

Is. 49:1-7 Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The LORD called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother's womb he named me.
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 cause is with the LORD,
and my reward with my God."

5 And now the LORD says,
who formed me in 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 sight 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 survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

7 Thus says the LORD,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,
the slave of rulers,
"Kings shall see and stand up,
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

THE FIFTY DOLLAR ILLUSTRATION

A motivational speaker began his talk by holding up a fifty-dollar bill. He asked, "Who would like this fifty-dollar bill?" Hands started going up.

He said, "I am going to give this fifty-dollar bill to one of you, but first let me do this." He proceeded to crumple the fifty-dollar bill up into a tight wad.

He then asked, "Who still wants it?" Hands still went up in the air.

"Well," he replied, "What if I do this?"

He dropped the bill on the ground and started to grind it into the floor with his shoe. He picked it up, now crumpled and dirty and asked, "Now who wants it?"

Still the hands went up in the air.

He said, "My friends we have learned a valuable lesson. No matter what I did to the money, you still wanted it because it did not decrease in value. It was still worth \$50.00.

Many times in our life we are crumpled, dropped and ground into the dirt by the decisions we make and the circumstances that come our way. We may even think that we are worthless.

But, no matter what has happened or what will happen, you will never lose your value. Dirty or clean, crumpled or finely creased, you are still priceless to those who love you. "

A SONG FOR HEAVY HEARTS

Long ago the prophet Isaiah attempted to encourage a people who had been crumpled up, dropped and ground into the dirt. This was the time of the Babylonian Exile. The magnificent temple and the city of Jerusalem had been completely destroyed.

The Jewish people had been in exile for more than fifty years. It looked hopeless. God's chosen people had begun to doubt their worth.

How could they worship God in a foreign land? Perhaps they should just forget about the Promised Land and make themselves comfortable in Babylon?

And then God called Isaiah to tell this crumpled and beaten down people that God still loved them. They still had worth. And they were going home. Jerusalem and the temple would be rebuilt. God would restore His people.

No doubt the exiles received this message with skepticism. They had been in exile for a long time. Their children were learning the language and the ways of the Babylonians. All those that remembered the glory of Jerusalem and the temple were now old and gray.

But, God was greater than their circumstances. God was preparing a servant to set his people free and lead them home. God was singing a song to people with heavy hearts.

HE WAS BORN FOR THIS

And Isaiah had been called to preach this message to the exiles. In fact, Isaiah proclaimed to the world that he had been appointed to bring this message before he was even born.

There's a commercial for the PGA tour. It shows current tour golfers playing golf when they were very young children, and then it shows them in action on the tour.

The tag line goes: "They were born for this."

If you've ever seen them play golf, you would be inclined to agree. What they can do on a golf course is amazing. They were born for this.

That's the kind of feeling Isaiah had about his calling to preach a message of restoration to a people in exile. He was born for this.

And God had equipped him for the job. God has made his servant's tongue like a "sharp sword" and God has hidden his servant away like a "polished arrow" in a quiver.

In other words, the servant who proclaims salvation to an exiled people is God's secret weapon. And the "weapon" this servant wields is God's Word; the sword of the Spirit that is powerful enough to create the world is also powerful enough to lead God's people home.

God tells the prophet, "You are my servant, Israel in whom I will be glorified."

A DISSONANT NOTE

But, the servant and the servant's people were not so sure about that. In the middle of this song of deliverance we hear a dissonant note.

The prophet says, "I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity."

You can't blame the prophet and his people for feeling this way. It's hard if not impossible to have hope when your life is crumpled up and ground into the dirt. People who are down and out don't want to sing a song, even when it's a song of salvation.

I'm reminded of a Psalm written during the exile. The Psalmist wrote,

By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)

The prophet was singing a song to people who had vowed never to sing again.

Our Stephen Ministers read a book entitled, "Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart." The gist of that book is that when people are in mourning, they have a hard time hearing a song of salvation, a message of hope. In fact sometimes our attempts to encourage those who mourn fail because we don't take their pain seriously enough. We can actually do more harm than good.

Exiles have a hard time moving on, even when the move takes them back home. God's servant sang a song to exiles, to those with a heavy heart.

But, at first they thought the good news was too good to be true. They rejected the message.

And God's servant thought that he had failed. It had all been for nothing.

FAITHFULNESS, NOT SUCCESS

But, then in the middle of the sentence, the servant remembers something important.

His reward did not depend upon success. His reward depended upon being faithful. The success of his call was in God's hands. And God was his reward.

The servant remembers once again that he was indeed born for this. God was with him and for him from the very beginning. How could he lose? As the Apostle Paul would later put it, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

You see the real test of faith does not come when everything is going our way. The real test of faith comes when everything has fallen apart, when we are crumpled up and ground into the dirt.

Then we learn what we really believe.

Are we God's children? Have we really been chosen by grace to be a blessing to the world? If we believe that, doubt and depression will not have the final word. God will have the final word.

God's servant pulls back from his sudden attack of doubt and depression. He remembers who he is and the power of the One who has called him.

Yes, God will restore His people. Yes, God will bring His people back home from exile. There is no doubt. God's Word can be trusted. God's promises are sure.

WAIT THERE'S MORE!

But, then God says (much like an infomercial!), "Wait, there's more."

God tells the prophet that it is too "light" a thing for him to just proclaim salvation to the Jews in exile, as important as that may be. God has an even bigger job for his servant.

God is going to do more than bring his people home and restore the city of Jerusalem. God is going to bring a message of salvation to the whole world. The servant will be a "light to the nations" and through this servant God's salvation will reach everyone.

I suspect the prophet didn't understand this word from the Lord. How could the Jews be a light to the nations when the light in their own life was about to be extinguished?

The prophet wasn't sure if he was up to the task of leading God's people back to the Promised Land. How could he proclaim that message from coast to coast and to the ends of the earth when his own people were reluctant to hear and believe?

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Actually, fulfillment of this prophecy would not come through Isaiah. Long after this song of salvation is sung to a people in exile, another servant by the name of Jesus would bring this prophecy to fruition.

That baby in the manger, so small and so unknown was the very presence of God. He was hidden away at first (like a hidden polished arrow in a quiver). But, some knew the truth from the very beginning. He was the King of kings, the light of the world, a word of salvation for Jews and Gentiles alike. (See for example Luke 2:32.)

Jesus described himself as "the light of the world." (John 8:12) And this ultimately proved to be true.

According to the prophet Isaiah, the servant would be a suffering servant. He would be deeply despised by some. And that came to pass as well. Jesus was crucified by the very people he came to save.

But, death would not have the final say. The light of the world was too strong even for the darkness of death. Jesus and the people who followed him would bring the eternal light, the light of God to the nations.

And the servant songs of Isaiah would become important proofs in the early church that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the long promised Savior of the world. (Acts 26:23)

WE ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Jesus, the Suffering Servant of God, the Light of the world still calls his people to join him in his mission. He sends us out as he sent out those first disciples telling us, "You are the light of the world. (Matthew 5:14)

I don't know about you, but that sounds like way too big a job for me. Like Isaiah long ago, I look at what God has called us to do and I just shake my head in disbelief.

How can I do this? How can I be a light to the world when my own world seems pretty dark right now?

The answer of course is that it's not up to us. It's up to God. And "with God all things are possible." The salvation of God is not limited by our weakness and our sinfulness. God's salvation is always greater than we can predict or understand. (Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27)

I believe that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. We can't sing songs to a heavy heart. But, God can. God can do what we cannot do. And God always does more than we can imagine.

I believe that the salvation of God always prepares the way for something new, a greater salvation. God's story moves forward in ever widening circles of grace. Our journey to the Promised Land is never really over. It continues in a variety of ways and circumstances.

And the first step of that journey involves service in the name of Jesus.

A Rabbi once told me, "The Jews are God's chosen people. But, we were not chosen for special privilege. We were chosen for special service."

I think that's how we should look at our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. We were not chosen for special privilege. We were chosen for special service.

And the extent of that service will always be much greater than we can imagine. It's a matter of faith, a matter of trusting in God in good times and bad.

FAILURE INTO SUCCESS

They were one of those families. Every minister knows what I mean. They were troublemakers.

They didn't like their new pastor. They told him as much the first Sunday he preached in that church. They loved their former pastor, and it was already obvious to them that he would not live up to that high standard.

Things went from bad to worse. They talked down all his plans, and came to church only sporadically. Despite all his attempts to establish a relationship with these people, they always seemed cool to his efforts.

But, many years later, while serving in a different church, the pastor ran into these folks that had been such a thorn in the side at his previous parish. Strangely, they embraced their old pastor and wanted to go for coffee.

They said, "We can never thank you enough."
The incredulous pastor replied, "Thank me?"

"Yes, we owe the life of our son to you and your good work. Remember how you stuck with him during the tough times?"

Remember how you confronted us about him? It made us real angry at the time. But, later we came to see the truth of it all. Things are going much better now. Thanks."

Honestly the pastor didn't even remember what he had said to this family so long ago. But, now they were thanking him.

Somehow through the grace of God more was done than he could have ever imagined. God took what he thought was a failure and made it a success.

STORIES AND THE STORY

I believe this is how God is bringing light to the nations ... one story at a time. The stories of many people are being changed by the power of God's grace, and those stories are being woven together into an even bigger story.

Isaiah teaches us a very important lesson in this passage. When we fail, God does not fail. Indeed, God has a pretty spectacular record of taking what we consider failures and turning them into successes.

God took an old nomad like Abraham and turned him into the Father of great nation. God struggled with a crook and a cheat like Jacob and changed him into Israel, the namesake of God's people.

God took Moses, a murderer who wasn't a very good speaker and made him into the one who delivered God's message to Pharaoh with powerful words and actions. God took a defeated and discouraged people in exile and brought them back to the Promised Land.

And finally God took Jesus, an itinerant preacher who was killed by the very people he came to save. He was (as the Creed puts it) crucified, dead and buried. That sounds like utter failure to me

But, just when you think God's story is over, the story continues. "The third day he rose again." And God's story continues.

What Jesus told his disciples is also true of you. You are the light of the world. No, you're not the only light. You're not the primary light.

But, your story is part of the greater story. The Holy One of Israel has also called you.

God give us the faith to follow.

Amen.