

Third Servant Song of Isaiah

Isaiah 50:4-11

The third of the Servant Songs of Isaiah begins with verse 4; however, the first three verses of the chapter serve to create a context for this song. Paul D. Hanson, places these first three verses in the context of a trial taking place over the people's indictment of God for abandoning them. Their accusations toward God are that the holy one has lost power, he cannot save them and that they have been victimized by their oppressors. They accuse God of having sold them into captivity, that God is no longer faithful to his promises.

God raises the defense. Show me the bill of sale. Show me the divorce decree. There is none. ". . . because of your sins you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was put away." The people of Israel like people everywhere strive to put aside their own responsibility for the afflictions that come upon them and to transfer blame to those around them. God turns the divine defense into an indictment of his own. Your sins bought this for you. Your transgressions paid the price for this affliction. The Promised Land and the covenant with God rested upon the faithfulness of the people to their covenant relationship with God. When they broke that with their injustice, their unrighteousness, and their idolatry they paid the price of their loss. Hanson writes:

. . . it is no wonder that human beings jeopardize their relationship with God through the vice of self-deception. Such was the case in ancient Israel. Viewing the precarious juncture at which the exilic community was standing, Second Isaiah realized that now more than ever it was important that this people candidly face the facts of its situation. They were fugitives in a distant land as the result of repudiating God's gift of a homeland by claiming their own efforts as the source of their abundance. Their beautiful temple had been leveled to the ground because they had tainted worship with self-adulation. But more than allowing their relationship with God to be healed through admitting their faults, they valued preserving their pride by defending themselves against any blame.¹

The point of the prophet's message is not a need for perfection in the people; but the need when sin and transgression of the Lord's commands comes to the surface for the people to admit their wrong and return to the Lord for forgiveness. Second Isaiah preaches a message of forgiveness. The introductory paragraphs of Second Isaiah announce, ". . . say to her that warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned." (Is. 40:2 RSV) Isaiah 40: 6-8 talks about the vulnerability of the people, "they are as grass . . . that withers." Yet God makes known that ". . . the Word of the Lord endures forever." Vulnerability and frailty, even failure is forgivable, yet

¹ Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40 – 66, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 136.

they require admission of the fault and self-appraisal and admission of the fault before God. God forgives the people.

The One Who is Taught

Here the Servant Song begins. The servant is given the “tongue of a teacher,” aimed at building up the people, to “sustain the weary with a word.” This servant is awakened daily and taught by God, he “awakens my ear.” It appears here, that the prophet relates to the servant as one whom God teaches and awakens. This prophet is called upon to sustain the weary with this word. Yet, here we also begin to see that the task of being the Lord’s teacher without rebellion against the command of God draws attack. The servant of the Lord suffers. We find the servant addressing his attack:

- I gave my back to those who struck me
- and my check to those who pulled out the beard
- I did not hide my face from insult and spitting

Servanthood brings with it the dual experience of both following in the way that God directs while simultaneously finding oneself in the defense position receiving the attacks of those around. In this understanding of being the servant of the Lord, suffering takes its place, not as the *sine qua non*, but as the result of following God rather than the crowd. God’s ways are not our ways and the distance between the two seems to grow greater as God’s ways appear to cost us more.

Such a post, The Servant of the Lord, requires great faith. What could possibly sustain such a person in the course of delivering God’s message, both hard and the gracious? This servant song addresses the confidence necessary to set out on the task. “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.” (verse 7 & 8a) The confidence of this servant is that God is the teacher, God is the one who gives the message, God is the one who sends, and God is faithful to those he sends, God remains steadfast even in the face of adversity.

We can begin to see a bit more clearly the image of Jesus in this servant. As we observe Jesus in the narrative of his passion and death, we see the servant of the Lord who set his face as flint against those who attacked him. Jesus remained faithful to the message of God’s deliverance through his own personage rather than through the Torah or the traditions that had come to take the place of God’s holy one. Jesus stood in the face of accusation, spitting, hitting, and ultimately execution rather than to turn his face to save his own life. His life and ministry enacted and enfolded the prophetic words of Isaiah, and God vindicated him. Vindication was not rescue from the suffering of the world that rejected him and God’s leadership. Jesus could not be rescued from the death of the cross. God’s vindication was the word of ultimate restoration and revitalization that transformed death into life. God’s vindication was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Those who were called to follow Jesus into the role of Servant of the Lord, his disciples and the apostles that followed were promised the same vindication. Theirs would not be escape from the clutches of death either; but just as with Jesus, God's vindication would be forgiveness and restoration to life eternal.

Return to the Court Room

We return in the remainder of the verses of this Servant Song to the courtroom.

- Who will contend with me?
- Who are my adversaries?
- Who will declare me guilty?

God's defense will win the day.

- Let us stand up together
- Let them confront me
- It is the Lord God who helps me
- All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

The sentence is passed, not upon the Servant of the Lord, but upon those who have turned their back. The questions go out:

- Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant
- Who walk in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?

In contrast:

- . . . all of you are kindlers of fire, lighters of firebrands
- Walk in the flame of your fire, and among the brands that you have kindled.
- This is what you shall have from my hand:
- You shall lie down in torment.

Vindication belongs to God alone. Yet, the servant of the Lord often suffers. Hanson writes:

Through personal suffering there steadily grows the capacity to uplift a whole community that has been driven close to spiritual defeat by the fierce blows of history. It is one of the mysteries of life that those with the greatest ability to encourage the distraught are often people who, far from being exempt from suffering, discover special gifts of empathy and empowerment precisely in their own valleys of personal suffering.²

Servants suffer because their pathway following God conflicts with the world, yet in God's hands all of human experience when lived with God's guidance can become the instruments that "sustain the weary." Servants suffer. Yet, God vindicates. Not even death can conquer.

©Copyright Rev. Dr. Kipp W. Zimmermann, Wednesday, July 18, 2007 Brooklyn 2007. All rights reserved. Reproduction of this document must carry this copyright.

² Hanson, 141.