

Isaiah 50:4-51:8

Overview

The paragraphs from Zion's lament through the end of 51:8 form a cohesive drama (chart).

- In 49:14-26, Zion laments her desolation, and the Lord assures her of his faithfulness and promises to restore her lost children.
- In 50:1-3, the Lord rebukes Zion's children (in the plural) for their sin and blames them for Zion's desolation. He asks why nobody responds to him. He has been calling to them by the voice of his servants the prophets, at least since the time of Jehu, 100 years before Isaiah (2 Kings 9:7).
- In 50:4-9, the preeminent Servant speaks, reporting that he shares this rejection.¹ He recognizes the Lord's call to him, declares his willingness to carry the Lord's message in spite of persecution, and focuses his trust in the Lord.
- In 50:10, Isaiah exhorts the people to hear the Servant's message (50:10), and thus turn from the sin for which vv. 1-3 condemn them.
- Then the Servant presents his message in 50:11-51:8.

50:4-9, The Servant is Confident in the Lord

The last time we heard from the Servant, he acknowledged his divine call, but was discouraged about its outcome. The Lord encouraged him, and now four times the Servant expresses his faith in "the Lord GOD" (אֲדוֹנָי יְהוָה). The first two statements (perfects, looking to the past) describe two aptitudes that the Lord has given the Servant, a learned tongue and an obedient ear, and describe the result of his faithfulness. The next two (using imperfects to describe ongoing action) outline the Lord's help in overcoming his adversaries.

4-6 The Servant's Obedience Leads to Persecution

4 The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned,--Notice the What, the Why, and the How of this gift.

What God has given to the Servant is "the tongue of the learned."

We must be careful to take the right meaning from "learned." At first glance, we might think that the Servant is claiming that he speaks like a learned professor, perhaps with complicated arguments and deep, original ideas. That would be misleading. "The tongue of the learned" is not the ability to use

¹ In the original exposition of this section, I suggested that the Servant is an example of a counterexample, one of the people who do hear the Lord's voice. Brian Johnson pointed out that Isaiah would be another such example, but strictly speaking that would contradict the "no man" of v. 2. It is better to see Isaiah, the Servant, and others of the faithful remnant as the voice through which the Lord has been calling. "My servants the prophets" are the forerunners of the great Servant, the Messiah. All share in the rejection described in these verses (cf. Matt. 23:29-37).

words like *Gestalt*, hermeneutic, epistemology, deconstructionism, *Weltanschauung*, or *Überlieferungsgeschichte*.

“Learned” appears for the first time in Isa 8:16, where Messiah prays,

Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my **disciples**.

The point is not that he sounds educated, utters complicated sentences, and glories in his original discoveries. Rather, he faithfully passes on what he has learned from his master.

Joh 7:16 Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is **not mine, but his that sent me**.

Joh 12:49 For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and **what I should speak**.

Joh 17:8 For I have given unto them **the words which thou gavest me**; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me.

This is also the responsibility of the elders in the church:

Tit 1:7-9 For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; 8 But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; 9 **Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught**, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.

2Th 2:15 Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and **hold the traditions which ye have been taught**, whether by word, or our epistle.

2Ti 1:13 **Hold fast the form of sound words**, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

Jud 1:3 Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly **contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints**.

“The tongue of the disciples” is the ability to pass on faithfully to others what one has received.

that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary:--This is *why*, the reason for this gift. He has received the “tongue of the disciples,” not to win arguments, but to help those who are weak. In v. 2, the Lord asked why nobody responded to his invitation. The Servant now offers to reach out to those too weak to respond.

he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned.--Here is *how* of this gift, the means by which the Lord has given him “the tongue of the disciples.” It is attained, not by formal credentials, but by daily attention to God’s word. Note

- the *frequency* of this attention: “morning by morning” בבקר בבקר is a common idiom meaning “every morning.” The Messiah’s teaching could not succeed if he heard from God only once a week. He must attend daily.
- The *time* of this attention: “morning.” There is no time of day when the Scriptures are unprofitable, but it is a special blessing to make them the first object of our mind’s attention

when we arise, before the many demands of the day distract us.

- The *manner* of this attention: “as the learned,” that is, “as the disciples.” There is a reason that “disciple” and “discipline” sound similar. A disciple learns in a disciplined way. He pays careful attention, concentrates, and studies hard. This knowledge is not like the oracle of a prophet, imparted in an instant by a vision, but the result of patient study.²

In 8:16, Messiah prayed that the Lord will “seal the law among my disciples.” God continues to answer that prayer as we regularly, daily, meet him over his word. We do not expect visions or dreams, nor do we glory in independent novel discoveries. Like faithful disciples, our concern is to hear his word, know it, and use it to help others.

5 The Lord GOD hath opened mine ear,--God deals with the servant’s ear not only to enable him to teach, but also to guide his actions.

It is noteworthy that he gives credit to God for his obedient ear. If this was true of the Son of God, how much more is it true of us. None of us can receive and obey God’s word in his own strength. It is only as the Lord GOD opens our ears that we can respond in this way.

Eph 2:10 we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back.--As we have been considering in our studies in James, true hearing requires obedience. The sign that the Servant’s ear is truly open is that he does what the Lord tells him to do, even though that obedience leads to personal shame. Other OT references help us understand the humiliation described by the four acts of dishonor described here, and the NT mentions all but one as the experience of our Lord in his time of humiliation.

6 I gave my back to the smiters,--Solomon tells us that this treatment is appropriate to a fool:

Pro 26:3 A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool's back.

The NT records,

Mat 27:26 Then [Pilate] released ... Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair:--This is the one mistreatment that the NT does not mention, though it may well have been applied to our Lord. An episode in the history of David’s kingdom shows how degrading it was considered to have the symmetry of one’s beard destroyed. David sent ambassadors to Hanun king of Ammon with condolences on the death of his father.

2Sa 10:3-5 And the princes of the children of Ammon said unto Hanun their lord, Thinkest thou that David doth honour thy father, that he hath sent comforters unto thee? hath not David rather sent his servants unto thee, to search the city, and to spy it out, and to overthrow it? 4

Wherefore Hanun took David's servants, and **shaved off the one half of their beards**, ... and sent them away. 5 When they told it unto David, he sent to meet them, because the men were greatly ashamed: and the king said, Tarry at Jericho until your beards be grown, and then return.

2 Delitzsch: “The prophets receive revelation chiefly through the night, either in a dream or (like Zechariah) in ecstatic visions. Here, however, the servant of Jehovah receives the divine revelations neither in dream nor in vision, but as the antitype of Moses (Num 12:6-8) ... fully awake with the clearest consciousness.”

Disfiguring one's beard, like tearing one's clothing, was a sign of mourning, adopted by Ezra when he learned of the mixed unions that some of the Jews had undertaken.

Ezr 9:3 And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and **plucked off the hair** of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished.

And Nehemiah applies this form of disgrace to those a few years later who repeat the same error:

Neh 13:23-25 In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: ... 25 And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, **and plucked off their hair**, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.

I hid not my face from shame ...--David, in a Psalm that contains multiple allusions to the Messiah, laments,

Psa 69:6-7 Let not them that wait on thee, O Lord GOD of hosts, be ashamed for my sake: let not those that seek thee be confounded for my sake, O God of Israel. 7 Because for thy sake I have borne reproach; **shame hath covered my face**. (cf. v. 20)

This was our Lord's treatment at the hands of Herod's soldiers and the people.

Luk 23:11 And Herod with his men of war set him at nought, and **mocked him**, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate.

Luk 23:35-37 And the people stood beholding. And the rulers also with them **derided him**, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.

And the writer to the Hebrews marks this as a distinctive aspect of our Lord's example to us:

Heb 12:2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, **despising the shame**, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

I hid not my face from ... spitting--This was a recognized symbol of dishonor. The first example in the Bible is the Lord's comment when Miriam has dishonored Moses, and the Lord brings leprosy upon her. Moses prays for healing.

Num 12:14 And the LORD said unto Moses, If her father had but **spit in her face**, should she not be ashamed seven days? let her be shut out from the camp seven days, and after that let her be received in again.

We read of it again in the law of levirate marriage:

Deu 25:9 Then shall his brother's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot, and **spit in his face**, and shall answer and say, So shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother's house.

Job, describing his humiliation, notes,

Job 30:9-10 And now am I their song, yea, I am their byword. 10 They abhor me, they flee far from me, and spare not to **spit in my face**.

Our Lord received this dishonor both from the Roman soldiers and from the priests.

(soldiers) Mat 27:29-30 And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! 30 And **they spit upon him**, and took the reed, and smote him on the head.

(priests) Mat 26:67 ~ Mark 14:65 Then did they **spit in his face**, and buffeted him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands

In summary, when our Lord foretold his passion, he mentioned three of these four:

Mar 10:34 ~ Luke 18:32-33 And they shall **mock** him, and shall **scourge** him, and shall **spit upon** him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again.

So the servant's obedience leads to his deep disgrace and dishonor in the eyes of others. How does he avoid an ungodly attitude of depression?

49:4 summarized his basic approach, which is the same that we have seen in James.

Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God.

He commits the final evaluation of what he has done to the Lord. Here, this takes the form of the conviction, repeated twice, that the "the Lord GOD will help me." The shift from past tense to future marks the transition from his present experience, based on his obedience to the Lord, to his future hope.

7-9, The Servant Trusts in the Lord to Vindicate Him

7 For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed.--The threat of being confounded and ashamed is often leveled against sinners and Israel's enemies (see notes). The Servant's adversaries try to bring it upon him (v. 6). But two things protect him from this:

- The assurance of the Lord's help and vindication
- His own resolve.

On the latter, compare

our Lord's behavior: Luk 9:51 And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem,

Paul's behavior: Act 20:22-24 And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: 23 Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. 24 But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

Paul's example shows the combination of these two, personal resolve undergirded with a clear sense of the Lord's direction.

The Lord's help does not necessarily remove us from trouble, but it vindicates us at the end. The Servant expresses this with the image of a court of law, before which the claims of the Servant and of

his adversaries are reviewed. To understand this passage, we should first review how Israel's legal system works, as described in Deut 25:1.

Deu 25:1 If there be a controversy between men, and they **come** נגש unto **judgment** המשפט, that the judges may judge them; then they shall **justify** [צדק Hifil] the righteous, and **condemn** [רשע Hifil] the wicked.

The adversaries approach to the judges. The task of the judges is to declare righteousness and wickedness. The bold terms (come, judgment, justify, and condemn) all occur in this passage. Note that “justify” and “condemn” are the responsibility of the judges. This insight helps us understand the structure of vv. 8-9a (chart)

The Servant asks three questions, but the first two differ from the third, in two ways.

- In the first two, he invites his adversary to come near. There is no such invitation in the third.
- The third is separated from the first two by the repetition of his confidence in the Lord's help.

Deut 25:1 helps us understand why. The first two questions describe what the adversary does. The verb in the third question is appropriate, not to the adversary, but to the judge. The Servant knows the judge's decision before the case ever comes to trial: “he is near that justifieth me.” The third question simply states this confidence in the form of a question: “Who is the judge that shall condemn me?”

This text is the central link in a chain of three biblical texts: it is founded upon an earlier one (Job 13), and itself forms the foundation for a later one (Rom 8). The first applies to the bottom half of the hourglass, this one to the Messiah, and the final one to the top half (chart). We'll begin by reviewing the text itself, then show how it is derived from Job, and how it is echoed in Romans.

Isaiah's Text

8 He is near that justifieth me;--The Servant looks up to the judge, and describes the one who sits in judgment as “my vindicator,” “my justifier.” In the light of this, he declares that no one can bring a successful case against him in two parallel statements.

who will contend יריב with me? let us stand together;--The verb “contend” describes a formal lawsuit. The Servant invites his legal adversaries to come stand together before the judge.

who is mine adversary [בעל משפטי “master of my judgment”]? let him come near נגש to me.--The expression translated “my adversary” is “master of my judgment,” the one who “owns” the case against me and brings me to court. In personal matters, we should seek to avoid going to court (Matt 5:25-26), but the Servant welcomes an official review of his mission. Using the language of Deut 25:1, he invites the accuser, the one who brings the case against him, to draw near, because he is assured that the Judge will recognize his integrity.

9 Behold, the Lord GOD will help me;--The Servant repeats his confidence that the Lord will defend him. Then he asks a third question. The first two questions focused on the futility of the adversaries. This one corresponds to 8a, and reminds us of the Judge's favor toward him.

who is he that shall condemn me?--The Judge has already been identified as “he that justifieth me.” The corresponding negative statement, presented as a rhetorical question, is that there is no one to

render a guilty verdict.

The bottom line is that when people oppose us, what matters is not their opposition, but who is sitting in judgment. We get all frustrated at the action of our fellow creatures. Our focus should be on the creator, before whom we all stand.

lo, they all shall wax old בלה as a garment בגד; the moth עש shall eat them up אכל.--With the court stacked against them, the adversaries are doomed to fail. They will decay and fade away like an old, moth-eaten garment.

Roots in Job 13-14

Our text has many echoes of Job 13:18-28 (chart). The parallel with Job is an example of the bottom half of the hourglass. In fact, God introduces Job as “my servant Job” (Job 1:8; 2:3; 42:7, 8), making him a prototype for the messianic Servant. The Servant takes comfort from the experience of godly Israelites before him.

8 He is near that justifieth me;--Job also describes his condition as being in a court of law:

Job 13:18 Behold now, I have ordered *my cause* [משפת “judgment”; “I have placed my case in order”]; I know that I shall be **justified**.

who will contend יריב with me? let us stand together:--Using the same legal verb, Job cries out,

Job 13:19 Who is he that will **plead יריב** with me?

who is mine adversary [בעל משפטי “master of my judgment”]?--Job uses the noun משפט “judgment” in v. 18, when he states that he has organized his defense:

Job 13:18 Behold now, I have ordered *my cause* [משפת “judgment”; “I have placed my case in order”]

9b lo, they all shall wax old בלה as a garment בגד; the moth עש shall eat them up אכל.--Again, Isaiah draws his language from Job 13, repeating four of Job’s words:

Job 13:28 And he, as a rotten thing, **consumeth בלה**, as a **garment בגד** that is **moth עש eaten אכל**.

This last parallel is puzzling. In Job, the one who waxes old and is consumed is man in general, of which Job is an instance, while the Servant is confident that this fate will befall his adversaries. This contrast is not a mark of carelessness in Isaiah’s citation of Job. Rather, it reflects a deep understanding of Job’s experience and its parallel in the sufferings of God’s people in every age.

Recall the story of Job. Job, a man distinguished for his righteousness, and blessed by God, is the centerpiece of a context between God and Satan. Satan claims that he can turn Job away from God by persecution. God grants him access to Job, so long as he spares his life. Job knows nothing of this cosmic struggle. All he sees is the disintegration of his happy, blessed life. His children die, his wealth vanishes, his health deteriorates, his wife nags him, and his friends, in their attempt to comfort him, can only surmise that he must be hiding some secret sin for which God is punishing him.

In ch. 13, Job boldly brings his case before God as the righteous judge.

13:3 Surely I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason with God. ... 15 Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him. 16 He also shall be my salvation: for an hypocrite shall not come before him. 17 Hear diligently my speech, and my declaration with your ears. 18 Behold now, I have ordered my **cause**; I know that I shall be **justified**. 19 **Who is he that will plead** with me? ... 22 Then call thou, and I will answer: or let me speak, and answer thou me. 23 How many are mine iniquities and sins? make me to know my transgression and my sin.

But God is silent. The suffering continues, with no explanation.

24 Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and holdest me for thine enemy? ...

In v. 28, Job broadens the discussion. He is not the only one who must endure suffering. This is the condition of all men. Note the *casus pendens* between 13:28 and 14:1. v. 28 does not describe the consequence of the judgment that Job desires, but the general condition of himself and all men.

28 And he, as a rotten thing, **consumeth**, as a **garment** that is **moth eaten**, 14:1 [that is,] man that is born of a woman, of few days, and full of trouble. 2 He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.

Why does God bother entering into judgment with such miserable creatures as Job and his fellow humans? Better far for God to leave them all alone until they die.

3 And dost thou open thine eyes upon such an one, and bringest me into judgment with thee? 4 Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one. 5 Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass; 6 Turn from him, that he may rest, till he shall accomplish, as an hireling, his day.

The answer to Job's mystery lies in the role of Satan. From his ancestors, Job would know that Satan can directly tempt men to sin, but he knows nothing of his opposition behind the scenes, and if God were to reveal it to him, it would spoil the whole demonstration. It looks to Job as though God is opposing him, and mankind along with him, and that they must all wear out like a moth-eaten garment. But in fact Job's sufferings are the result of God's combat with Job's adversary, and by the end of the book God vindicates his servant, and Satan is defeated. (Chart)

Job does not know the reason for his sufferings. But Isaiah, who has read Job, does, and so does every believer from that time on. We are engaged in a cosmic struggle between God and Satan. Suffering in our lives does not necessarily mean that God is angry with us. It may mean that he loves us so much that he has entrusted us with a central role in the ongoing spiritual war. In this case, when we face his tribunal, we are not the ones who will fall apart like a moth-eaten garment. That fate belongs to those who are both our adversaries and God's. (Chart)

Branches in Rom 8:33-34

Just as Isaiah builds on Job, Paul alludes to vv. 8-9 in Rom 8:33-34.

<p>Isa 50:8-9 He is near that justifieth me; who will contend with me? let us stand together: who is mine adversary? let him come near to me. 9 Behold, the Lord GOD will help me; who is he that shall condemn me?</p>	<p>Rom 8:33-34 Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? <i>It is God that justifieth.</i> 34 Who is he that condemneth?</p>
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The first thing to note is that as in the echo of 49:6 in Acts 13:47, and of 42:6-7 in Acts 26:16-18, so here, what is said of the Servant is applied to his body, the Church. “As the Father hath sent me, so send I you.” Thus, in the three citations in this chain, we have all three parts of the hourglass.

Next, let us lay hold of the encouragement that the Servant claims, the assurance that God is for us, and so it does not matter who may set themselves against us.

50:10-11, Introduction to the Servant’s Message

These two verses have distinct speakers. However, thematically they are tightly coupled: the first poses a question to which there are two answers, one in v. 10, the other in v. 11. The first answer is amplified in 51:1-8, suggesting that we should take these two together as an introduction to 51:1-8.

50:10, Isaiah Poses and Answers a Question

In this verse, the speaker is neither the Lord, nor the Servant, both of whom are referred to in the third person. Likely, we hear Isaiah here. The Servant has just said that he has been sent with a message, and has been obedient to his charge, in spite of severe persecution. Now Isaiah exhorts those who hear the Servant’s message.

The AV deviates from the MT punctuation in associating “that walketh in darkness” with the first half of the verse; the MT puts it with second, where it makes more sense. The question in the first half is parallel to 50:2a,

Wherefore, when I came, *was there* no man? when I called, *was there* none to answer?

The second half of the verse gives a prescription. Imagine a pause after the initial question.

10 Who is among you that feareth the LORD,--and the judgment threatened against those who oppose the Servant in vv. 7-9

that obeyeth the voice of his servant?--empowered as it is by the Lord, v. 4.

The point of this half-verse is the same as Rom 3:11, “There is none that understandeth; there is none that seeketh after God.”

He that walketh in darkness, and hath no light,--This relative clause, the subject of the second half of the verse, describes the moral dilemma of such a person. Where can I find light to guide my steps?

Isaiah has used this language before, in 8:19-9:2. See the notes on the earlier study on that passage.

- 8:19-20 warns the people of the choice they must make in their authority. They can follow either the lies of spiritists, or the Word of God.

- 8:21-22 draws on the image of Israel during the exodus, “pass[ing] through” lands that they did not possess. They are deprived, wandering in darkness.
- 9:1-2 promises a reversal, in three repeated phrases:
 - 1a “She who was in anguish shall not have dimness.”
 - 1b should be read, “at the first he dishonored ... and afterward did honor.” The contrast is between the Assyrian invasion that first hit the country in its northern tribes, and the coming of the Messiah (cf. 9:6), whose ministry began in those same northern tribes.
 - 2 summarizes the reversal by returning to the language of 8:21-22, the coming of light upon those “that walked in darkness.”

Two answers are possible. Isaiah offers one, while the Servant (in the next paragraph) describes the other.

let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God.--The first answer is to trust in the Lord. This will bring blessing.

The following three calls to “hearken” (51:1, 4, 7), with their emphasis on God’s righteousness, flesh out this promise. We will see that they come on the lips of the Servant. Thus, the advice to the walkers in darkness here is the same as it was in ch. 9, to look to the promised Messiah. But first, there is a warning for those who choose another way.

50:11, The Servant Warns of the False Solution

Another voice now breaks in. v. 11 “mine hand” shows that a divine person is now speaking. Yet he speaks of “the Lord” in the third person, 51:1, the anomaly of persons that we have seen elsewhere in Isaiah (e.g., 48:16; 49:10), and that becomes common in Zechariah (2:8,9; 4:8,9). We see the same ambiguity in 51:1-2, in which the speaker refers to “the Lord” in the third person, yet claims to be the one who called Abraham. The Servant is delivering the message that he promised in 50:4, presenting himself as the only source of salvation and righteousness.

11 Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks:--In his introduction (v. 10), Isaiah addressed him “who ... walketh in darkness and hath no light.” Isaiah’s counsel is to trust in the Lord, but some people would rather try to provide their own light.

It’s so easy to turn on a light today that we forget the difficulty two hundred years ago. One had to strike steel against flint, or a rock against iron pyrite, to generate a hot spark, then catch it in tinder and gently blow on it until the tinder burst into flame. People carried around a little metal box with steel, flint, and tinder, the way one might carry a butane lighter or a pack of matches today.

It takes a knack to start a fire with flint and steel. Not every spark goes into the tinder, and not every spark that hits the tinder ignites. The Servant here picture people who are surrounded with sparks. They are striking fiercely, making lots of sparks, but with little light to show for it.

walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled.--If we will not accept the Lord’s light, we must try to light our own fire. What will be the result of such an effort?

This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow.--Attempts to define our own moral standard inevitably lead to sorrow. Note that the Lord himself takes credit for that sorrow.

The world likes to think of great moral thinkers as intrinsically righteous, even if they do not follow the revelation of Scripture. God says that anyone who tries to set up a moral standard apart from his word will have to answer to him. Such an action is not morally good. It is wicked, because it seeks to establish an alternative to the creator's law.

51:1-51:8, The Servant Invites the People

After this warning, the Servant offers three invitations to those who seek for light.³ Each invitation mentions the Lord's righteousness, and the second and third also emphasize his salvation.

The progression among the paragraphs is marked by the shift in the people addressed in each section. (Chart) First he addresses those who seek righteousness. Once they have found it, he describes them in the second section as "my people." Finally, as those who "know righteousness," he warns them of opposition, but encourages them of their vindication.

51:1-3, Faith brings Blessing: Salvation

51:1 Hearken (שמע) to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the LORD:--The first invitation is addressed to those who are seeking righteousness, seeking the Lord. These are people who recognize that they are in the dark (50:10) and who also recognize the futility of seeking to establish their own righteousness (50:11). Our Lord describes these people as "they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Matt 5:6). Salvation does not come to those who think that they are already righteous (Mark 2:17); we must repent of our sin before we are in a position to receive God's righteousness.

The immediately preceding verse (50:10 "mine hand") was spoken by a divine person, as is 51:2 ("I called" Abraham), yet the speaker here says not "ye that seek me," but "ye that seek the Lord." See note on 50:11; the Servant's voice begins to merge with that of the sovereign Lord.

look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged.--It is a great blessing when we can look to our parents for spiritual inspiration. In colloquial terms, the Servant exhorts the people to be "chips off the old block." Some of us do not have this privilege, but Israel did. Their ancestor Abraham is the canonical example of faith (Rom 4).

What if our parents do not provide us with the example that Abraham does to Israel?

First, let this principle be an example to us in our parenting. Let us seek to be the kind of parents to which our children can look when they hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Second, rejoice that we can look to Abraham as our spiritual father. (chart)

Rom 4:11 that he might be **the father of all them that believe**, though they be not circumcised;

Rom 4:16-18 ... Abraham; who is **the father of us all**,

³ The corresponding 55:1-57:21 is also an alternation of invitation and warning, but with two rather than three panels.

Gal 3:7 Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, **the same are the children of Abraham.**

2 Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you:--Those who follow after righteousness are exhorted to look to Abraham. The word “righteousness” (צדקה; the word here, צדק, does not appear in Genesis) appears only twice in Abraham’s history (chart). The first use tells us of Abraham’s imputed righteousness, because of his faith:

Gen 15:6 And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.

All personal righteousness must start with this transaction, as Paul makes clear in Rom 4. But this is not the end of the story. The second reference to righteousness in Abraham’s life concerns his practical righteousness, which results from God’s election:

Gen 18:19 For I know him, [in order] that למען he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice צדקה and judgment; that למען the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.

The conjunction למען indicates purpose. This verse sets forth a causal chain with three links:

1. God knows Abraham, that is, enters into a personal relation with him.
2. Abraham runs his household in a godly way, which yields righteousness and judgment.
3. God brings blessing on Abraham.

Both verses emphasize the point of 50:10-11: human righteousness comes from God. Our relation with him begins with righteousness that he imputes through faith, and continues with practical righteousness that he generates in us.

for I called him alone,--Here is the divine initiative that led to both the faith and obedience of Abraham. God made the promise that led to the faith of 15:6; he entered into the relation that yielded the obedience of 18:19.

and blessed him, and increased him.--Just as God’s call leads to Abraham’s righteousness, so his righteousness leads to blessing.

3 For the LORD shall comfort Zion:--The shift from past tense to future indicates that the same principle that led to Abraham’s blessing will now lead to Zion’s blessing. His calling will lead to righteousness that in turn will produce blessing, both material and psychological.

he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD;--First he highlights the physical restoration that Zion will experience. We have seen this promise multiple times throughout the book: 44:26; 49:8; 41:18; 41:19. His action remedies two disasters. The “waste places” are literally “ruins,” the result of the Babylonian invasion, while the vitalization of the desert reverses the curse imposed after Adam’s sin, restoring the Edenic state.

joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.--The restoration will be not only physical, but also psychological. People will rejoice in the Lord’s goodness.

51:4-6, God's Salvation is Universal and Eternal: Gospel Outreach

4 Harken (קשב Hifil) unto me, my people עמי; and give ear (אזן Hifil) unto me, O my nation לאומי:--The audience changes. Initially, it consisted of those among unbelieving Israel who sought for righteousness, sinners who recognized their problem. They were told to follow Abraham's example of faith and obedience. Now they truly constitute God's people, his holy nation. He instructs them concerning two characteristics of his righteousness and salvation (note the repetition of these terms in vv. 5 and 6). The imperative in 6a marks the break between two paragraphs with distinct but related themes. (Charts)

for a law shall proceed from me, and I will make my judgment to rest for a light of the peoples. 5 My righteousness is near; my salvation is gone forth, and mine arms shall judge the peoples;-- "People" at the end of v. 4 and the middle of v. 5 is plural, and refers to the various ethnic groups among the Gentiles. The promise here is that God's kingdom, his rule, is not just for Israel, but extends across all the earth. Note also לאומ earlier, which throughout Pss represents the Gentiles.

The Great Commission is the outworking of this prophecy, as was Israel's original duty to carry the knowledge of God's rule to all nations, Deut 20.

the isles shall wait upon me, and on mine arm shall they trust.--"Trust" here is the same word יקל used in the prophecy of the Servant in 42:4,

Isa 42:4 He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall **wait** for his law.

These are the only places this verb appears in Isaiah, confirming that the one speaking here is the Servant.

6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath:--An imperative now introduces a new paragraph. He draws their attention to the most fundamental and enduring elements of their environment, the heavens and the earth.

for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment,--He may be repeating the prophecy of Ps 102,

Psa 102:25-26 Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens *are* the work of thy hands. 26 They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed:

and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner:--Humans are no more permanent than the universe that they inhabit.

The theme has changed from space in vv. 4-5 to time in v. 6. The heavens, the earth, and their inhabitants are transitory and temporary.

but my salvation shall be for ever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished.--But the gifts that God bestows on his people are eternal. They will never end.

Thus this paragraph encourages those who have received God's righteousness that his salvation is universal in both space and time. In space, it will extend to all nations of the earth. In time, unlike the current world in which it has been revealed, it will endure for ever.

It is interesting that these two themes, the spatial and temporal universality of God's reign, are echoed in the only two times that the Bible declares God to be thrice-holy:

Isa 6:3 Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: **the whole earth** is full of his glory

Rev 4:8 Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which **was, and is, and is to come**

51:7-8 His People will meet Opposition but be Vindicated

7 Harken (שמע) unto me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law;--This is the strongest statement about the addressees. In the first panel, they were following after righteousness. Now they know it, and God's law is in their heart.

We think of the law in the heart as a mark of the New Covenant (Jer 31:33), but it is a sign of righteousness in the OT as well (charts):

Psa 37:30-31 The mouth of the righteous speaketh wisdom, and his tongue talketh of judgment.
31 The law of his God *is* in his heart; none of his steps shall slide.

Psa 40:8 I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.

Psa 119:11 Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.

True righteousness in either covenant is not outward conformity to the law, but the outworking of the law of God written in the heart.

The experience of those who receive the Servant's instruction, as presented in these three invitations to hearken, will parallel his (chart).

fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be ye afraid of their revilings.--The Servant faces rejection by men:

Isa 49:7 Thus saith the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, *and* his Holy One, to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers,

Isa 50:6 I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.

Those who follow the Servant will meet opposition, just as he did.

8 For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worm shall eat them like wool:--The Servant said of his adversaries,

Isa 50:9 lo, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up.

Now he encourages his followers with the same expectation.

These parallels are remarkable. They show that the upper half of the hourglass is not just the result of NT interpretation, but is anticipated within Isaiah. The Servant in Isaiah incorporates all three elements: Israel, the Messiah, and those who receive Messiah's message.

but my righteousness shall be for ever, and my salvation from generation to generation.--As at the end of v. 6, so now he again emphasizes the permanence of the gifts that he gives to his people.

Notes

Descriptions of Shame

Collect vv in Isaiah that use more than one of the verbs בוש, כלם, חפר

Ref	Subject	Valence	בוש	כלם	חפר
41:11	Israel's enemies	+	X	X	
45:16	Idolaters	+	X	X	
45:17	Israel	-	X	X	
50:7	Servant	-	X	X	
54:4	Mother Zion	-	X	X	X
1:29	Sinners	+	X		X
24:23	Sun and Moon	+	X		X