EBS5 Isa 48-49

**Lesson 5: Isaiah 48:1-49:13**

**Israel Does Not Work—The Turning Point**

**Objectives:**

1. Students will understand the division among the exiles about the return and God’s response.
2. Students will understand how Isa 48 is the climax of Isa 40-48.
3. Students will understand the issues revolving around the servant passages in Isaiah.

**Preparation:**

1. Consider using the hymn, “It is Well with My Soul” which uses a line from Isa 48. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horatio_Spafford>
2. Read the article in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia about the servant in Isaiah.

**Theme:** The God of hope and history sends a servant.

**Background:**

1. Isa 48 is a turning point chapter in terms of the message of Isa 40-55 and to some degree the form that the message takes.
   1. Message: Isa 48 is the climax of all that Isaiah says to the exiles in Isa 40-47:
      1. Isa 40—God announces the end of exile. Isaiah stresses God’s power to restore his people and his concern for them. He can be trusted because he is incomprehensible, incomparable and inexhaustible.
      2. Isa 41—God reassures his people and shows his superiority over the Babylonian idols.
      3. Isa 42—God announces that he will send a servant whose identity is unclear but whose work will be for God. Despite God’s attempts to win the exile’s trust, God finds Israel blind and deaf to his overtures.
      4. Isa 43—God continues to reassure his people and offer of protection on the return home.
      5. Isa 44—A long taunt song against idols and idol making contrasts with the God who sends Cyrus.
      6. Isa 45—God announces his work through Cyrus, but Israel objects to this plan. God stresses his work not just with Israel, but with all nations.
      7. Isa 46—Idols must be carried but God carries Israel. Babylonian theology is bankrupt.
      8. Isa 47—Using the metaphor of a princess, Babylonian destruction is anticipated. Babylonian politics are bankrupt.
      9. Isa 48—Israel’s resistance causes God to alter his plan.
   2. Form: In Isa 40-47 Isaiah tends to alternate between the trial scenes and the Hallmark cards (salvation oracles)
      1. 41:1-5—Who does these things? (Trial))
      2. 41:8-13—Fear not (Salvation Oracle)
      3. 41:14-16—Fear not (Salvation Oracle)
      4. 41:21-29—Who does these things? (Trial)
      5. 43:1-7—Fear not (Salvation Oracle)
      6. 43:8-15—Who does these things? (Trial)
      7. 43:16-21—I am doing a new thing (Salvation Oracle)
      8. 43:22-28—Has Israel been faithful? (Trial)
      9. 44:1-5—Fear not (Salvation Oracle)
      10. 44:6-8—Who does these things? (Trial)
      11. 44:21-23—Does Israel remember? (Trial)
      12. 45:14-17—God with you (Salvation Oracle)
      13. 45:20-25—Who does these things? (Trial)
   3. In Isa 49-55 Isaiah tends to alternate between addressing the servant and talking with Zion
      1. 49:1-13—servant
      2. 49:14-50:3—Zion
      3. 50:4-9—servant
      4. 50:10-52:12—Zion
      5. 52:13-53:12—servant
      6. 54-55--Zion
   4. In Isa 48 God seems to make three decisions.
      1. Israel will not respond positively.
      2. God will appoint a teacher.
      3. God announces the departure from exile.
2. Context
   1. Compare the harsh rebuke in Isa 48:1-11 to two previous sections:
      1. Isa 42:18-25—Blind Israel did not understand captivity.
      2. Isa 43:22-28—Israel worships but not the LORD.
      3. Isa 48:1-11—Israel remains stubborn and does not understand captivity.
   2. Each rebuke passage is followed by something substantially different:
      1. Isa 42:18-25 is followed by 43:1-7—Fear not (Salvation Oracle).
      2. Isa 43:22-28 is followed by 44:1-5—Fear not (Salvation Oracle).
      3. Isa 48:1-11 is followed by the announcement of a new plan in 48:12-17.

**Learning Experiences:**

1. Isa 48:1-11—Hear! (twenty times)
   1. Isa 48 contains some form of the Hebrew word “hear” ten times which becomes the theme of the section:
      1. Hear—v 1
      2. Made known—v 3
      3. I announced them—v 5
      4. Heard—v 6
      5. Heard—v 7
      6. Heard—v 8
      7. Hear—v 12
      8. Hear—v 14
      9. Hear—v 16
      10. Proclaim it—v 20
   2. The passage speaks of Israel’s several sins. List them.
      1. They confess God but not in truth or right (v 1) perhaps a reference to worshiping idols while claiming to follow God (cf. Isa 43:22-28) or more likely a division in the community with some worshiping God and others resisting that allegiance.
      2. They are obstinate (v 4). Isaiah’s vivid image of iron necks and brass foreheads suggests they are resistant and uncooperative.
      3. They do not listen (v 8) which was part of the trial speech in Isa 42:18-25.
      4. They deal treacherously with God (v 8) perhaps reflecting the sins of their fathers that lead to the downfall of Jerusalem in 586 BC and now the sins of the exiles in rebelling against God’s desire to bring them home.
      5. They rebel from birth (v 8).
      6. Their resistance profanes the name of God (v 11).
   3. Note the 8 different phrases in vv 1-2 that identify those being addressed. Make a list.
   4. The previous trial speeches sought to convince both the nations and Israel that God controlled history, but here God seeks to convince Israel.
      1. The former things (Isa. 9:1; 41:22; 42:9; 43:9, 18; 46:9; 48:3; 61:4; 65:7, 16f) appears to be a like a snowball rolling down the hillside of history. As more history takes place the new things get rolled up in the former things and God creates a new set of new things. While early references to former things in Isaiah may refer to the Exodus and monarchy, now the former things refer to events that the people in exile have already experienced.
      2. God stresses that he announced them before they happened so Israel could not say that the idols they worshipped had caused them to happen.
   5. God reveals several things about his wishes and Israel’s resistance:
      1. He withholds his anger not because Israel repents but because he is God.
      2. The purpose of exile was to refine Israel, but the refining process did not produce the pure metal God intended to find.
      3. “I do it” (v 11) seems to point to God’s willingness to forgive Israel despite their resistance. He will bring them home even though there are those who do not return.
      4. No one else is permitted to receive glory for what God does. Not Cyrus, not Israel, not even the servant.
2. Isa 48:12-17—God: teacher and leader
   1. After speaking to Israel about its stubbornness in Isa 48:12-17, God now addresses Israel (v12) and all nations (including Babylon! v 14).
   2. God announces :
      1. He called Israel—v 1.
      2. He created by command—v 2.
      3. He loves and makes Cyrus (the “him” and “he” of v 14) do his will against Babylon (removing Babylonian power in order to permit Israel to go home). Cyrus will be successful because God wills it.
      4. He has announced all these events publically from the beginning (much of it earlier in Isaiah)—v 16.
      5. Now God makes a new announcement—v 16
         1. God has “sent me and his Spirit”
         2. The identity of this “me” is uncertain.
         3. Some suggest the prophet or Cyrus, but many see this anticipating the work of the individual servant that God will send.
         4. Following this chapter Cyrus is not mentioned directly or indirectly again in Isaiah.
      6. God announces his two roles—v 17
         1. God is a teacher (thus the 10 uses of “hear”)
         2. God is a leader (taking the exiles from Babylon back to Jerusalem)
3. Isa 48:18-19—What might have been: peace like a river
   1. God speaks about the promises Israel misses. List them:
4. Peace like a river—18
5. Success like the waves of the sea—18
6. Descendants as the sand of the sea—19
7. Offspring as numerous as the sea—20
8. Enduring name—20
   1. Since Gen 1:26ff God seeks to bless people. These verses summarize what God intends by blessing. For more on this topic see the chapters on blessing in Harold Shank, *Listening to His Heartbeat—What the Bible Says About the Heart of God*. Joplin, Mo: College Press, 2009; *Children Mean the World to God*. Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 2001.
9. Isa 48:20-22—Go!
   1. After 8 chapters of encouragement and confrontation between God and the exiles, God now announces that they are to depart. Cyrus’ work opened the door. The people are to go home.
   2. The return is described in six ways in vv 20-21. Make a list.
   3. There will be a second announcement in Isa 52:11.
   4. Just as the servant was to be a light to the nations (Isa 42:6) so now the news of deliverance will reach all nations.
   5. Isa 48:21 affirms the earlier promises of protection on the return (Isa 40:3-5) that will be like the protection in the wilderness during the exodus (Ex 17:1-6; Josh 4:23-24).
      1. In Isa 48:22 the wicked could refer to either Babylon (see their lack of mercy in Isa 47) or the unrepentant exiles (cf. Isa 48:4) or possibly anticipate those returnees who practice injustice in post exilic Jerusalem (see Isa 56-66).
10. Isa 49:1-13—Light to the nations!
    1. The word servant is used extensively in Isa 40-55 (see Isa. 20:3; 22:20; 37:35; 41:8f; 42:1, 19; 43:10; 44:1f, 21, 26; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3, 5ff; 50:10; 52:13; 53:11; 63:11).
       1. Sometimes the terms refers to the entire nation—41:8.
       2. Sometimes it refers to a special mission of all Israel or a particular section or person in Israel—42:1; 49:3.
       3. Sometimes it refers to an individual—53:11.
       4. One way of understanding this language is that God calls all the Israelites in captivity to serve him. Some resist, so he centers his work on those who want to return (also called “Zion”) but out of those returnees is one particular servant who leads and teaches (48:16; 50:4-9) and suffers (50:4-9; 52:12-53:12). However, the only individual who fully becomes that servant is Jesus (Acts 8) who reissues the call to his followers to be servants (Mk 10:45) who never rise up to his level of being a servant.
    2. Isa 49:1-13 lists many qualities and roles of this servant. List them.
       1. Called from the womb—v 1.
       2. Mouth like a sharp sword—v 2 (the servant is a teacher whose words penetrate like a sword).
       3. Like a polished arrow—v 2 (the servant’s work goes a long distance).
       4. Kept hidden—v 2 (the servant passages gradually reveal what God has planned).
       5. Called by the name Israel—v 3.
       6. The servant believes he is a failure—v 4 (perhaps the servant was charged with gathering all the exiles for the return home, but as a result of his work only a small number participate).
       7. God reaffirms the servant’s role in leading the exiles home—v 5.
       8. God again raises his expectations of the servant as a light to the nations—v 6.
       9. The servant is despised and abhorred by the nations—v 7 (cf. Isa 50:4ff; 53).
       10. Kings will bow before the servant—v 7 (cf. Isa 52:12-13).
       11. The servant will be a covenant to the people, establish the land and apportion the heritage—v 8 (a reference to the work of restoration in post exilic Jerusalem).
       12. The servant will safely lead the returnees through the wilderness on the way from Babylon to Jerusalem by God’s protective hand –vv 9-11.
       13. The servant is told that not only Babylonian exiles will return home, but also those exiled in other directions—v 12 (Jesus uses the same image in Lk 13:29).
11. The sequence of this lesson includes:
    1. God’s recognition that Israel is stubborn—48:1-11
    2. God’s plan to use a special servant to lead the people home—48:12-17
    3. God reflects on what might have been—48:18-19
    4. God announces the return—48:20-22
    5. God assigns duties for the return to the servant—49:1-12

**Continuities:**

1. The exiles resist the work of God and the words of Isaiah. Compare their resistance with the resistance of: a—people in contemporary society; b—people in the contemporary church; c—you. In what ways does each group resist God?
2. How was God a teacher for ancient Israel? How is God a teacher to us? How was God a leader for ancient Israel? How does God lead today?
3. How do you respond to what God might have done for Israel? What might God do today for the church that has not been realized?
4. What does the NT say about service and being a servant? What passages might be cited? How does Isaiah’s teaching about the servant compare to the NT teaching?
5. Why do you think Isaiah does not clarify the identity of the servant? Some argue that every time Isaiah mentions the servant he is talking about Jesus and not a person in Isaiah’s day. Comment on that perspective.

**Assignment: Read Isa 49-52**

**Additional Study:**

1. Note the Faithful-Unfaithful rhythm in Isaiah
   1. Isa 1-12: Jerusalem is unfaithful
   2. Isa 6—Isaiah is faithful
   3. Isa 7-8—Ahaz is unfaithful
   4. Isa 9-12—God is faithful
   5. Isa 13-23—unfaithful nations
   6. Isa 24-27—God is faithful
   7. Isa 28-35—unfaithful Judah
   8. Isa 36-39—Hezekiah is faithful
   9. Isa 40-47—exiles unfaithful to God, called out of idolatry
   10. Isa 48-55—God is faithful and will call Judah out of exile
2. Historical Background & References
   1. 586 BC—Jerusalem fell: 2 Chron 36:13-21; 2 K 25:1-21
      1. Judeans taken into exile—Jer 52
      2. Symbols of hope destroyed with Jerusalem’s destruction.
         1. King (Gedaliah becomes governor).
         2. Land.
         3. Temple.
         4. Mosaic covenant.
         5. Priestly cycle.
   2. 586-539 BC—Babylonian exile
      1. Many exiles are filled with despair (Isa 40:27; 41:14, 17; 42:22; 45:9, 24; 46:122; 49:14, 24; 54:11; Lam 3:18; Ezek 37:11.
      2. Many exiles become idol worshippers (Isa 40:18-20).
   3. 539—Cyrus
      1. Cyrus founded the Achaemenid Persian empire which lasted till Alexander (331 BC).
      2. Achaemenes was the Persian leader in 681BC who gave his name to the whole Achaemenid dynasty.
      3. This was the ruling house of Persia from 553 BC until the overthrow of Darius III in 330 BC.
      4. Cyrus
         1. Inherited Anshan from his father.
         2. In 546 BC he defeated Lydia.
         3. Merged the Medes and Persians into 1 people.
         4. Invaded Neo-Babylonians in 539 BC predicted by Isa 43:14; 45:1.
      5. Babylonians during the time of Cyrus.
         1. The Babylonian king Nabonidus worshipped god Sin at Haran at expense of Babylonian deities and was absent from Babylon.
         2. In his absence Belshazzar ruled.
         3. Belshazzar was in a riotous banquet when Cyrus took the city without resistance (Dan 5) on October 12, 539 BC.
      6. Cyrus reversed cruel policies of Assyrians/Babylonians and permitted transplanted populations to go home. See 2 Ch 36; Ezra 1-6.
         1. 50,000 Jews returned home led by Zerubbabel and Joshua.
         2. He allowed Jews to rebuild the temple.
         3. Artaxerxes I (465-423) issued the decree to rebuild Jerusalem.