

Listen to me, you islands;

hear this, you distant nations:

*Before I was born the LORD called me;
from my birth he has made mention of my name.*

² *He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;*

*he made me into a polished arrow
and concealed me in his quiver.*

³ *He said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."*

⁴ *But I said, "I have labored to no purpose;
I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.
Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand,
and my reward is with my God."*

⁵ *And now the LORD says—
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD
and my God has been my strength—*

⁶ *he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."*

⁷ *This is what the LORD says—
the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—
to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
to the servant of rulers:
"Kings will see you and rise up,
princes will see and bow down,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you." (Isaiah 49:1-7)*

Jesus is the Perfect Savior

One day last week, I was sitting at the Detroit airport waiting for a flight. Behind me, a man was talking on his cell phone. It was clear that something serious was going on, probably in his family. He was saying that "she" – whoever that is – is going to have to make some choices. But choices about what? I couldn't tell. I didn't know the man who was talking and I couldn't hear the other side of the conversation so I couldn't offer him any pastoral advice. The truth is, I can't tell you today what they were talking about. In the words that the prophet Isaiah wrote for us this morning, we also have a conversation recorded. But this time, we have both sides of the conversation. Verses one to four are one speaker and verses five to seven are another. And we do know both of the people who are speaking: God the Father and Jesus. So we can understand what they're talking about. In fact, it's only because we can understand this conversation that it appears in the Bible at all! The Father and the Son certainly have had many conversations that we know nothing about. But God recorded this one so that we can learn from it. What is the point of this conversation? **Jesus is the perfect Savior.**

I.

Now, when I say that we have a conversation recorded here, we have to remember that it's recorded in the form of poetry. When the conversation actually took place, it probably didn't sound exactly like this. But the Holy Spirit led Isaiah to write these words as a poetic summary of something that happened before the world began: the Father and the Son planned to save us. To fulfill their plan, Jesus had to step into this world and become the Savior that we need. **Jesus is the perfect Savior. He is the perfect weapon to win salvation.**

So in the first half of the conversation, Jesus himself speaks. He says, **"Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name."** God called his Son to come into this world before he ever said, "Let there be light." When the time was right, he sent him into the womb of the Virgin Mary. Do you remember what happened when she turned up pregnant? Joseph knew that he didn't have anything to do with it. So he was going to quietly break off their engagement. But then the angel Gabriel came and explained that she was still a virgin. The child in her womb was a miracle of the Holy Spirit. And then he told him what to name the child: Jesus. That name means "Savior." God spoke the name Jesus when he was still in the opening weeks of his gestation in her womb. Then the angel went on to quote a different chapter from this very prophet Isaiah which calls his name Immanuel. That name means "God with us" – the mighty Lord has put on human flesh to dwell with us. God spoke that name 700 years before Jesus was conceived. Nothing that happened in the life of Christ was an accident. It was all God's plan.

Jesus continues and says that God made his mouth like a sharpened sword. How did Jesus do his work when he lived here? He didn't raise armies. He didn't run for office. He didn't build or invent or design things. He preached and taught. And his word has power. When Christ spoke the law, he cut his enemies off at the knees and left them bewildered. When Christ spoke the gospel, he lifted up broken hearts and created faith and healed us from all the hurt that we suffer here.

God made Jesus to be a weapon to fight against sin. He sent him here to defeat the devil, to conquer the sin in our hearts, to destroy the unbelieving world's endless efforts to break our faith. He doesn't need armies. He doesn't need politics and laws and lawyers. He doesn't need new inventions and electronic gadgets. His word is powerful all by itself. But sometimes, that's hard for us to see. So Jesus says that God made his mouth like a sword and then he hid him in the shadow of his hand. God made him like a polished arrow – one that will fly straight and true and penetrate its target – and he hid him in his quiver. Jesus is a kind of concealed weapon and he constantly takes people by surprise. Think how often his enemies underestimated him. For three years, they kept trying to beat him at debate. They always lost. They didn't figure out that they couldn't win an argument with him until just a day or two before they killed him. This nobody, this Galilean surrounded by fisherman was the greatest spiritual weapon God ever gave us. Even today, so many people underestimate his power to save us.

That next verse is the hardest part of Jesus' side of the conversation. He reports that his Father said to him, **"You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."** What does that mean? It doesn't mean that God was speaking to the nation of Israel. He was talking to Jesus. But he calls him Israel because of what the name means. It means, "He wrestles with God." God gave that name to Jacob, the ancestor of the Jewish people and he meant it to be a testimony to the way he lived his faith. He wrestled with life in this sinful world, with God and with man the way all Christians do as we struggle to understand how he's guiding our lives, and the Bible says that Jacob wrestled with God and man and overcame. So Christ does the same. He had to face life in a sinful world and all that goes with it. He had to wrestle with opposition and hatred and God didn't spare him anymore than he enables us to go through life without facing sin and sinners. But Christ overcame in the end.

That is what his final comments mean. Jesus speaks almost as if he were in despair: **"I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing."** But we never hear him actually speak like this during his lifetime, because he never despaired. Rather, this is a poetic way of him speaking of his humiliation. In this life, so many people didn't listen to him. His life here was an endless labor for us, but when that life ended on the cross, it looked like no one understood. The only people who thought about the fact that he had said that he would rise were his enemies. His friends all gave up. It all looked like a waste.

But Jesus never entrusted his success or failure to us. He says, **"What is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God."** After he died, he rose. He didn't need us to give him glory. His

Father gave him all glory. He rose. He ascended. He is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven right now and he rules all things for our good.

So what does all this mean for us today? Why should we care? Because all too often it looks like we spend our lives in vain, too. I've spent twenty years in the ministry and there have been days when it felt like I labored to no purpose. Many of us here have been Christians for decades, and yet when we look at our own lives, we can only see how far short we really have fallen from what God calls us to be. We see sin every single day. We see laziness and selfishness and failure. Sometimes, we don't want to look at ourselves because we know how bad it's going to be and it just hurts. But getting to heaven isn't about what we do. It's about what Jesus has done. He lived in this sinful world in our place. He suffered through life here and endured everything that sin does to us here. He even died like we will all have to do. He suffered the death and the hell our sins and selfishness deserve. But then he rose. When he did that, he saved us. He wiped away all our sin. He made us holy and perfect in God's sight. This conversation shows us that God always planned for that victory. God sent his Son to be the perfect weapon to destroy sin and to give us life. That life is ours today.

II.

God recorded this poetic conversation so that we could see all that. In reality, even in the poem, the conversation is recorded as if Jesus were telling us about it, like if your spouse told you about a conversation they had with someone at work. "I said this and then he said that." That's the way these verses work. After telling us what he said, Jesus reports how God the Father answered. God's answer affirmed all that Jesus had been doing. **Jesus is the perfect Savior. He deserves perfect glory from God and us.**

First Jesus reminds us that God sent him to bring back the nation of Israel. The Old Testament is a long, sad story of God's love and his people's indifference. They constantly drifted away from him until they almost lost him altogether. But God always had a plan to bring them back. Jesus was his plan. After centuries of promises like this one, Jesus was finally born in Bethlehem. As he himself noted, he longed to gather the children of Israel like a hen gathers her chicks. Jesus came and he died and paid for all the sins of Israel. Jesus came to fulfill all their hopes and dreams.

It's sad that so many people in Israel did not believe in him. But that's not why God turned to us. Sometimes you hear that. Some people teach that God's dealing with us gentiles is just a temporary thing brought on by the rejection of the Jews and that the Bible is really just about them. But that's not what God says here. The Father says to the Son, **"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."**

It is too small a thing. God wants to give glory to his Son for all that he did and just being the Savior of Israel is not enough. The entire Jewish population of the world today equals less than one percent of all people on earth. From God's perspective, that just isn't a great enough work for his Son to do. Jesus left heaven itself to be born of a human mother. He lived thirty years in a world that by today's standards was primitive. Even by that world's standards, he was poor and unimportant. He faced all the hurts and sorrows of this life. He went to the cross and there, he suffered hell itself and then he died. Jesus did all that because that's what every human being deserves. Jesus' love was so great that he was willing to make himself nothing to save us. So when God gives glory to his Son for that love, it's just not enough to make him the Savior of less than one percent of the world's population.

God made him a light for us gentiles and today, all over the world, we gentiles worship him as our Savior. Through the gentiles, God has indeed brought salvation to the very ends of the earth – that's why Jesus is telling us gentiles that story in this Bible passage. In the next verse, God points out that even though Jesus was despised and abhorred by the gentiles – think of the Roman soldiers planting that crown of thorns on his head and laughing hysterically while they bowed down to him and called him the king of the Jews. Think of them beating him and spitting on him and finally nailing him to the cross and walking away thinking they had done a good day's work. All that Jesus would face, but God says that even so, kings and princes would come to him and bow down. The cross and the mockery and the pain were not the end for Jesus. He came here to win eternal life for us and then to spread that message throughout the earth.

My friends, that is happening in our lifetime. Now, not every important person is a Christian. Many powerful and influential and smart people have nothing but scorn for Christ. But many powerful and influential and smart people do know their Savior. And when Judgment Day comes and all that God has been doing

finally comes to an end, every king, every prince, every president or bank owner or society leader will bow down and acknowledge Christ as the true King and Savior of the world. All because he did the work God sent him to do.

All that we see in this conversation, our Savior shared with us seven centuries before he was born, but many centuries after he actually had it with his Father. God planned to save us. God made that plan work in the life of Christ and in our lives. He told us all about this divine conversation so that we could know and understand who our Savior is. Now, my friends, start a new conversation, a conversation that gives glory to God. Talk about Jesus and what he has done for you. Amen.