

Title: Where is the restart button?
Text: Isaiah 50.1-9
Theme: Our greatest need: Substitutionary atonement
Series: Isaiah #42
Prop Stmt: God provides more than a fresh start, he gives us a Savior.
Aim: I aim to help my people see the depth of God's love for us in Christ.

Read Text:

What if you could move to a new place where no one knew you and you could start over? You could shed the things about you that others, and you, do not like. You could rid yourself of needy people, and carefully manage those whom you let into your world, only revealing the nice parts about you. You could, perhaps, become a new you. It sounds so appealing. In fact, I am convinced it is one of the reasons why people are so transient. I would guess that every single one of us has felt like just running away at times. I've got to get out of here. But, what does that mean? Does that mean that I want to get away from the mess that I have made without having to face the consequences of my choices? Does that mean that I am so disgusted with what I have become, that I see no other option, than hitting the restart button in another place? Does that mean that others around me are so demanding that I cannot fix them? Does that mean that I really do not care about the people in my life, that I can just, move on and try something else?

It seems that life in a small town is thought of as confining, because everyone knows you, which means that everyone knows your business. So, people want to leave and go to the big city, where they can start over and be somebody different. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why big cities sell a great deal of image, and small towns are not impressed with that stuff.

Maybe you do not necessarily want a restart button, but you would like a reset button. I would love a reset button. There are so many times when I say something in a sermon, and I wish that I could just hit reset button, and go back and re-word that because it really came out wrong. But, hold the phone. Aren't we assuming something? Aren't we assuming that if we could hit the restart or reset button that we would actually be able to be a different person? What are we thinking? What guarantee do I have that I would not say something foolish or embarrassing again?

In this text, Isaiah is addressing the people of Judah, whom, it seems in one sense are going to get the chance to hit the reset button. Although, the Babylonians will take them into captivity (586 BC), they will return to their land. They will get a chance to start over. But, here is the problem. What is going to be different this time? Everything that God told Isaiah would happen to Judah, did. They rebelled against God. They experienced the consequences of this and lost their land, their lives (many), their freedoms and often their families. Now, Isaiah is writing to these future generations, some of whom would be in captivity and would be given the freedom to return and hit the reset button. Isaiah anticipates that instead of humbling owning their sin and acknowledging the righteous judgment of God that instead they would be blaming God for their circumstances and

saying that it was God's fault that they were cast off, or that God was somehow coerced into giving them up. Some of the people were surmising that the reason they were split up and sold off into captivity was because God had to cover some debts. When a family was so far in debt that they could not get out, they would be indentured to others. They would be sold into servitude in order to satisfy the debts. So, some of the people were surmising that this had happened to them. God had gotten in over his head. He, was just one of a many gods in the world, and in the god-world, he was behind in his payments. They did NOT own the problem and were instead blaming God! (1)

I. Suffering is no guarantee of salvation... (50.1-3)

God says; let's look at the certificate of divorce. (1a) What is God saying? He is saying, let's go back and look at the reason why I sent you away. There were no creditors. It was because you were unfaithful to me. It was because of your iniquities and transgressions that you were sold. (1c) Look, right here on the certificate, are listed the reasons for the divorce. The reason was unrepentant unfaithfulness on the part of Judah. So, for 70 years Judah is in captivity, suffering the just judgment of God. So, what happens? If Judah's heart does not change, nothing will change.

God is saying that when he came to offer them a way out, that instead of being ready for that, desiring that, looking for that (2), they ignored God. They were too busy blaming God for the problem or accusing God (2b-3) of not being able to save them instead of owning the problem. Isaiah again shows us how God, over and over stands with his arms open to help and virtually no one responds. Only a remnant believed God. But, it is not because his hand is short or his arm is weak, it is because people refuse to humble themselves and own the problem.

Unless you own your part of the problem, you are never in a place to hear the solution. Even if you are in a situation where your part of the problem is just a fraction of the entire mess; unless you really see your part for what it is, you will not be able to see the other person's part of the problem for what it is either. Let's say that you and your spouse are in conflict, and you both have used the conflict as an excuse to sin. In your case, of course, your sin is justified. Right? After all, if she hadn't, or he hadn't said that, you wouldn't have done what you did. What does your spouse need? Your spouse needs mercy and forgiveness. But you cannot see that, yet. In fact, you want your spouse to get justice. You want your spouse to get your justice. And justice like that is rarely satisfied. But, when you humble yourself before God, and accept the truth about your own sin, and cry out to God for mercy, his mercy, like a flood comes rushing in. Now, you are in a position to see your spouse with fresh eyes. Facing the truth about your own sin, is humbling and therefore the most difficult and most liberating thing you can do. If you do not face the truth about your sin, you will simply suffer under its weight. But just because you suffer, does not mean that you have learned a thing! Your suffering, while perhaps justified, will never produce redemption. There is only one source of redemption and that is from the unjust suffering of the Servant.

II. ... but the unjust suffering of the Servant is. (50.4-9)

The overall theme of Isaiah is: Our God Saves! Initially that sounds like something that everyone would be interested in, but the truth is, the more you dig into this, the less attractive it is, because most people want to be saved from the consequences of their sin, but do not want to be saved from the sin itself. Like Judah, we are more interested in managing the symptoms of our sin, than dealing with heart-change. The longer Isaiah goes on, the more the audience falls off. We want God to rescue us from discomfort, not from our self-centeredness. They wanted God to deliver them from their captivity, but God was using their captivity as a consequence to show them that they had a bigger problem than the Babylonians. They had a problem with him. It wasn't that their bodies just needed to be rescued, their souls needed to be rescued. It is the same thing that we saw in our study of Exodus. Deliverance from Egypt was easy. (First half of the book) But, But, who would deliver them from a perfectly righteous God who demands absolute holiness? Only God can save us from God. God sees that our problem is much worse than we realize. We need to be rescued from ourselves. We need to be delivered from our self-righteous, arrogant, self-justifying, hearts. Who can do that? The answer is: The Servant. In this latter half of Isaiah, God sets forth his hero – the Servant. God promises that he is going to send a Servant to this world who will do for us, what we cannot do for ourselves. This is the greatest issue in this history of the world. God staged world events to reveal this and spell it out. (1 Peter 1.10-12)

In the midst of Isaiah's writing (much of which is poetry), there are four songs that are the songs of the Servant.

42.1-9 – a song (poem), sung by the Father about his Son, the Servant.

49.1-13 – a song by the Servant about his calling, his frustration, and yet is effectiveness.

50.4-9 – a song sung by the Servant about his righteousness, his suffering, his rejection and his vindication.

52.13 – 53.12 – a song sung about the Servant about his humility, his intense suffering, his substitutionary punishment, his horrendous death, soul-crushing sacrifice, and victorious atonement.

I know that we are taking a long time working through Isaiah, but honestly, we could spend our entire lives, studying the poetry, the cadences, the grammatical markers, word play and meter that not only reveal the genius of Isaiah, but more importantly they reveal the amazing mind of God. It is not just what God says, but it is how he says that only adds to what he says. Note the change of speaker between 50.3 and 50.4.

50.4-9 is the third Servant song. While the first two speak of the Servant, it is this third one that begins to address him as the Servant who suffers. Clearly, the Servant is not the nation of Israel as the orthodox Jews believe. Israel suffered justly for her rebellion. This Servant is pictured as suffering unjustly because he never rebelled. Judah suffered humiliation at the hands of her conquerors, who were the agents of discipline that God

used in response to her sin. Their suffering and humiliation, though justified was ineffective bringing about a change in heart. Punishment alone does not bring redemption. Here, we sing a song of the Servant who will come and who like Judah will suffer humiliation. However, unlike Judah, his humiliation will not be justified. Furthermore, unlike Judah, his humiliation and suffering WILL result in redemption. The irony of all of this is that his humiliation and suffering is at the hands of the Jews.

A. The Servant speaks as a true prophet (4)

This prophesy about Christ describes him as one who is appointed by the LORD God (4x in this song, denoting Sovereign Lord, whose appointed mission will not fail) who is thoroughly prepared to speak. This prophecy captures the teaching ministry of Christ so well. He is so skilled, so learned, that the scholars were amazed, the critics were confounded, but for the most part, the scholars and the critics were not the ones who benefited from his speaking. Many of them listened in order to argue or to find fault. But it was the weary who were sustained with his word. They still are. Christ did not come to condemn the world (John 3.17), because the world was already condemned. He came to provide a way out. Those who listened to him with arms crossed, brows furrowed, and hearts closed, were already condemned because they were full of themselves and thought they knew how to justify their sin. Those who were broken over their sin, looking for hope, longing for forgiveness, but who were repeatedly met with the unsatisfying and impossible standards of religion, were the ones who hung on every word.

Christ is the true prophet who speaks exactly what he has been given to say, and who hears it perfectly as well. The hearing is not simply an audible function, but speaks of him hearing with his heart; that is obeying. Christ hears and submits to the Word of His Father. He, therefore not only speaks, but He embodies, He personifies the Word as well. He is not only a true prophet, he is a true follower. (4b).

B. The Servant responds as a perfect prophet (5)

Being a prophet was a burden. You knew things, saw things, felt things that others did not. You also knew that you had to say things that people did not want to hear. You had to say things that you did not want to hear. Remember Jonah? He lived about 60 years before all of this. He hated Assyria. They were the enemy. And God told him to go into the capital city – Nineveh, and preach. God told him to preach on repentance. Jonah did not want them to hear that because he did not want them to repent. Remember Moses? The word of the Lord came to Moses and he was looking for every reason under the sun why he was not the man for the job. What about Jeremiah? Every time Jeremiah spoke, he got into trouble – it seems. He lived after Isaiah and was in Jerusalem during the actual fall of the city into the hands of the Babylonians. He knew it was going to happen. He told the people it was going to happen. Of course, the King of Judah hated him for it and threw him into a pit, but then sent some people to secretly ask him if there was a Word from the Lord. Jeremiah is absolutely scorched. If he tells him a word from the Lord, he gets busted in the chops, and if he doesn't, then he is lying. So, Jeremiah said, "I quit. I am done with this. No more." And what happened? God would not accept his resignation.

Christ, however was not rebellious. He did not turn backward. He accepted his mission. He accepted the message. He was the message.

C. The Servant suffers as a rejected prophet (6)

Here we begin to see what happens to the Servant. He hears the message perfectly. He speaks the message perfectly. He holds nothing back, and therefore, he experiences the full fury of those who hate the message that he speaks. There was nothing more humiliating than being a true prophet. There were other prophets (false). These were the prophets for hire. These were the guys who would tell you what you wanted to hear and would give you (the King, or the people) an aura of credibility even though they had no authority to do so. They played politics, pure and simple. A true prophet was usually not in the inner circle. If you were a true prophet, you were despised. You were scorned. You were accused of being the problem. You were accused of being a hypocrite. You were accused of bringing shame on the people. You were an embarrassment, because the Word that you declared exposed the hearts of the people. This text simply reveals the age-old game of: if you don't like the mail, shoot the mailman. If you don't like the message, destroy the messenger.

But, this prophet is different than the rest. This prophet is not taken captive against his will and tormented. This prophet volunteered; he willingly turned over his back to those who strike. He yielded his body to those who so hated what he had to say that they expressed their fury through beating him and pulling his beard out. They were singularly focused on shaming him and humiliating him as much as they could for as long as they could. Their fury went that deep; and he let them. If he did not let them, if he did not turn his back over to them, they could never have punished him. But, he gave his back to them, he gave himself, he yielded himself to disgrace and spitting. This giving of himself to be shamed and humiliated (6) was part of his obedience to the Word of God in his ear (5). The LORD God told him what to say, what to do and the Servant, the perfect Servant, the Suffering Servant did it. But, as he did it...

D. The Servant believes God's Word (7)

He never stopped believing in God's Word. "But the LORD God helps me." There is an unwritten rule, an assumption of sorts in sports that if a ref makes a call, and the player does not really protest that he is tacitly agreeing with the ref. The same was true in the Ancient Near East culture. If a person was punished in public and meekly submitted to it, he was acknowledging in a way, that he deserved it. Here, the Servant is suffering disgrace, not because of disobedience, but because of obedience. Therefore, he knows that even though he is experiencing disgrace, he, himself, is not actually disgraced. His suffering of disgrace (our sin placed on him) is part of his obedience to God. His obedience makes him appear to be disobedient. But, he is fulfilling his calling and is confident in God. His face is set. He will not be distracted from the right course, even though his enemies appear to have won the day. He has no doubt about the outcome.

E. The Servant is vindicated by God (8-9)

Christ is so confident of his vindication that he challenges anyone in all of creation to come and bring a challenge against him. Who is my adversary? Where are they? Who can bring a charge against me? Since, the LORD God helps him, there is no one who can declare him to be guilty. All those who thought that they could find something on him, will be like a moth-eaten garment, and will simply dispel into the wind.

I wonder what Isaiah thought as he was writing all of this. Here, 700 years before Christ, he not only predicted the details of his death, he predicted the details of the salvation that Christ accomplished and secured for us. It is truly remarkable, but no less offensive to proud people. If you want to justify yourself and pretend that you are always right, or that you have a right to be snooty, demanding, demeaning, then there is no hope in this text for you. In fact there is no hope in all of God's Word for you. This text, like the Servant, the Savior, came for those who humble themselves and admit their sin. Don't ignore it. Don't play games with it. Don't pretend that it does not matter, and that you are fine. Go into the corner of your heart, and face your secret sins. Pull them out, all of your bitterness, your unforgiving spirit, your animosity, your self-justification, your pride, your lust, your stealing, your immorality, your deceit, your laziness, your complacency, your hard-heartedness, etc. Pull them out, all of them. Pull them out of the darkness and bring them into the light. Now, watch them taken by Christ. Watch them being placed on him, owned by him, and now weighing upon him. It's not just the weight of sin, it's the fact that he chose to be treated as if he had done every one of these. He admitted to being guilty of your sins as an act of obedience in your place. He, who knew no sin, was counted as, credited as if he was actually guilty of all of our sin, so that in his death our sin could be paid for.

Do you see why our suffering does not pay for sin? We are sinners. Our payment is tainted. Our currency is tarnished and corrupted. All of our righteousness is counterfeit righteousness and is not accepted. We have nothing with which to pay. We deserve the wrath of God. But, the unjust suffering of Christ is the only payment for our sin because he is the perfect offering, the pure sacrifice, the Servant.

What if you moved away and started over? You would still discover that you are a broken person, trying to figure out life in the midst of a bunch of other broken people. Our attempts to restart, simply give us opportunities to repeat our sin. There is no restart button in life; there is something better. There is a Redeemer. God has given you a Savior, who has come to us. He took our sin, upon himself and in exchange he offers you his righteousness. In taking your sin on himself, he then died in your place and paid for it. This offering of payment and his offering of righteousness is yours, and is only yours through faith alone, in Christ alone. You cannot pay for it, nor earn it. This salvation not only changes your standing from an enemy of God to being in the family of God, but he continues to change you into the likeness of his Son, and will complete that perfectly.