

God's Servant Brings God's Comfort

Isaiah Chapters 50 and 51

A buzz word in the church over the last fifteen or twenty years has been the term “servant-leader.” When you think of the word “servant,” what comes to mind? Probably someone who is lowly in society, who follows orders, and who is rather nondescript. On the other hand when you think of the term “leader,” you probably envision someone who gives directions to others, who is articulate, someone that everyone else pays attention to. So how can those two terms, which seem so opposite, come together into a single concept?

As you are probably aware, the term came about from looking at the example of Jesus. He is certainly a leader, yet when He was on earth He often took the role of a servant. Recall how He washed the feet of His disciples? As we look at chapters 50 and 51 of Isaiah today we will see a similar blend of the Messiah, or Christ, also being a servant to His people.

Let's begin by reading.

Isaiah 50:4-11 NAS:

*4 The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples¹, That I may know **how to sustain the weary one** with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.*

5 The Lord God has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back.

6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.

7 For the Lord God helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed.

8 He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me.

*9 Behold, the Lord God helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; **The moth will eat them.***

10 Who is among you that fears the Lord, That obeys the voice of His servant, That walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.

*11 Behold, all you **who kindle a fire**, Who encircle yourselves with firebrands, Walk in the light of your fire And among the brands you have set ablaze. This you will have from My hand: You will lie down in torment.*

¹ An apprentice or pupil attached to a teacher; one whose allegiance is to the instruction and commitments of that teacher.

There are four passages in Isaiah that are referred to as “*Servant Songs*.” We’ve already seen two of them and we will get to the fourth one next week. Today we look at the third one. In the first two *Servant Songs* in Isaiah 42:1-7 and Isaiah 49:1-7, we saw hints of opposition to the Messiah’s ministry. But in this third *Song* the suffering of Jesus Christ, the *Servant*, is vividly described. When we get to the fourth *Song* in Isaiah 52:13—53:12, we will be told not only how Jesus suffered, but why His suffering is necessary.

Note that four times in this passage (verses 4, 5, 7, and 9) the *Servant* uses the name “**Lord God.**” The Hebrew words, “*Jehovah Adonai*,” can be translated “*Sovereign Lord*,” and you will find this title nowhere else in the “*Servant Songs*.” According to Robert B. Girdlestone, the name “*Jehovah Adonai*” means that “*God is the owner of each member of the human family, and that He consequently claims the unrestricted obedience of all.*”² **So the emphasis here is on the Servant’s submission to the Lord God in every area of His life and service.** If our Lord Jesus was so surrendered and submitted to His heavenly Father, so we also should submit to and obey Him in every thing.

In verses 4-9 the *Servant*, Jesus, is speaking for He addresses God as the **Sovereign Lord** in verses 4, 5, 7, and 9. As the Lord God taught the *Servant* daily how to comfort the weary, the *Servant* did not rebel against that instruction. In fact He was even willing to give His body up to torture and death to those who persecuted Him. Jesus, before He was crucified, was beaten, mocked, and spit on.³ In extremely difficult circumstances, certainly more difficult than what Isaiah’s original readers were facing, the *Servant* was obedient and submissive (1 Peter 2:22-23).⁴ We are expected to have the same kind of obedience as the *Servant*, Jesus.

Isaiah 50:4 NAS:

*4 The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me **morning by morning**, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.*

In verse 4 we see that Jesus’ mind was submitted to the Lord God so that He could learn His Word and His will. Everything Jesus said and did was taught to Him by His Father.⁵ He prayed to His Father for guidance (John 11:42; Mark 1:35) and meditated on the Old Testament Scriptures. What God taught the *Servant*, the *Servant* shared with those who needed encouragement and help. Are you feeling weary? Then go every day to Christ so that He may strengthen and comfort you. Christ had a daily “*quiet time*” with His Father (Mark 1:35). We also need a daily “*quiet time*” with Him. The *Servant* sets a good example here, morning by morning. We should take note of Jesus’ perfect example and change our lives accordingly.

² *Synonyms of the Old Testament*; Eerdmans, 1951; p. 34.

³ Matthew 26:67; Mark 14:65; 15:16-20.

⁴ Walvoord, John F.; Zuck, Roy B. Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Commentary: An exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c12985, S. 1:1104

⁵ ² John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28

Isaiah 50:5,6 NAS:

5 The Lord God has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back.

6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.

The Servant's will was also submitted to the Lord God. An “*opened ear*” (verse 5) is one that hears and obeys the voice of the master. Jesus is the true Israel, the completely obedient Servant. The people to whom Isaiah ministered were neither “*willing*” nor “*obedient*” (Isaiah 1:19), but the Servant Jesus gladly obeyed the will of the Lord God. This was not easy. Jesus must have struggled to remain obedient as He was subjected to excessively cruel treatment, for it meant yielding His *body* to wicked men who mocked Him, whipped Him, spat on Him, and then nailed Him to a cross (Matthew 26:67; 27:26, 30; Mark 14:65). Unlike the nation Israel, the Servant Jesus would present to God perfect obedience and willingness to endure humiliation and persecution for the Father's sake. During His Good Friday sufferings Jesus was sustained by His consciousness of being in the will of God and therefore in the right, as against all the slanders and assaults of His enemies.

Do we follow in the footsteps of our Servant Leader Jesus? When we feel battered and beaten by the world and criticized for living out our faith, do we take it with grace and recognize we are in the will of God? Or do we try to blend in with the crowd and downplay our testimony so we won't be shunned or ridiculed?

Isaiah 50:7-9 NAS:

7 For the Lord God helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed.

8 He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me.

*9 Behold, the Lord God helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? Behold, **they will all wear out like a garment; The moth will eat them.***

This is why Christ could get through such horrible treatment and it is why we can endure our trials and persecutions. The Lord God is our Help. Jesus was confident that the Father would bring Him victoriously through crucifixion and burial, and that His opponents would be subject to divine judgment, which they were when the capture of Jerusalem by Titus occurred in A.D. 70.

The Servant did all of this by faith in the Lord God. He was determined to do God's will even if it meant going to a cross (Luke 9:51; John 18:1-11), for He knew that the Lord God would help Him. The Servant was falsely accused, but He knew that God would vindicate Him and eventually put His enemies to shame. Keep in mind that when Jesus was ministering here on earth, He had to live by faith even as we must today. He didn't use His divine powers selfishly for Himself but trusted God and depended on the power

of the Spirit. The Servant was aware that those who falsely accused Him would eventually face Him as their Judge and would come to nothing. Like moth-eaten garments, they will perish.⁶

Isaiah 50:10 NAS:

10 Who is among you that fears the Lord, That obeys the voice of His servant, That walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.

Life is not easy. And contrary to what some popular speakers say, becoming a Christian does not guarantee a life of sunshine and roses. God allows trials into our lives so that we may grow and develop. Walking through dark times presents a challenge to even the most faithful. Arthur Pink, a Bible teacher of a previous generation, had this to say:

“There are seasons in the lives of all when it is not easy, not even for Christians, to believe that God is faithful. Our faith is sorely tried, our eyes dimmed with tears, and we can no longer trace the outworking of His love. . . .

“We find it difficult, yes, impossible . . . to harmonize His frowning providence with His gracious promises. Ah, faltering soul, seek grace to heed Isaiah 50:10,

“Who among you fears the LORD? Who obeys the voice of His Servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely upon his God.”

“When you are tempted to doubt the faithfulness of God, cry out, ‘Get thee hence, Satan.’ Though you cannot now harmonize God’s mysterious dealings with the avowals of His love, wait on Him for more light. In His own good time He will make it plain to you.”⁷

Isaiah 50:11 NAS:

11 Behold, all you who kindle a fire, Who encircle yourselves with firebrands, Walk in the light of your fire And among the brands you have set ablaze. This you will have from My hand: You will lie down in torment.

Verses 10–11 are addressed especially to the Jewish remnant that will return from the exile in Babylon, but they also have an application to God’s people today, and in the end times as well. God’s faithful were uncertain as to what He was doing, but He assured them that their faith would not go unrewarded. But those unfaithful ones who try to eliminate the darkness by lighting their own fires, that is by following their own ideas, will end up in sorrow and suffering. In obedience to the Lord, you may find yourself in

⁶ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:1105

⁷ Pink, Arthur. *Gleanings in the Godhead*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1975. Pp.48-49.

the darkness, such as the believers living in the difficult times when Jesus was crucified, but do not panic, for God will bring you the light you need just at the right time.⁸

Salvation would come to sinners only through faith, through trusting in the God of grace.⁹

Isaiah made an urgent appeal to the Servant's followers, those who fear the Lord and obey His Word, but who are in the dark. They are to walk by faith, trusting in the Lord. If they insist on walking by their own light they will suffer the fate of those who reject Him. They will lie down in torment.¹⁰ This warning was directed to those living in Isaiah's day. But all who refuse to trust the Lord will suffer the same eternal damnation.¹¹

What a Servant we've seen in this chapter! What an example for us as we "*fix our eyes on Jesus, The Author and Finisher of our faith*" (Hebrews 12:2, NKJ).

ISAIAH CHAPTER 51

Now as we move into chapter 51 we will find that once again God is urging His people to listen. There are four phrases to that effect in this chapter: "*Listen to Me*" (verse 1), "*Pay attention to me,*" . . . "*give ear*" (verse 4), "*Listen to Me*" (verse 7), and "*Please hear this*" (verse 21). In verse 9 the phrase "*Awake, awake*" is in a prayer addressed to the Lord. God wants His people in Babylon to hear what He has to say to them.

Isaiah 51:1-3 NAS:

1 "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, Who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were hewn And to the quarry from which you were dug.

2 "Look to Abraham your father And to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain; When he was but one I called him, Then I blessed him and multiplied him."

3 Indeed, the Lord will comfort Zion; He will comfort all her waste places. And her wilderness He will make like Eden, And her desert like the garden

⁸ Wiersbe, Warren W.: Be Comforted. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1992 (An Old Testament Study), S. Is 50:4

⁹ Pfeiffer, Charles F.: The Wycliffe Bible Commentary : Old Testament. Chicago : Moody Press, 1962, S. Is 50:10

¹⁰ Luke 16:23, 28; also note Rev. 20:13-15; 21:8.

¹¹ Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 1:1105

of the Lord; Joy and gladness will be found in her, Thanksgiving and sound of a melody.

In this chapter we find these three admonitions¹² which are addressed to the faithful remnant in Israel, the people described in Isaiah 50:10. In the first admonition (51:1–3), the Lord told them to *look back* and remember **Abraham and Sarah**, the direct ancestors of the Jewish nation (Genesis 12–25). From these two elderly people came a nation as numerous as the dust of the earth and the stars of the heaven (Genesis 13:16; 15:5). The remnant leaving Babylon was small and weak, but God was able to increase them into a mighty nation and would also one day turn their ravaged land into a paradise. “*Be comforted!*” God said to His people. “*The best is yet to come.*”¹³

Here God is speaking to those who pursue righteousness (Matthew 5:6) and seek Him. The believing remnant in Israel was to think back on their history. The rock from which they were cut, figuratively speaking, is explained in verse 2 as Abraham and Sarah, the “*founders*” of the nation. God gave the patriarch many descendants just as He had promised (Genesis 12:2; 15:5). For many years Abraham and Sarah had no children, but they believed God when God told them in Genesis 15:5: “*Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That’s how many descendants you will have!*” Though they had not yet seen the completion of God’s promises about Israel being a nation in the land (Genesis 15:18–21), **Israel had God’s promises that God’s kingdom will one day be established on the earth. Because of God’s compassion (Isaiah 49:10, 15) the land will someday be fruitful like the Garden of Eden. Because of this, as we’ll see in verse 11, joy will prevail among the remnant of the people of Israel.**

Isaiah 51:4–6 NAS:

4 “*Pay attention to Me, O My people, And give ear to Me, O My nation; For a law will go forth from Me, And I will set My justice for a light of the peoples.*”

5 “*My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth, And My arms will judge the peoples; The coastlands will wait for Me, And for My arm they will wait expectantly.*”

6 “*Lift up your eyes to the sky, Then look to the earth beneath; For the sky will vanish like smoke, And the earth will wear out like a garment And its inhabitants will die in like manner; But My salvation will be forever, And My righteousness will not wane.*”

In the second command, Isaiah 51:4–6, God told them to look ahead and realize that justice would come to the world and they would be vindicated by the Lord. Note the emphasis on the word “*My*”; “*My people, My nation, My justice, My righteousness, My arms, and My salvation.*” This is the grace of God, doing for His people what they did not deserve and what they could not do for themselves. The *arms of the Lord* is a key

¹² Strong suggestions.

¹³ Wiersbe, Warren W.: *Be Comforted*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1992 (An Old Testament Study), S. Is 51:1

concept in Isaiah's prophecy conveying the ideas of strength, power, and salvation.¹⁴ Heaven and earth will pass away, but God's righteousness and salvation will last forever (Hebrews 1:11). That righteousness will be displayed in a special way when Messiah returns and establishes His kingdom on earth in the end times.¹⁵

Isaiah 51:7, 8 NAS:

7 "Listen to Me, you who know righteousness, A people in whose heart is My law; Do not fear the reproach of man, Nor be dismayed at their revilings.

8 "For the moth will eat them like a garment, And the grub will eat them like wool. But My righteousness will be forever. And My salvation to all generations."

The third admonition (51:7–8) focuses on looking within, where we find either fear or faith. Why should the nation fear men when God is on its side? "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid" (Isaiah 12:2). "Sanctify the Lord of hosts Himself, and let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread" (Isaiah 8:13).

To have God's law in your heart means to belong to Him and be saved (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Hebrews 10:16).

The moth and the worm shall destroy the enemy, but God's salvation will endure. Moths and worms do not do their work conspicuously, but they work efficiently just the same. The seeds of destruction were already in the Babylonian Empire, and **the leaders did not know it**.¹⁶ The leaders in the United States don't know it either.

God's work of salvation and standards of righteousness will continue forever according to verse 8. Therefore, knowing this fact, the remnant with God's Law within them (in the end times) and eternal hope before them, should take courage and not be disheartened by their enemies. Those enemies will perish like a moth-eaten garment, a description the Servant used earlier.

Isaiah 51:9-11 NAS:

9 Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; Awake as in the days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not You who cut Rahab in pieces, Who pierced the dragon?

10 Was it not You who dried up the sea, The waters of the great deep; Who made the depths of the sea a pathway For the redeemed to cross over?

11 So the ransomed of the Lord will return And come with joyful shouting

¹⁴ (Isaiah 30:30; 40:10; 51:5, 9; 52:10; 53:1; 59:16; 62:8; 63:5, 12).

¹⁵ Wiersbe, Warren W.: Be Comforted. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1992 (An Old Testament Study), S. Is 51:1

¹⁶ Wiersbe, Warren W.: Be Comforted. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1992 (An Old Testament Study), S. Is 51:1

to Zion, And everlasting joy will be on their heads. They will obtain gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away.

“Awake, awake” meaning “Listen to Me” was spoken by God elsewhere to admonish the people, but here in verse 9 “awake, awake” is a prayer, a call to the Lord (51:9-16). The remnant in Babylon prayed as though God were asleep and needed to be awakened (Psalm 7:6; 44:23; 78:65-72). Their explanation to themselves regarding God’s silence had been that He must be asleep. They had forgotten Psalm 121:3, 4, NAS:

*3 He will not allow your foot to slip; He who keeps you will not slumber.
4 Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

They wanted God to bare His arm as He did when He defeated Pharaoh and redeemed His people from Egyptian bondage. They reminded God—and in the process reminded themselves—of the mighty work God had done to deliver them from Egypt. The return from Babylon was looked upon as another, or a new “exodus” (Isaiah 43:16-17; 49:9-12), with God wholly in charge and the enemy completely defeated.⁶

Isaiah 51:12-16 NAS:

12 “I, even I, am He who comforts you. Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies And of the son of man who is made like grass,

13 That you have forgotten the Lord your Maker, Who stretched out the heavens And laid the foundations of the earth, That you fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor, As he makes ready to destroy? But where is the fury of the oppressor?

14 “The exile will soon be set free, and will not die in the dungeon, nor will his bread be lacking.

15 “For I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea and its waves roar (the Lord of hosts is His name).

16 “I have put My words in your mouth and have covered you with the shadow of My hand, to establish the heavens, to found the earth, and to say to Zion, ‘You are My people.’ ”

God replied to their prayer with words of comfort (51:12–16; see vv. 3 and 19). He reminded them again of the weakness of man (Isaiah 40:6–8) and the power of God the Creator (51:13). Because they are His people, with whom He has deposited His Word, He will release them, protect them, and provide for them. They had an important task to perform and He would enable them to do it.¹⁷

Isaiah 51:17-23 NAS:

17 Rouse yourself! Rouse yourself! Arise, O Jerusalem, You who have drunk from the Lord’s hand the cup of His anger; The chalice of reeling

⁶ Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Comforted*. Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 2996, c1992 (An Old Testament Study), S. Is 51:1

¹⁷ Wiersbe, Warren W.: *Be Comforted*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1992 (An Old Testament Study), S. Is 51:1

you have drained to the dregs.

18 There is none to guide her among all the sons she has borne, Nor is there one to take her by the hand among all the sons she has reared.

19 These two things have befallen you; Who will mourn for you? The devastation and destruction, famine and sword; How shall I comfort you?

20 Your sons have fainted, They lie helpless at the head of every street, Like an antelope in a net, Full of the wrath of the Lord, The rebuke of your God.

21 Therefore, please hear this, you afflicted, Who are drunk, but not with wine:

22 Thus says your Lord, the Lord, even your God Who contends for His people, “Behold, I have taken out of your hand the cup of reeling, The chalice of My anger; You will never drink it again.”

23 “I will put it into the hand of your tormentors, Who have said to you, ‘Lie down that we may walk over you.’ You have even made your back like the ground And like the street for those who walk over it.”

The word translated “Rouse” in verse 17 is the exact same Hebrew word translated “awake” in verse 9. The Remnant of Israel had asked God to awaken, to be alert, in verse 9, and to do something. Now God asks the people to be awake, because He is about to do something. Their suffering was coming to an end. In the exile they had drunk, that is experienced, God’s wrath fully, all the way to the bottom of the cup. In the horrible destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, many of their young sons had died. Devastation, destruction, famine, and sword spoke of the awful suffering of the people of Jerusalem. Young men, objects of God’s wrath, had been killed in the streets of Jerusalem. However, God pronounced that this time of judgment was over. Now the judgment, again pictured as a cup to be drunk, would be given to her enemies who had walked on the dead bodies in Jerusalem. The Babylonians, who had destroyed Jerusalem, would in turn suffer God’s wrath.

Isaiah 52:1-6 NAS:

1 Awake, awake, Clothe yourself in your strength, O Zion; Clothe yourself in your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; For the uncircumcised and the unclean Will no longer come into you.

2 Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; Loose yourself from the chains around your neck, O captive daughter of Zion.

3 For thus says the Lord, “You were sold for nothing and you will be redeemed without money.”

4 For thus says the Lord God, “My people went down at the first into Egypt to reside there; then the Assyrian oppressed them without cause.

5 “Now therefore, what do I have here,” declares the Lord, “seeing that My people have been taken away without cause?” Again the Lord declares, “Those who rule over them howl, and My name is continually blasphemed all day long.

6 “Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, ‘Here I am.’”

The third “*wake-up call*” comes in Isaiah 52:1–6. It is also addressed to Jerusalem and is a command not only to wake up but to dress up. It’s not enough for her to put off her hangover (Isaiah 51:17–23), she must also put on a new, fresh look. Babylon the “*queen*” would fall in the dust in shame (Isaiah 47:1), but Jerusalem would rise up from the dust and be enthroned as a queen! Egypt had enslaved God’s people, Assyria had oppressed them, and Babylon had taken them captive; but now that was ended. Of course, the ultimate fulfillment of this promise will occur when the Messiah returns, delivers Jerusalem from her enemies, and establishes Mt. Zion as the joy of all the earth in the end times (61:4–11).

The city of Jerusalem is called “*the holy city*” eight times in Scripture.¹⁸ It has been “*set apart*” by God for His exclusive purposes; but when His people refused to obey Him, He ordered it destroyed, first by the Babylonians and then by the Romans. During the Captivity, God’s name was blasphemed because the enemy taunted the Jews and asked them why their great God did not deliver them (Psalm 115; 137). Paul quoted Isaiah 52:5 in Romans 2:24. But when the remnant is restored, they will know God’s name and seek to honor it.

Isaiah 52:7-12 NAS:

*7 How lovely on the mountains Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace And brings good news of happiness, Who
announces salvation, And says to Zion, “Your God reigns!”*

*8 Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices, They shout joyfully together;
For they will see with their own eyes When the Lord restores Zion.*

*9 Break forth, shout joyfully together, You waste places of Jerusalem; For
the Lord has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem.*

*10 The Lord has bared His holy arm In the sight of all the nations, That
all the ends of the earth may see The salvation of our God.*

*11 Depart, depart, go out from there, Touch nothing unclean; Go out of
the midst of her, purify yourselves, You who carry the vessels of the Lord.*

*12 But you will not go out in haste, Nor will you go as fugitives; For the
Lord will go before you, And the God of Israel will be your rear guard.*

The defeat of Babylon by Cyrus was certainly good news to the Jews because it meant freedom for the captives (Isaiah 40:9; 41:27). The Good News we share today is that Jesus Christ can set the prisoners free (Rom. 10:15). For decades, the remnant had suffered in a foreign country, without an altar or a priesthood; but now they would return to their land, rebuild their temple, and restore their God-given ministry.

The leaders, watchmen, take up the message and sing together to the glory of God (Isaiah 44:23). But they not only hear what God has done; they also *see* it happening. The wilderness will join the song because the desolate cities and “*waste places*” will be transformed (Isaiah 51:3). The remnant prayed for God’s holy arm to work, and He

¹⁸ Neh. 11:1, 18; Isa. 48:2; 52:1; Dan. 9:24; Matt. 4:5; 27:53; Rev. 11:2.

answered their prayer.

It seems strange that God would have to urge His people to leave a place of captivity, but some of them had grown accustomed to Babylon and were reluctant to leave. The first group, about 50,000 people (approximately 5 % of the numbers of Jews in captivity), left Babylon in 538 B.C. when Cyrus issued his decree. They were under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua the high priest (Ezra 1–2). They carried with them “*the vessels of the Lord*” (Isaiah 52:11), the articles that were needed for the service in the temple. A second group of nearly 1,800 people led by Ezra, left in 458 B.C. (80 years after the first group left).

God commanded them to depart because Babylon was a condemned city (Jeremiah 50:8ff; 51:6, 45). He warned them not to linger but to get out quickly while they had the opportunity (Isaiah 48:20). They did not have to flee like criminals, but there was no reason to delay. He also cautioned them not to take any of Babylon’s uncleanness with them. “*Touch nothing unclean*” would certainly include the whole Babylonian system of idolatry and occult practices that had helped to ruin the Jewish nation (Isaiah 47:11–15). Paul makes that application to believers today in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1.

God had a special word for the priests and Levites who were carrying the vessels of the temple: “*Go out of the midst of her, purify yourselves, You who carry the vessels of the Lord.*” This is a good command for all of God’s servants to obey. If we defile ourselves, we will also defile the work of the Lord. How tragic for a holy ministry to be a source of defilement to God’s people!

The prophet added a final word of encouragement: “*The Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.*” This reminds us of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt when the Lord went before them (Exodus 13:21) and stood between them and the enemy (Exodus 14:19–20). When God’s people obey God’s will, they can always count on God’s leading and protection.¹⁹

¹⁹ Wiersbe, Warren W.: *Be Comforted*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1992 (An Old Testament Study), S. Is 51:1