

Isaiah 51: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 51. Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you. For he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him. For the Lord comforts Zion. He comforts all her waste places, and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song. Give attention to me, my people, and give ear to me, my nation, for a law will go out from me, and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples.

My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out, and my arms will judge the peoples. The coastlands hope for me, and for my arm they wait. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath. For the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner. But my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed. Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law. Fear not the reproach of man, nor be dismayed at their revilings. For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool.

But my righteousness will be forever, and my salvation to all generations. Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord. Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

I, I am he who comforts you. Who are you that are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass, and have forgotten the Lord, your maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth? And you fear continually all the day because of the wrath of the oppressor, when he sets himself to destroy. And where is the wrath of the oppressor? He who is bowed down shall speedily be released. He shall not die and go down to the pit, neither shall his bread be lacking.

I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar. The Lord of hosts is his name. And I have put my words in your mouth, and covered you in the shadow of my hand, establishing the heavens and laying the foundations of the earth, and saying to Zion, You are my people. Wake yourself, wake yourself. Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering. There is none to guide her among all the sons she has borne. There is none to take her by the hand among all the sons she has brought up.

[3 : 10] These two things have happened to you. Who will console you? Devastation and destruction, famine and sword. Who will comfort you? Your sons have fainted. They lie at the head of every street like an antelope in a net. They are full of the wrath of the Lord, the rebuke of your God. Therefore hear this, you who are afflicted, who are drunk but not with wine. Thus says the Lord, the Lord, your God, who pleads the cause of his people. Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering, the bowl of my wrath you shall drink no more. And I will put it into the hand of your tormentors, who have said to you, Bow down, that we may pass over. And you have made your back like the ground, and like the street for them to pass over. In Isaiah chapter 50, the exemplary faithfulness of the servant, who when faced with rejection and cruel treatment, trusted in the Lord's vindication, was seen against the grim backdrop of Israel's unfaithfulness. The servant would be the Lord's means of restoring his wayward people. The people were exhorted to follow the servant's example in trusting in the Lord in the darkness. Chapter 51 begins with an encouragement to those who are pursuing righteousness among the people, presumably the same people as those who were described in verse 10 of the preceding chapter, as those who fear the Lord and obey the voice of his servant.

The opening eight verses contain three charges to listen, in verses 1, 4, and 8. In these, we might be invited to recall the servant himself, who is the exemplary, attentive disciple of the Lord, as we see in verses 4 and 5 of the preceding chapter.

The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens. He awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious. I turned not backward.

The people chiefly addressed in these opening verses were presumably walking in darkness with no light, as described in verse 10 of chapter 50. This walking in darkness was not, as the images elsewhere used to suggest, a matter of living sinfully and with no regard for the Lord. Rather, the darkness was that of the Lord's apparent silence, and the lack of visible evidence of his presence and action in their situation. In these first eight verses, these people are encouraged, the Lord giving them reason to take heart. The first thing that the Lord encourages them to do is to look back to their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah. The Lord is the great rock of his people, but Abraham and Sarah are also presented with related imagery, as a rock from which the people were hewn, and a quarry from which they were dug. The righteous who are addressed here might consider themselves few and beleaguered, greatly outnumbered by those walking by the lights of their own fires, rather than looking to the Lord. However, Abraham and Sarah were even fewer in number in their own day, yet the Lord made of them a great people.

Indeed, while there is a kinship that can be known to Abraham in being a member of the multitude of his descendants, there is a deeper spiritual kinship to him in being faithful and acting in terms of the Lord's promises, even in the most difficult of days, and when only the smallest minority in a time of general unbelief. John Oswald remarks upon the fact that the verb for look in verse 2 is the same as that in Genesis chapter 15, where Abraham was instructed to look at the heavens and try to count the stars, to which his offspring were compared. Much as Abraham found assurance from looking to the innumerable stars that signified his descendants, so those descendants could find assurance by looking back at their forefather and seeing the extent to which the Lord's promise to him had already been realized. The waste places of the land could be restored by the Lord's gracious visitation, both the ruined city of Zion and the desolate regions of Judah. These wildernesses would become like a new Eden.

[7 : 08] The second charge to attend comes in verse 4, addressed to a people the Lord claims as his own, his people and his nation. The Lord's just rule and instruction is going to go out and be a light to the nations. The idea of the Lord going out from Jerusalem should be familiar from the key text of chapter 2 verses 2 to 4.

And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Likewise, the servant was described as a light to the nations in chapter 49 verse 6. The Lord is going to set the world to rights, and all the peoples await his redemption, and his mighty arm going forth to bring his salvation to the world.

To those who might fear that the Lord's establishment of justice would be short-lived and fleeting, the Lord declares that his righteousness and salvation will endure longer than the earth beneath their feet, or the vast expanse of the heavens over their heads.

The third charge to attend is in verse 7, and brings together elements of the preceding two charges. Those who pursue righteousness were addressed in verse 1. Here it is those who know righteousness.

[8 : 51] These are encouraged not to be dismayed at the resistance and reproach that they, like the servant, will face. As in the second charge, this is grounded in the fact that the Lord's salvation and justice will endure, here outlasting all its and their adversaries.

Verse 9 most likely starts a new unit of the text. Oswald notes the repeated calls to awake, appearing in verses 9 and 17 of this chapter, and then again at the beginning of the following chapter.

The unit rouses Zion to prepare for its coming deliverance. It begins, however, with a cry to the Lord to awake, a sense of concern at the Lord's inaction in crisis.

Isn't the Lord the one who delivered his people from Egypt and from the clutches of Pharaoh? Didn't he defeat the Egyptian army and rescue his people at the Red Sea, drying up the sea for his people to pass through? This great deliverance of the Exodus is described using the imagery of Rahab the great sea monster. In chapter 30 verse 7, Egypt was dismissed as Rahab who sits still. In chapter 27 verse 1, the sea monster Leviathan was also used to illustrate the Lord's final great defeat of evil. Presenting great deliverances of the past in terms of the imagery of the defeat of such monsters of the deep plays off the background of ancient Near Eastern myths. This presents the Lord as the one who has demonstrated the mastery claim for the false gods in their myths in actual history and also connects his providence and redemption in history with his rule over all of his creation. This remembrance of the Lord's great deeds of the past, however, appears in the mouths of a people who are calling upon the Lord to act in a comparable manner in their own day and are scanning the horizon in hope of a deliverance and a manifestation of the arm of the

Lord that doesn't seem to be appearing. Back at the end of chapter 35, when Isaiah had spoken of the way of holiness, the highway that the Lord would create for his ransomed people to return upon, the final verse of the prophecy, and of the entire body of prophecies prior to the narrative section, read, And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

[11 : 06] Almost the exact same words are found here in verse 11, but its relationship to its context here is less clear. How do we account for the repetition, and what is this statement doing in this specific context? Is it the answer to the question of the people? John Goldengay suggests that we should read this as a continuation of the challenge of the righteous to the Lord. They have recalled the great deeds of the Lord in the past, both as manifestations of his power and as declarations of his intent, and now they quote the Lord's promise back to him. These we should recognize are not just any old words from the earlier prophecies. These are the crowning words of the climactic eschatological vision of the Lord's salvation back in chapter 35. The Lord had promised such a redemption. Would he bring it to pass? In verses 12 to 16, the Lord answers the people's cry of verses 9 to 11.

Once again, the Lord underlines his identity and his uniqueness. He is the one who comforts his people. No other can do this. Furthermore, the fact that he is the comforter of his people should give them great confidence. With the Lord as their comforter, why need they fear any frail and mere mortal man?

The Lord is the creator and sustainer of all, before whom no oppressor will be able to stand. He confirms his saving intent to his worried people. He will both release and will provide for them.

They will not finally be destroyed. The God who is almighty over the tumult of the sea and its waves is the Lord their God. He has appointed them as his witnesses, placing his words in their mouths and covering them in the shadow of his hand. The language here is close to that of chapter 49 verse 2, where it describes the servant.

He made my mouth like a sharp sword. In the shadow of his hand he hid me. Commentators differ on the question of the one who is being addressed in verse 16. Some believe that the Lord is speaking to the servant.

[13 : 01] Brother Charles argues that the people are extending the mission of the servant. Perhaps we could see this as evidence of the restoration of the people to their initial calling through the work of the servant. The Lord is, as it were, planting a new heavens and a new earth as he establishes his people in this way.

We should note the way that the covenant formula, I will be your God and you will be my people, bookends verses 15 and 16. The people in verse 9 had called upon the Lord to awake and to act on their behalf.

In verse 17, the second of the three calls to awake. The Lord repeats the words of the people's cry back to them. Does the Lord need to awake? No, Jerusalem is the one that must awake from the stupor of judgment, bracing herself for the Lord's redemptive action.

She has drunk the cup of the Lord's judgment to its dregs and now lies in a hungover state, needing to be roused again to alertness and action. The imagery of the Lord's cup of judgment should be familiar from passages like Jeremiah chapter 25 verses 15 to 17.

Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, Having been struck by the Lord's judgment, Zion and her children are in a terrible state, each unable to help the other in their sorry condition.

[14 : 33] The Lord, however, is going to meet them in their plight, reversing the situation. Much as in Jeremiah chapter 25, the cup of the Lord's wrath will be handed to the oppressor and they will drink it and be brought low.

Zion herself would be delivered from their clutches. A question to consider. How might remembrance be seen as a key theme in this chapter?