

The Servant's Calling

The “servant” image connected to Jesus appears first in the Old Testament writings, not as a form



Michael K. Olmsted

of bondage, but as a position of joy:

- Psalm 31:6 calls upon God to “Make Thy face to shine upon Thy servant” (NASV)

- Jesus reminded his disciples, “whoever wishes to become first among you shall be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:27-28 NASV)

- The Apostle Paul often described himself as “a bond-servant of Jesus Christ.” (Romans 1:1)

The image is one of responsibility and joy, to bear the greatest message of hope for the world against all odds.

Isaiah 49 records the darkest night for Israel. Babylon has swept over the land, destroyed the Temple, gutted Jerusalem and relocated anyone who was educated or had marketable skills. It was the calculated strategy of the enemy to totally subject a people by eradicating their religious structures, destroying their societal stability and relocating anyone who could rebuild their national identity. Exiles who were resourceful blended into the new region, often succeeding, and quietly maintained their faith as Scripture records. It was during this exile period that the Jews developed a synagogue system to maintain knowledge of God's laws and promises and religious traditions.

Isaiah can be divided into three divisions, covering three historical periods. Our study focus is the second division, referred to as “Isaiah's Servant Songs,” beginning with the prophet's calling by God. In Isaiah 48:1, Isaiah speaks to the “house of Jacob,” but chapter 49 expands outward to the “coastlands ... you people far away” (v. 1). Some see this passage as either a physical proof text against abortion or as the idea of predestination for each human life, but it is much more.

It reminds us that God has chosen to work through the human race to reveal his grace and perfect will, that we are invited to serve God rather than programmed before birth. Part of the beauty and power of God's grace is the freedom it offers. Isaiah's language is poetic as he describes the God who sees beyond human weakness and failure and “forms” us with the potential “to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to (God's) strength” (v. 5).

God's calling includes intimacy, purpose and redemption. These same ideas are repeated in Jesus' ultimate example and teachings. In his shattered world Isaiah had experienced God's love. Without a temple or established rituals and sacrifices, Isaiah maintained a deep faith in the God who had spoken to Abraham and Moses, the God who was with him in exile. The prophet also understood, contrary to prevalent despair, that God was still at work and would bring ultimate redemption. Isaiah could choose to be part of the message of redemption. Creation exists by the choice of God and God seeks to love and be loved by those he creates. Isaiah's servant song translates into the New Testament narrative of Jesus and the church.

The Lord says to Isaiah that beyond his role of raising up “the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel: I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (v. 6). Like Isaiah and the Israel of his day, believers in our day should pay attention to this servant and his song. God is still working on fulfilling the calling he issued to Isaiah and continues to offer us. The darkness of unbelief and spiritual suffering continues to spread from generation to generation.

We identify the Messiah in Isaiah's servant songs. Even Luke, the one Gentile gospel writer, makes the connection between Isaiah and Jesus as he records the Temple testimony of Simeon when the infant Jesus was dedicated: “For mine eyes have

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seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, A light of Revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel” (Luke 2:31-32). In Acts, Luke's second book, he writes, “For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you up to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord” (Acts 13:47-48). We may bemoan the circumstances of our world and nation, but we should also see ourselves as the “servants,” who, like Isaiah, live in God's love and grace as we speak and live out the truth of Jesus.

Every child that is born is a promise. What kind of world will that child experience? How will that child influence or change this world? You cannot change all the world, but what about your immediate part? For years we have talked about evangelism, memorized witnessing plans, put together all kinds of church programs, argued about who really believes the Bible, divided ourselves into camps and set ourselves up as God's watchdogs. If we live as pilgrims on God's pathway, as witnesses in a hostile world, should we not face our calling to actually behave as God's people, follow the example of Jesus and show the world how blessed is the Christ life?

Looking back over my life, my repeated moves as a military dependent, the cultural changes, seeing a world outside the U.S. confronting racism, making mistakes and encountering people God placed in my pathway, I am convinced that we can learn to live out a witness and make a difference with God's help. If we are serious about following Christ we must first learn to sing the servant's song.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.