

The Servant of the Lord

“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Isaiah 53:4-5

Isaiah moves toward his vision of the suffering servant of the Lord as if he were scaling a glorious mountain of truth. His ascent begins with total confidence in the love and power of the Holy One, whose message of comfort rests in his sovereign power over all creation and the nations (40). From his Spirit-inspired vantage point, Isaiah can see beyond Judah’s Babylonian captivity on the immediate horizon, to the future work of Cyrus, King of Persia (41:2,25; 44:27; 45:1,13). But even that long range forecast was too limited for Isaiah who prophesied a new day coming that would change the landscape forever. “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland” (43:18-19). Isaiah was convinced that the secret to history did not lie in the past, but in the future revelation of the Servant of the Lord.

In order to track with Isaiah in his climb up this mountain of truth we need to follow his lead in distinguishing the various meanings of the servant of the Lord. In the first instance, Israel is the Lord’s servant. “But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you” (41:8-9). In spite of the fact that Israel fell far short of being a true servant of the Lord, God’s grace prevailed and Isaiah was led to deliver the Lord’s message of comfort, saying, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (41:10). Over and over again Isaiah reminds Israel of their privileged status as servants of the Lord and he expresses God’s faithfulness to them, “For the sake of

Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I call you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me” (45:4).

In his sovereign plan and purpose, the Lord raises up whomever he chooses, to fulfill his purposes. He can even use Cyrus, King of Persia, “calling him in righteousness to his service” (41:2) and using him to tread on rulers as if they were clay (41:25). It is clearly the Lord’s prerogative to say of Cyrus, “He is my shepherd” and to call him his “anointed” one, and to take hold of his right hand and lead him forth to subdue the nations. If the Lord can marshal the starry hosts (45:12) he can certainly use a pagan king for his righteousness (45:13). It was Isaiah’s responsibility to prophesy that Cyrus would one day subdue Babylon, rebuild Jerusalem and set the exiles free (45:13), and he prophesied this before Israel was subject to Babylonian captivity. But this radical, cliff-hanging truth was only part way up the mountain and no where near the summit of Isaiah’s vision. Cyrus, the Gentile liberator, was but a faint precursor to the Anointed One who would be “a covenant for the people and light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness” (42:6-7). Moreover there was no comparison between Cyrus’ military conquest and the coming Servant of the Lord’s redemptive provision.

The summit of Isaiah’s vision belongs to the Servant of the Lord whose identity the prophet developed slowly by weaving his description into the flow of immediate, long-range and end-of-time salvation history (42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-3). Isaiah paced his presentation of the Servant in a manner consistent with Jesus’ self-revelation in the Gospels. Jesus disclosed the true understanding of the messiah by disassociating himself from the popular and political messianic expectations. Over the course of his ministry the true meaning of the messiah emerged slowly and climaxed inevitably in the Cross. Not until the end, when the cross was imminent, did Jesus clearly and publicly admit he was the Messiah. In the Gospel according to Isaiah the person and work of the Suffering Servant is revealed as God’s hidden work. The Servant is hidden in the shadow of God’s hand and is like a polished arrow concealed in his quiver (49:2). The coming of the Servant of the Lord is the new and unexpected thing that God is doing. What was hidden and unknown is now being revealed (48:6). Isaiah’s revelation of the Servant of the Lord peaks in chapter 53, where the means of atonement and the suffering of the Servant come together for all to see who have eyes to see. This is the revelational vantage point from which everything else can be seen in perspective.

Hezekiah's Weakness

Isaiah used Hezekiah's faithfulness in the face of the Assyrian threat to conclude one section (13-37) and Hezekiah's foolishness before the Babylonian overture to open the next section (38-55). Isaiah intentionally reversed these two events of Hezekiah's life in order to use Judah's king as a "case study" conclusion on the one hand and a contrasting illustration of human weakness on the other.

Hezekiah's illness and recovery preceded the crisis with Assyria (38:6) and the arrival of the Babylonian envoys is thought to have occurred in the early months of 702 BC, about a year before the Assyrian siege and when Hezekiah still had plenty of gold and silver to boast about (39:2; see 2 Ki 18:14).

Hezekiah's physical illness and political foolishness illustrate the weakness of Judah's king in contrast to the strength and wisdom of the Sovereign Lord. In an era when kings were made out to be superhuman and their exposure to the populace was limited to preserve a sense of awe, Isaiah pulled back the curtain and gave an insider's look at the king's frailty and lack of judgment. This was not done to diminish Hezekiah's legacy, but to dissuade Judah from putting their hope in a human king and in political alliances.

Hezekiah's prayer for healing, following Isaiah's prophetic prognosis (38:1), is a great testimony to the king's dependence upon the Lord. Unlike Ahaz, who scorned a sign from the Lord (7:12), Hezekiah was desperate for a sign from the Lord and was thrilled to receive it (38:7-8). Hezekiah's humility before the Lord was presented by Isaiah for all to see and to learn from. The prophet of the Lord felt it was important for the people to hear Hezekiah say, "I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. I am troubled; O Lord, come to my aid!" And when he was healed, Hezekiah bowed before the Lord and gave God the glory. "What can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this. I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul. Lord, by such things men live; and my spirit finds life in them too. You restored me to health and let me live. Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; [for] you have put all my sins behind my back" (38:15-17). In this regard, Hezekiah's physical weakness and spiritual dependence pointed positively to the Lord, but this was not true of his political judgment.

When the official delegation from Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon, congratulated Hezekiah on his recovery, he was seduced. They appealed to his ego and he responded by showing off his “entire armory and everything found among his treasures” (39:2). Hezekiah virtually gave the Babylonian envoys an inventory of what they could hope to acquire if they conquered Judah! God’s test of Hezekiah sadly revealed a proud heart (2 Chron 32:24-31). In marked contrast to the description of the Sovereign Lord whose own greatness dwarfs the nations of the world (40:15), Hezekiah saw a large world, well beyond his scope, leading him to the false assumption that Judah was protected from Babylon because of hundreds miles of rugged terrain (39:3). Hezekiah’s lack of judgment and political naivete did not cause the Babylonian conquest, but it became the occasion for Isaiah’s prophecy. “Hear the word of the Lord Almighty,” declared Isaiah. “The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord” (39:5-6). Isaiah’s closing picture of Hezekiah is of a man who is simply glad that this devastating prophecy will not happen in his lifetime (39:8).

Isaiah develops the contrast between Judah’s king Hezekiah and the description of the Sovereign Lord in order to dissuade the people of God from depending on human leaders, even faithful, well-meaning leaders, who were subject to physical weakness, poor judgment and limited lifetimes. What follows next is Isaiah’s comprehensive description of God’s sovereign redemptive plan, purpose and provision, revealed by the prophet to prove that God alone is worthy of our trust and is all sufficient for our salvation. Isaiah placed his confidence in the Lord God, as we should. “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak” (40:28-29).

Comfort, Comfort My People

The conclusion to Isaiah’s 40th chapter is well known: “Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint” (40:31). If these words are lifted out of the flow of Isaiah’s revelation they sound more like a Hallmark greeting card than the heartfelt expression of the real hope and encouragement that was intended by Isaiah. Our souls are drawn to these words, because we have grown

tired and weary, but our confidence does not depend on a slogan but on God's salvation. Inspiration does not rest in a saying but in the real history of God's Gospel story. We long for assurance and encouragement because we do stumble and fall. In the face of discouragement and disappointment we often feel the need for a renewed perspective of the Lord's sovereignty and redemptive love. If we accept the prophet's challenge, what may be dismissed casually as greeting-card-inspiration can be transformed into real world strength and hope.

It is very important to keep in mind that when Isaiah began his message with "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God," he knew that he would be describing in graphic detail the suffering of the man of sorrows (40:1; 53:3). And when he announced to Jerusalem "that her sin has been paid for" he understood that this depended on the atoning sacrifice of the suffering Servant, who "was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (40:2; 53:5). Every step forward in Isaiah's prophecy is in full view of the peak. The comprehensive scope of Isaiah 40 is best understood in the light of Isaiah 53.

This God-commanded message of comfort is followed by three voices of revelation: the voice of expectation (40:3-5), the voice of desperation (40:6-8), and the voice of celebration (40:9). First, we hear the voice of hope. In spite of the unpromising landscape nothing can hinder the coming glory of God. Hearing this prophecy from our vantage point in God's Salvation History our minds immediately think of John the Baptist. The Lord is coming and nothing can stand in his way. We are to get ready. God is coming to us. Even in the desert he will find us. "Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God" (40:3) recalls the highway built for the remnant of God's people (11:16) and reminds us of the highway called "the Way of Holiness," to be used exclusively by the redeemed and ransomed of the Lord (35:8; see 57:14; 62:10).

What is surprising, however, is Isaiah's slowly developing picture of the one who is coming. The revelation of "the glory of the Lord" so that "all mankind together will see it" takes an unexpected turn: "See, my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth" (42:1-4). Isaiah used the highest authority to confirm

the Servant's task (42:5) and to declare that through the Servant, the Lord himself would lead his people by the hand and make them a light to the Gentiles (42:6). He is the one who opens the eyes of the blind and releases the prisoners, he is the very one anticipated by the voice of despair.

The second voice says, "Cry out!" It is a voice of desperation that reveals the tragedy of the human condition. The glory of humankind is fleeting, "All humanity is like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field." The temporary, transitory, and painful nature of the human condition is compared to the enduring glory of God, "the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (40:6,8). This contrast between utter human weakness and absolute divine endurance runs through Isaiah's prophecy and is vital in his description of the coming Servant of the Lord. For the Servant not only identifies with us in our weakness but addresses the human condition through the enduring Word of God. His mouth is empowered by the Lord like a sharpened sword (49:2), but he experiences the travail of human futility. "But I said, 'I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God'" (49:4). Isaiah placed the Servant's strong confidence in the Word in juxtaposition with his experience of suffering. The Servant testified, "The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary." It was a truth sorely tested by the Servant's description of persecution: "I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting" (50:4,6). He whose physical anguish could not be described more horrendously (53) is the very one who declared the everlasting Word of the Lord. He "was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (53:7), but he is also the one who was anointed "to preach good news to the poor" and "to proclaim freedom for the captives" (61:1). It is not by accident that each voice received its true fulfillment in the Servant of the Lord.

The third voice is one of celebration. "You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!' The culmination of revelation is this declaration! "Here is your God!" This is not a guilt-induced witness that says "Here is my God, whom you need to accept," but a worship-inspired witness that says, "Here is your God!"

The good tidings are for Jerusalem, but not limited to Jerusalem, her witness spreads to the nations (“islands”). It is good news for the descendants of Abraham (41:8-10), as well as “a light for the Gentiles (42:6). God’s saving message goes out to the “ends of the earth” with God’s guarantee, “Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear” (45:23). It is a promise that will find its way into an early Christian hymn (Phil 2:10). The Servant of the Lord will not only “gather Israel to himself” but bring salvation to the world. “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (49:6). Once again Isaiah affirms that the Lord will stand “as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him” (11:10). The Sovereign Lord says, “See, I will beckon to the Gentiles, I will lift up my banner to the peoples; they will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their shoulders” (49:22; see 12:4; 14:26-27; 19:24; 27:12-13; 35:8).

The voice of revelation leads to a vision of God. “See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power...He tends his flock like a shepherd.” Isaiah’s inspired vision of God combines the power of the Sovereign Lord with the gentleness of the Shepherd King. Isaiah’s majestic description of the limitless power of God is preceded by a picture of the intimacy of God’s care. “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (40:11). Kidner rightly observes, “The wrong inference from God’s transcendence is that he is too great to care; the right one is that he is too great to fail” (Kidner, see Motyer, p.307). The power of God is incomparable and his presence is intimate. The Lord holds the whole world in his hands, and he holds us in his heart. Isaiah’s prophecy combines the tenderness of God and the transcendence of God. Both humility and majesty, grace and glory, shape Isaiah’s vision of God. Who can not hear this prophecy without hearing Jesus say, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11).

Isaiah’s prophecy points to the Servant of the Lord as the chosen one who is called to transpose the transcendent majesty of God into God’s justice, righteousness and salvation on earth. The link between the Sovereign Lord who comes in power and the Shepherd who gathers his lambs in arms is the suffering Servant of the Lord.

Isaiah envisions the magnitude and the exactitude of God over the totality of the cosmos from the sea to the stars and from the dust of the earth to the mountains. This is the Lord's inventory compared to Hezekiah's wealth. The seemingly incalculable universe is easily measured by God, who forms and adjusts creation for precise function. Isaiah pictured God working on the universe the way a carpenter does, measuring and marking, so as to build to exact specifications. Before God the nations are nothing, much less a threat. There is no natural, cosmic or political power that rivals the Lord of the Universe. Just as Isaiah's prophecy informed the apostle's doxology, it should shape our praise (40:13-14). As we contemplate and meditate on the greatness and tenderness of God and learn to depend upon his power and wisdom, our strength will be renewed.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?
Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever! Amen. Romans 11:33-36

Idolatry and Blindness

Isaiah climaxed his description of the Lord God by comparing God's workmanship with the craftsmanship that fashions an idol. Isaiah has already made his case against idolatry, false religion, and meaningless spirituality, but he is not about to drop the issue. "To whom, then, will you compare God?" To an idol! In effect, Isaiah was asking, how could we possibly substitute our own creation for the Creator of the Universe? It doesn't matter whether it is an expensive idol or a cheap idol; it doesn't matter whether it is a beautiful work of art or a nailed down piece of wood. It is still just an idol. Isaiah exposed the ridiculousness of comparing the value of idols to the sincerity of the devotee (Motyer, p.305).

Isaiah contends that people turn to idol making out of fear (41:5). Instead of responding to the truth of God, the wonder of his creation and the wisdom of his providence, they encourage one another, "Be strong!" and then order an idol to be made. The idol maker compliments his own craftsmanship in a manner reminiscent of God's assessment of his creation, "It is good" (41:7). "All who make idols are nothing," contends Isaiah. From the same piece of wood they build a fire to warm themselves and make a god to worship. "No one stops to think, no

one has the knowledge or understanding to say, ‘Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?’ He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, ‘Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?’” (44:9-20; see 45:16; 46:1-2, 5-7; 48:5,14).

The prophet’s graphic picture of idolatry raises the sobering question: Have we substituted some object, ambition, or experience for God? It doesn’t matter whether the object is mental or metal, or the ambition religious or entrepreneurial, or the experience sacred or secular, if it stands in the place of God it is an idol. Are we looking for significance and glory in the wrong place? Isaiah’s spiritual direction causes us to question our own tendency to set up idols, those things that compete with God for our devotion and fidelity. How can we expect to soar on wings like eagles if our success depends on the stock market? How can we run and not be weary if our esteem depends on people’s praise? Jesus emphasized that our treasure, vision, and service should be of God. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!...No one can serve two masters” (Mt 6:21,23,24). The key to spiritual renewal remains to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33).

Isaiah’s prophetic exposure of pagan idolatry is matched by his description of Judah’s spiritual blindness. Throughout this section, Isaiah attacks Judah’s spiritual indifference and their refusal to accept the clearly revealed truth of God. He asked a series of questions, but they sound more like assertions demanding affirmation than questions looking for answers. They remind us of a parent or a teacher asking the obvious question for the sake of emphasizing the truth. Prophets aren’t known for equivocating, but for convicting. They don’t lead discussions, they call for decisions. They call for the question and we must vote either “Yes” or “No”. We all need to learn from Isaiah’s example of conviction and courage and become more willing to pose that challenging question, first to ourselves and then to others. What would Isaiah say to a beautiful couple, who are well-educated, physically fit, and worldly-wise, but who remain oblivious to God? Can’t you hear him say, “Do you not know? Have you not heard?...The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth” (40:21,28).

Isaiah’s questions bring the message home. Isaiah didn’t want anyone to miss the truth of God’s sovereignty, the power of his rule and the majesty of his transcendence. “Lift your eyes,” declared Isaiah, “and look to the heavens: Who

created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing” (40:26).

Instead of being humbled by the truth of God, people talked back to God using vague excuses and weak arguments. Instead of hearing faith-filled confidence in God, Isaiah heard about half-hearted disappointment with God. “Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God’”? (40:27). It appears that it was popular then as it is today to express disappointment with God. Indifference and unbelief can be concealed under the guise of an easy dismissal of God’s care. People can be glib about saying God doesn’t love them. They speak as if God cannot hear their complaints. Clearly Isaiah did not treat the people’s frustration with God as an honest lament in the tradition of Job or the psalmist. Instead of hearing them out he cut them off. “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak” (40:28-29).

Their escapist rebuttal was more an admission of their lack of understanding than an honest search for truth. Isaiah claimed that Israel’s blindness was self-imposed and her ignorance intentional. “You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing” (42:20). Instead of being a witness to the nations they were reduced to plunder. They were all set to blame God, but it was they who deserved blame. Their rituals were meaningless (43:22-28) and their foolish hearts were stubborn (48:4). Isaiah had spent a lifetime calling Israel to wake up and listen to the most glorious message imaginable. And as anyone could tell from listening to Isaiah, he had not let Israel’s determined resistance to the Gospel spoil his faith or sour his delivery.

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’ Listen you watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, your ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends

of the earth will see the salvation of our God” (52:7-10).

Isaiah helps us to see the difference between merely saying we hope in the Lord and truly hoping in the Lord. To accept the prophet’s spiritual direction is to receive the Lord’s comfort and hear God’s voice of revelation. It calls for envisioning the Sovereign Lord’s greatness and experiencing the Good Shepherd’s tenderness. To hope in the Lord means that we challenge whatever idols may compete with our devotion to God, and that we renew our faith in the providence and power of God. Hope in God transforms our knee-jerk grumbling and complaining into bended-knee gratitude and confidence in the everlasting God, who “gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak” (40:29). As we receive and obey the wisdom of Isaiah’s counsel, the familiar poetic lines not only sound good but describe the reality of the Lord’s empowering presence. We are enabled to soar on wings like eagles, to run and not be weary, and to walk and not faint.

The Suffering Servant of the Lord

Isaiah has led us up this glorious mountain of truth for a spectacular view never before imagined. The climax to his ascent is a vision of the suffering servant of the Lord, the man of sorrows, who had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (53:2-3). Isaiah wrote at a time when the Greeks were reveling in the beauty and glory of the human body. The first official Olympics in 776 BC underscored “the real religion of the Greeks—the worship of health, beauty, and strength” (Durant, II, p.211).

Who would have thought that the all powerful God of all creation, the Sovereign Lord of the nations, would transcend his transcendence and supercede his majesty by taking up our infirmities and carrying our sorrows. Isaiah has scaled the heights in order to reveal the depths of God’s love. Who would have thought that the servant of the Lord would be “stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted,” or that he would be “pierced for our transgressions,” “crushed for our iniquities,” and “the punishment that brought us peace” would be upon him. Isaiah inversed the expected picture of greatness and made God’s saving sacrifice the pinnacle of his love. Left to our imagination we invent gods and humans as Homer did. The great epic writer of the Illad was a contemporary of Isaiah, who based his world view on the titanic clash of egos fueled by rage and envy. The description of fight-to-the-finish heros is described differently in different eras, but it is the same old

story re-invented for our entertainment. On the contrary, Isaiah's unexpected description of the suffering Servant is based on God's revelation and is for our redemption.

Isaiah's vision of the Servant of the Lord begins and ends with his vindication. His victory is never in doubt, but it is hidden from view. The invitation to "See" (40:10; 42:1) is accompanied by praise and promise: "See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted" (52:23). In a line, Isaiah captures the resurrection, ascension and exaltation of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (see Phil 2:6-11). The one whose appearance "was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness" will save the nations and humble kings (53:14-15). His triumph is assured, but briefly expressed, "He will see the light and be satisfied." His conquest certain, but quickly illustrated, "Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong..." The heart of the story is what he did on our behalf. He is vindicated, "because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (53:11-12).

At the outset Isaiah raised a provocative question, "Who believes what we've heard and seen? Who would have thought God's saving power would look like this?" (53:1, The Message). Isaiah's ultimate vision of God's glory climaxes in a painful, emotionally charged, description of the Servant's humility, suffering and sacrifice. God's love is magnified in the midst of the horrible mess of the human condition. The fullness of Salvation rises out of the depths of depravity because the Servant was willing to suffer the full impact of sin. Isaiah pounds the message home by using every shade of meaning for evil and punishment. The Man of Sorrows willingly bore the brunt of every infirmity, sorrow, transgression, and iniquity. He was despised, stricken, smitten, afflicted, pierced, crushed, oppressed, and cut off for our sakes. We gave ourselves up to sin; he gave himself up for our sin. We were dead in our sins; "he poured out his life unto death" that we might live. "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (53:5). Isaiah marveled at the hidden work of God: "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel" (45:15). Who would have imagined that God's saving power would look like this? Who would have expected that this is the new thing God had in mind when he said, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland" (43:19). Who among us would

disagree with the Lord's assessment: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8-9). Even Abraham, who was commanded by God to sacrifice his one and only son, would have had trouble seeing this coming. Nor would Job on the ash heap, the man who believed in God when there was no worldly reason to do so, have predicted the passion of the suffering Servant. Not even King David, who felt so God forsaken, would have ever imagined the God-forsaken God.

But no truth should thrill our hearts more than this Truth. Isaiah tried to picture this jubilation, "Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy..." (54:1). He wanted to illustrate the tremendous reversal wrought by the fullness of Salvation. The joy of salvation will be like a barren, desolate woman suddenly being blessed with many children, without the pain of childbirth. It will be like a widow, who has known devastating grief, humiliation, abandonment and desolation, suddenly finding herself in the perfect marriage relationship. Isaiah reminds us of Hosea's prophecy and identifies Israel as the desolate woman who is loved again by her husband the Lord God. The joy of salvation will be reminiscent of the days of Noah when the Lord promised to never again send a flood. It will be like a ruined city rebuilt to unbelievable perfection. It will be the joy of parents who know their children are receiving the best care possible, because their sons and daughters are being taught by the Lord himself. Moreover the joy of salvation will not be vulnerable. No tyranny or terror will threaten to undo what God has done. No weapon or accusation will unsettle the peace of God. It will be a lasting joy. "This is what God's servants can expect," declared the Lord. "I'll see to that everything works out for the best" (54:17, The Message).

It is on the basis of this glorious truth that the Lord God extends his gracious invitation to us. "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!" (55:1). The Lord invites our personal response, "Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my unfailing kindnesses promised to David" (55:3). It is a universal invitation that is meant for all people, "See, I have made him a witness extended to the peoples..." (55:4). It is an urgent invitation that requires our immediate response, "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our

God, for he will freely pardon” (55:6-7).

Isaiah gave three reasons for responding to the Lord’s invitation. First, he was confident in the wisdom of God. He never would have imagined God’s saving power through the atoning sacrifice of the suffering Servant, but having ascended to the heights and depths of this truth he was the first to agree with the Lord’s declaration,

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (55:8-9).

Second, Isaiah was confident in the fulfillment of God’s word. He had been called by God to deliver God’s message to people who were “ever hearing, but never understanding” (6:9). He had been mocked by those who felt his message was simplistic and unsophisticated (28:10). Furthermore he had persisted in delivering God’s Word for decades in spite of widespread resistance. Nevertheless he believed in the fulfillment of God’s Word and gave his “Amen” to the Lord’s promise:

“[For] as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out of my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (55:10-11).

Third, Isaiah was confident in God’s peace and joy. He lived through the mess of the human condition with the certain hope of God’s complete salvation. He looked forward to a day when the mountains and the hills would burst into song. Isaiah begins and ends this section on our response to God’s saving power by emphasizing praise. He confidently believed in the promise of God that we who believe (54:1) would be joined by the mountains and the hills in jubilate praise.

“[For] you will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands” (55:12).