**Light to the Nations**

Isaiah 49

***A lot of the Old Testament feels like we are reading someone else’s mail***, right? Most of the communication is between God and His people, Israel - and most of us are not Jews so a lot of this contains messages that were written to a different nation, a different people. But listen to verse 1 again:

“Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention ***you peoples from afar***. The LORD called me from the womb…” Isaiah 49:1

**This chapter was actually written FOR US** - we are the “peoples from afar” in both time and space. Now, we’ll see it’s still not written TO US - but we are explicitly invited to listen in on a conversation between God and His prophet, between God and His people. And this conversation is profoundly relevant for all people from all nations.

In this chapter we see four promises from God to His people. And for us as followers of Jesus, these apply to us in two ways: they apply to us first because ***we are now God’s people***, grafted into the vine of Israel through Jesus. And yet we are a part of the gentile harvest, we are among those peoples far off that the Lord is using to gather all of His people in. Let’s be encouraged by this conversation with God as the Lord comforts His prophet and His people, all the while encouraging us to listen in on the conversation. The first promise:

**Four Promises for God’s People:**

1. You have a **Purpose** from the Lord

“The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name.” Isaiah 49:1

As we’ve seen over and over in this part of Isaiah, the identity of the servant of the Lord is a moving target. Sometimes it is definitely Jesus, the coming Messiah. Sometimes it is definitely Israel, the nation as a whole. Here it is clearly the prophet himself.

**Four Promises for God’s People:**

1. You have a **Purpose** from the Lord

“He made my mouth like a sharp sword… he made me a polished arrow…” Isaiah 49:2

***The prophets of God were His mouthpieces*** - His spokesmen. God gave Isaiah a special anointing through the Holy Spirit to speak His word with boldness, clarity and authority. Even in the Old Testament ***the Word of God was like a sword*** that could cut through pride and selfishness, stubbornness, and resistance. The sword represents power, victory, clarity, and victory. God’s Word cuts so deeply, Hebrews tells us, that it divides soul from spirit - it is the most powerful tool to impact the human heart.

And Isaiah was also **like an arrow** - a man on a mission, with a clear and definite target to hit. His job was to speak comfort to the nation of Israel, to fill them with hope in the future Servant of the Lord who would suffer and die for them to restore and bring them all in.

Isaiah had a very clear bullseye for his life. He had a definite purpose from the Lord.

And so do you.

***You and I are equipped with the full armor of God*** and the one offensive weapon we have is the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. Isaiah only had the Old Testament, and not even all of that was finished yet. You and I have the entire OT plus the entire NT, illumined by its glorious fulfillment in Jesus Christ. We have the sword that Isaiah sharpened for us.

And we, too, are like arrows that God designed to accomplish specific tasks. **Ephesians 2:10** has become a key verse for us at Oakwood. “We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” In other words, we are - collectively - **God’s great masterpiece**. The whole church of God is a giant global temple, and each of us is a small brick in that glorious building. The whole church is the body of Christ and each of us is a part of that body.

You have a purpose. Look at verse 3.

**Four Promises for God’s People:**

1. You have a **Purpose** from the Lord

“And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’” Isaiah 49:3

Our purpose as God’s people is to honor and glorify Him. ***Your life is not primarily for your happiness or fulfillment*** - at least not in the way our culture thinks about it. Your life was designed by God to reflect His glory, so you could be a mirror in which people can see the light of God’s goodness and mercy and power and life. It’s a dim reflection, for sure, but the Holy Spirit keeps polishing and shining it up. And the more you learn to glorify God, the more you realize THAT is where true happiness is found anyway.

***If you try to find happiness apart from God*** you will miss out on your primary purpose in life, you will forfeit your soul and not go to heaven and in the end even if you manage to gain this whole world, you’ll find it to be nothing but dust and ash in your mouth.

***But if you try to find happiness IN GOD*** you will be guaranteed heaven and eternal happiness AND as an added bonus, you will experience a deep and lasting joy in Him right now.

Hear this word from the Lord today: YOU are my servant. You are one of my children. I will be glorified in you.

As we listen in on this private conversation between God and Isaiah, we hear the prophet’s response:

“But I said, ‘I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God.’” Isaiah 49:4

Anyone who has ever tried to serve the Lord has felt this way. I’ve been working my tail off, and for what? I’m worn out. I’ve been praying. I’ve been serving. I’ve been preaching - and ***what do I have to show for it?*** NOTHING. Vanity. Emptiness. As Solomon said, life and ministry is like chasing the wind.

I expect you all knew when you walked in today that you have a purpose from God. You have natural and spiritual gifts to use to make a difference in this world and glorify God. ***And I’m sure you try every day*** - or most days - to live out that purpose and fulfill your personal ministry calling. But you feel the challenge of it. It’s an uphill climb. It’s a spirital war. The wins are few and far between. A lot of our prayer life is expressing this kind of frustration to the Lord.

And isn’t it wonderful in passages like this and in the Psalms that God lets us listen in on His most personal conversations with His most passionate and gifted followers - like Isaiah and King David - so we can take comfort that, if it was OK for Isaiah to say this or for David to rage and fume, ***it must be ok for us too!***

But Isaiah does what that Psalmists always do - ***expresses his frustration but then turns back to faith***. Yes, yes - I do believe God will vindicate me in the end. I know He will. My reward is in Him, not in this world. I trust you, Lord - even though I don’t feel like you’re helping me very much right now. Read Psalm 31 if you need a boost today. That’s one of the most vivid Psalms of David in expressing his righteous anger, confusion and frustration but right in the middle of the Psalm David takes a deep breath, falls to his knees and says, ***“BUT I TRUST IN YOU, OH LORD.”***

That’s our first promise from the Lord today: you DO have a purpose from Him, even if it doesn’t feel like your work for Him has been very fruitful today. In some ways, that’s when we honor God best, is when we keep praying, keep praising, keep working and serving, even when it doesn’t seem to be bearing any fruit. To this discouragement of His prophet God speaks another promise:

**Four Promises for God’s People:**

1. You have **Power** in the Lord

“He who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him… for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength.” Isaiah 49:5

Our power comes as we pursue our God-given purpose. Isaiah hears the Lord speaking to Him, **reminding Him of His commission into ministry** when he had his lips cleansed of their sin and stood up to say, ***“Here am I, send me.”***

Notice the beautiful **cycle of glory here**. Isaiah’s purpose is to glorify God, but God shines honor right back on His prophet. The same is true of us, just as it is within the Trinity. The Father honors and exalts the Son, who turns around and reflects that honor and worship back to the Father - all in the power and life-giving love of the Holy Spirit. And we are caught up in that Trinitarian dance as we walk with God. We worship and glorify Him and in the same moment we feel the gospel revelation that He honors and blesses us because we stand before Him in Christ. So, the same love God the Father has for God the Son is the love and joy and delight and honor He has for US.

Brother, sister - if you belong to Jesus then **God speaks these words to YOU today** - “You are honored in the eyes of the Lord and your God has become your strength.”

One of the ***devil’s favorite lies is “you can’t.”***

* You can’t stop that behavior
* You can’t escape that addiction
* You can’t change
* You can’t keep going
* You can’t reach anyone with the gospel
* You can’t make a difference in the world
* You can’t… You can’t… You can’t…

Now, apart from Jesus - that’s totally true. “Apart from me,” Jesus said, “You can do nothing.”

**But IN CHRIST**, with Christ, guided and empowered by His Spirit - there is NOTHING we cannot do. He promised the Holy Spirit so His followers would do GREATER THINGS than He did while on earth. Greater than healing paralytics, opening blind eyes and raising the dead. Greater than walking on water, feeding thousands of people and calming a storm with a word.

An older pastor once said, “the key to moving mountains is to look at GOD not the mountain.”

With Jesus, there is no can’t. Yes, **that should remind you of Yoda**. Luke couldn’t lift the X-wing out of the Dagoba swamp, he wore himself out and whimpered, “It’s just too big.” The Jedi master then lifted his hand, bonded with the living force and lifted the starfighter out of the swamp, moving it over onto solid ground. Luke watched, amazed and said, “I don’t believe it.” And the wise old master said, “And that is why you fail.”

***Do you BELIEVE that ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE in Christ?*** Have you experienced this truth in your own life? Have you learned the difference between walking in your own power (which is worthless) and walking in the power of God (which is LIMITLESS)?

You hear someone talk about a powerful answer to prayer and you respond like Luke, “I don’t believe it.” And to that, our wise Jedi master, Isaiah says, “And that is why you fail.”

Many of you know this was my story for years even as an apparently mature follower of Jesus, even as a pastor - that ***I was secretly struggling with a periodic addiction***. It would only flare up a couple of times a year so it seemed manageable and, in my experience, that was way better than other guys I knew - so it seemed like I was doing as well as could be expected.

Eventually I realized that my ongoing failure - even if it was only once in a while, and even if it was a little better than other guys - was an affront to the holiness of God and a denial of the power of the gospel. In effect I was doing exactly what Luke had done - I was refusing to believe the power that was inside of me in Christ.

I wanted the freedom from the penalty of sin, but I didn’t believe there could be real freedom from the power of sin. **This is why I love Romans 8 so much** and tell just about anyone who will listen to me to memorize it - as much as you can. Verse 1 says there is no condemnation in Christ - freedom from the penalty of sin. But verse 2 talks about freedom from sin’s POWER. “For the law of the Spirit of life HAS SET YOU FREE in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”

Before you surrender to Jesus, you are under the law of sin and death. You can’t escape it, you can’t do anything about it. But **if you are IN CHRIST** - if you have committed to Him in personal faith - then there is a new LAW operating over you. You are FREE from the law of sin and death and now are under the law of the Holy Spirit - the law of freedom and life and joy and holiness and victory and purpose and mission.

You have a purpose from the Lord. You have POWER in the Lord. Third promise:

**Four Promises for God’s People:**

1. You will lead **People** to the Lord

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob… I will make you as a light for the nations.” Isaiah 49:6

This is what this chapter is all about - ***God’s purpose for Israel was always about the whole world, not just the Jews***. It wasn’t a big enough mission for Isaiah to just speak God’s Word to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. He was a light to the nations, just as Israel was called to be a light to the whole world.

**This is the verse Paul quotes** when he shifts his attention from Jews to Gentiles at the end of Acts 13. Of course, he still went to the Jews first if any town had a synagogue he started there. But his mission changed, his focus shifted to the whole world - and the Bible passage the Lord used to change the apostle’s life direction was right here in Isaiah 49.

**No doubt it was in Jesus’ mind** in the sermon on the mount when he said, “YOU are the salt of the earth… you are the light of the world.” No doubt it was in Jesus’ mind when he commissioned his apostles to go and make disciples of all nations and when He promised the Holy Spirit so they could be witnesses for him to the end of the earth.

Now, we can’t get into all the details today - study the whole chapter on your own. But look a little closer at this promise. God speaks in verse 8 of a time of favor, a day of salvation. He promises freedom for captives, food to eat, water to drink, a smooth highway for exiles to come home leading to verse 12:

1. You will lead **People** to the Lord

“Behold, these shall come from afar and behold, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.” Isaiah 49:12

Scholars tell us that **Syene is southern Egypt**, so that would pick up the SOUTH point of the compass meaning those from “afar” would come from the EAST since North and West are also named here. The point is that God’s children will be gathered in from all points of the compass - from all over the world. And this leads Isaiah to pause in verse 13 for worship - calling all of creation to join in the song of praise to God for His mercy and grace.

1. You will lead **People** to the Lord

“Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult O earth… For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.” Isaiah 49:13

Now, I hadn’t studied this chapter in detail before now, so I expected the chapter to be about the gentile nations. That’s certainly how Paul took it in Acts 13, so that application is certainly here. But Isaiah is still focused on the Jews.

1. You will lead **People** to the Lord

“But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.’” Isaiah 49:14

Earlier it was Isaiah feeling discouraged and frustrated - ***here it is the whole nation***, focused on Jersualem, Zion. As Assyria loomed over them in the north and they knew that a time of exile from the land was coming, Israel felt forgotten, forsaken. Those feelings would get worse during their 70 years in Babylon. But God gave them all of these comforting promises to reassure them that His work in them was not finished. They would be back in the land.

1. You will lead **People** to the Lord

“Can a woman forget her nursing child? … Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you… I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.” Isaiah 49:15-16

**God’s people are SAFE in His covenant love**. Praise the Lord, our security now and forever does not rest on our performance or our faithfulness, it rests entirely on God’s unbreakable promises. Hold on to this, child of God - your relationship with God is not based on a CONTRACT. In that case, you would never have peace or confidence because the contract’s benefits would rest on your fulfillment of your part of the contract.

***Thanks be to God we do not have a CONTRACTUAL relationship with God, we have a COVENANTAL relationship with God*** - based entirely on His grace and mercy and promises. And what God promises Israel here is the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham - that they would become a great nation, more numerous than the stars in the skies.

1. You will lead **People** to the Lord

“Lift up your eyes around you and see; they all gather, they come to you… The children of your bereavement…” Isaiah 49:18,20

***God promised to bring the nations TO ISRAEL***, and through the nations to gather in all of His people. The Jews will no longer see a barren, empty land - it will be filled with people, swarming with children and they won’t understand where all of those children have come from.

**Israel right now is a BARREN nation** - they are unable to have children spiritually because they have rejected Jesus. So look at what God is doing!

1. You will lead **People** to the Lord

“Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these?” Isaiah 49:21

Suddenly God’s chosen people, the Jews, will see the nations streaming to Jerusalem - both literally and figuratively. ***God is drawing all people to JESUS through the Church - the holy city of God.***

1. You will lead **People** to the Lord

“I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples, and they shall bring your sons in their arms.” Isaiah 49:22

People from all nations will come. They will hear the voice of God and respond. They will hear the good news of Jesus and come running to Him as their Messiah. So this promise is a MISSIONARY PROMISE - we are those people from afar who have heard the call of God and are invited to come to His holy city. ***And as we go, we bring others with us!***

This is how God will fill up His land and fill up His heaven - by scattering all of His people out to the four corners of the earth and then calling for all of them to come home, and bring as many others with them as they can! And in the process, ***Israel - the ethnic people of God - will be gathered back in as well.***

And here is the final result, the fourth promise:

**Four Promises for God’s People:**

1. You will have **Peace** forever

“I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children.” Isaiah 49:25

Isaiah’s whole book is ***God’s promise to bless and restore His people.*** Discipline was coming and a time of hardening while the gospel goes to the nations. But God never has and never will give up on His ethnic people - the Jews. And in the same way, He never gives up on us, His spiritual children. He protects us from our enemies and promises to save us and keep us safe forever. Nothing can snatch us from the Father’s hand. No weapon formed against us can prosper. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Four Promises for God’s People:**

1. You will have **Peace** forever

“Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Savior, and your Redeemer, the Mighty one of Jacob.” Isaiah 49:26

***See how personal this is to the Jews?*** “I am the Lord YOUR Savior, and YOUR Redeemer, the Mighty one of JACOB.”

Hear these promises to you today, **believer in Jesus**. If you have called on Him to save you, then He will never leave you or forsake you. He looks on you and says I am YOUR Savior, I am YOUR Redeemer, I am YOUR mighty One who will uphold and strengthen you - who will bless and protect you throughout your life and through the endless ages of eternity.

**Four Promises for God’s People:**

1. You have a **Purpose** from the Lord
2. You have **Power** in the Lord
3. You will lead **People** to the Lord and
4. You will have **Peace** forever

***You have a purpose from the Lord***. Your life is no accident. God designed you, before you were even conceived, and prepared you like a smooth, polished arrow. There are people for you to love and serve. There are issues for you to address, tasks for you to do.

***You have POWER from the Lord***. Don’t ever believe the lie that you can’t. In Christ, you can do ANYTHING. Find your mountain and start telling it to move. Don’t look at the mountain, look at the Lord and trust Him to give you the strength you need to deal with that problem or take on that issue.

Because **all of us are called to reach people with the gospel**. NOW is the time of God’s favor. Now is the day of salvation. The door stands open for people to be forgiven and set free, brought into right relationship with God. But as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be soon - the door of the ark was shut and there was no more time for people to come in. Who is on your heart to reach out to? What step could you take this week to build into that relationship and point them to Jesus?

Oh, ***we will have PEACE forever.*** This world is dark and broken, but that will not be our story for much longer. We will be whole and healthy, loved and treasured FOREVER. The LORD is our Redeemer, our Savior, our Mighty One.

**Jim Elliot** - the famous missionary to the jungles of Ecuador in the 1950s - reminded his parents that children are described in the Bible as “a heritage from the Lord - as arrows in a quiver. And he said, “What are arrows for but to shoot?” So he wrote to Mom and Dad:

“Grieve not then, if your sons seem to desert you, but rejoice, rather, seeing the will of God done gladly… With the strong arms of prayer, draw the bowstring back and let the arrows fly, all of them, straight at the Enemy’s hosts.” Jim Elliot

May this be our attitude toward our own children and grandchildren and toward one another. **May each of us be a flaming arrow for Jesus** - launched full speed into the darkness and evil of this world bringing the love and justice and healing and power of God where it is not currently felt!

Let’s pray that the Lord would ignite us and aim us this week!

BENEDICTION: Salt and Light - Matt. 5