

Isaiah 49:3-6

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/isa/isa-49/isaiah-493-6/>

The second Servant Song of Isaiah continues as the LORD's Servant reveals a dialogue between Himself and the LORD where the Servant seems to lament that He failed to achieve His mission. The LORD consoles Him that He has not failed, and that it was too small a thing for Him to only redeem Israel—the Messiah's known mission—but that He will also redeem the nations unto the end of the earth.

This commentary is a continuation of the first message (Isaiah 49:1-6) within Isaiah's second *Servant Song* (Isaiah 49). It covers Isaiah 49:3-6.

The Conversation between the LORD and His Servant

After announcing to the Gentiles how *the LORD* “concealed” the *Servant's* identity and had *Him* hidden for a select purpose, the *Servant* shares a fascinating conversation between Himself and *the LORD* (Isaiah 49:1-2).

This conversation begins with *the LORD* boasting of *His Servant's* guaranteed success,

*He said to Me, “You are My Servant, Israel,
In Whom I will show My glory” (v 3).*

The LORD said to Me [the Servant]: “You are My Servant.” This is the first time this particular prophecy has explicitly referred to the Messiah as “*My Servant*.”

A *servant* is someone who does not act on his own will but the will of another. A *servant* puts others needs and desires above his own. Servants in the ancient world had limited liberty, if any at all. They were generally viewed as less important, even though they performed many of the tasks necessary for survival, or managed the business affairs which sustained their master and his way of life. Because they were deemed less important or appealing than their masters, they were often overlooked and ignored. A *servant's* occupation was often humble.

The reason *the LORD* called the Messiah “*My Servant*” was because the Messiah would perform *the LORD's* will and do the hard tasks the *LORD* assigned *Him* to do. The Messiah would serve *the LORD's* purpose and be accountable to Him.

The LORD names *His Servant*, “*Israel*.”

In Hebrew, the name *Israel* means “*God Prevails*.” *Israel* was the name that the angel of the LORD gave to *Jacob* after they wrestled together at Peniel (Genesis 32:24-32—especially Genesis 32:28). *Israel* was the name *Jacob's* descendants adopted. By calling *His Servant* “*Israel*,” *the LORD* appears to have been saying the achievements that *Israel* had been prophesied to accomplish would be accomplished or made possible by this Messianic *Servant*.

This verse also lends credence to the idea from Jewish tradition that the events of Israel's history prophetically apply to the Messiah, such as the Messiah being called out of Egypt (Matthew 2:14-15).

This reference to God's *Servant* as Israel is further explained when the LORD declares of *My Servant, Israel, in Whom I will show My glory*. *Glory* means someone or something's essence being visibly demonstrated (1 Corinthians 15:40-41). This boast also means that *the LORD* will both reveal *His glory* to *His Servant*, and that *His Servant* and the *Servant's* success will display *the LORD's glory* to others. Through *His Servant's* mission, everyone will see *Israel*—that “*God Prevails*.”

One of the primary missions of *the LORD's Servant* was to *restore Israel* and bring the children of *Jacob back* into harmony with *God*. This was widely believed about the Messiah within Jewish tradition:

- that He would be a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18); and
- a King like David (2 Samuel 7:12-13); and
- a priest like Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4).

It was not as widely known that the Messiah would also be a *Servant* among the Gentiles, like *Jacob's* exiled son, Joseph (Genesis 37:18-36, Genesis 39-50). This prophecy of Isaiah 49, and the other *Servant Songs* of Isaiah, make the point that the Messiah will be a *Servant* like Joseph, but without explicitly naming Joseph.

The main point of the LORD's boast: *You are My Servant, Israel, in Whom I will show My glory*, is that *the LORD* promises that *His Servant* will be the glorious champion who successfully finishes everything *the LORD* sent *Him* to accomplish. As a result of this amazing accomplishment, Jesus was given the name which is above every name (Philippians 2:9, Matthew 28:18, Revelation 3:21).

But next, *His Servant* seems to question *the LORD's* boastful declaration,

*But I said, "I have toiled in vain,
I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity (v 4a).*

The *Servant* responds to *the LORD*: *but I have toiled in vain*. The Hebrew word translated as *toiled* in this verse is: יָגַעַ (H3021—pronounced: “yaw-gah”). It means to grow weary, to completely exhaust or spend one's energies. The Hebrew word for vain is רִיקַ (H7385—pronounced “reek”). It describes a sense of failure and futility. It literally means “empty” or “to no purpose.” The *Servant* confides in *the LORD*: that He has exhausted Himself in pursuit of His calling, but has come up empty. There is *nothing* to show for His efforts.

He reiterates His apparent failure to *the LORD*: *I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity*.

The Hebrew word for vanity is: הֶבֶלַ (H1892—pronounced: “Hebel”). It means “vapor.” This word is a primary theme of Ecclesiastes, that trying to understand the world through our own

reason and experience is like trying to grab vapor (“hebel”)—it is a futile endeavor. The Messiah is perhaps lamenting the fleeting and perhaps short-lived, but now gone, opportunity to successfully redeem *Israel* and restore the reign of the throne of David during His earthly life.

The *Servant*'s confession to *the LORD* sounds more like a bitter defeat than a victory celebration. He tells *God*: *I have given every ounce of energy that I have had to fulfill the select task You called Me to, but I have come up empty. I have failed to successfully complete My mission.* This might be telling us that this was part of the prayer Jesus prayed in Gethsemene, when He agonized even to the point of death (Matthew 26:38).

At some point during the *Servant*'s quest to accomplish *the LORD*'s select tasks, the *Servant* appears to feel as though He has failed miserably in His task. The *Servant* does not specify which task He feels that He miscarried, but the context that follows seems to suggest that He felt as though He failed to accomplish the Messiah's primary objective which was to *raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel* (v 6).

God promised a Messiah that would restore the throne of David and establish it forever (2 Samuel 7:12-13). It was clear at the moment Jesus was awaiting His arrest, after Judas had betrayed Him, that this objective would not be met. So perhaps this Servant Song tells us the prayer Jesus prayed, pouring out His disappointment to His Father. We see something of His grief that Israel refused His offer in Jesus's lament over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37).

He felt as though His efforts came to *nothing and vanity*. With respect to the goal to have Israel accept His message and repent, that mission was vain. The only consolation that the Servant had for His toil was the truth that He spoke to Himself to salve His apparent defeat:

*Yet surely the justice due to Me is with the Lord,
And My reward with My God.*

Despite apparently failing to win the objective to redeem Israel politically, the Messiah knows that *the justice due Him is with the LORD*. He knows that *the LORD* knows *His Servant* was faithful and that He gave His all despite the undesirable outcome. He trusts that His *reward* will be attached to His faithfulness, not the results; results are up to God. Jesus conveys that same message to His servants in the book of Revelation (Revelation 1:1)—namely that He will greatly reward His servants who overcome failure, loss, rejection, and (perhaps) death by continuing to live faithfully (Revelation 3:21).

The *Servant* trusts *the LORD* to vindicate His toilsome efforts in His quest. He does not need to vindicate Himself or find approval from others. Even more than righteous Job, the *Servant* knew He was upright and faithful to what *the LORD* had *called Him* to do. Moreover, the Servant believes that His *reward is with His God*. Despite the apparent failure in the mission's external objectives, the *Servant* did not compromise. He did not scuttle the *LORD*'s plans or settle for a lesser trophy for His prize. He kept His eyes on the prize and did not waiver. His *reward* was in *the LORD*'s hands, and He trusted in His Father.

This reads as though the *Servant* had external goals that He hoped, perhaps even expected, to accomplish. When these results did not materialize how He hoped, He was naturally discouraged. But despite the disappointing outcome, the *Servant* was successful in His ultimate goal, which was to do the will of *the LORD* and to please Him.

Jesus knew He was going to suffer and die. He told His disciples as much (Matthew 16:21). However, it appears that Jesus began to speak in this manner after a certain time, as it became clear Israel was rejecting Him, as Matthew 16:21 states “from that time” Jesus began to prepare the disciples for His death and suffering. So perhaps Jesus, living as a dependent human, had hopes that Israel would accept Him, hopes that were dashed. This is possible since Jesus was fully God and fully human, so could know all things while setting aside His foreknowledge (Matthew 24:36, Philippians 2:6-7).

Even the Messianic *Servant of the LORD*, who was both divine and human, acted according to the three things humans can control,

- Who We Trust: The *Servant* trusted *the LORD*.
- Our Perspective: Rather than dwelling on the disappointing results, *the Servant* focused on

pleasing *the LORD*, and trusting His reward.

- Our Actions: The *Servant* did *the LORD*'s will, trusting that would be for His best.

Remarkably, even the Messianic *Servant*, who had the backing of *the LORD*, did not seek to control the outcome, the results. He did not seek to go beyond *the LORD*'s will to accomplish His important task, although it would have been easy to rationalize, because the fate of *Israel*, His people, was at stake. Rather, Jesus entrusted Himself and the outcome of His work completely to *God*. And Jesus followed *God*'s will.

If the Messiah did not seek to control or stake His identity on the outcome or results, neither should we. We should follow the *Servant*'s example in trusting *the LORD*, choosing *His* true perspective, and choose to take actions that follow *His* will for our lives.

This portion of the conversation aligns with the perspective of Jesus, the Messiah, in many ways,

“I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.”
(John 5:30)

“So Jesus said, ‘When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me. And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him.’”
(John 8:28-29)

“I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.”
(John 17:4)

“It is finished!”
(John 19:30b)

“Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”
(Hebrews 12:2)

“Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”
(Philippians 2:5b-8)

And like the *Servant of the LORD*, Jesus the Messiah’s *reward* was given *Him* from His *God* and Father,

“For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”
(Philippians 2:9-11)

Perhaps the most poignant way this portion of the prophetic dialogue between *the LORD* and *His Servant* relates to the life of the Messiah was when Jesus prayed to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-42, Mark 14:32-36, Luke 22:39-44).

Matthew wrote when Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane, He “began to be grieved and distressed” (Matthew 26:37). Jesus confided to His closest disciples: “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38). The reason Jesus was so distraught was that He knew the dreaded hour had come for *Him* to be delivered into the hands of His enemies who would ridicule, torture, and murder *Him* on a cross (Matthew 20:18-19).

Moreover, He knew His friends would soon abandon *Him* (Matthew 26:31). He knew one of them would deny knowing *Him* (Matthew 26:34). He knew another was in the process of betraying *Him* (Matthew 26:25). He knew He would suffer great humiliation, injustice, and be rejected by His people (Isaiah 53:3-4, 8). He knew He would be bearing the crushing weight of the sins of the world and be crushed by the LORD (Isaiah 53:10).

All of this grieved *Him* to the point of death.

From a human perspective, His human perspective, this Isaiah passage indicates that He felt as though He had failed miserably in accomplishing the task *the LORD* had *called Him* to do—which was *to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel* (v. 5). From

a human perspective, all He had to show for His toil was *nothing* but painful rejection and an excruciating death.

Jesus asked His Father to “remove this cup from Me” (Mark 14:36). Nevertheless, He entrusted His life’s work, His body, and even His death in His Father’s hands. Submitting to God, Jesus told His Father that He would not act according to His desires, but according to the Father’s plan (Luke 22:42).

Despite the intense feelings “to the point of death” (Matthew 26:37), Jesus listened to His emotions; investigated them according to His Father’s will; decided to obey His Father; and dismissed their misgivings.

The Gospels do not reveal what Jesus’s Father told *Him* in response. We only know that He sent an angel to minister to *Him* (Luke 22:43) and that His Father did not remove the cup of the cross that Jesus was to drink.

However, the next verses in this *Servant Song* may give us some indication of what the Father communicated to His pleading Son in the Garden of Gethsemane,

*And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant,
To bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him
(For I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
And My God is My strength) (v. 5).*

The LORD responds to *His Servant* who He sent to redeem *Israel*, and who is pleased with *His Servant*’s faithfulness in carrying out *the LORD*’s instructions. *His Servant* was honored in the sight of *the LORD*—even though He was rejected by everyone else (Isaiah 53:3-4, Matthew 27:22).

The phrase *And My God is My strength* could mean that either the power with which the *Servant* worked was from *God* or that His resolve was in *the LORD*. It could also mean both.

And then *the LORD* makes a remarkable statement,

*He says, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (v. 6).*

Notice what *the LORD* says to *His Servant*.

It is too small a thing to merely restore Israel. You will do much more than this. The idea seems to be that the Father tells Jesus “If you achieved the objective of restoring Israel now, it would be far too small an achievement—I have something much greater in store for You. I will also use You to redeem the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

In other words, take heart, *I will* use what is perceived to be *Your* failure to *restore Israel* and their shameful rejection of *You* as an opportunity to redeem the entire world—to *the end of the earth*. The Apostle Paul affirms this sentiment in his letter to the Romans (Romans 11:11).

It seems God is saying to Jesus that “*Israel’s* rejection of *You* and your humiliation will work to the Gentiles’ advantage and in the end—both will be redeemed!” It is possible that God revealed these words to Isaiah so that He could bring them to Jesus’s mind during His prayer in Gethsemane. It is also possible the Father spoke these words, or conveyed them through angels, even though they were recorded beforehand.

The Gentiles are the intended target for the *select arrow the LORD has hidden in His quiver*. It was for this reason that He concealed the identity of His Servant, so that He could use Israel’s rejection of the Messiah to bring *His salvation to the end of the earth*.

We mentioned earlier in this commentary how the apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians how this mystery has now been revealed in the time period after Jesus’s ascension into heaven (Ephesians 3:1-7). He elaborates on the revelation of the mystery of God’s plan to use Israel’s rejection of the Messiah to bring the gospel to the Gentiles in Romans 10:16-11:36,

“A partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written.”
(Romans 11:25b-26a)

Not only will *Israel* come to recognize and praise *You* as their Messiah, the Gentiles and the whole world will confess Jesus as their Messiah as well. *The Servant of the LORD* will serve and bless all the peoples of the earth.

The *Servant* knows that *the justice due to Me is with the Lord, and My reward with My God* (v. 4), even though this portion of the *Servant Song* does not describe what the *Servant’s reward will be*.

However, the first verse of the next section of this *Servant Song* does describe His reward,

“Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One,
To the despised One,
To the One abhorred by the nation,
To the Servant of rulers,
‘Kings will see and arise,
Princes will also bow down,
Because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You.’”
(Isaiah 49:7)

And so does the final verse of the fourth *Servant Song* describe the *Servant’s* reward.

“Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
And He will divide the booty with the strong;

Because He poured out Himself to death,
And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the transgressors.”
(Isaiah 53:12)

The theme of this promised reward is a crown of authority for faithfully suffering and serving. These refrains in Isaiah 49:7 and Isaiah 53:10-12 assure us that *the Servant* will be exalted for His faithfulness.

Paul admonishes the Philippian believers to choose the same mindset as that of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Philippians 2:5-11). Jesus chose to be “despising the shame” *He* was feeling, and do *His* Father’s will, looking to this promised *reward* (Hebrews 12:2). Here “despising” means simply “rejecting,” or “counting as unimportant.”

Paul exhorts each believer to choose this same road as Jesus. The result of choosing this same mindset is that it makes sense to choose to humbly serve and suffer now, for a much greater *reward* than anything we can gain on this *earth*. If we follow *God’s* will, then *God* will exalt us in His time (Matthew 20:27, 2 Timothy 2:12, James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:6).

Christ came first to serve (Matthew 20:28, Luke 22:42). Because of His faithful service He has been granted all authority, and given *the earth* as His *reward* (Matthew 28:20, Philippians 2:10, Hebrews 12:2).

Jesus offers us the same promise, and urges us to overcome temptation, even as He overcame (Revelation 3:21). We have been given a great example to follow, of the *Servant’s* mentality to faithfully serve *the LORD’s* will and entrust His *justice* and *reward* to Him. Also, we have the example to follow of Jesus’s submission to His Father’s will in the Garden of Gethsemane. These both are powerful examples for us to emulate as we strive to resist sin and temptation.

Finally, these last lines of verse 6 in the second “*Servant Song*” of Isaiah are quoted by the devout man, Simeon, when his old eyes saw the baby Jesus, the infant Messiah (Luke 2:25-35),

“For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
A Light of revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of Your people Israel.”
(Luke 2:30-32)

The expression “A light of revelation to the Gentiles” spoken by Simeon in Luke 2 is a paraphrase of: *I will also make You a light of the nations* from Isaiah 49:6.

The phrase that immediately follows the phrase *I will also make You a light of the nations* in Isaiah 49:6 are the words: *so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth*.

It is fascinating to consider how the Hebrew word that is translated as *salvation* in this verse is the same root word as the Hebrew name of the actual Messiah—Yeshua—Jesus. (The Hebrew word is יְשׁוּעָה—H3444: pronounced, “yesh-oo'-aw”). When Simeon said: “my eyes have seen Your salvation” (Luke 2:30), he was literally speaking “my eyes have seen Jesus.” The calling of the LORD’s *Servant* is to bring His *salvation to the end of the earth*, which is exactly what Jesus does. *Salvation* is His name. *Salvation* is Who Jesus is.

Biblical Text

**³ He said to Me, “You are My Servant, Israel,
In Whom I will show My glory.”**

**⁴ But I said, “I have toiled in vain,
I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity;
Yet surely the justice due to Me is with the Lord,
And My reward with My God.”**

**⁵ And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant,
To bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him
(For I am honored in the sight of the Lord,
And My God is My strength),**

**⁶ He says, “It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”**