

1. Isaiah 49:1-6 is the second of Five Servant Songs in Isaiah (the first one is Is 40:1-6) Piece together the portrait of the Servant in these verses:

a) To Whom is he speaking? b) What is he called to do? c) How will he accomplish his task? Knowing what you know from biblical and redemptive history, how can the *servant* be both Israel (vs. 3), but yet also be the one who will save Israel (vs. 5)?

2. Read Isaiah 49:6. How did Israel fail in this mission? In light of the coming of Jesus Christ; how does he fulfill this mission to be a “light for the nations”?

3. Read Isaiah 49:13-16. What is Israel’s complaint back to God? What is God’s amazing response to them in 49:15-16? What two images does he use?

4. In Isaiah 50:4-10 we have the third of the Servant Songs. List the characteristics of the servant:

5. During times of trial, difficulty and suffering how do we often respond to God? How do these two chapters help shape, inform and sustain a more God-centered picture of human suffering and difficulty?

Lesson 4

Is 49:14-50:3

'Talking to yourself,' we used to say, 'is the first sign of madness.' Far from it, rather it's an important sign of Christian commonsense — depending, of course, on what we are saying to ourselves. Paul puts it another way when he says that we are transformed by the renewing of our mind (Rom. 12:2) — and, of course, the mind is only renewed by thinking of new and renewing topics. If we talk to ourselves about worldly things we develop a worldly mind; if we focus on things above we develop a heavenly mind (Col. 3:1-2). We can cultivate the mind of the flesh or the mind of the Spirit (Rom. 8:6). Every thought entertained disposes our minds in that direction. It matters what we talk to ourselves about! And today, in particular, what do we say to ourselves when things go from bad to worse and despondency takes over? The natural tendency — and it often seems strong beyond resistance — is to 'retire hurt', and moan to ourselves how terrible and unfair life is, to 'chew the fat'. Go that way and despondency feeds on itself, and deepens and darkens by the minute. Don't do it, Isaiah would counsel us. Feed your mind on the promises of God, tell yourself all he has pledged to do; hold on to his Word. Look at the four promises in today's passage: he never forgets us (14-16); he will increase his church (17-23); he will give it victory over the world (24-26); and he will ransom us from every alien power (1-3). Somewhere in that list you can position yourself in every situation. The Lord's therapy is to bring us, by means of his Word, pondered and understood, out of depression and the downcast face (Luke 24:17) into the burning heart, the buoyant step, and the assured testimony (Luke. 24:32-35).

Is 50:4-11

The difficulties and sufferings of life take us by surprise, but they should not. Jesus said, 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you' (John 15:20), or, as the hymn puts it, 'It is the way the Master went, Shall not the servant tread it still?' All too often trials make us retire to the sidelines and 'retire hurt, but Isaiah teaches 'No'. 'Time of trial, time for trust, not time to leave but time to lean.' That's the Jesus-way. Walking in darkness is no fun; it is a high risk situation and we seriously need the electric torch, or even the homely candle. So far so good, but is it the torch of our own abilities, the candle of our own best efforts ('I can cope')? Yes indeed, the time of trial may demand our utmost efforts if we are to get through, but not effort arising from self-reliance. The effort called for is that seen in the Servant, determination to stay the course, constant come what may, but only doing so in the 'strength that God supplies,' confident in his God, still walking in the time of trouble, but walking because trusting, walking because leaning. Four times over, and with tremendous emphasis in Isaiah's Hebrew, the great divine title and name sounds out: 'the Sovereign Yahweh.' He is in total command. If we are 'in the soup,' then it is he who has decided what sort of soup it is! And at what temperature we must endure it! And how long it will last! He is a God who is truly God, *Sovereign* at all times, in all places, over all forces, in all circumstances. But he is always the Sovereign *Yahweh*, the God of all grace, who hears our cries of distress, knows our sorrows, and comes down to deliver (Exod. 3:7-8). The old prayer got it right: he 'declares his almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity.' A God worth knowing, and trusting, an arm to lean on.