

Review of Isaiah 49-57

Context of Ch. 49-57

Isaiah has two parts, describing Judah’s relation to the two great world powers of the day (chart). The first 37 chapters assure her that in spite of Assyria’s power and the fall of the northern kingdom, the Lord will defend her, and ends describing the destruction of the Assyrian army at the gates of Jerusalem. The second section of 29 chapters, which starts with a visit of Babylonian ambassadors to Jerusalem, anticipates the Babylonian captivity and focuses on the future return from Babylon.

After the historical narrative of ch. 38-39, the second section has three parts of nine chapters each (chart). Each ends with an announcement of God’s judgment on the wicked. These 27 chapters deal with three broad themes.

- God demonstrates his superiority to the gods of Babylon, in spite of the coming conquest, by predicting the future. Israel, though blind and deaf, is called as a witness to his demonstration.
- God will raise up his servant to redeem and restore his people.
- Israel is sinful, but God will restore them to faith and service.

All three themes are present in the first nine-chapter section (40-48). The contest between the Lord and the pagan gods drops out in the second and third sections, and the designation of the “Servant of the Lord” is not found in the third (though the person designated by this title is central).

Shifts of characters and speakers mark the structure. The section is chiasmic, ABA, centered around the watchman’s triple call in 51:9-52:12 (chart). The two outer panels (A) each have three corresponding elements (one of which is doubled in the first panel): the Lord's Servant, God's people depicted as a woman, and God's warning and invitation to his people. The central call echoes these three elements.

The Lord and his Servant (The agent of salvation)	49:1-13 (Conversation between the Lord and the Servant) (13 vv)	52:13-53:12 (Conversation between the Lord and the People, about the Servant) (15 vv)
The Lord and the Woman (Indicative statement of salvation)	49:14-50:3 (Mother Zion) (16 vv)	54:1-17 (Barren Sarah) (17 vv)
The Lord and his Servant	50:4-9 (The Servant speaks about the Lord) (6 vv)	
The Lord Challenges his People (Imperative warning and invitation to receive salvation)	50:10-51:8 (10 vv)	55:1-57:21 (46 vv)
The Watchman’s Call	51:9-52:6, Detailed (21 vv)	52:7-12, Summary (6 vv)

Section by Section Review

Now we’ll visit each of these sections, in order, read a few verses, and summarize the point of the section. Along the way, we’ll exercise the application questions (chart): What is the

- Example to Follow

Isaiah 49-57 Review

- Sin to Avoid
- Command to Obey
- Promise to Claim
- Truth to Believe
- Prayer to Echo

Not all of these are appropriate to every passage, but they form a helpful checklist to identify practical implications. I'll select one for each passage.

49:1-13, *The Lord talks with his Servant*

Read 49:1-3.

The section is an alternation between the Servant and the Lord (chart), describing the commissioning of the Servant.

Summary: the Servant reports his call from the Lord, patiently submits to his frustrating task, and receives the Lord's encouragement that his mission will be successful.

An outstanding application from this section is the Example of the Servant. He does not gloss over the challenge that he faces, but commits his work to the Lord's hands and looks to him for reward. It is in this spirit that we should serve the Lord.

49:14-50:3, *The Lord Comforts Mother Zion*

Read 49:14-17.

Like the previous section, this one is a conversation between the Lord and another character, in this case the female characterization of Judah, the one called "Daughter Zion" in the first part of the book. Here, she is depicted as a mother bereaved of her children.

Summary: The Lord comforts Zion, mourning over the loss of her children, by promising that he will defeat her enemies and restore her children to her.

This section teaches the remarkable truth that God is able to reverse our condition miraculously, even if it is our own fault.

50:4-9, *The Servant talks about his Lord*

Read 50:4-7

Again, we hear from the Servant, but this time he is speaking to the people (chart).

Summary: The Servant reports that the Lord is his past teacher and enabler, and his future hope.

Application: follow the Servant's example of learning for service, and hearing for obedience.

50:10-51:8, The Lord Challenges his People

Read 50:10-11; 51:1, 4, 7

Summary: After introductions by Isaiah (50:10) and the Servant (50:11), the Servant gives three invitations (chart): to receive righteousness by faith, promote the worldwide spread of the gospel, and persevere through suffering.

The application is the threefold command to receive the Lord's gift of righteousness, recognize his worldwide mission, and suffer patiently for his name.

51:9-52:12, The Watchman's Call

Read 51:9, 17; 52:1, 7-10 (chart)

Summary: The Lord summons the Servant, under the title "Arm of the Lord," to deliver oppressed Jerusalem, who is to rejoice over this salvation. Here we see drawn together the three elements of the first panel: the Servant, Jerusalem, and her required response.

The command of Isa 52:9 merits our careful attention:

Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the LORD hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem.

God's redemption deserves our active praise. There is a modern tendency to focus on our spiritual obligations to one another. These are important, but first we must respond in worship to the Lord.

52:13-53:12, The Lord tells the People about the Servant

Read 52:13-15

In the previous Servant sections, the Lord and 's Servant spoke together, and the Servant bore testimony to the Lord's faithfulness. Now the Lord engages the people about the Servant. The section is organized around changes in speaker, and moves between the servant's humiliation and glorification:

- The Lord begins by anticipating the Servant's exaltation, but then describes his humiliation.
- The people acknowledge their rejection of him and his substitutionary work for them.
- Isaiah acknowledges his sufferings, but anticipates his glory.
- The Lord confirms that his servant will be highly glorified.

Summary: The Lord presents his humbled Servant to his people, who recognize him as their redeemer and anticipate his reward of glory.

I am most struck, in these descriptions of our Savior, by his submission to the Father and his humble condition, and for myself, the application I draw from them is the example they provide.

54:1-17, The Lord Comforts Barren Sarah

Read 54:1-5

As in the first panel, the Lord turns to comfort his bride, through a series of triplets (chart). This time, though, instead of a widow who has lost her children, he draws from two examples of barren wives from the OT: Sarah and Ruth. In both cases, Gentiles enter the picture—not just as those who have been conquered and who bring the nation back, as in ch. 50, but now as members of the family.

Summary: The Lord promises to enlarge the family of his barren people to include the Gentiles, and assures them of his protection and blessing.

As an application, I cling to vv. 3-4, which promise that the Gentiles will be included in the people of God. Here the Lord is opening the door to us to enter his family, under Sarah's tent, a point that Paul develops with the Galatians.

55:1-57:21, The Lord Challenges his People

Read 55:1-4

We have just completed this very long section. At the outset (chart), we noted its disproportionate length, and wondered whether in fact it was all one unit, but our analysis (chart) does show a tight, coherent structure.

Summary: God invites his people to receive his blessing freely and in spite of their sin, but warns of the judgment they will face if they reject him.

Application: we must all be wary of the sin to avoid that is implicit in the second invitation, “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found.” Keep short accounts with God, and do not delay to claim his blessings as soon as you learn of them.

Summary

The whole nine chapters consist of a beautiful embroidery of three main ideas:

- the servant by whose suffering the Lord will redeem his people,
- the restoration that the servant will achieve over their humiliation,
- and their responsibility to accept that blessing or suffer the consequences of their sin.

We can propose a final summary for the entire section:

God sends his suffering servant to deliver Daughter Zion from her humiliation, and challenges her to receive the blessing that he has purchased for her and for all nations, lest his judgment fall upon her.

A good overall application would be the example of the Servant, who sets a pattern for us as we carry the Lord's invitation and warning to those around us.