? In its own way, this spiritual alienation from God caused by their sin is a much more serious problem than their physical captivity in Babylon.

So what can God do to address this problem?

The answer to that question is given in chapters 49-55. Although the language and imagery of captivity continues, specific reference to Babylon and its idols is conspicuously absent, as is any further reference to Cyrus.

In other words, a different kind of captivity is being addressed here, and the deliverer from this captivity is the **Servant of the Lord**, who was first introduced in 42:1-9 (First Servant Song).

As the Servant becomes the means of Israel's restoration to God, he makes them the prototype for the restoration of all the world.

## II. SECOND SONG OF THE SERVANT OF THE LORD (49:1-6)

### A. Overview

In the first song of the Servant of the Lord (42:1-9) we meet the servant for the first time and we are told of his mission to liberate the exiles.

In this second song (49:1-6), the servant himself speaks. He addresses the **“coastlands,”** and **“peoples from afar.”** He is conscious of having been chosen by God from his mother's womb to carry out God's plan of salvation even in those distant parts.

The song, or poem, contains things that the Servant has to say about himself (vs. 1-4), and things that God says about the Servant (vv. 5-6).

He starts with a description of his call or vocation (49:1, 5), much like that of Jeremiah (see Jer. 1:10). Like a prophet, the mission of the servant involves speaking: **“he made my mouth like a sharp sword”** (49:2).

These words are reminiscent of Jeremiah's call to be a “prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5).

**Read: Isaiah 49:1-6**

***[1] Listen to me, O coastlands,***

***and hearken, you peoples from afar.***

***The LORD called me from the womb,***

***from the body of my mother he named my name.***

***[2] He made my mouth like a sharp sword,***

***in the shadow of his hand he hid me;***

***he made me a polished arrow,***

***in his quiver he hid me away.***

***[3] And he said to me, "You are my servant,***

***Israel, in whom I will be glorified."***

***[4] But I said, "I have labored in vain,***

***I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;***

***yet surely my right is with the LORD,***

***and my recompense with my God."***

***[5] And now the LORD says,***

***who formed me from the womb to be his servant,***

***to bring Jacob back to him,***

***and that Israel might be gathered to him,***

***for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,***

***and my God has become my strength --***

***[6] he says:***

***"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."***

### **B. The Mission of the Servant (49:1-6)**

The Second Servant Song describes the “Servant” of God and further develops the idea that:

- the Servant will establish a **covenant** with the people, and be
- a **light** to the Gentiles.

It also introduces the idea that the Servant will suffer, for he will be **deeply despised**, and **abhorred by the nations**.

### **C. The Servant's Message is for the World**

As noted above, the speaker is the Servant himself and he addresses the **coastlands**, and the **peoples from afar**. The message is therefore meant not merely for Israel, but for the whole world.

The **coastlands** include not only islands but also the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, and the nations, or **peoples from afar**, are the Gentiles. Thus the servant's words are addressed to the entire pagan world.

And they are commanded to listen attentively **“hearken”** to the servant's proclamation – to what he is going to reveal.

### **D. Called and Anointed for Mission**

The first revelation is one of call and confidence.

- The servant has no doubt of his call: ***the LORD called me from the womb*** (49:1),

- His divine empowerment: **he made my mouth like a sharp sword . . . he made me a polished arrow** (49:2-3),
- His ultimate vindication (49:4).

He has been called from the womb, so his vocation is no secondary thing. Furthermore, he is perfectly suited for whatever task God may have for him. Like a sharpened sword or a polished arrow he will accomplish exactly what God wants at the appointed time.

There's no hint of blindness or rebellion in this servant, unlike the nation of Israel, even though his servant-role seems futile: **"I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity"** (v.4).

The Servant is presented here as called from his mother's womb to glorify the Father: **"You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified"** (v. 3). This means that he is called to restore the honor of God trampled by the weight of human sin.

**Note 1:** In verse 3, the servant is called Israel – so is the servant the nation and therefore represents Israel and not an individual? This question was discussed in Week 21 of our study.

**Note 2:** As noted elsewhere, there are several options regarding the identity of the Servant but it seems clear that the reference here is both to the nation as well as to an individual.

- All major points lead to the conclusion that the Servant is the future Messiah, and represents Israel as Israel was meant to be.

In other words, the **Servant is both the Messiah and His people** - the people of (redeemed) Israel. He is both the Head and the Body; just as Christ is the Head of the Church, His mystical Body.

## E. The Mission Will Seem to Fail

In verse 4, the Servant enters into dialogue with God and says he has labored in vain. This means that he will not enjoy earthly success, but will apparently fail in his mission **to bring Jacob back to (God)**, and to gather Israel to the Lord.

In other words, the mission of the Servant/Messiah will not have full success among the children of Jacob; in that regard it will seem that he has been sent in vain, since only a remnant of Israel will be converted.

This leaves the Servant saddened, disappointed, and discouraged.

Passing from an experience of despondency to one of sure confidence, the Servant proclaims his firm assurance that God is with him: **“yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God”** (v.4).

## F. God's Answer (49:5-6)

Then the Lord gives a surprising answer to His discouraged Servant (v.6). The Lord says that the restoration of Israel is not a sufficiently great task for the servant; he is also to be:

- a light to the gentiles, and
- God's salvation to the ends of the earth.

In other words, the apparent failure of the messiah to gather Israel is not to be considered a failure, for he is to bear great fruit in the extension of the light of revelation and salvation to the Gentiles.

One of the tasks of the Servant (v.6) is **to restore the preserved of Israel**. The **“preserved”** are those who have been saved from calamity.

## G. Restoration of Israel and the Gentiles

The raising up and restoring of the people of Israel is essentially the same work as becoming a light and salvation.

The first step in the work of restoration of the people of Israel was the return from exile, but this restoration only served to make possible the spiritual restoration of Israel accomplished by Christ.

- Yet the Servant's work is greater than the redemption of Israel – it extends to the whole world. For the Lord says to His Servant: ***I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.***

The Gentiles are seen as being in spiritual darkness, but when light comes to them they are delivered from their darkness. This *light* is the Servant, just as Jesus in the days of His flesh declared, “*I am the light of the world*” (John 8:12).

### III. APPLICATION

- 1) The gentiles are in **darkness** and need light. They are not already redeemed but are lost in the darkness of sin and ignorance. Hence the need for vigorous missionary work.
  - One religion is not as good as another.
  - Christ alone is the Light of this dark world.
- 2) Israel is the firstborn in the household of faith. Therefore, we Gentiles who have been brought in from without must love Israel and strive to bring the Gospel to the Jews.
- 3) True unity is found in Jesus Christ alone in whom both Jew and Gentile have become one.

## IV. A DAY OF SALVATION (49:7-13)

### A. God's Response to His Servant

What follows is a response by the Lord, who is described as the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One, to His Servant.

God declares that although the servant is **deeply despised** and reduced to the level of a slave (**the servant of rulers**), a day will come when Kings and princes will honor him because of God's faithfulness in his life (49:7).

In particular, the Servant's task is to be a representative of God's "covenant" to his people. Like a new Joshua he will settle the people in the land of freedom and abundance, where the God of "compassion" will tend them as a shepherd tends his flock Isaiah (49:8-11).

**Read: Isaiah 49:7-13**

**[7] Thus says the LORD,  
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,  
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,  
the servant of rulers:  
"Kings shall see and arise;  
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;  
because of the LORD, who is faithful,  
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."**

**[8] Thus says the LORD:  
"In a time of favor I have answered you,  
in a day of salvation I have helped you;  
I have kept you and given you  
as a covenant to the people,  
to establish the land,  
to apportion the desolate heritages;  
[9] saying to the prisoners, 'Come forth,'**

**to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.'  
They shall feed along the ways,  
on all bare heights shall be their pasture;**

**[10] they shall not hunger or thirst,  
neither scorching wind nor sun shall smite them,  
for he who has pity on them will lead them,  
and by springs of water will guide them.**

**[11] And I will make all my mountains a way,  
and my highways shall be raised up.**

**[12] Lo, these shall come from afar,  
and lo, these from the north and from the west,  
and these from the land of Syene."**

**[13] Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;  
break forth, O mountains, into singing!  
For the LORD has comforted his people,  
and will have compassion on his afflicted.**

## **B. A Covenant to His People**

**"In a time of favor** means in God's good time: our salvation depends on his will, not ours.

In particular, the Servant's task is to be a representative of God's **"covenant"** to his people.

We discussed the word **"covenant to the people"** in the context of 42:6, but here it is explained in terms of hope for the land and the desolate heritages of Israel, as opposed to the nations of the world.

In verses 9-11 two images are chosen to describe the salvation of God's people.

## **C. Release of the Prisoners (49:9-11)**

First, salvation will be experienced as a general amnesty. Prisoners are released and come out into the light of day after a long, dark imprisonment. The text applies first to the exile, but the release extends much further.

The prisoners are commanded to **“Come forth,”** and those in darkness to **“Appear.”** The command may extend to those imprisoned in death – those who are bound in darkness.

This can indicate either the bonds and darkness of death in *sheol* or the bonds of spiritual death which is sin. We know that Christ releases mankind from both bonds.

We believe that the gates of heaven were opened after Jesus died on the Cross, and that Jesus immediately descended to Sheol and released the just souls retained there (cf. 1 Peter 3:18-20).

#### **D. God's Care of the Former Prisoners**

Second, the prophet describes the blessedness of the life of the prisoners and those who had been in darkness. They are pictured as a flock that will pasture on land that had formerly been without pasture.

Likewise the bare hills where nothing grew now prove to be the pastures for the flock. Thus, God will care for the released prisoners like a good shepherd, feeding them, protecting them from danger, leading them by springs of water.

They will neither hunger nor thirst and they'll be protected from the burning sun of the desert. The people will not wander through the desert aimlessly, nor will their leader (God) be unconcerned about them; ***for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.***

In this too he will show them mercy!

The prophecy concludes with a short hymn of praise (v. 13). Heaven and earth are invited to join in the singing along with the mountains ***“for the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted.***

## V. APPLICATION

We can become the servants of God as we share the life of the Servant. We have the privilege of participating in the life of God as we follow the guidance he gives us in his Word, and through the life of the Sacraments.

Furthermore, as those who participate in the life of the Servant, we too can have that sense of enablement by God. We too can become aware of being a **“sharpened sword”** or a **“polished arrow”** in his hand (49:2).

This does not mean we're necessarily doing something as earth-shaking as the Servant, Jesus Christ, did. However, as we perform what may seem to be simple tasks, they may have more significance than we will ever know on this side of the grave.

But in the daily routine we can have that sense of having been divinely equipped for just what it is we're doing.

This does not mean we will never feel that our lives are pointless and futile. The clear implication of 49:4 and 7 is that Christ felt that way.

At the end of a long day of verbal sparring with religious leaders who ought to have been the most responsive and were yet the most stubborn and hostile, Jesus must have felt that way.

Similarly, when the disciples failed to grasp a simple spiritual truth for the fourteenth time, he must have felt that way.

And when the great crowds of his early ministry began to drift away, there's something almost sorrowful in his question to the disciples, “you do not want to leave too, do you?” (John 6:67).

In other words, do not think that to have a sense of calling and of divine enablement means you will always feel “on top of things.” He did not, so why should we?

But in the midst of that frustration and sense of futility, Jesus never lost the confidence of who He was and what that meant. He knew that he was God's and God was His (cf. "my God" in 49:4).

He knew that if he would only be faithful, he could trust the outcome of his service into God's hands. He might be despised and abhorred by people (49:7), or he might be honored by them, but they were not the ultimate dispensers of the rewards. He knew, as we can know, that **"my reward is with my God"** (49:4). In the words of Psalm 56:4:

In God, whose word I praise,  
In God I trust without fear.  
What can mortal man do to me?

## Home Study – Week 22

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1. Read Isaiah, Chapter 49
2. Read Chapter 13 in *Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah*.
3. Answer questions 1-10 in *Come and See* (pgs. 120-122).
4. Read the following paragraphs from the CCC:

***Chapter Three: Man's Response to God***

***Paragraphs: 142-152***