

A Light to the Nations

SCOTT HOEZEE

In both the Old Testament and New Testament, when God is forced to pronounce judgment on His people, He doesn't mess around. The language of judgment can be stern; but what God really wants to do is pronounce blessings and promise new life; and so perhaps it is no surprise that when God does have the opportunity to proclaim the promise of restoration for His people the language soars higher and higher. God's imagery for new life is stirring, moving, and lavish. Today on Groundwork, we will consider Isaiah Chapter 49, and see there a wonderful array of imagery that properly fills our hearts with hope and joy. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and welcome to this, our fourth program of seven on some of the latter chapters of Isaiah; and the reason we are looking at these chapters, and these were the Servant Songs of Isaiah, is because this ultimately all got fulfilled in Jesus Christ; and so for us in the Church today, particularly like during seasons of Lent when we think about the sacrifice of Jesus and what Jesus went through to achieve our salvation, these chapters are so very, very relevant to us; and as we are going to see today, some of the lovely and lavish imagery in these chapters is also properly comforting for us in the Church today.

DAVE BAST

Right, absolutely; and this is Chapter 49, another one of the Servant Songs; this particular one is the light to the nations, and as you think of this in terms of the Gospel narrative and the season of Lent, you might think of, of course, John 1, which we identify more with Advent – the prologue of John 1 – the true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world – but also John 8, where Jesus stands up in the feast and says: I am the light of the world; as He draws all people to Himself; and that is straight back to Isaiah 49, where the original language is used where God calls His Servant a light to the nations. So, let's dive into the passage, which opens with these words:

⁵And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, and that Israel might be gathered to Him, for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and my God has become my strength. ⁶He says, "It is too light a thing that You should be My Servant to raise 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 might reach to the ends of the earth."

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁷Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, and His Holy One, to one deeply despised and abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers; "Kings shall see and stand up. Princes, and they shall prostrate themselves because of the Lord, who is faithful. The Holy One of Israel, who has chosen You."

So here we have language that is simultaneously tender and majestic, right? We once again have imagery we have seen before in Isaiah, that God formed them in the womb. It is as though Israel is God's own child, and so there is this intimacy to this language in the very creation and birth of Israel. God can never cut them off. They are too precious to Him; and because it is that precious, God is saying to the people, still in exile, let's remember, as these prophecies are made, they are still stuck in Babylon, God is saying: Chin up. Hold your

head up high. I haven't forgotten you and I am about to do great things; and it is not too big a deal for Me to do it. I will do it; I will restore you.

DAVE BAST

This is also a passage where it becomes evident that the Servant of the Lord cannot simply be the collective people of Israel. As Chapter 49 opens, it clearly says: You, the people of Israel, are My Servant; but as He goes on He is talking about an individual. The Lord formed Me in the womb. Even more so, he says that part of the individual servant's mission will be to bring Israel back to Him – to restore Jacob; but it will be more than that: I will make You a light to the nations; and there is actually kind of an interesting play on words in verse* 6, in the NIV – as the NIV translates that, which is the version we read:

⁶“It is too light a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob; I will give You as a light to the nations.” So, it is too light, or we might say, too small. God is giving His rationale here. Why must You be a light to the nations? Because it is not big enough for Me as the God of the universe to simply be a tribal deity to the Jewish people. I need to be the God of all the earth because anything less than that would be unworthy of Me. It is too small a thing. We get a wonderful hint of God's motivation for doing this – for making His Servant reach out to the nations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it goes straight back to Genesis Chapter 12, a passage we have referenced earlier in this series, because you cannot talk about the purpose of Israel without going back to the call of Abram in Genesis 12, when God immediately says to Abram: Look, I am calling you out. I am singling you and Sarai out. You are going to start a nation, but it will never just be an end in itself. You will become a blessing to all nations.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So I am going to start with one nation, God says, to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth so that the whole earth may be saved; and so this light to the nations is reminding Israel of it's basic purpose, which is to stand up and witness to God so that all the nations may come in and be God's people again.

DAVE BAST

Right; and this is no new thing. This is not God somehow changing in midstream what He intends for Israel to be. We think of the book of Jonah, and actually we have a Groundwork series that we did on Jonah a while back; Jonah is the classic place in the whole Old Testament that uses humor and sort of outrageous exaggeration to make this same point. Jonah is mad at God for calling him to go to Nineveh because he is afraid they *will* respond and they *will* repent; and then when they do, he is even more angry because he says in the climax of the book of Jonah, he throws back in God's face the fact that He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in compassion: I knew You were like that; I knew You would forgive them; and I don't want them to be forgiven. No, says the Old Testament, that is the whole point.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's right; you want Nineveh to be in the club – you want Babylon to be in the club – you want everybody to be in God's family. Jonah forgot that, and he was a symbol of the time of Israel, collectively of course; and it is the same for the Church today. I mean, the Church today does not exist to be a buttoned up, buttoned down fortress against the world that does everything it can to turn people off and keep them out. No, the Church is the light to the nations now. We are the new Israel, and that is our purpose; that is our vocation; we are a light to the nations; we want to welcome all people into God's family.

DAVE BAST

Yes, who was it... Emil Brunner, I think, who said: The Church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning. I mean, it is our very nature. God intends us to be attractive. That is the whole point of the analogy of a light,

right? A light attracts you; in a dark place, you cannot help but have your eyes drawn to the light; and it signifies everything that is good and positive. So we are to be magnetic; certainly the life of many congregations is anything but magnetic to people on the outside...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Unfortunately.

DAVE BAST

So that is the challenge for us. We are supposed to be a light to the nations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So being a light – a beacon to the nations – is a wonderful piece of imagery in Isaiah 49, but this chapter isn't over yet. Lots more wonderful imagery to come, and we will take up some more of it next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork; and today our theme is a light to the nations, and the chapter that we are digging into is Isaiah Chapter 49; and we pointed out this beautiful image of light, which is supposed to be magnetic and attractive, and it was the mission of Israel originally – it is what Jesus came to fulfill – and ultimately now it is for the Church to be this kind of beacon that draws people to the one, true, living God; but there are other fabulous images that God uses for His undying love for His people, and His commitment to saving them, and we will continue in Isaiah 49 with those.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We will pick it up at verse 13: Sing for joy, O heavens, and exalt, O earth! Break forth, O mountains into singing. For the Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on His suffering ones. ¹⁴But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me." ¹⁵Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands. Your walls are continually before Me. ¹⁷Your builders outdo your destroyers, and those who laid you waste go away from you. ¹⁸Lift up your eyes all around and see. They all gather; they come to you. "As I live," says the Lord, "You shall put all of them on like an ornament, and like a bride you shall bind them on."

So, God is making these promises: You are going to be a light to the nations. I am going to restore you. And then here God quotes the sentiment of the people, saying: Nah, I don't believe that. Look where we are. We've been in exile for 70 years. God has forgotten us; just plum forgot us. And God is saying: No way.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is a dialogue, really. God on the one hand speaking, and on the other Zion, which is, of course, an image for the whole people of God; not just Jerusalem, but Israel – ultimately all the people of God – and God is making all these wonderful, incredible promises of restoration, of salvation, of redemption, of bliss, eternal happiness, and God's people say: Oh yeah? Forget about it. You have forgotten us. Look at where we are. Look at how miserable we are.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, God uses two main images here. One we have seen often, and so we will just mention it in passing. God says: Look, the mother who is nursing a child does not tend to forget the child. Well, God says, I suppose it is possible that sometimes there are bad mothers who might actually forget or sacrifice her children, but that is not going to happen with Me; but then He says this other image of: I have engraved you on the palms of My hands. That is a very interesting image. It reminds me that some years ago before smart phones burst onto the market, for a little in-between period there, there was this device called a Palm Pilot. I used to use a Palm Pilot, and I always said if I lost it or if the data disappeared I'd be in big trouble because it

was my appointment book – it was my calendar. If I didn't have the Palm Pilot I would forget things. The young people at my church had a youth service one year and they chose Isaiah 49 as the passage, and so I kind of made a comparison in that sermon to the Palm Pilot, but said: For God it is more radical. It is not something He holds in His palm with your name on it. It *is* His palm.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is on His palm.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Emily, George, Jacob... whatever your name is, God says: I have inscribed you on My very palms, that is how much I remember you.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is like God is into tattoos, you know. There is this beautiful hymn that has been rediscovered for the Church through kind of a re-tuned hymnody: *Before the Throne of God Above*; and it has the lines: My name is graven on His hands; my name is written on His heart; I know that while in heaven He stands no tongue can bid me thence depart. That is the image that Isaiah uses. It is radical. It is shocking. What, God is into body modification? It is not just us as individuals, but if you read carefully what Isaiah says:

¹⁶See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands. Your walls are continually before Me. It is as though He has a map of the city engraven on His hand. It is the whole people of God who are there. Not one is missing. All of Zion, who has just been complaining: You forgot me. No, no; I've got you all. It is just such a dramatic, powerful image. Is my name written there? Yes, the answer is yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it was a radical, dramatic image for the people of Israel when they heard it in the Sixth Century B.C.; but now, of course, we Christians cannot read that without thinking of Jesus' hands, and the nail holes. That is the most radical expression of being engraved onto the palms of God. The hands of Jesus, which after His resurrection He showed to the disciples to prove it was Him, but to remind them what He did for them; and so, you cannot help... and I don't think it is a stretch or making it too allegorical or anything to make that stretch that the hands of Christ now are the proof that indeed we are engraven on His hands. What a wonderful thing to remember at all times because we all go through seasons when we feel like God has forgotten me; that must be why I lost that job I loved so much; I got fired; that must be why my loved one died; that must be why my marriage ended; because God forgot me because if He hadn't forgotten me I wouldn't be suffering. Well, we don't know the whys and wherefores of suffering, and nobody should be too quick or too glib to explain things away to people, but on the idea that it means God has forgotten you, we loop back to this passage in Isaiah 49; we loop back to the hands of Jesus to say: No, no; whatever is going on or whatever the whys and wherefores are of this season of suffering, the forgetfulness of God is not the reason.

DAVE BAST

I just think this is a great resource for all of us in those times of trouble, in those times of doubt – seasons of doubt – that inevitably come when it seems as though God isn't there or God is not listening or God doesn't care. Can a mother forget the child who is nursing at her breast? No, probably not; maybe; even if so, God will never forget. It is the "how much more" argument that we see so often in the Bible: No, God never will; He never could; and if we doubt that, there they are; our names on His hands. It is like the high priest in the Old Testament who had the names of the tribes of Israel engraved on the breastplate, and he brought them continually in the presence of the Lord... well, God doesn't need that reminder either because He has made His own Palm Pilot notes. He has written them down.

It is just so moving to me; and I love that hymn, which I have come to know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is beautiful.

DAVE BAST

It is being sung frequently now in our churches, but it is a good one. Take a listen to it and be comforted. Well, that is not the end. We haven't even reached all the resources. In Isaiah 49 there is a wonderful passage at the end of the chapter that we want to consider next before our program closes.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we have been looking today at Isaiah 49, Dave, and we have seen rich and lush and lavish images about a light to the nations, comparing Israel to a child nursing at it's mother's breast who could not be forgotten. God has not forgotten His people. God has engraved our names on the very palms of His hands. We thought about Jesus' nail-pierced hands and that connection; but there is a last set of images here starting at verse 22 of Isaiah 49, and we want to think about those to close out the program.

DAVE BAST

Right; here it is: Thus says the Lord God, "I will soon lift up My hand to the nations and raise My signal to the peoples; and they shall bring your sons in their bosom and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders. ²³Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground, they shall bow down to you and lick the dust of your feet. And then you will know that I am the Lord. Those who wait for Me shall not be put to shame."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So this is just a great passage, and what it is, Dave, too, is it is an encapsulation – or that is to say it is kind of a compact summary of the whole sweep and arc of the Gospel, where we look to God to be the great reverser of all things; and so, here He says: These great big kings are going to become foster fathers and the queens will become nursing mothers. The kings and queens are going to become your servants, in other words, and the fortunes of all people are going to be reversed. Everything we think of by normal social stratifications – class distinctions – that is all going to be turned on its head one day, God is saying through Isaiah; and there is something about the whole Bible that aims in that direction again and again.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is kind of the happy fairytale ending, you know, where things look terrible right up to the end, and then some miraculous event happens, and this is the fairytale that is actually true, you know. Jesus comes and He dies on the cross; but then He is raised from the dead on the third day and ultimately He brings His kingdom in; a kingdom in which the poor and the humble will be exalted and the rich and the mighty will be brought low, and everyone will be shown what the truth is and who the people of God actually are. It is just Good News for the Church.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am sure, Dave, even as you said those words just now, I will bet for a number of our listeners it was ringing some familiar bells; and if you are not sure what bells are ringing in your head, I will tell you it is Mary's Song from Luke Chapter 1: *The Magnificat*, as we usually call it; because when Mary herself – lowly, humble, little nobody, anonymous Mary out in the middle of nowhere in the Roman Empire – when she finds out that she is going to become the mother of the Messiah, God has exalted humble little Mary, she sings a song where she says... and that is just what God does. So in *The Magnificat* she sings: The rich and the haughty are going to be sent away empty. They are going to be scattered, but the lowly and the poor are going to be raised up to become the leaders of God's people. And so, that kind of move on God's part to sort

of iron everything out, level everything out, get rid of harmful, hurtful social stratifications, that is just so like God; and in fact, it also reminds me of a psalm that almost is certain Jesus recited on the very night when He was betrayed because it is one of what is called *The Hallel Psalms*; always read at Passover; and so Jesus probably recited Psalm 113. On the very night when He was about to be ultimately humiliated, Jesus probably said these words from Psalm 113:

⁵Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high; ⁶who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? ⁷He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, ⁸to make them sit with princes – with the princes of His people. ⁹He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord.

DAVE BAST

I love the imagery of that psalm, too, because it envisions God as great and high and exalted. I mean, so high, in fact, that it says He doesn't just look down on the heavens and the earth, He looks *far* down – you know, it is a long way from where He is enthroned, but He doesn't just look down, He comes down, as the Gospel will tell us, and becomes one of us, and in so doing, He raises the poor from the ash heap, where they are kind of outcasts, and He makes the barren woman happy, giving her children – making her the happy mother of children. So, this is the very character and nature of God. It also explains, I think, something in these closing verses from Isaiah. Because remember it is a dialogue at this point. God is speaking to Zion, and Zion says: No, no; I don't believe You. You have forgotten me. And God says: No, I haven't forgotten you. That would be impossible. And then He goes on to kind of tell her: Now look, someday everything that you thought you lost is going to be given back to you; and all those children you thought had disappeared in the wars and the conquest and the exile... you are going to look up someday and say: Who are all these... where did all these children come from? Here they are. You know, the barren woman – Israel – is made the joyous mother of children; and we see it now fulfilled in the Christian Church as the people of God continue to grow and God brings people increasingly together in Him; even though the Church today, frankly, doesn't look all like that hot stuff, you know, in many places.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; I read a statistic recently: The average church in North America has 100 members. It is not big; it is not lavish; their facilities are not state-of-the-art. Churches look small. Most people say if you are looking for power and influence, go to Hollywood – go to Wall Street – go to Ottawa – go to Washington DC – go to Paris. Those are the citadels of power; and sometimes we in the Church hear that and kind of half believe it ourselves. It is like: Yeah, you know, we are just little old us Christians at the corner of Third Street and Main in Nowhereville, USA or Canada. We cannot get anything done. But God, through this passage reminds us: No, that is just how God gets things done. He hides the power of His Gospel, which is the biggest power in the universe for salvation, in the Church. So we should be encouraged. There are no unimportant people. There are no unimportant congregations. God is always elevating the lowly to do great things.

DAVE BAST

There is one last idea here that I think it would be good to close on: Another theme of Isaiah that occurs again and again; the importance of waiting – waiting for the Lord to finish His work. Don't judge too quickly who the great and the important ones are and who the poor and insignificant ones are. So God says in this passage finally: Those kings and those queens, I will make them bow at your feet and they will lick the dust beneath your feet; which sounds a little bit harsh; but there is a verse in the New Testament, in the book of Revelation, where God says to His poor suffering Church: Your enemies will come someday and bow before you and they will know that I have loved you. So Isaiah concludes:

^{24b}You will know that I am the Lord, and those who wait for Me shall not be put to shame. What a wonderful message that is for us to remember.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is a wonderful promise. Well, thank you for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we want to know how we can help you to continue digging deeper into the

scriptures. So visit groundworkonline.com and suggest topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.
**Correction: The audio of this program misstates the reference for this passage as chapter 6. The correct reference is Isaiah 49 verse 6.*

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