

“The Life of Faith in a Dark World”

Isaiah 50:4-11

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Isaiah chapter 50 is in the midst of what scholars refer to as the Book of the Servant, that section of Isaiah that contains the four servant songs; prophesies of the coming servant of the Lord, the Messiah, the Redeemer who would, of course, prove to be Jesus of Nazareth.

Vv. 4-11 of chapter 50 comprise the third servant song, though in this song there is no specific reference to the servant of the Lord. It is the remark in v. 10 about obeying the voice of the servant that identifies the one speaking in the previous verses as the servant of the Lord. As will be obvious as we read this text, the servant is summoning us not only to obey his voice but to imitate his life. Remember how Peter put it: the Lord Jesus left us an example that we should follow in his steps. Christians are followers of Jesus not only because they believe in him and trust him as their Savior and King, but because they seek to imitate him in their daily living.

In context the servant is the polar opposite of Israel in Isaiah’s day. The first three verses of the chapter describe Israel as a people of unbelief, rebellion, suffering for their refusal to trust and obey the Lord.

Text Comment

- v.4 The “tongue of those who are taught” is the speech of a real disciple, someone who has been eagerly listening for a long time to the Word of God and seeking to fashion his or her life according to that Word. This sort of wisdom and understanding equips a person to be truly helpful to someone who is facing troubles in his or her life. This is not knowledge gathered once for all, but morning by morning, as the Word of God instructs and disciplines both the mind and the heart. That was the Lord’s life as a boy and young man: a student of the Word of God, being formed and fashioned by its truth day after day, first at his mother’s knee and then, no doubt, by himself as he read, memorized, and meditated upon the word of God. His response to the Devil’s temptations at the very beginning of his ministry – a powerful demonstration that he had learned and absorbed the Word of God – is proof of that.
- v.5 The mark of the real disciple is that he not only hears the Word but does it.
- v.6 The problem is that obedience to the Lord inevitably exposes his disciples to hardship, especially to the opposition of others. The servant did not deserve this suffering, but he accepted it and endured it in loyalty to God. Remember, in the fourth and last of the servant songs, the immortal 53rd chapter, we read at some length of the suffering the servant will endure for the salvation of his people. Because he is the servant of the Lord, he is there to do the Lord’s bidding and to fulfill his will. [Young, III, 298]

Those who strike or smite are those who have the duty of flogging a criminal – as the Jews argued Jesus was – another anticipation of chapter 53, as is the reference to disgrace and spitting.

- v.7 There is some question about how to read the verbs here, whether as present tense or future tense: the Lord *helps* me or the Lord *will help* me. If presents the verbs describe the servant's state of mind in suffering: the Lord is helping him to endure. If futures the verbs describe his confidence that the Lord will rescue him in due time. But one way or another he is determined to remain faithful to the Lord and to his calling.
- v.9 The servant's bold challenge is reminiscent of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8: "If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies." The servant is sure that God will make clear that he is innocent of all the charges his enemies bring against him. His accusers, who are now so confident in their hostility, are the ones who will be exposed in the end. Vv. 8 and 9 are a short form of and share the spirit of St. Patrick's Breastplate, a binding to this soul of the presence and power of the Lord; a triumphant retort to the struggles of life and the enemies of the soul. The other name for that great hymn of St. Patrick is the *lorica*, Latin for body armor. Our confidence in God and his Word are our protection in the battle of life.
- v.10 Now comes the exhortation based on what the servant has said. This is what scholars call a "tail piece," and each of the four servant songs has one. The two final tailpieces, this one and the one that follows chapter 53 are exhortations to respond to the servant by accepting him as a model for your own life. [Motyer, 401] To trust *in the name* of the Lord, in the parlance of the Hebrew Bible is to trust in who Yahweh is and what Yahweh is like.
- v.11 No OT writer speaks as often or as transparently or as dramatically of the reality of eternal punishment as Isaiah. In that way he resembles the Lord Jesus who spoke much more of hell and eternal punishment than any other NT figure. Indeed, some of the Lord's most memorable descriptions of hell are drawn from Isaiah.

J.C. Philpot had an interesting life. He was an Oxford don, and, at first, an Anglican clergyman. But in the middle of the 19th century he resigned his Anglican ordination and his Oxford fellowship to join the Strict and Particular Baptists. You would have to know Victorian Britain to appreciate how unusual and controversial such a "conversion" would have seemed to virtually everyone. To leave the national church and a position at Oxford University to join up with a small, strange, and unusually conservative Protestant sect! By "particular," in the phrase, "Particular Baptist," is meant Calvinistic; it is especially a reference to particular redemption or what is more often called limited atonement. For the next 26 years he was a Baptist pastor and the editor of the Particular Baptist magazine *The Gospel Standard*. Many of his sermons, still being read today in some circles, first appeared in that magazine.

One of Philpot's sermons was on the last two verses of Isaiah 50. In the sermon he argued that it is a characteristic feature of the Christian life that it is hard, heavy, and generally sad. As he put it:

“The true child of God, because he realizes the plague of his own heart and his own sinfulness, walks through this world heavily and laboriously.”

Calvinists have sometimes deservedly acquired a reputation for a dour outlook on life. I certainly don't think that is a fair characterization of the Christian life described in the Bible. True enough, there is sorrow and trouble – the Bible is painfully honest about that – but there is also gratitude, happiness, fulfillment, and the satisfaction that comes with living one's life for the highest and purest purposes and in the fellowship of the saints. If Holy Scripture teaches us that the Christian is sorrowful, it adds immediately, “but always rejoicing.” And the Apostle Paul, who certainly experienced a lot of trouble and opposition in his Christian life, nevertheless reminds us that “the kingdom of God is a matter of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” [Romans 14:17] The Lord Jesus himself, the holiest man who ever lived, the only man of perfect faith, while described as the “man of sorrows,” was also accused of being a drunk and a glutton. He was not a morose man who isolated himself from those who were enjoying a good meal and stimulating conversation.

Nevertheless, no one can deny that the practice of faith in the Lord *in the teeth of life's troubles and hardships* is a mark of the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. As the servant suffered, so must his followers, a point that Jesus made many times in his teaching. “The servant is not above his master. If they hated me, they will hate you.” “If you are unwilling to take up your cross in following me, you cannot be my disciple.”

But the point of our text is not that we suffer. The point is that in suffering *as Christians* we are called to depend upon, to trust in the Lord.

Verse 10 is the nub of the lesson to which attention is drawn in the tailpiece of the third servant song:

“Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.”

Now the first thing to notice about this instruction, and we will just notice it this evening, is the characteristic interplay between God's grace and work, on the one hand, and our responsibility to trust and obey on the other. We spoke of this this morning and encounter this same tension between the divine and the human on every page of the Bible. The servant begins with the acknowledgement that “the Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught.” That he responded to the Word of God with faith and obedience he knew was the gift of God, the work of God for him and in him. And not once, but constantly in his life. He goes on in the same verse to say, “Morning by morning *he* awakens my ear to hear...”

This, of course, was absolutely characteristic of the Lord's daily life as it is described to us in the Bible. *He was a man of faith par excellence*. He was always and everywhere conscious of his heavenly Father's presence, turned to him at any moment of the day or night, and was in all things dependent upon his Father's provision. It was that understanding of both the presence of his Father and his need for his Father's help that made him the man of prayer that he was. Here the servant says it again in v. 7: “the Lord God helps me.” That is how he managed to endure and

to surmount the opposition that he faced. Sometimes when we are reading the gospels, we can get the impression that the Christian life was easy for the Lord Jesus. It was not. And here in Isaiah 50 we learn how he managed it. He managed it in the confidence that his Heavenly Father was present with him every moment and that he could turn to him and receive grace to help in time of need. He took strength from the fact, as he puts it in verse 8, “He who vindicates me is near.”

But, at the same time, the servant speaks equally emphatically about what he has done, what he needed to do, what it was his duty to do. The Lord opened his ear, true enough, but, as he says in v. 5, “I was not rebellious.” And so it was that he gave his back to those who strike. And so it was that he set his face like flint to a life of obedience, no matter the trouble that came his way as a result. And then in v. 10 comes the exhortation to action: trust and rely on the Lord.

We have this interplay between the divine and the human, between what God does for us and what we do for God everywhere and always in the Bible. We cannot escape it. And, as I said this morning, I don’t think this duality in the Christian life is difficult for Christians to accept. They know they are dependent upon the grace and the gifts of God, his work in their hearts and lives; and they know that they are obliged to respond to God’s grace with faith and obedience of their own. They know that God grants faith, but they also know that he doesn’t believe for them or obey for them. How to explain that God must do all and that we must do all may be, no doubt is beyond our capacity, but that it is true we do not doubt. The Bible relentlessly reminds us of both facts, and we know the truth of them both in our consciences. We know we are helpless without God and we also know we are personally responsible to respond to God’s grace and will have no one to blame but ourselves if we do not.

But it is essential that we remember this day by day: both our dependence on the Lord and our responsibility to respond to his grace. We will not remember this if we make no effort to pray for God’s grace, as the Lord always did, and *if we do* remember how much we depend upon the Lord for his grace it will nerve us, as it did the Lord, to serve him faithfully through thick and thin.

But tonight, I want to spend a few minutes parsing the exhortation in v. 10:

“Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.”

Now, true enough, a Christian is to trust the Lord in happy times as well, but we all know how much more difficult it is to maintain our confidence in God and *to act in that confidence* when we are discouraged, when we are suffering, and when we do not see the light at the end of the tunnel. Or, as the servant puts it, when we are walking in darkness. And every Christian has periods of time in which he or she is walking in darkness. The point seems to be that if we can trust the Lord then, we can trust him always.

We use words such as faith and trust and reliance often enough. The Bible teaches us the importance of faith by commending it to us and commanding us to exercise it times without number. But like much other religious language, its constant use can dull us to the actual meaning of such words. What does it actually mean to *trust the Lord* or *to rely on him*?

The word “faith,” for example, is used not infrequently in the Bible – in both the OT and the NT – in contexts in which it soon becomes clear that whatever reliance or confidence or trust was meant, it was not the genuine article. There has always been a great deal of false faith, of imitation faith, of only the appearance of faith in the church. For example, in Exodus 14:31 we read that after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, the people of Israel *believed in the Lord*. But as events would demonstrate, whatever faith they had, whatever that faith was, it wasn’t the trust in the Lord that enables a person to stand up to the temptations of life. And in the New Testament, as in the Old, we are reminded again and again that that generation perished in the wilderness *because they did not have faith*. Similarly, in John 2:23 we read that when the Lord Jesus was in Jerusalem at the beginning of his ministry, “many *believed in his name* when they saw the signs that he was doing.” But then we read that the Lord Jesus knew better. He knew that their faith would not last because it was not a true submission of their hearts but only amazement at his miracles.

Dr. Buswell, the first professor of theology at our Covenant Theological Seminary, in 1923, as a young scholar, wrote a learned article entitled “The Ethics of ‘Believe’ in the Gospel of John.” You can find that article, all these years later, in the bibliography at the end of the entry on *pistis*, the Greek word for faith in the standard lexicon or dictionary of New Testament Greek used by almost all of biblical scholarship. It would be the triumph of any scholar’s career to get one of his articles in the bibliography of any entry in the *Bauer–Arndt–Gingrich–Danker Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, still more in an entry for one of the most important terms in the Greek New Testament! Dr. Buswell wrote that article as a young man, long before he had earned his PhD, and there it sits as it has for many years in the bibliography under one of the most important words in the Greek New Testament. It was part of Dr. Buswell’s argument that faith, even when it is called faith in the Bible, is not always faith, in the same way that love is not always love. Think of, David’s son Amnon in 2nd Samuel who, we are told, loved Tamar, but then abused her and in a moment his so-called love had turned to hate. The word “love” can be used in many ways to mean many things and so can the words faith or trust. Think of our current parlance in American politics – “faith-based ministries,” whatever in the world that mean; as if everyone in the world is not operating with some significant measure of faith in one way or another. I’ve always liked Alexander Whyte’s definition of faith. I think it captures the Bible’s emphasis.

“Faith in its most elementary sense, faith in its first and foundation sense, simply means the reliance placed by one man on the truthfulness and power of another. You make a statement of fact to me or give me a promise and offer an assurance and faith is that state of mind in me to you, that state of mind in me which accepts your statement and relies on your promise.” [*Sermons 1881-82*, 68]

Believing what you have been told to be true you act accordingly. *That* is living faith. And the entire challenge of living by faith as we learn in the Bible and in our own experience is that it is not always, perhaps even not usually, obvious that what God has told us is really the case. It can often seem as if God’s promises cannot be relied on, as if he is not doing for us what he has promised to do. As one commentator explains:

“Belief, however strong, cannot be the same as sight; and from a Christ whom we cannot see we are to that extent separated, just as a blind man is cut off from the world to which he nevertheless belongs...” [Plummer, *2 Corinthians* ICC, 151]

To walk by faith, according to the Bible, is the most difficult thing in the world, which is why so many never try it and why even Christians never do it as well as they know they should. To rely absolutely on an assurance for which the evidence you can see or touch or hear is lacking is a great challenge. Years ago, I came across this homely illustration of both the nature of faith and the challenge of it. It comes from Richard Cecil, one of the Great Awakening preachers in England.

“Children are very early capable of impression. I imprinted on my daughter the idea of faith at a very early age. She was playing one day with a few beads, which seemed to delight her wonderfully. Her whole soul was absorbed in her beads. I said – ‘My dear you have some pretty beads there.’ ‘Yes, papa!’ ‘And you seem to be vastly pleased with them.’ ‘Yes, papa!’ ‘Well, now, throw them [into] the fire.’ The tears started into her eyes. She looked earnestly at me, as though she ought to have a reason for such a cruel sacrifice. ‘Well, my dear,’ do as you please; but you know I never told you to do anything which I did not think would be good for you.’ She looked at me a few moments longer, and then (summoning up all her fortitude, her breast heaving with the effort) she dashed them into the fire. ‘Well,’ said I, there let them lie: you shall hear more about them another time; but say no more about them now.’ Some days [later], I bought her a box full of larger beads and toys of the same kind. When I returned home, I opened the treasure and set it before her; she burst into tears of [joy]. ‘Those, my child,’ said I, ‘are yours because you believed me, when I told you it would be better for you to throw those two or three paltry beads [into] the fire. Now that has brought you this treasure. But now, my dear, remember, as long as you live, what faith is. I did all this to teach you the meaning of faith. You threw your beads away when I bid you, because you had faith in me that I never advised you but for your good. Put the same confidence in God. Believe everything he says in his Word. Whether you understand it or not, have faith in him that he means your good.’ [The Thoughts of the Evangelical Leaders, 8]

Is that not what faith is? And has not the Lord done many things in your life very like what Richard Cecil did to teach his daughter the nature of faith. Think of the official at the end of John 4 who had come to Jesus desperate over his dying son. Jesus told him that his son would live, and the man *took Jesus at his word* [NIV] and went home to greet his boy whom he knew would be recovering. Taking the Lord at his word to the extent that one lives his or her life acting on that word: *that is what it means to trust in the name of the Lord*. And that is how we are to live our lives day by day, always and everywhere.

What words of the Lord are we to believe to be true and then act in the confidence of that truth? Well words such as these.

1. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
2. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

3. He who honors me, I will honor.
4. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.
5. The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials.
6. He has separated our sins from us as far as the east is from the west.
7. Behold, I am coming quickly, bringing my reward with me.
8. Blessed are they who mourn; who are poor in spirit... for great is your reward in heaven.
9. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.
10. To live is Christ and to die is gain and to die is better by far.
11. I will never leave you or forsake you.
12. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness.
13. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.
14. If God is for us, who can be against us.
15. You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you...

And a great many other “words” of God like those that he has spoken to us, to us who have been given the tongue of those who are taught. How different must the life be of someone who truly believes in those words, counts on them to be true, and so acts accordingly in his or her daily life?

Faith is *the great thing*, the essential thing. It is the thing that connects earth and heaven, this world with the unseen world, and our souls with the Almighty himself. No wonder so much of what God does in our lives is designed to teach us faith, to test and strengthen our faith, to expose where our faith is weak or to prove to us how powerful faith is, nothing less than the power of God placed at the disposal of man.

And that is why in this servant song it is the will of the servant that we should, above all, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on our God. If we do that, we do all.