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# Isaiah Series 2

## Lesson 12

### “Isaiah 49:8-26”

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**Objective** - To understand the meaning of specified passage from Isaiah for both the original audience, and what it came to mean to those that came later; especially to the Jews of the first century A. D. The passages were specifically selected because of their usage in the Gospel of Mark, either as direct quotes, or as allusions. The goal is to understand this material better in its original context, to its original audience, and in the fall to be able to examine the Gospel of Mark with a better understanding of the role of Isaiah in the theology of that Gospel and of the church.

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**Materials** - Commentaries, Journal articles, Targums, Books.

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**Procedures**

1. We will seek to set the basic background for the writing of the book of Isaiah.
2. Choose the texts that are applicable to Mark's Gospel.
3. Translate those texts from the Masoretic Text, with reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Targum of Isaiah.
4. I will search commentaries, journal articles, and books for understanding of these texts both to their original audience and to later Judaism, especially the Judaism of the 1st century A. D. and the early church.

<sup>8</sup> Thus says Yahweh, “In a time of pleasure I answered you, on a day of salvation I helped you; and I kept you and gave you for a covenant people to establish the land, to take as a possession the desolate property. <sup>9</sup> You will say to the prisoners ‘come out’ to those which are in darkness, ‘reveal yourselves.’ Upon the highways they will graze and on every bare height they will find pasture. <sup>10</sup> They will not be hungry and they will not be thirsty, nor will the scorching heat smite, or the sun smite, for the one having compassion on them will lead them and by springs of water they will continue the journey. <sup>11</sup> I will set on every mountain a road and my highways will be exalted. <sup>12</sup> Behold these from afar will come, and behold these from the north, and west and these from the land of Sinim. <sup>13</sup> Shout for joy, O heavens, and rejoice O earth, be joyful O mountains, a ringing cry, for Yahweh has comforted his people, and he will have compassion on his afflicted.” <sup>14</sup> But Zion said, “Yahweh has abandoned me, and the Lord has forgotten me.” <sup>15</sup> Can a woman forget her nursing child; from compassion the son of her belly also these may forget, but I myself will not forget you. <sup>16</sup> Behold, upon the palm of my hand I carved you; your walls are in

front of me continually. <sup>17</sup> Your sons make haste back, the ones destroying you and the ones causing your desolation from you depart. <sup>18</sup> Lift up your eyes all around and see; all of them assemble, they all come to you. As I am living, says Yahweh, “all of them as ornaments you will put on, you will bind them on like a bride.” <sup>19</sup> Yea your waste and your desolated places and the ruined land; surely you will too small for now the inhabitants, and they will be the ones who swallowed you up, they will be far away. <sup>20</sup> Still they will say in time, to your ear, the sons of your bereavement, I am cramped in this place, draw near to me so I can dwell. <sup>21</sup> And you will say in your heart who brought forth to me these, I was bereft of children and barren, and degenerate and these who has raised them, behold I was left alone, where did these children come from? <sup>22</sup> Thus said the Lord Yahweh, “behold I will raise my hand toward the nations and to the peoples I will cause to be exalted my standard, and your sons, they will be caused to come in the bosom, and your daughters will be carried upon the shoulder. <sup>23</sup> And kings will become your foster fathers, and queens will become their nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground they will lick the

**dirt on your feet: And you will know that I am Yahweh, the one who waits will not be ashamed. <sup>24</sup> Can prey be taken from a mighty warrior, or can captives be rescued from a righteous one.” <sup>25</sup> Thus says Yahweh, “even the captives of the mighty they will be caused to be seized and the prey of the tyrant will be delivered, and your adversary, I will contend with those who contend with you, your son I will save.” <sup>26</sup> I will cause your oppressors to eat their own flesh, and as sweet wine, on their blood they will become drunk and all flesh will know that I am Yahweh coming to your assistance and acting as your kinsman redeemer, the mighty one of Jacob.**

We once again in this section find ourselves dealing with one of the servant oracles of Isaiah. As with the other servant oracles of Isaiah the Hebrew here in this section is extremely challenging and as you go through I would recommend careful attention to the readings as they can vary considerably from one translation to another with some going to great lengths in emending the text in order to get it to have a meaning that the translator finds acceptable. Sometimes this is done with the aid of textual evidence from the Qumran scrolls, at other times it is done without any textual evidence, but in an effort to

understand the anticipated intent of the author. Even where to split this chapter into sections is disputed. We choose to begin our work with verse 8 and since there is such tremendous variety and disagreement in the various interpretations of this section we will try to retain a more literal approach to the text. This will at times create unique problems as what is said will seem vague and sometimes even not make clear sense. I will refer at times to the Targum that smooths out these interpretive difficulties and reads much clearer than the Hebrew text. Sometimes this will add clarity, but leave us wondering if this was really the meaning intended, but at other times it seems likely that the information from the Targum aids in clarifying the intent of the prophet.

This oracle, that begins at verse 8, further describes the role of the servant in the new exodus of God's chosen people. The phrase "I have ... appointed you a covenant for the people," is the phrase that provides the crucial link from this servant song to the first servant song. The mission of the servant in chapter 49 is a continuation of the mission originally given to the servant, Israel: to be a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind and to release prisoners from

darkness. However, there is expansion of the servant's task in chapter 49 as a part of that task is the restoration of the land (verse 8) and the gathering of the those scattered in the diaspora (verse 12). These are themes that are closely allied with the new exodus. It should be made clear that the extension of the servant's role as described in chapter 49 is not an attempt to replace an earlier corporate understanding of the servant Israel with that of an individual prophetic figure. Rather the idea here is that the servant always remains Israel, but Israel is now understood within the dynamic movement of prophetic history as embodied in a suffering, individual figure who has been divinely commissioned to the selfsame task of the deliverance of the chosen people, and the nations at large.<sup>1</sup>

In this oracle, beginning at verse 8, Yahweh speaks again to his servant assuring the servant support, and solidarity. The accent here is not upon support, but upon the assignment of the servant. The servant is to be "a covenant" as in 42:6. The sense of the phrase is not totally clear but it appears to indicate a powerful agent and

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<sup>1</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, in The Old Testament Library series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 386-387.


partner in the practice of loyal solidarity that makes a new future possible. The servant as “covenant” is empowered to speak: the text here uses two imperative verbs; to the prisoners, the servant is to give the command to “come out.” To those who are in darkness, the servant is to command “appear” (verse 9a). If these are both taken as images of exile, and the despair that results from exile, then the verbs are intended as countermeasures to that despair. At verse 9 the verb “come out” (אֲצִיֵּץ) is an exodus verb asking the Babylonian exiles to leave the thralldom of Babylon in a manner reminiscent of their ancestors leaving Exodus (cf. Isaiah 52:11). It is easy to imagine that over time the sense of distinctiveness has eroded among those taken into exile in Babylon. Israel had begun to lose its purpose, its hope, and its sense of possibilities. The task of the servant is to enliven the exilic community with a renewed intentionality and courage that will ultimately lead to a new exodus and a homecoming, a life outside the contours of the empire.<sup>2</sup>

This same language speaks to us today as the covenant people of God who are in exile in this age and the temptation is strong for us

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, in the Westminster Bible Companion series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 113-114.





to assimilate to the standards of our Babylon, our world culture. One of the amazing historical facts is that Israel has been able to retain distinctiveness as a people across the face of the world. Not matter what country, or period of history, they have retained distinctiveness. The impetus for many returning to the nation of Israel today still comes from the power of the words of Isaiah who continues to call people to fulfill the will of God. Their hope is that in their obedience they will bring about a new era, a new world order. This ancient call was one that inspired the church and can be seen powerfully in the writings of Paul as they anticipated the intervention of God into history. Isaiah calls those who would be the servant of God to follow in obedience and distinctiveness and thus to stand out from the throngs of the nations as a beacon, as a city set upon a hill. All of this call seems to be set against the backdrop of a people currently in exile. This vision perhaps should challenge us to see our current existence as being a people still in exile, and yet called out of that exile into a new existence, a new exodus.


All the fearful things that would be encountered by a people contemplating an exodus back to Jerusalem are touched on in the

next few verses. At verse 10 we are informed that they will not hunger, or thirst, and the scorching heat will not strike them down. They will be guided back by springs of water and those roads that are blocked by mountains will be no obstacle as the valleys and mountains will be flattened, and roads that are flat and easy will be constructed. This will be a journey that is blessed by the preparations and the care of God along the way. The flock will be cared for because the shepherd, that is not named here, will care for them and guide them along the way. The language here echoes the assurance of 40:11<sup>3</sup> and of course it calls to the mind Psalm 23. The scattered are in a great many places, but they will be gathered (verse 12).<sup>4</sup> In the context of these words it is easy to see how they continue to apply to the church as we are called out of our exile, to be freed from our dreariness and lack of hope into a new reality with renewed and fresh hopes. We are called to a new exodus too, and the assurances given to ancient Israel still resonate with us today. We are called to retain our distinctiveness, to be God's own people to be his serving

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<sup>3</sup> **11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.** NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 114.



agent in the world bringing light into the darkness and release to the prisoners as the covenant people of Yahweh.

As we move now to the next section we are confronted with a series of brief utterances with a variety of literary forms and modes of speech. Through all of this variation, however, there is a constancy of theme: the faithfulness of Yahweh will bring an end to exile and that same faithfulness will empower Israel's return to Jerusalem, it will be the impetus for the new exodus as it was for the old exodus. This section begins with a hymnic affirmation (verse 13), followed by an expression of doubt on the part of Zion at verse 14. In verses 15-18 Yahweh seeks to override the doubt of Zion. The hymnic affirmation comes in the characteristic style of hymns (lines 1 and 2) and the *reason* in the next lines (lines 3 and 4). The summons comes in order that the whole cosmos might sing the praise of Yahweh. The reason for the praise, Yahweh has "comforted" and had "compassion" on Israel. The cosmos is then to celebrate the comforting of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

The affirmation evokes doubt on the part of Israel with accusations that Yahweh has forsaken Zion. It is here, in this section,

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 115.

that we find one of the most clearly maternal expressions, in Scripture, of Yahweh for Zion. Zion feels distraught with feelings of grief, helplessness and loss (verse 14). However, the response of Yahweh takes up a reminder based in the maternal feelings of a mother for a nursing child. The complaint and oracle here are grounded in the painful realities of exilic life that appear to be glossed over by the hymnic section of this oracle. The retort here of Yahweh asks the question about whether a mother can forget her nursing child with the clear expectation that answer is of course not. Yahweh does not stop here though because as news reports of our own day make all too clear sometimes mothers are cruel in their treatment even of their suckling children. Despite even this rare forgetfulness on the part of mothers, the devotion of Yahweh is stronger and more assured than even that of a mother for her child. Even though mothers may forget Yahweh will not forget.<sup>6</sup>

The text here then imparts in verses 16-17 into a language phenomenon known as paronomasia. This is a type of pun that refers to two, or more, meanings using word play. An example of this

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<sup>6</sup> Kathryn L. Roberts, "Between Text and Sermon. Isaiah 49:14-18," *Interpretation* 57 (2003), pp. 58-60.

type of thing can be seen in the account of the harlot Rahab. The name Rahab refers both to the mythical monster of chaos (Isaiah 51:9) and to the historical Egypt (another example of this type of word play can be seen in Exodus 2:10 in the Hebrew text). Rahab is then a reference both to the Exodus deliverance and to the conquering of chaos in creation. In Isaiah 49:16-17 there are a whole series of such two-dimensional words used.<sup>7</sup> It is virtually impossible for us to bring out the full nuance of these word plays in every instance as many of them only make sense in that original language and then only with some knowledge of the history of that word. For us, I think it is important that we are aware that this is going on and that sometimes the difficulty that we have in understanding the word choices of the prophet are related to this phenomenon. Such instances are not often critical to us in the understanding of the text but they certainly affect the depth and color of what we gain from the passage.

At verse 16 there is the imagery of the Zion engraved upon the hands of Yahweh so that he can never forget their plight. Some think

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<sup>7</sup> Islwyn Blythin, "A Note on Isaiah xlix 16-17," *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (1966), pp. 229-230.

that this imagery refers to the plan of the rebuilt city which is engraved upon the Divine hands and so it cannot be forgotten.<sup>8</sup>

Blythin relates this to imagery such as that which is used in Canticles 8:10 (Song of Solomon). The idea is not only that the name of Zion is graven upon the hands of Yahweh but also that the image of Zion is branded upon the mind of Yahweh.<sup>9</sup> For us this image is perhaps subtle but it tapped into powerful, visionary elements for the Jewish people in captivity and provides additional force to this already powerful imagery. Verse 17 is a difficult verse to translate and we find in the Targum, “They hasten, *they build your ruins*, those who *razed you* and those who laid waste *go away from you into exile*.”<sup>10</sup>


Two themes are artfully intertwined here in verse 17 and 18. The return of the children and the rebuilding of the walls. Some have even argued that in the Hebrew the consonants *bnyk* (verse 17 בְּנִיךְ) indicate a double reading is to be retained. By changing the vowel pointing of these Hebrew consonants you can have either “sons” and

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<sup>8</sup> I. W. Slotki and A. J. Rosenberg, *Isaiah*, in the Soncino Books of the Bible, Revised second edition (London, The Soncino Press, 1983), p. 243.

<sup>9</sup> Islwyn Blythin, “A Note on Isaiah xlix 16-17,” *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (1966), pp. 229-230.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum*, The Aramaic Bible, Volume 11 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 97.




the reading that is found in the Old Greek translation and Qumran, which reads this word as “builders.” The reference to children returning continues in the later verses so it is the most likely primary reading here.<sup>11</sup>

It must be remembered that there are no vowels written in the Hebrew text. The vowels that we currently use to determine one word from another were added by the Masoretes. They did their work between the 6th and 10th century A.D. They were a group of scribe scholars who added the vowels and other markings to the text, they were also largely responsible for the preservation of the Hebrew text that we use to translate our English Bibles. They are the ones who devised the vowel system that is still widely used today as well as other symbols that have to do with cantillation. They were extremely skilled, but there are times when the decision that they made with regard to the text cuts a very fine line. At times they were aware that even the consonants in the Hebrew text were wrong and rather than correct this they would put a notation in the margin to tell those that read the text that they should read the corrected

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<sup>11</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah A Commentary*, p. 392.




version, but they never altered the consonants in the written text. It is like knowing that a word is not spelled correctly but being unwilling to correct it because the consonants were considered sacred.

Making the decision about the vowels also takes away some of the subtle meaning such as that which we spoke of earlier with regard to whether the text should read “sons,” or “builders.” Without the vowels both words could easily come into the mind of the reader, sort of like a pun. In this way the author would be able to convey a connection between sons and builders that would call for questions from those reading the text. We prefer to have things either, or, but sometimes there is real power in the both, and, allowing more meaning, depth and texture to be conveyed than with the more simplistic idea.

At verse 19 we come to the image of a deserted and desolate Jerusalem: this serves as the ultimate image of judgment. The uninhabited city acts as a stark beacon of the judgment that has been brought upon Jerusalem. The language here characterizes Jerusalem when the exiles are absent. In a very swift and stark reversal, verse 20 indicates that the place that was so sparsely populated is now






crowded, cramped, and overflowing. These verses play on this contrast and there is a reference here to the basic creative directive of Genesis to be fruitful and multiply. The power of Yahweh's blessing brings this about. The exile had seemed to be a termination of the blessings and promises of Yahweh and yet here we see that it is not so. Israel will be dazzled with their multiplication. Those who felt forsaken and abandoned have been blessed through the compassion of Yahweh and they are reminded that they have not been forgotten.<sup>12</sup> Even today in Israel there is a quest on the part of the Hasidic Jews to be fruitful and multiply. In this, they see their calling and inspiration from God and they also see that having large numbers of children is an affirmation of the blessing of God.

At verse 22 the imagery changes slightly: the imagery shifts to the children already born in the diaspora. Those in the diaspora have become war booty, cheap labor, slaves. It appears that they have no future and that they will just merge into the woodwork of the larger empire. Such is not the case as Yahweh will raise his signal to the people and the kings, the rulers of the nations answer the signal of

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 117.




Yahweh and release their captives in submissive deference and they gladly send the Jews on their way back to Jerusalem. There is almost here a flavor of the Exodus when God gave the Jews favor in the eyes of the Egyptians and they gave treasures to the departing Jews. God controls not just Israel, but the nations. In the poetry here there is imagined this great flood of exiles returning home and the kings and queens of the nations will bow down and lick the the dust of the feet of the Jews. Verses 22—23 seem to indicate that the nations yield their captives willingly, verses 24-25 however, indicate that at least some are reluctant. The losing of these captives would bring shame and financial hardship upon their nations.<sup>13</sup>

At verse 24 the question is asked regarding whether the prey can be taken from the mighty, or the captives rescued from the tyrant. In verse 25 Yahweh answers this question and indicates that they have no choice because he will contend with those who contend with the Jews and he promises that he will save their children. In verse 26 he indicates that their oppressors will be forced to eat their own flesh and that they will be drunk from drinking their own blood.

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 118.




These are powerful images indicating that these oppressive tyrants have no choice in this matter. The sovereignty of Yahweh once more comes powerfully into view and there is the indication that all flesh will know that Yahweh is Israel's Savior, and Redeemer. No one can stand against Yahweh. His will, will be done.

This is a powerful oracle calling upon Israel to be faithful to Yahweh and challenging them not to give up hope in their time of despair and desperation, but to recognize that Yahweh would keep his promise. They are given hope in the midst of their despair and promised a bright future in the midst of darkness. Exile is not the end for the servant of Yahweh. It is out of the deep darkness and despair of exile that the brilliant light of Yahweh's calling and power shine even more brightly by contrast. For those who wait upon Yahweh the future is glorious and bright.

# Synopsis

In this oracle we once again find the imagery of the servant of Yahweh. We find a connection between this servant oracle and that one previously given. In this oracle, there are additional things revealed about the mission of God's servant Israel. They are to be a covenant people to establish the land and they are to call the prisoners out of the darkness also there will be an indication that God will call those who have been dispersed among the nations. There is here an indication that Yahweh is calling his people to leave their exile and he promises them that he will prepare their path of return. They will not perish along the way, there is no need to be afraid of the hardships of the journey. God provides comfort to his people.

Even in the midst of the comforts of this oracle there is the indication that human nature is very much at work doubting and complaining. The faithlessness and arrogance of the people is seen in their accusations against Yahweh, but he answers their charges giving them assurance and comfort even in the midst of their arrogance. He indicates that he has carved them on the palm of his hand and that



the image of the walls of Zion are continually in his mind. He also indicates that even though they may be small in number when they return they will be blessed, and they will greatly multiply in the land.

There is also in this section the promise that Yahweh will bring exiles from the nations and some of the kings will be favorable to the Jews, but others will try to defy Yahweh and he will contend with them causing them to eat their own flesh and become drunk on their own blood. We are once again reminded that Yahweh is the kinsman redeemer of Israel. Those who trust in Yahweh will not be disappointed and not only will Israel come to know that Yahweh is their redeemer, but so will all flesh. This is a powerful and moving oracle that calls the people of Israel to a new exodus. It calls for them to leave behind the comfort and security of their exile, along with its despair and hopelessness, and to trust in Yahweh. If they will trust in Yahweh they are promised a bright and amazing future, blessed by God.

# Questions

1. What do you think it means for Yahweh to answer Israel in a time of his pleasure (verse 8)?
2. How do you think God interacts with history?
3. Why do you think God is concerned about the prisoners that are in darkness?
4. What is the scariest trip that you have ever been on? Why was it frightening?
5. Have there been times when you stepped out in faith and followed God even when you were afraid? Why, or why not?
6. Have you ever complained to God? What was the result?
7. What are some ways that you think the church is being called to follow God today that are counter to the world culture?
8. Do you think God still causes nations to be faithful toward Israel today? Why, or why not?
9. Do you think the promises that are made here still hold true for the Jews today? Why, or why not?
10. Why do you think Yahweh is so harsh with the oppressors of his people?
11. What do you think it means for Yahweh to act as the kinsman redeemer of Israel?
12. When would a kinsman redeemer not redeem their kin?
13. What message do these words bring to your mind today?