

Catholic Scripture Study

The Book of ISAIAH – Chapter 50

Memory Verse: Isaiah 49:15-16a

*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast,
and have no compassion for the child of her womb?
Even should she forget,
I will never forget you.
Behold, I have carved you on the palms of my hands . . .*

Week 23 - The Servant of the Lord (3)

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Overview (50:1-3)

Isaiah now takes up Zion's complaint voiced in 49:14, that God has forsaken his people, and points out that Israel's separation from God is a result of their own sin and not because God has forsaken them.

God's word (oracle) is addressed this time to Zion's (Israel's) children, rather than to Zion herself, and introduces two images.

First, God is Zion's husband, but He has never divorced Zion; no irrevocable "**bill of divorce**" had been drawn up. Zion's separation from her Lord, her true husband, was only temporary.

Second, God had never sold them into slavery, like some desperate debtor.

Note: The final step in a man's downfall was when he had to sell his children to pay off a debt.

But God has no debts, no need to borrow, and no creditors.

Since neither of these two irrevocable steps towards breaking the relationship between God and his people had been taken, they are still “married” . . . still husband and wife.

The sufferings of the people were temporary, and, what is more, a deliberate part of God’s plan to punish them, to discipline them for their **iniquities** and their **transgressions** (v.1).

Their punishment was proof that he cared for them in the same way as a father who must sometimes discipline his son.

The Exile was a punishment that had to happen; it was a temporary thing, provoked by the people’s sins. But God keeps his promises; he will restore Zion; he is as mighty now as He was at the time of the exodus, as He will demonstrate.

The children and the mother are to be seen as one entity – Israel, the chosen of God.

Read: Isaiah

[1] Thus says the LORD:

***"Where is your mother's bill of divorce,
with which I put her away?
Or which of my creditors is it
to whom I have sold you?
Behold, for your iniquities you were sold,
and for your transgressions your mother was put away.***

***[2] Why, when I came, was there no man?
When I called, was there no one to answer?
Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem?
Or have I no power to deliver?
Behold, by my rebuke I dry up the sea,
I make the rivers a desert;
their fish stink for lack of water,
and die of thirst.***

**[3] I clothe the heavens with blackness,
and make sackcloth their covering."**

B. He Called, but No One Answered (50: 2)

This separation (suffering and exile) of Israel can be no way be attributed to a lack of love and concern on God's part. He came to his own, but they received Him not: He called to them, but no one answered.

Verse 2 rebukes the disbelievers for their lack of faith: when "he comes with might" can they not recognize Him? When He calls to them, can they not respond?

Then comes more images about God's saving power: ***Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver?***

God reminds them of the miracles He worked during the Exodus such as the dead fish on the dry land where the Red Sea had been parted (Ex 14:22-29, 7:21).

Just as God alone can deliver them from the power of the nations, he alone has the power to deliver them from sin. His "**arm**" is not "**short**" and weak; rather, it is long and powerful. He can **dry up the sea**, and turn off the sun; what is so difficult about defeating sin?

C. The Heavens Covered in Darkness (50:3)

I clothe the heavens with blackness. The last image recalls the darkness that covered the land during the plagues in Egypt when the Pharaoh of Egypt refused to allow Moses and the Israelites to leave his country (see Exodus 10:21-29).

II. THE THIRD SERVANT SONG (50:4-9)

A. Overview

This third of the so-called “Servant Songs” reveals yet more clearly that the servant’s obedience to the Lord will result in suffering for him.

This “servant” is clearly not the nation of Israel, since they did not suffer because of their obedience but because of their rebellion.

The speaker is the Servant of the Lord, describing his work as that of a prophet, one with a “well trained tongue . . . to speak to the weary” (50:4).

But this prophet is in constant contact – morning after morning – with the **Lord GOD** (50:4), that is, he experiences unbroken fellowship with God.

In this third “song” or poem, we encounter the suffering of the Servant for the first time. He encounters bitter hostility, beatings, and insults – which he accepts without protecting or defending himself (50:6).

In spite of the suffering He will remain unfaltering in His faith in God, confident that God will support him (50:7-9).

Read: Isaiah 50:4-9

***[4] The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him that is weary.***

***Morning by morning he wakens,
he wakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.***

***[5] The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,***

***I turned not backward.
[6] I gave my back to the smiters,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I hid not my face
from shame and spitting.
[7] For the Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been confounded;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
[8] he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary?
Let him come near to me.
[9] Behold, the Lord GOD helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.***

B. A Learned Tongue (50:4)

The phrase, “***the tongue of those who are taught***” designates the speech of a learned or skilled man and hence a ready, expert tongue.

The learned are instructed by the Lord; the tongue belongs to one taught by God, and so it is the tongue of a person illumined by His Spirit.

This ability to speak a word of truth, ***a word to him that is weary,*** is a divine gift. The weary are the ***bruised reed*** and the ***dimly burning wick*** (42:3).

C. An Open Ear (50:5)

The reference to the Lord opening his ear means that the suffering Servant of the Lord will be marked by a spirit of absolute obedience

to the will of the Father (***I was not rebellious***) even to the point of utter humiliation and death (***I gave my back to those who beat me, and my cheeks to those who pulled my beard***).

The servant did not turn back as a faithless one would have done.

D. The Suffering of the Servant (50:6)

God has instructed the Servant to declare His message.

But if the message is declared, there is going to be abuse (50:6) and the Servant is willing to bear that abuse because he knows that God will vindicate him in the end.

The Servant now presents details to show how he was not rebellious: ***I hid not my face from shame and spitting*** (v.6).

The people of Israel would be rebellious towards God's chosen servant and treat him cruelly. He will be spit upon, beaten, despised and treated with the utmost contempt. However, he shall continue to be meek, his face unmoved (***set my face like a flint***) trusting absolutely in the Lord.

The striking language calls to mind immediately the physical sufferings of our Lord.

Then they spat in his face, and struck him; and some slapped him (Matt 26:67).

And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe upon him, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on his head, and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

And they spat upon him, and took the reed and struck him on the head (Matt 27:28ff).

E. God Is his Advocate (50:7-8)

How does the Suffering Servant remain faithful in the face of such abuse and torture? The Lord comforts, sustains and strengthens him (***for the Lord GOD helps me***). He is a willing, obedient servant who leans upon the Lord.

Since he is certain that the Lord is on his side and supports him, the Servant throws out a bold challenge to his adversaries; ***who will contend with me? Who will declare me guilty?***

F. Worn-Out Garments (50:9)

The adversaries of the servant will grow old or worn out as garments do.

(Scripture uses this figure to express gradual decay).

As old clothes are devoured by the moth, so the enemies and accusers of the Servant will pass away and come to nothing.

When they stand in court to bring accusations against the Servant, they'll be put to shame as easily as a moth devours the worn-out clothes.

G. Liturgical Note

This passage is used in the liturgy of Palm Sunday (along with Psalm 22 and St. Paul's hymn - Philippians 2:6-11), before the reading of our Lord's passion.

III. THOSE WHO FEAR THE LORD (50:10)

The speaker here is the Servant of the Lord.

In verses 10-11 a contrast is made between those who listen to the voice of the Servant and those who rage against it.

This verse (v.10) is addressed to the believers among the people. Those who fear the LORD and listen to and obey the voice of His servant are characterized by faith and trust even in dark and troubled times.

Those who have “no light” can walk safely if they will entrust themselves to God in the way that he has revealed.

Read: Isaiah 50:10-11

***[10] Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the voice of his servant,
who walks in darkness
and has no light,
yet trusts in the name of the LORD
and relies upon his God?***

Those among the people who fear the Lord are able to walk in darkness without light (i.e., experience trials and difficulties) and to follow the example of the Servant and place their entire trust in God.

Fearing the Lord and listening obediently to the voice of His servant go hand in hand. Whoever hears in obedience the voice of the servant is one who fears the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is not the abject terror of the slave, but a reverential fear and awe of the Lord. It is the fear of loving and obedient children to a loving and compassionate father.

Such godly fear manifests itself in obedience to God's commands.

IV. THOSE WHO RAGE AGAINST THE SERVANT (50:11)

The previous verse had been addressed to believers among the people; this verse is directed to those who do not believe in the Servant but remain unrepentant in the hardness of their hearts.

Those who fear the Lord and listen to his Servant are characterized by faith and trust even in dark and troubled times. However, those who reject the Servant and plot to destroy him, only destroy themselves.

Willful disobedience and arrogance are self-destructive.

Read: Isaiah 50:11

***[11] Behold, all you who kindle a fire,
who set brands alight!***

***Walk by the light of your fire,
and by the brands which you have kindled!***

***This shall you have from my hand:
you shall lie down in torment.***

Those who reject God's way and try to "make their own light" will find that their way leads to torment.

Emphasis is placed upon the fact that the fire belongs to those who have kindled it (***your fire***).

The outcome is decreed by God. It comes from His hand, that is, from His power (***this shall you have from my hand***). The word "this" probably refers primarily to what follows, that is, the final punishment of the wicked (hell).

This is the fate reserved for those who reject God.

Home Study – Week 23

1. Read Isaiah, Chapter 50 and check out the references.
2. Read Chapter 17 in *Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah*.
3. Answer questions 1-5 in *Come and See* (pgs. 160-161).

4. Read the following paragraphs from the CCC:

Section 2, Chapter 2: Jesus Christ – the Only Son of God

Paragraphs: 422-455