



God Comforts

The one true God is compassionate; He comforts His people.

ISAIAH 49:1-13

Some things in life seem impossible. A doctor's diagnosis, the emotions of an ended relationship, or being called into the boss's office can make us feel like there is no tomorrow. The people of Israel faced the seemingly impossible in the form of conquering armies, guilt of moral failure, and God's judgment for their disobedience. Isaiah reminded them that God was preparing the way for His Servant. Through this Servant, He would accomplish His purposes and reward those who faithfully serve Him.

What or who gives you comfort when you are facing a seemingly impossible situation? How does that item or person give you comfort?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ISAIAH 49:1–50:11

Isaiah included four Servant Songs in his prophecy. Of the four, two are included in this week’s context passage. Although Bible scholars sometimes disagree on the precise number of verses included in the Servant Songs, Isaiah 49:1-13 contains the second Servant Song and 50:4-11 contains the third. In the ancient Near East, ambassadors, trusted envoys, chosen emissaries, or personal representatives of kings were often called “servants.” The “servant” in Isaiah is a royal figure who represented God and did His work.

God chose Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing to the nations. The Servant’s identification with Israel in Isaiah 49:3 indicates He was Abraham’s chosen seed who would not only fulfill Israel’s purpose to be a blessing to the nations but who also would restore Israel back to Yahweh. He would mediate a new covenant with Israel. The Servant would accomplish what Israel had failed to do. He would be despised but God would vindicate Him. World leaders would bow before Him in recognition of who He is. In Acts 3:13, the apostle Peter identified the Servant as Jesus.

Isaiah 49:14–50:3 indicates the Servant’s work would have a significant impact on Zion—another name for Jerusalem—and the people of Israel. The city’s inhabitants felt like the Lord had forsaken them. The Lord responded by declaring He had more compassion for Israel than a mother nursing her child. Even though Israel experienced the consequences of its sin, God had not abandoned His people, and He would not leave them in exile. Using foreigners, God would defeat their oppressors and bring many of His people back to Zion.

In the third Servant Song (Isa. 50:4-11), the Servant proclaimed that He was taught how to encourage the weary. Though He endured severe opposition and mistreatment, He was resolved to obey God, knowing that one day God would vindicate Him before His enemies. The Servant’s instruction to the people of God was to remain faithful and trust the Lord. He then warned that those who failed to do so would suffer God’s judgment as the consequence of their unbelief.

As you read Isaiah 49:1-13, note the actions to be taken by the Servant. How are these actions seen in Jesus and His work?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INCLUDED (ISA. 49:1-4)

¹ Coasts and islands, listen to me; distant peoples, pay attention. The LORD called me before I was born. He named me while I was in my mother's womb. ² He made my words like a sharp sword; he hid me in the shadow of his hand. He made me like a sharpened arrow; he hid me in his quiver. ³ He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." ⁴ But I myself said: I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and futility; yet my vindication is with the LORD, and my reward is with my God.

VERSE 1

These are the words of the Servant of the Lord. (See v. 3.) They begin in verse 1 with a command to the *coasts and islands* and the *distant peoples* or nations. Whenever the Old Testament writers used the word *peoples*, they were referring to the nations. Thus, this message was universal, addressed to everyone everywhere. The command was for the peoples to *listen to me*. The insistence for the people to *listen* is common among the prophets and reveals that the Servant was a prophet. However, the expression, *listen to me*, is unique to the Book of Isaiah, and only the Lord used this phrase as He addressed the people.

What does this reveal about the Servant? The Servant was going to proceed by revealing what God planned for Him to do. He began with how God called Him. Just as God spoke to Abraham and called Israel to be a blessing to the nations before Israel was a nation, the Lord also called the Servant for a specific task. Moreover, since Yahweh issued the commission, the Servant came at God's bidding with divine authority to do God's will. Consequently, the command to listen to Him is as authoritative as was God the Father's command concerning Jesus when He said, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mark 9:7).

VERSES 2-3

Like a sharp sword, the Servant's message would pierce the hearts of those who were near. *Like a sharpened arrow*, it would pierce the

hearts of those far off. His gospel would reach those both far and near. Everyone would have to respond one way or another to His message. When the apostle John saw Jesus in a vision of the future, he wrote: “A sharp sword came from his mouth” (Rev. 19:15). The writer of Hebrews wrote: “the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). Furthermore, as the Servant carried out His mission, He would be secure in the hand of His heavenly Father, and the Lord would protect and keep the Servant hidden like arrows in a *quiver* until it was time for the Servant to reveal Himself.

The Servant revealed that God called Him *my servant, Israel*. It seems straightforward. However, verse 3 needs to be understood in light of the immediate context and in the context of all of Scripture. In verses 5-6, the Servant would “bring Jacob back” to Yahweh “so that Israel might be gathered to him.” He would raise up “the tribes of Jacob” (Israel) and restore “the protected ones of Israel.” Clearly, the Servant, an individual, was doing these things for Israel. It was not Israel doing them for itself. In Isaiah 50:5, the Servant said “I was not rebellious,” and 53:9 indicates the Servant would suffer and die even though “he had done no violence and had not spoken deceitfully.” These descriptions certainly do not pertain to Israel. Isaiah realized that Israel as a people could not accomplish what was needed for the salvation of the nations, let alone their own salvation.

So why did God call His Servant (Jesus) *Israel*? First, He did it to reveal the Servant was a descendant of Abraham. God’s promise to use Abraham to bless the nations was fulfilled in Jesus. Paul wrote that God’s “purpose was that the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles by Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:14). Second, God called Jesus *Israel* because He was the ideal Israel. The Servant would succeed and embody in perfect obedience what Israel as a nation had miserably failed to do. He would be everything they should have been.

In Hebrew, verse 3 has a strong grammatical break between *You are my servant* and *Israel*. Therefore, it could be read, “You are my servant; Israel, in you I will glorify myself.” God used Israel as an instrument of blessing to bring forth His Son, the Servant of the Lord, who would glorify His heavenly Father in His work of salvation.

VERSE 4

Verse 4 reveals the Servant would be rejected and would not see a great response to His message. John wrote of Jesus: “He came to his

own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11). At times, it would appear He *labored in vain*. He suffered ridicule and abuse, and poured out His life for His people. In the end, one of His disciples betrayed Him and only one went with Him to the cross while the rest abandoned Him. Nevertheless, the word *yet* indicates a strong contrast because the Servant knew the Lord would vindicate Him and ensure that the Servant would completely accomplish all His Father sent Him to do. The Servant’s confidence was in His heavenly Father, and the Servant would trust His Father with the results.

How can knowing that God vindicates His children help believers learn to trust Him with the results and timing?

BIBLE SKILL: *Compare similar passages.*

Compare Isaiah chapter 40 and chapter 49. Make a list of the promises of chapter 40 and similar phrases in chapter 49. How will the servant of the Lord fulfill God’s plan to comfort His people? Look up 2 Corinthians 5:16–6:2. What connections do you see between this passage and Isaiah 40 and 49? Note them in your list. How do Jesus’ actions as the servant of the Lord apply to believers today?

CALLED (ISA. 49:5-7)

⁵ And now, says the LORD, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him so that Israel might be gathered to him; for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God is my strength— ⁶ he says, “It is not enough for you to be my

servant raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the protected ones of Israel. I will also make you a light for the nations, to be my salvation to the ends of the earth.”⁷ This is what the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, his Holy One, says to one who is despised, to one abhorred by people, to a servant of rulers: “Kings will see, princes will stand up, and they will all bow down because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel—and he has chosen you.”

VERSE 5

This verse stands in contrast to the despondency at the beginning of verse 4. The Servant would lead a remnant of the people of Israel back to the Lord. Whatever discouragement there was that tempted the Servant, it quickly dissipated with the knowledge that God had prepared Him for His mission from the very beginning. The task that looked like it would defeat the Servant was what God had prepared Him for—*to bring Jacob back*. Even though Israel had abandoned the Lord, He would not abandon them. Therefore, God sent His servant to go get them and restore them. It was to be much more than just a mere rescue from Babylonian exile. It was to be a spiritual deliverance. Like a shepherd, the Servant would go, gather them, and bring them back to God.

What would bring God the greatest glory would be the salvation of people from every nation.

VERSE 6

It is not enough literally means in Hebrew, “it is too light a thing.” The Hebrew word translated “glory” literally means “to be heavy.” Thus, God told the Servant it was not glorious enough for the Servant to restore Israel alone, only one nation. What would bring God the greatest glory would be the salvation of people from every nation. Therefore, God told the Servant He would make the Servant *a light for the nations*, to be God’s salvation *to the ends of the earth*. With this purpose in mind, the Servant would fulfill God’s promise to Abraham and his seed to be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). The salvation of people from every nation always was and still is God’s purpose.

VERSE 7

Initially, people would despise and abhor the Servant; those He came to save would scorn Him. Furthermore, this chosen Servant of the Lord would submit Himself before human rulers. Jesus certainly did this before Pilate and Herod (John 18:33-37; Luke 23:6-12). However, the day will come when the kings and princes of this world will recognize the Servant for who He is and bow before Him because He is God's *chosen* One.

In the New Testament, believers are identified as bearers of the light and given the responsibility of sharing that light with others (Matt. 5:14-16). We are called on to share Christ with all, pointing them to the comfort found in the Servant.

What role does today's believer play as a bearer of the light, one who carries the message of the gospel? How does that role relate to the work done by the Servant?

VINDICATED (ISA. 49:8-13)

⁸ This is what the LORD says: I will answer you in a time of favor, and I will help you in the day of salvation. I will keep you, and I will appoint you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land, to make them possess the desolate inheritances, ⁹ saying to the prisoners: Come out, and to those who are in darkness: Show yourselves. They will feed along the pathways, and their pastures will be on all the barren heights. ¹⁰ They will not hunger or thirst, the scorching heat or sun will not strike them; for their compassionate one will guide them, and lead them to springs. ¹¹ I will make all my mountains into a road, and my highways will be raised up. ¹² See, these will come from far away, from the north and from the west, and from the land of Sinim. ¹³ Shout for joy, you heavens! Earth, rejoice! Mountains break into joyful shouts! For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

VERSES 8-12

The *time of favor* and *the day of salvation* is when the Servant would accomplish the work of salvation for Israel and the nations.

The apostle Paul quoted verse 8, “At an acceptable time I listened to you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. See, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. All of the covenant promises and blessings are embodied in Him. Consequently, union with God comes only through Christ for the Israelite and Gentile alike.

Verses 9-12 paint a picture of the Lord’s blessing on His restored people. Like a shepherd, He would feed His people in secure places, protected from hunger, thirst, and sweltering heat. With compassion, He would lead them to springs of water. He would transform their obstacles into clear paths. It is difficult to determine the location of *Sinim*, but the point of verse 12 is clear: the people of God would stream to Him from all over the earth. The return of the exiles from Babylon would foreshadow this much greater event in the future when people of every nationality will experience the blessings of provision, protection, and compassionate guidance that come with the Lord’s salvation.

VERSE 13

Isaiah concluded this Servant Song with a call for the *heavens*, the *earth*, and the *mountains* to rejoice in the Lord’s salvation of His people. The phrase, *his people*, refers not only to physical descendants of Abraham but also to all whom the Lord will graciously save through their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. God will save those who are afflicted by sin and struggle in darkness, and those who deserved God’s judgment will experience His compassion.

Define the rejoicing experienced by a person who trusts in Jesus for salvation. How is the Servant (Jesus) honored through our rejoicing in the salvation He provides?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Last Things*

God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end (Heb. 9:27-28).

APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers can find comfort in knowing that God includes them in His redemptive plans.
- Believers are called upon to compassionately deliver the message of God’s salvation to all people.
- Believers can live with confidence, knowing that God will vindicate them.

Discuss as a group the comfort found by those who know God has included them in His plan of salvation. How can your group help others discover this truth? List actions to be taken by the group.

How can you demonstrate your thankfulness for God’s salvation? Reflect on ways you rejoice in God’s salvation. How does rejoicing in His salvation give you comfort?

PRAYER NEEDS
