

Isaiah 50:1-3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/isa/isa-50/isaiah-501-3/>

In this preface to Isaiah's third "Servant Song" the LORD chastises one generation of Israel from following the same adulterous and idolatrous sins of her mother (a previous generation of Israel). The LORD reminds the Israelites that He has the power to save them, even in the depths of their iniquities, and He also has the power to judge them.

Isaiah 50 begins with a bitter address to the faithless people of Israel from *the LORD*. It serves as a sort of prologue to Isaiah's third Servant Song (Isaiah 53:4-11):

Thus says the LORD (v 1)

The LORD addresses His people as a husband might speak to his adulterous wife or as a father might speak to his shamefully promiscuous daughter. *The LORD* asks the faithless people of Israel a series of rhetorical questions. The first question He asks is:

*Where is the certificate of divorce
By which I have sent your mother away?* (v 1)

The question is rhetorical, which means that there is only an implied response. The expected answer to *the LORD's* question is that *the certificate of divorce* is nowhere to be found.

This would mean that no *certificate of divorce* was given, and that the woman (God's covenant people) foolishly ran away from her loving husband (God) without one. This would mean she has no protection, and no legal station to gain protection by marrying someone else. This is consistent with Ezekiel 16, where God asserts that Israel is His wife who has committed adultery with every man (nation) walking by. And unlike a prostitute, who is paid, she pays them (Ezekiel 16:31-34). This refers to Israel/Judah adopting the exploitative pagan practices of other nations, to her own self-harm.

After continued unfaithfulness, God had removed His protection from Israel, and it was taken into exile by Assyria (2 Kings 17:22-23). Only Judah remained (2 Kings 17:18). But God did not forsake/divorce Israel—He promised to still redeem her. The northern kingdom of Israel could be the *mother* of which Isaiah speaks, as Israel was exiled some hundred and fifty years prior to Judah's exile. Israel was conquered and exiled in 722 BC, while Judah was conquered and exiled by Babylon in 586 BC.

God judged His disobedient people according to the terms of His covenant/treaty with them (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). He allowed His wife (His people Israel) to be placed into the exploitative "care" of her "lovers," who became her abusers (Ezekiel 16:37-39). But God makes clear that He will take Her back, meaning that He did not and will not divorce Her (Ezekiel 16:60-63, Romans 11:26, 29).

Under the Mosaic law, only a husband could *divorce* his wife. In ancient cultures, women found protection under the headship of a husband, or father, or other male family figure who could provide for her. But a husband could not leave his wife and stop providing for her unless he granted her a *certificate of divorce* (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). This *certificate* made her eligible to remarry and find protection and be provided for by another husband.

God asks, *Where is the certificate of divorce By which I have sent your mother away?* There is not one, so she is not eligible to find protection elsewhere. Where she sought protection, she found abuse.

Here *the LORD* seems to be asking the daughter of His wife, *where the certificate of divorce was, by which He sent her mother away.* If so, the LORD is talking to one generation of Israel (the daughter) about a previous generation (her *mother*), and *the LORD's* wife.

It appears that this daughter to whom *the LORD* is speaking is a later generation of Israel. This could equally refer to the people of the southern kingdom of Judah, who might have heard this prophecy prior to their exile, about the generation of Israel (the northern kingdom) which had already been exiled.

The context of this passage makes clear that the *mother* was faithless to her husband. This indicates how Israel was previously faithless to *the LORD*. Israel made a covenant vow at Mount Sinai to follow their covenant with God; they said "I Do" (Exodus 19:8). Now Israel had broken their vow, committing adultery.

What is also clear is that the promiscuous daughter to whom *the LORD* is speaking, is following in the same *iniquities* of her *mother*. This likely refers to a subsequent generation that had followed the example of the prior generation. The point seems to be that God had been patient, and sent prophets to urge repentance. But the nation had persisted—therefore it was now time for judgment to come upon them, according to the provisions of their covenant/treaty with their Husband/God (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

The awkward scenario appears to be similar to the faithlessness of Gomer to her husband Hosea the prophet, and the third child she bore—"Lo-ammi" (Hosea 1:8-9). The name "Lo-ammi" in Hebrew means "not my people" (Lo: "not"; ammi: "my people").

The next question *the LORD* asks concerns His wife's daughter.

Or to whom of My creditors did I sell you? (v 1)

This too is a rhetorical question. The implied answer is "None of them." *The LORD* acted as a good father should. *The LORD* did not *sell* the daughter of His unfaithful wife to any of His *creditors*. The meaning of this metaphorical expression is that *the LORD* did not make Israel worship false gods or put their trust in earthly kingdoms. They chose to do these wicked things of their own free will.

The LORD then states two tragic facts:

*Behold, you were sold for your iniquities,
And for your transgressions your mother was sent away. (v 1)*

Even though *the LORD* did not *sell* His possibly illegitimate daughter *away*, *behold*, she was *still sold*. The word, *behold*, indicates a sense of shock or surprise. Again, this implies that despite a loving father and being given every opportunity to live a good life with his blessing and protection, the daughter *sold* herself. She chose to be abused rather than to be cared for.

Moreover, it was for these same *transgressions* that *your mother was sent away*. *The LORD* says that the daughter or later generation of Israel was committing the same *iniquities* and *transgressions* of her *mother* (or previous generations of Israel). This is what is meant by the line: *And for your transgressions your mother was sent away*. The generation *the LORD* is speaking to has *sold* and prostituted herself *away* just its ancestors had.

This refers to these generations of Israel/Judah violating their covenant/treaty with God—a covenant that was akin to a marriage agreement.

In verse 2, *the LORD* asks the wayward child of Israel four additional rhetorical questions,

- *Why was there no man when I came?* (v 2)
- *When I called, why was there none to answer?* (v 2)
- *Is My hand so short that it cannot ransom?* (v 2)
- *Or have I no power to deliver?* (v 2)

The first two of these rhetorical questions are asking “Who protects you now?” The expected answer is “No one does”—that is *why there was no man when the LORD came* and that is *why there was none to give an answer when the LORD called out*,

“It is better to take refuge in the Lord
Than to trust in man.”
(Psalm 118:8)

These questions serve as a rebuke to the wayward daughter for leaving the perfect protection and blessing of *the LORD* in exchange for *no* protection or blessing. This daughter is like the son who ran away from home for a far off country, squandered his inheritance, and hired himself to feed pigs in Jesus’s “Parable of the Prodigal Son” (Luke 15:11-32).

The second pair of these rhetorical questions seem to ask the wayward daughter: “Why did you not ask Me, the LORD, for help?” *Is My hand so short that it cannot ransom? Or have I no power to deliver?* The expected answer to both questions is: “No.” *The LORD’s hand is not so short that He cannot reach us in our depravity to ransom us*. His arms are long enough to save us. And He does *have the power to deliver* us.

After describing His *power to deliver* and *ransom* Israel from the *transgressions* of her *mother*, *the LORD* also reminds the wayward daughter that He has the power to judge.

The word—*Behold*—separates *the LORD*'s rhetorical questions demonstrating His power to save and *deliver* from the examples He is about to give which demonstrate His *power to judge* and *rebuke*.

Seen in this light, *the LORD*'s final two rhetorical questions to the wayward daughter are an invitation to repent and receive His mercy rather than continue to suffer the consequences of her *iniquities* and face His judgement.

He explains His *power to judge* by means of three examples.

The first example *the LORD* gives demonstrating His *power to judge* is *I dry up the sea with My rebuke* (v 2b).

Here God asserts that at His rebuke of judgment, *the sea* dries up. This is a breathtaking display of *power*. But the wetness of *the sea* is in *the LORD*'s hands, because He made it. He has that kind of authority. And if the implication is that if *the LORD* can command *the sea* to *dry up* and it does so at His *rebuke*, then so too does He have the authority to judge His people. A prior generation had actually seen God do this, when He dried up the sea for Israel to escape from Egypt (Exodus 14:21-22). In spite of knowing God's power, they chose not to trust in Him.

Next, *the LORD* uses a similar example to demonstrate His *power to judge* His people,

*I make the rivers a wilderness;
Their fish stink for lack of water
And die of thirst.* (v 2b)

Just as the LORD can rebuke the sea to become dry, so too can He make the rivers into a dry desert wilderness. The *fish die* because they have no *water*. What were once life-giving *rivers* teeming with *fish* are now *dry wilderness*. The only evidence of its former glory is the *stink* rising from all the dead *fish*. One of the consequences of disobedience to Israel's covenant/treaty with God was famine (Deuteronomy 28:23-24). God sent famine in order to wake up His people, that they might turn to Him, but they refused (Amos 4:7-8).

This image also suggests that all our blessings not only come from *the LORD* (James 1:17), but they also have their proper place in Him (Colossians 1:17). Moreover, even the very best things in life become barren wastelands that stink *instead* of producing additional blessing, when they are separated from their Creator and His good design. This is why Jesus tells us to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

Finally, *the LORD* uses a third example to demonstrate His *power to judge* His people,

*I clothe the heavens with blackness
And make sackcloth their covering.* (v 3)

Here *the LORD* says that He can blot out *the heavens* (i.e. the sun, the moon, and stars) with blackness. He will do this by putting a curtain of *sackcloth* over *the heavens*. In ancient Israel,

sackcloth was the attire of mourners. The expression “*sackcloth* and ashes,” is what someone wears during a period of mourning the death of a loved one. The ashes blackens their appearance.

In using this imagery, *the LORD* once again shows His mighty *power* to judge. But the image also suggests a sense of deep mourning and regret over the outcome. Those who experience the LORD’s judgment will be mournful, like those who mourn the dead. Perhaps a parallel idea to this image from the New Testament is the expression: “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This expression describes sorrow (weeping) and bitterness or anger (gnashing). It is often used in Jesus’s parables when He describes those who have been banished to the outer darkness (Matthew 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30, Luke 13:28).

These three verses at the beginning of Isaiah 50, serve as a sort of preface or prologue to the rest of Isaiah 50, which is the third Servant Song of his prophetic book (Isaiah 50:4-11). The Servant is the Messiah Whom *the LORD* will send to *ransom* Israel in her *transgressions*. Jesus is this Servant Messiah, who first comes to ransom and *deliver* not only the people of Israel, but every nation (Isaiah 49:6, Philippians 2:10-11).

That God will deliver His people fits with the theme that God never divorced His people; He will ultimately redeem them. But Israel appears to be a metaphor for all peoples, as God will redeem the entire world, for all who believe (John 3:16). This was Jesus’s first advent to earth, where He came to serve, and suffered that we might live (Matthew 20:28).

But Jesus will come to earth again, a second time, to *rebuke* and judge (Revelation 19:11-16).

The third Servant Song of Isaiah begins in earnest with the next verse of the chapter.

Biblical Text

**Thus says the LORD,
“Where is the certificate of divorce
By which I have sent your mother away?
Or to whom of My creditors did I sell you?
Behold, you were sold for your iniquities,
And for your transgressions your mother was sent away.
2 “Why was there no man when I came?
When I called, why was there none to answer?
Is My hand so short that it cannot ransom?
Or have I no power to deliver?
Behold, I dry up the sea with My rebuke,
I make the rivers a wilderness;
Their fish stink for lack of water
And die of thirst.
3 “I clothe the heavens with blackness
And make sackcloth their covering.”**