

## Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

### D. Dissolution and Restoration

#### 12. The Messianic Hope

The complete restoration of God's people required much more than leaders such as Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel could accomplish in their lifetimes. It required a Messiah. Hence our topic today: The Messianic Hope.

Looking back at the Old Testament, as we can't help but do from the perspective of people who live after the incarnation of Jesus Christ and all that the New Testament says about his identity and purpose, it is difficult to put ourselves into the shoes of those who lived before Jesus. And we might wonder to what extent they expected someone like him—not just someone anointed for a special purpose, but a particular anointed one, a Messiah who would be the ultimate savior and leader of God's people and bring them to a time of greater blessings than they had ever experienced to this point.

The biblical evidence is that this expectation was well-developed before Jesus began his ministry. When John the Baptist began to preach, he was asked about who he was. John knew that question was really about whether or not he was claiming to be the Messiah, so he immediately denied that he was the one they were looking for (John 1:20).

And it wasn't only the Jews that were looking for the Messiah; so were the Samaritans, whose religion had some things in common with that of the Jews. The Samaritan woman whom Jesus engaged in conversation by a well in Samaria expressed her confidence that the Messiah, when he came, would clear up all the confusion surrounding worship practices (John 4:25).

By this time, the expectation of a coming Messiah had been growing for many years. We'll look in a few minutes at what some of Israel's prophets said about the messianic hope, but first, let's take a look at earlier biblical hints of a coming Messiah.

Already in the time of Adam and Eve, God had promised that a seed of the woman would deal a death blow to the serpent who successfully tempted Adam and Eve to sin (Gen. 3:15). And thereafter we see in the biblical story, repeated instances in which God exercises his sovereign control in order to ensure the survival of the line that eventually resulted in the birth of Jesus.

One of the first things God did was raise up Seth to take the place of the murdered Abel. Centuries later, he preserved alive Noah and his family in the midst of worldwide destruction. Next, God singled out Abraham and Sarah as the couple whose descendants would be made into a nation, given a land, and used to bless the whole world. After that promise, the whole story of the patriarchs is the story of God repeatedly performing his miracles to ensure the birth and then the survival of the Messiah's ancestral line.

And the miracles continued with Israel's deliverance from Egyptian slavery through the agency of Moses. Furthermore, as God told Moses, *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him* (Deut. 18:18-19). The context makes clear that Moses would have not only one successor, but that God would actually raise up a series of prophets like Moses.

This series of prophets would usher Israel into its homeland and give the people guidance on how to please God there. And they would continue their all too frustrating task throughout Israel's loss of that homeland because of disobedience, and their restoration by the grace of God. It was in these latter days especially that the Messianic expectation became stronger. Since not even the best prophets of Israel were able to adequately address the problem of Israel's disobedience, it became increasingly clear that a unique Messiah would be needed, one who could really help Israel become all that God intended it to be.

The prophet Isaiah is as clear as any Old Testament writer on the messianic hope. Among other places he does this in four songs or poems that deal with someone called the Servant of Yahweh. Follow along in your Bible as I read and make comments. Isa 42:1-7 is the first Servant Song: *Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.*" This is what God the LORD says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Notice several points about this Servant of Yahweh:

- He has a relationship with God; God calls him "my" servant. That means that God's strength and power "uphold" him. This divine support is especially necessary where identification with God results in suffering.
- He is chosen by God and the object of his affection. God's delight is not limited to the act of choosing; it's not a one-time or temporary thing, but continues throughout the life of the servant. And God's choice of the servant is the foundation for his honorable position and the faithful performance of his task.
- The servant is enabled. This is by the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit's gifts can involve many things. Micah 3:8 says this: *But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin.* According to Isa.11 the gift of the Spirit entails wisdom and understanding, counsel and power, and knowledge and the fear of the Lord. All of these things are characteristic of the age of salvation and result in obedience to God and a direct relationship with him.
- The servant is anointed. "Anoint" occurs throughout the Scriptures in connection with induction into office, as eg. happened with kings and prophets.
- The Servant is sent; his mission is to be a covenant for the people (i.e. God's people) and to be a light and to bring justice to the nations—i.e. to help the nations live under the rule of God.

I'll come back to say more about this first Servant Song. But first, let's take a look at the second passage (Isaiah 49:1-13). Isaiah speaks in the first person, as if he were this special servant. Listen as I read to see if you think he's talking about himself or someone else.

- <sup>1</sup>*Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name.* As in the first passage we looked at, the servant is called, set apart, chosen, elected. It is the first step; nothing can begin prior to the calling of God or contrary to it. God's call begins it all.
- <sup>2</sup>*He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.* The servant gets weapons or rather is made into a weapon—his mouth like a sharpened sword, he becomes a polished arrow. In other words, this servant is given the necessary strength for his work. And that work is to become a vehicle for the Word of God, before which everything is exposed.
- <sup>3</sup>*He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."* V. 5 continues this theme of honor; here the servant says, *"I am honored in the eyes of the Lord.* Also v.7: <sup>7</sup>*This is what the LORD says — the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel — to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: "Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."* There's honor for the servant...at least sometimes.
- But not always, because, the servant gets discouraged by the opposition: <sup>4</sup>*But I said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God."* He's discouraged; even so, he confesses has sure confidence in God even in the midst of this: "God is my reward; I will trust in him."
- Now, as to the specifics of the job that God has given the servant: <sup>5</sup>*And now the LORD says — he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength —* <sup>6</sup>*he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."*
- *"He who formed me in his womb to be his servant"* – this refers again to God's choosing. And what is the task? To restore Israel, for one thing. This is the very thing God called all his Old Testament prophets to do—to keep his people faithful, yes, but more often to call them back to faithfulness. But the job is bigger than this. That job of restoring Israel is too small. "It's too small a thing for you to recall Israel to faithfulness. Not too easy a thing; that's not what God says. But too small a thing. Salvation is bigger than that: God wants his light to go to the Gentiles, his salvation to the ends of the earth.

The next verses flesh out what this salvation looks like:

- <sup>8</sup>*This is what the LORD says: "In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances,* (Salvation is a home, a resting place for God's people, a place without invaders where they can kick off their shoes and put their feet up, where they can provide for their families without fear of being driven away or having their land seized by corrupt officials.
- <sup>9</sup>*to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'* Salvation is freedom from captivity, release from prison, no more dark holes and dirty cells and enforced labor. It is freedom to move around, freedom to go home. It's also a light in the darkness, dispelling shadowy fears and helping people to see where to go, helping them to see how to avoid stumbling.

- <sup>9</sup>...*"They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill. <sup>10</sup>They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water. <sup>11</sup>I will turn all my mountains into roads, and my highways will be raised up. <sup>12</sup>See, they will come from afar — some from the north, some from the west, some from the region of Aswan."* Salvation is food and water and shade. It is absence of hunger and thirst and heat stroke. It is leadership through hard places; it is clear paths.
- <sup>13</sup>*Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.* Salvation is comfort in affliction.

That's the first two Servant Songs. But let me stop here to ask a question. Who do you think Isaiah is talking about? Who is this servant of the Lord?

Well, we're talking about the messianic hope, so it must be the Messiah, right? But not so fast. Could the servant be more than one person? We must remember that often the OT prophecies have multiple fulfillments. And if they do, then we cannot understand the fullness of their meaning unless we understand the intermediate fulfillments.

Where we have to begin is with Abraham and his descendants. Actually, God worked with particular servants before the time of Abraham, but it's on Abraham and his descendants, physical and spiritual that the whole Bible focuses. God called Abraham and his descendants into a special relationship with himself. He chose Abraham, just as Isaiah says the servant was chosen. And God enabled Abraham, made him his partner. He made a covenant with him in which he guaranteed not only his own commitments to Abraham, but Abraham's to himself. (I'll expand on this in the lecture: "Our Covenanting God.")

And what God promised to do for Abraham and his descendants – give them a home where they could live at peace and in fellowship with God, he also wanted them to be instrumental in helping the rest of the world to experience. As they lived in the blessed state to which God was calling them, they would be a witness to the surrounding nations who would then say, "We want some of that."

That's the very thing did happen in small ways: When some of the Egyptians joined the Israelites as they left Egypt. And when Rahab of Jericho threw her lot in with Israel. And when Ruth the Moabite left her home and family and religion to accompany Naomi to Israel where she could serve Yahweh. And so on!

But, alas, such things happened all too infrequently. Too often it went the other way as Israel turned its back on Yahweh to serve other gods. And then was brought to repentance... And then relapsed... And then repeated the cycle, in the end getting kicked out of the Promised Land and sent into exile. Israel, as a whole clearly failed as God's servant.

But God always maintained a remnant of the faithful. Some of them we know by name, people like Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David (at the best of times), the prophets of Israel like Elijah and Isaiah and Ezekiel, and many others who preached to God's people, telling them to repent of their sin and come back to God. And many we don't know by name, like the 7000 in Israel whom God told Elijah had not bowed to Baal. Those included in the remnant of righteous Israel lived lives of integrity and worked for justice.

The righteous remnant certainly has many characteristics of the Servant of Yahweh of whom Isaiah speaks. Even so, the members of this righteous community weren't all that successful in their mission. And, with a few exceptions, the Gentiles (the nations of the world) apparently didn't benefit much from their ministry. So, while the righteous people of Israel were indeed servants of Yahweh, what Isaiah says in the Servant Songs applies only incompletely to them.

And that's why that righteous remnant kept looking for a more complete fulfillment in a Messiah to come. They wanted more. As the book of Hebrews puts it (Heb. 11:13,16), They "were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance...They were longing for a better country, a heavenly one." Not in the sense of an other-worldly experience, but a this-worldly experience of life lived in fellowship with their creator as he had intended from the beginning of time.

Much more can be said about the Messianic hope in the Old Testament—far more than we have time for here. The last two Servant Songs flesh it out a little more. The third song (Isaiah 50:4-11) emphasizes the sufferings and patient endurance of the Servant. "The Servant declares that Yahweh who disciplined Him will also vindicate Him....and the obedient walk of the Servant's disciples [is contrasted] with the judgment to come on the wicked."

And the fourth song (Isa 52:13 - 53:12) announces the exaltation of the Servant because of his substitutionary sacrificial death, which offers satisfaction for the sins of both his own guilty people and the Gentiles. The Servant will be supremely exalted and will both purify the nations and receive their worship. Believing Israelites will mourn their past rejection of the Servant in seeing the true meaning of His death. And, the Servant will be exalted because He did God's will in dying as a guilt offering.

In closing let me point you to just a couple of other important passages that contributed to Israel's expectation of an ultimate Messiah. One is the first verses of Isaiah 61, quoted in part by Jesus himself as he began his earthly ministry (Luke 4:18-19): *The Spirit of the LORD is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.* Here Jesus clearly identifies himself as the one who fulfills Isaiah's words.

And the other passage is Psalm 110 which is generally held to be the most directly prophetic of all the Psalms. Psalm 110 has the distinction of being quoted or alluded to more often than any other Old Testament passage by the writers of the New Testament. They apply it mostly to teach the elevation of the Jesus the Messiah to the position of authority over everything. Christ is on the throne of the universe which he rules as eternal King of kings. Nor will he turn from his purposes until everything is under his control and there is no more opposition. He is the one who completely fulfills the messianic hope of the Old Testament.