

**Introduction:**

- A. Illus.: We have friends who raised four kids. One of them, Karen, went through a spell where she wouldn't get up in time for school and was constantly missing the bus. So Mike would drive her to school. Nothing seemed to work to correct this problem, so finally one morning when she missed the bus, Mike told her she was going to walk to school. It had to be three or four miles. I *assume* it wasn't a happy morning, but I *know* this: Karen walked, all the way. And Mike walked all the way behind her.
- B. God's discipline in our lives often feels heavy-handed. And, of course, like any good parent, God doesn't just discipline bad behavior. He disciplines us so that we would develop habits of faith and righteousness, so that we would learn the humility that only suffering teaches, so that we would prove to our accuser Satan that our faithfulness to God is not only for fair weather. But whatever its purpose—all good, to be sure—discipline hurts.

A young mother I know posted a photo on Facebook of her little guy throwing a tantrum on the kitchen floor. He'd been like that all week and she was at wits' end. I talked to someone who said, "Pastor, don't ever live to be 93. It hurts." A dear friend lost his job this week in a downsizing. I have a friend in jail. Another friend told me it had taken him a year to get over the pain and resentment from the way he had been treated. Discipline—whatever God's purpose—hurts. And how we react defines our spiritual life and growth.

- C. The book of Isaiah says a lot about discipline and God's comfort. Turn to **Is 49**, a passage we began studying last Sunday. Isaiah is writing to a future generation of Jews who would feel abandoned by God to exile in Babylon. At the beginning of this chapter, we meet God's Servant. We know that Isaiah is describing Jesus Christ. Called to serve

the Lord from before birth, his message being God's secret weapon. He is Israel the Second, sent to display God's splendor. But in **v.4** he says how it seems all his work for the Lord comes to nothing, yet still he trusts the outcome to God. God, in turn promises him that his work will *not* be in vain—that he will draw the remnant of Israel back to God, and more—he will also be a light to the Gentiles, to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth.

- D. But the message behind this exchange between the LORD God and his Messiah is to Israel, when they endure long and dark times of discipline. And that is why we need this word, too. God's discipline can be a long, hard walk.
- E. **V.8** begins with God the Father speaking to Christ. I'm sure these very assurances were on Jesus' mind as he died, seemingly in vain. They were given to Jesus, and they in turn comfort us when we suffer.

**I. TAKE COMFORT IN THE PROMISES GOD GAVE TO HIS SUFFERING SERVANT, JESUS (49:8-13)**

- A. Throughout his life, and certainly in his dying hours, Jesus prayed. He prayed for his nation to repent. He wept over the hardheartedness of Israel. He prayed for his disciples. He asked that God would be glorified. He prayed in the Garden that the cup of suffering would be taken from him. He cried out in lament on the cross, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* And his last prayer was, *"Into your hands I commit my spirit. It is finished."* And he died, without his prayers answered. So look at **v.8a...** At 3 p.m. on Good Friday, when Jesus died, a new day dawned in the darkness. It was the opening day of Salvation Season, and all Jesus' prayers began to be answered. We live in the season of Jesus' answered prayers. His death was the Amen. *"It is finished."*
- B. As Jesus' death closed in around him—the mocking crowd, Satan's taunting, the sin-smothering blackness, the hell-

sentence for all the sins he bore as our sacrifice, the rattling of death's dungeon door—Jesus was defenseless. That was the point, really. A lamb to the slaughter, silent and helpless. *This is it. Forsaken. Finished. But then this promise from God: "I will keep you."* So if he kept Jesus, our sin-bearer, from the iron grip of death and the eternal condemnation of sin, will he not keep you, who have hidden in Christ? *"The Lord is my refuge, and my fortress; my God in whom I trust. No harm will befall you."*

- C. **V.8b-9...** *"I will make you to be a covenant for the people..."* Israel had a covenant with God that they would obey him and he would protect and bless them. But they had violated it countless times. It wasn't working, and never would. So Jesus, in dying and then rising from the grave, became God's living covenant with us. We put our faith in him and he holds us to God. He is God's promise to us and our promise to God. Before he died, Jesus said, *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood."*

As God's living Covenant Jesus assures Israel of two covenant promises: 1) he will restore to you all that you have lost—all your land and the blessings that go with it, and 2) you'll be set free. Paul says that *all God's promises are 'Yes' in Christ.* *"I will bless you and keep you."* **Yes!** *"I will be gracious to you."* **Yes!** *"I will give you peace."* **Yes!**

- D. **V.9-12...** When Jesus Christ shouts to the captives, "Come out!" and to those in darkness, "Be free!" God's scattered sheep will come streaming from every direction toward home, and God himself will be their shepherd. This portrays a kind of second Exodus, with a greater shepherd for Israel than Moses, and a far easier journey to the land of God's promises. No waterless wilderness to cross. No withering heat. No rugged, trackless mountains. And God's people will not only come from Egypt, but from every direction—all drawn by the sound of the Good Shepherd's call. Does this language sound familiar? **Rev. 7:9, 13-17...**

- E. **V.12...** Heavens and earth have every reason to rejoice when God comforts his people by shepherding them home. This world has always been like a teeming refugee camp. Everyone displaced. No one where they really belong. Identities lost. No one really safe or blessed; no one ever actually *home*. Even the earth and the skies groaned over the homeless, fatherless, orphaned world. So when God, through Christ, brings all his people safely home, the heavens will shout hallelujah, the earth will cheer, and the mountains will break out into deep-throated singing.
- F. Wow! So when is this Salvation Season? Right now! Though I can't say how much longer it will last. In **2 Cor** the Apostle Paul says... [**5:20-6:2**]. Right now, Jesus is shouting to you in your captivity, "*Come out!*" and to you in your darkness, "*Be free!*" So do not delay in being reconciled to God. Salvation Season could end any minute, any day.

Then there is an jarring interruption in the text like a baby squalling during a symphony. **V.14...** That's how discipline feels; how Karen's long walk to school probably felt. So, even though he'd been over this before, God responds again so graciously.

## **II. TAKE COMFORT KNOWING THAT GOD WILL NEVER FORGET HIS PEOPLE (49:14-23)**

This passage is about the nation of Israel; more specifically, about the faithful remnant of Israel—people who continue to trust God despite long, dark years of waiting for his salvation. So where do we Gentiles come into this? We only come into these promises by coming into Israel, by becoming children of Abraham through the kind of faith he had. "*Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.*" When we trust God, and God counts our trust in him as righteous, then we are grafted into the vine of Israel. Jews who trust in Jesus as the Messiah are not absorbed into us. We who trust Jesus are adopted into them, into true Israel. But Isaiah makes

promises specifically to believing Jews that involve God's salvation of the Gentiles. In the end, before Jesus returns, Scripture teaches that many Jews will put their faith in Christ. They will believe he is their Messiah. They will be restored to their ancient inheritance. And they will see this passage come true before their very eyes.

So here the Jews, locked in what seems like endless weakness and defeat, complain that God has forgotten them.

A. **Vv.15-16... God can never, ever, ever forget his people.** He is more deeply bonded with his people than a nursing mother with her baby. Think about that! The old song says, "*He's got the whole world in his hands,*" but what *he* says is that *he's got his beloved people carved—tattooed—into his hands* so that he cannot do anything but that he thinks of them. The walls of his holy city—which is really a people, not buildings—are always on his mind. **Never mistake God's silence for forgetfulness, nor his discipline as forsaking.**

B. Now he reveals an amazing promise. Remember, Isaiah is speaking to a people exiled. A nation decimated, whole tribes lost—dispersed into a wilderness of worldliness. The scrap of Israel remaining, not only in Babylon, but in the dark centuries that follow, are like a widow nation, a people dressed in black bemoaning their lost home and children. Now listen: **v.17-21... In God's good time the faithful remnant of Israel will be astonished to see that they have mothered a vast number of children they knew nothing about.** We say of pregnant women that "They're expecting." Here was a pregnant woman, Israel, who *wasn't* expecting. Yet her *unexpected* children will adorn her like a bride's jewels. Her decimated household will swell till there is not room enough for everyone. "*Where in the world did all these children of Israel come from!*"

C. And how does God answer their dumbfounded question? Notice how **v.22** begins: "*This is what the **Sovereign LORD***

says." We've seen this statement again and again, but here the word *Sovereign* is inserted because what the LORD promises here can only be done by the God who controls all the world. **Vv.22-23... At the Sovereign LORD's signal, the nations of the world will bring all Israel's children home.** Isaiah speaks seven times of the coming Christ as the banner that will draw the nations, like in **Is 11:10**, "*In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.*" So here is Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and reigning, held up for all the world to see, shouting through all his witnesses, "*I am the Light of the World,*" and over the hills and across those wilderness highways here they come! Can you imagine meeting on the road? "*Are you Chinese? Are you Kenyan? Are you Columbian?*" "*No, once I was, but now I am a child of Israel, and Abraham is my forefather.*" Children of the bereaved, barren Israel, coming out of all the nations, with kings and queens as their babysitters and nannies. The rulers who despised Israel will be brought so low as to lick the dust at the feet of the once powerless, homeless, king-less people.

D. "*Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed.*" **Then you will know, but not yet. Hope will not be disappointed. So we wait.** We cannot endure God's discipline, nor live for Christ in this dark and dangerous world, if we do not have patience; if we cannot survive on God's promises. God can never forget his people, and even now he is beckoning children from all over the world to Christ. And on that day, we will no longer hunger or thirst. We will no longer be wearied by desert heat and sun. We will drink from living waters and enter God's holy city, from every direction, on a straight and raised road, to the singing of the earth and skies.