

ISAIAH 51:1-6.

GOD'S PLAN 2, LONG-TERM

When I first read this passage, in starting to prepare this talk, I was immediately struck by the idea that this passage makes a bridge between the Jewish and Christian Scriptures (OT and NT) in a way familiar to the Jewish mind. It seems to cover all God's Plan from Abraham through to Eternity, when Earth and Heavens will be made new. That gives me immense hope and joy. However, there is much more: we can get an idea of the character of God's Plan.

--- Three Ways To Interpret This Passage

Read on its own, a main message that many people glean from this passage of six verses is "Hope: God restores you when things have been tough". It generalises from what is actually said and applies it across to "me" or "us" today, and ignores what is actually said about Abraham and Sarah, the people of Israel and other things. That way of interpreting it is OK but feels thin to me.

A second interpretation I have seen is as liturgy-drama-poetry. This draws away further from the content of the passage, emphasising style and aesthetics. It can be useful sometimes, but personally I find this very weak spiritual gruel, because it elevates art above what God is saying clearly.

Today I want to interpret the passage directly, its actual content. What is God saying, to whom and in what ways is it relevant to us here and now?

Let us read the passage, with two verses before and after, 50:10 to 51:8.

The Context

To understand what a passage actually says, understand its context. The people of Israel and Judah are scattered and exiled and are very disheartened. God will return them, but to a shattered land. Isaiah 50 is about God's servant - who could be the Messiah, Israel or a prophet, or all. God has made the Servant able to listen properly and to sustain the weary with just the right word. The Servant is meek, not rebelling nor grumbling even when struck, insulted or spat at. Our passage is to those who listen to God's Servant and love righteousness. (Whether Isaiah 51 is written later, or earlier as foretelling, does not matter to us.)

To Whom?

The message of these verses is to those who

"fear Yahweh and obey His Servant [50:10] ... those who pursue righteousness, you who seek Yahweh [51:1] ... you who know righteousness, you people who have my teaching in your hearts [51:7] ..."

What picture does this paint? To me, it is not so much the details of what we do (fear, obey, pursue, etc.) but of the attitude of a heart oriented to Yahweh (taking Yahweh seriously: seeking Yahweh). They hence pursue and know what characterizes Yahweh, which twice is righteousness, translated from the Hebrew *tsedeq*) and love Yahweh's teaching (Hebrew: *torah*, Law).

We often misunderstand righteousness as moral uprightness ("he is a righteous person"). But throughout the Jewish Scripture, it means something broader, which has been characterized as "Right relationships among all Created things." This is not just about the character of a person but about a state of affairs in Creation, in which all Creation is "very good" in the sense of all working well together, humans, animals, plants, planet, etc. This makes sense because Yahweh God loves all the Creation [Psalm 145:9]. Those who love Yahweh and the Creation will obey Yahweh's Servant.

This is contrasted with those who want to live according to their own designs, plans, abilities and power: those who light their own fires and torches - whose end shall be torment [50:11]. Echoes of God's promise to Adam when he wanted to live life his own way, by his own values? The Creation works against such people, neither with nor for them [Genessi 3].

Jesus' understood this: it is the meek, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are blessed [Matthew 5].

The Message: God's Long-Term Plan

In verses 1-6 we can see God's long-term Plan, stretching from Abraham, through the Jews, through Christ (mentioned indirectly), through the gospel to all nations, right through to the Consummation, when the Heavens and Earth will renewed. All these, over thousands of years, are mentioned in five verses.

Those whose hearts are for Yahweh are told:

- ◆ 51:1-2. The people of Israel are grounded in **Abraham and Sarah** (one becomes many; hope). So are we who have truly accepted Christ: spiritually [e.g. Romans 4]. Abraham, to me, is when Yahweh God began to initiate the Plan of Salvation, revealing more clearly what Yahweh is truly like.
- ◆ 51:3. You, who have been exiled and your city flattened, will be comforted, your barrenness and aridness turned to **fruitfulness**. You are still part of **My Plan** because ...
- ◆ 51:4-5. ... My teaching (*torah*) and right-judging (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedeq*) and salvation (*yeshah*; c.f. Jesus) will go to **all peoples** for light (through and because of you). All are God's Love. (Is not this more glorious than just you receiving comfort?)
- ◆ 51:5. It is ready to go, on the way; my [strong] arm will accomplish it.
- ◆ 51:5. The rest of the people and world is **waiting eagerly** for this - the Creation that has been spoiled by sin [c.f. Romans 8:19].
- ◆ 51:6. My *yeshah* and *tsedeq* is **sure, certain and everlasting**, lasting longer even that the current Heavens and Earth.
- ◆ 51:7-8. So you who are acquainted with My *tsedeq* and *torah* **do not fear** those who reproach and revile you. They will fade away but My *tsedeq* and *yeshah* last forever. This is your stability from Me, the ground of your hope.

Relevance To Us Today?

Welcome, not fear, God's righteousness and judging, because it is these that ensures the well-functioning of all Creation and without these, Creation groans and suffers. That is why the "coastlands" and indeed the whole Creation look forward to it. And so can we. To both the people of Israel then and of us today, all who represent God:

- ◆ Rejoice that you are part of My Plan, to bring salvation and right relationships to all.
- ◆ Do not fear those who revile or reproach you.
- ◆ This message of hope is true for all time, from Abraham to Eternity, because it has very sure foundations.

Not sure you truly seek Yahweh and love *tsedeq*, and would like to? All you need to is respond to God's *yeshah*, Jesus who died for us, such as with "Jesus, I am not sure I fit this, but want to; please come in and be in charge of my life."