

The Lord's Comfort & Compassion for His People

~Isaiah 49:1-13

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March 8, 2020

Sometimes we may think that little gestures don't matter. Sending a card; offering a prayer; speaking a word; listen intently. Such gestures can seem so small and insignificant in the vastness of our planet. But when you're going through something difficult, small gestures can make a big difference.

I experienced this through the illness and passing of both my parents when my Dad got very ill. I had been a pastor for 16 years. I visited people in hospital with loved ones facing life or death. I prayed with them. I was there sometimes when their loved one passed. I ministered to people who received difficult news from doctors. I had experienced the care giving side of reaching out to those in need many times.

But the roles reversed in June 2005. I flew out to be with my Dad for his last days. Suddenly I was part of the family getting visited. I experienced the exhaustion of staying with dad through the night as he suffered. I got frustrated with the doctors. Our family had to navigate that journey of care decisions. And upon his passing we received the cards, flowers, prayers, words and listening ears. I so treasured each gesture.

Then in the first days of 2012, we faced the same thing with my Mom. She was quite ill through much of 2011. We went down to visit during the Christmas and New Year break 2011/12. We drove home New Year's Day after visiting with her in hospital and watching a Mr. Bean show. She seemed on the road to recovery. But then we got the sudden and somewhat shocking news on Jan 4 that she had passed.

I probably thought for a few moments, "I've already been through this. I know how to handle it." It was similar yet different. Losing your Mom is not the same as losing your Dad. So again the cards, prayers, visits, flowers and listening from many of you meant a whole lot to us. I couldn't believe how small gestures added up to such a big impact. But even more important was God's presence & comfort. He sustained me through those times of doubt, weariness, grief and sorrow/ He spoke to me, strengthened me, and helped me.

Life brings hardships like the death of loved ones, serious illness, job loss, a loved one leaving the faith or a struggling child or marriage. Sometimes we go through difficult times with little support. We may not have received cards, calls, visits or listening ears. We may not have sensed God's presence. We may have even wondered if God listened or cared.

Tough times can cause us to question God and people's love and concern for us. It is inevitable that people will disappoint us. Someone will fail to respond to your difficulties in ways that you hoped because we all fail and sin. But does God forget us? Does God forsake us?

Think about the Jewish exiles living in Babylon about 550 BC. They descended from the chosen people of God. Yet Jerusalem lay in ruins. The charred remains of Solomon's temple lay at the top of the city. Thousands of Jerusalem's former residents now lived in captivity in Babylon. Looking only at their circumstances, you might not blame them for concluding that God had forsaken and forgotten them.

But God had not abandoned them. God would ensure they heard about His concern and compassion for them. He did this by sending prophets or the writings of the prophets to encourage them. In our Scripture passage today, we will see God comfort and show compassion to His people. If you wonder about God's compassion for you today, I pray this will remind you of His care. Maybe life is fine today and you don't wonder about God's care. But I pray this will remind you of times He comforted you in the past. After we look at His comfort, we consider what we need to do with His comfort. So our text today is Isaiah 49:1-18 – Page 522 in the Bibles in front of you if you'd like to follow along. Let's look for God's comfort and compassion.

Isaiah 49:1-18 (ESV)

49 Listen to me, O coastlands,

and give attention, you peoples from afar.

The LORD called me from the womb,

from the body of my mother he named my name.

²He made my mouth like a sharp sword;

in the shadow of his hand he hid me;

he made me a polished arrow;

in his quiver he hid me away.

³And he said to me, "You are my servant,

Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

⁴But I said, "I have labored in vain;

I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;

yet surely my right is with the LORD,

and my recompense with my God."

⁵And now the LORD says,

he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,

to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
⁶he says:
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
⁷Thus says the LORD,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation,
the servant of rulers:
“Kings shall see and arise;
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

⁸Thus says the LORD:
“In a time of favor I have answered you;
in a day of salvation I have helped you;
I will keep you and give you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages,
⁹saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’
to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’
They shall feed along the ways;
on all bare heights shall be their pasture;
¹⁰they shall not hunger or thirst,
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.
¹¹And I will make all my mountains a road,
and my highways shall be raised up.
¹²Behold, these shall come from afar,
and behold, these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.”

¹³ Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!

For the LORD has comforted his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted.

¹⁴ But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me;
my Lord has forgotten me."

¹⁵ "Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.

¹⁶ Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.

¹⁷ Your builders make haste;
your destroyers and those who laid you waste go out from you.

¹⁸ Lift up your eyes around and see;
they all gather, they come to you.

As I live, declares the LORD,
you shall put them all on as an ornament;
you shall bind them on as a bride does.

How does the Lord bring comfort and compassion to His people? He called the servant to bring God's good news to us.

(49:1-6). Verse 1 begins with the Servant speaking. He calls to the coastlands or islands which was like the end of the earth to the people at that time. Then he reviews the Lord's call on his life. He recognizes that the Lord called him from birth to carry out this mission.

The Lord not only called but equipped him. In verse 2 we see how the Lord prepared him. He made the servant's mouth like a sharp sword. He made Him a polished arrow. So the servant's ministry involved speaking. Yet his words would cut deeply. He would speak truth and proclaim God's invitation to the world. But the Lord would also make him like a polished arrow. Now what's the difference between a regular arrow and polished arrow? Well remember they made their own arrows. They would likely mass produce the general arrows. There might not be much time to prepare the arrows for greater accuracy. But sometimes archers had time to polish arrows or remove anything rough or uneven that might alter the arrows flight. Well the Lord would make the servant like a polished arrow so his word would penetrate deeply into hearts. Yet the Lord also hides the servant or kept him in his arrow quiver until the time came for his ministry.

But who is this servant? Well in verse 3, the servant tells us what the Lord said. “You are my servant Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” What does Israel mean here? Could it be the nation or the people? Possibly. But that seems a bit weird when you look down at verse 5 which says “the Lord formed me to bring back Jacob and that Israel might be gathered to him.” Well if the servant is the nation Israel, how can the nation Israel gather the nation Israel? I agree with those who think the servant Israel in verse 3 is actually a person who will somehow gather the nation Israel to the Lord. Remember, the name Israel actually started as a personal name given to Jacob back in Genesis 35:10. Maybe the Lord called the servant Israel to say he fulfills the ultimate mission of Israel to be God’s light to the nations. So verse 3 sounds very encouraging with this great commission for the servant of the Lord.

But then comes surprising verse 4. The servant concludes that his work failed to accomplish anything. He almost sounds like the author of Ecclesiastes. “I have worked in vain – for nothing.” The servant spoke but experienced a lot of rejection. Disappointing response met His work. Yet the servant does not give in to despondency. He continues to trust the Lord. He continues to put His confidence in the Lord.

Isaiah 49:4 turns out to be a great verse for anyone discouraged in their ministry. You may have worked hard. You may have done all the right things. You may have a great message to deliver. Yet not many showed up or responded. So it seems like all that work didn’t matter. But don’t let the results discourage you. Faithfulness to the Lord is most important. Leave the results of your ministry in His hands. Continue in confidence with Him.

The Lord responds to the servant’s disappointment in verse 6 with a new mission. The Lord declares, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to bring back Israel; I will make you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth.” This was always the mission of Israel. They were supposed to be a light to God’s salvation to the other nations. But they had turned their backs on God. So He needed to bring them back to Himself. But he would not abandon His mission to the nations. He would make this servant the light and bring His salvation to the ends of the earth. This is where God’s compassion reached us.

Friends, you and I live at the end of the earth, at least compared to ancient Israel. We are thousands of kilometers away from there. Yet God sent His light through time and people to reach us. God showed His compassion to us by bringing us His light in the midst of our darkness. So through this servant, we would eventually receive God’s light and His salvation.

Verse 6 shows up in the New Testament. One instance occurred in Acts 13. Paul and Barnabas deliver the message about Christ to the Jewish community in the synagogue. But after they spoke, some were filled with jealousy and began to contradict them. So Paul and Barnabas declare in Acts 13:46-47 that they would focus their ministry on the Gentiles. Then they quote Isaiah 49:6 as God's command to them. So, the first way God showed His compassion for us was sending this Servant who turned out to be Jesus so we could receive His salvation.

But the servant's mission would face many difficulties. In verse 7, the Lord speaks about the servant. "Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers." People would despise Him. We don't like it if one person dislikes us. This servant would face many people who deeply despised Him. The nation abhorred Him. Abhor means strong dislike and even hatred. The servant would experience widespread abhorrence from the very people He would bring light to. But the Lord would ultimately look after this. Look at the second half of verse 7. "Kings shall see and arise; princes shall prostrate themselves because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." So the Lord would vindicate this servant. The Lord will reveal His glory through this Servant's ministry. So kings would stand up which they never did in the presence of an inferior. Princes would bow down which they never did for servants. But this servant would become worthy of the worship of kings and princes.

Then in verses 8-13, we see another way God shows compassion to His people. **He provides for those released to make it home to Him (49:8-13).** These verses present the servant going to people in prison or darkness. In verse 9 he calls prisoners to come out. He calls those in darkness to step out into his light. In the immediate context, this would apply to the exiles in Babylon. They lived in the prison of Babylon and the darkness of captivity. But the servant calls them to come out and go on a journey home.

Yet, it was about a 4 month journey by foot. The people didn't have a lot of resources. Their supplies would run out in days. How would they make it? Verses 9 and 10 talk about God's provisions along the way for them. "They shall feed along the ways. The bare heights shall be their pasture." So you don't normally expect to find food beside a road or on bare pasture. But here the Lord would provide for them. Verse 10 – They shall not hunger or thirst. They wouldn't have to worry about the scorching Middle Eastern heat. In fact, they would be led by one with pity or sympathy. He would provide springs of water for them along the way.

Now think about verses 8-10 describing your spiritual journey. When we first received Christ, He released us from the prison of sin and the darkness of Satan's rule. But that's only the beginning of our spiritual journey. We need to walk day by day in dependence on the Lord. He provides for us along the way. He feeds us so we grow. He brings us through times of spiritual thirst and hunger. He leads us to springs of water along the way. He provides so we will ultimately come home to Him. The Lord would ultimately provide this for the exiles.

So, in verse 13, the prophet calls for celebration because of the Lord's provision. "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted." This call to praise remembers the Lord's comfort in the past and looks forward to his compassion for our future afflictions.

Yet, when we suffer sometimes remembering the past and looking ahead with promises can seem just like words. Our situation does not immediately change. We're still waiting. The exiles had to wait about a decade before some of them actually made it back to Jerusalem. So we might identify with what they say in verse 14. "But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.'" There's that doubt that we can jump to about God when our circumstances don't improve. Sometimes, the Lord does not immediately speak to our doubts in our suffering. That's part of the story of Job.

But here the Lord immediately speaks. The third way He comforts His people. **He remembers those feeling forsaken by engraving us on his palms (49:15-18).** The Lord reassures the people that He will never forget them. So, in vs. 15, He draws of a picture of a mother with her nursing child. Most mothers with nursing children have deep compassion for them and never forget them. In a rare case they may forget about their child. See that at the end of verse 15 – "Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." In fact, He says in verse 16, "I have engraved you on the palm of my hands." If you write something on your hand, you're very unlikely to forget about it. You'll see it all the time. But the Lord doesn't just write us on his hands. He engrave us there. He constantly remembers and thinks about His people. He will not forsake them. He will not forget them. The Lord comforts His people and has compassion on His afflicted. So, we have seen three ways God shows compassion to His people. I pray that you can remember times in your life where the Lord comforted and showed compassion to you. Once we receive the Lord's comfort, we must use it for others. To help us see this, I want to show you a passage in the New Testament that talks a lot about comfort and affliction.

2 Corinthians 1:3-7

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. ⁷Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

So there's a lot of comfort and affliction in this passage. But it teaches what to do with God's comfort and some basics about going through hard times. First, **Bless God in the midst of suffering.** We tend to first cry out to God to do something or curse Him when he doesn't immediately resolve our situation. But think about how blessing God brings a different dynamic. Instead of approaching God as an adversary from whom we try to squeeze a blessing, we approach Him as our comforter who has already showed His care. We recover this essential perspective when we bless God. We regain the picture of our Lord Jesus, who also suffered but now reigns as Lord of the universe.

Then we must **receive God's comfort in the midst of our struggle.** Notice Paul says the God of all comfort confronts us in all of our affliction. This does mean God will automatically rescue us out of a situation. He more often says "I come beside you with my strength to fortify you to go through this. One commentator puts it like this. "God's comfort strengthens weak knees and sustains sagging spirits so that one faces the troubles of life with unbending resolve and unending assurance." D. Garland – 2 Cor – 1999.

Then comfort others with the comfort you have received from God. Let God's comfort from your life overflow into other lives. I can share how God sustained me through the death of both my parents. I can testify to how He enabled me to continue life without them and go forward in His strength. With God's comfort, we comfort others.

So I would like us to practice this approach as we close today. I am going to guide you in prayer. Then we will meet at the Lord's Table to remember his great suffering so that we could receive God's salvation.

- Lead in a prayer – Bless the Lord and I remember His comforting work in your life.
- Receive the Lord's comfort and consolation today – I receive your comfort and consolation for my soul today.
- Ask the Lord to bring to mind someone you know who needs the Lord's comfort and then connect with them today.