

Notes on Isaiah 51:1 – 52:12

By [David H. Linden](#)

Isaiah 51:1-8

Isaiah 50 ended with a call to obedience (50:10), a godly response to the Lord modeled on that of Christ. His ears were open to God's Word. In other places God has addressed His rebellious people, but in chapter 51 He speaks to those who respond to this call; those *who pursue righteousness*. The Lord commands attention (vv.1,4,7) and promises blessings (vv.1-3) that shall be to all the world (vv.4-6). Man cannot stop Him; ungodly men may persecute, but they will fail (vv.7,8). This part of Isaiah comes between the third and last Servant Song and repeats many statements from the first one in chapter 42.

51:1 – Just as in 48:1,12,14,16 the opening “Listen to me” is the speech of God, speech used by Christ in 49:1 and by the Lord again in 51:1. The Lord addresses people who seek righteousness (vv.1,7). This can only be the remnant; treacherous rebels (48:8) have no right to the good name “Israel” (48:1,2; Romans 9:5). The blessing promised is for the godly, not for everyone who calls himself an Israelite.

51:1-3 – The rock in a stone quarry has no life. God's people are reminded how similar this is to their own beginning as a nation. The nation did not multiply till Isaac was born; by then Abraham's body was as good as dead and Sarah had never been able to have children (Romans 4:19). God had supernaturally given life, and made Abraham into many. They are commanded to remember that, because that is the same kind of powerful transformation God has in mind for them. His salvation will be completed (Philippians 1:6). When it is fully experienced, it will be the difference between a barren desert and the Lord's lush Garden of Eden prior to man's sin. The blessing promised will replace the curse on mankind (Genesis 3:16-19). That curse brought sorrow and sighing (v.11), but when God comforts Zion there will be joy, gladness, singing and thanksgiving.

Paradise Regained

As Isaiah proceeds, the mention of Eden here in 51:3 becomes in 52:1 the holy city Jerusalem without sinners within it, just as we find in Revelation 21:27 since “nothing impure will ever enter it”. This is the climax of redemption. It is also the reversal of the expulsion of Eden with cherubim guarding the way to prevent the first sinners (our parents) from returning and approaching the tree of life (Genesis

3:22-24). Isaiah 51 and 52 picture a re-entering. In Revelation, the Biblical unfolding is complete; the tree of life is situated in the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. Making Zion's deserts like Eden (51:3) is imagery highly suggestive of the curse being removed. That explains in the same verse, the joy and gladness that will be found in her. Finally, finally, finally sin will be behind us forever.

51:4 – These verses are to the godly remnant. (Compare vv.1 & 7). The nation addressed is true Israel, not a mixture of believers and unbelievers. (Nathanael in John 1:47, was a *true* Israelite). It is no longer, “Who *among you* fears the Lord?” (50:10), because that implies that not all fear Him. As in 11:9, a situation is approaching where the Lord says, that they will all know Him (Jeremiah 31:33,34).

51:4-6 – The Lord links salvation and His righteousness. This surely shows the character of His salvation, but it also shows that no righteous standard of God is overlooked, since His salvation meets His own approval. God speaks of this saving activity in words that repeat the ministry of Christ in Isaiah 42:1-6. In this way He shows His coming salvation is through Christ. “My justice will become a light to the nations” (v.4) and “justice to the nations” (v.5) repeat 42:1 & 6. “The islands will look to me” (v.5) connects to 42:4. This linkage to the first Song is deliberate to keep clear that the Servant's work is the work of the Lord; His salvation is through Christ.

51:5 – The Arm of the Lord

Prior to this, Isaiah has referred to the personal activity of the Lord as the exercise of His arm. The arm of the Lord does not refer to what God does through a man. Only God Himself is in view. *Arm* indicates what God does *actively, directly* and *personally* by Himself (30:30). His arm is His power (40:10) working salvation (59:16 & Exodus 6:6). Isaiah is preparing his readers for a climax. He maintains the arm analogy to tie it to Christ. In 42:1,4, it is Christ Who brings justice; now in v.5 it is the Lord's Arm which (or Who) will bring justice, therefore Christ is the Arm of the Lord – a point that will be made more forcefully in 52:10 and 53:1. In v.5 the first mention of arm is plural in Hebrew, and the second is singular. This unexpected use of words prepares the reader to think of a very specific “arm”.

The distant islands with people who do not yet know the Lord wait in hope for the Lord's Arm. They have desires and needs that can only be satisfied in Christ. It does not mean that Paul is wrong when he said, “There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God” (Romans 3:11). Man seeks a more normal humanity, not knowing it will be found only in being in the image of God again. The sinner does not analyze his condition accurately. The Arm of the Lord delivers justice and salvation, bringing with the truth of the gospel a reception of it. Thus the distant islands and nations far from Israel will yet look to the Lord.

God will awaken their need to have Christ, and with Him as their light and salvation, save them (49:6).

51:6 – The salvation coming will be for all the earth, but it will also last forever. Heaven and earth will pass away (Mark 13:31), but God’s salvation will not. This is a good indication that when it is complete, sin will not occur among God’s people again. As in Psalm 102:24-28, the earth will wear out like rotted cloth, but not the Lord or His people who will continue to live in His presence. The inhabitants of the earth (Revelation 8:13) who do not have His salvation, will perish.

51:7 – The New Covenant

The remnant have God’s law in their hearts, therefore this is not a statement of spiritual life that exists only in some future age. Men like Daniel (Jeremiah 24:4-7) had a new heart, as did the Psalmist (Psalm 37:31). We ask, what of the new covenant in which God promised that He would *later* write the law on the heart? (See Jeremiah 31:31-37; Ezekiel 36:25-27; 37:1-14; Isaiah 44:1-5; Joel 2:28-32.) The Bible stresses in these texts that there would be a tremendous outpouring of the Holy Spirit to empower God’s people after Christ ascended to heaven (John 7:39; Luke 24:48). This does not mean there was no activity of the Holy Spirit among God’s people in the Old Testament. Every prophetic word from every prophet of God was from the Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), and the Spirit enabled men to do their work (Exodus 31:3; Numbers 11:16,17). All the judges received their power from the Holy Spirit (Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29). The Spirit’s work included producing obedience in the heart (Numbers 14:24, Psalm 51:10-12; 143:10). Compare Psalm 139:7 with vv.23,24. So the sanctifying work of the Spirit is not limited to an age after the close of the OT. It was new that God would replace a covenant in which the response of His people was not guaranteed (Deuteronomy 28:9; 29:4) with a covenant in which all who are truly part of it by faith would have the relentless cleansing by the Spirit working in the heart (Deuteronomy 30:6-8; Galatians 5:16-18; Hebrews 8:6-13). In Isaiah 51:7 when God speaks of His elect remnant He speaks of them as *“people who have my law in your hearts”*. There was a remnant, so there were people like that who read those very words before our Lord was born. Such a transformation of heart is only possible through the Spirit (John 3:5-8) Who is always involved whenever God does anything, from creating the world (Genesis 1:3), to feeding lions, and taking care of life in the ocean (Psalm 104).

51:7,8 – Like an old garment, the world will decay (v.6), and like one eaten by worms, wicked men will be devoured. But while they live they will insult the righteous. God’s true people are commanded not to fear their reproach or be shattered at their insults. They are like a vapor that will soon be gone (James 4:14). Believers must maintain a perspective of time. In this brief life persecution will happen, but it will soon end, and the persecutors will be gone forever. Like the Egyptian army on the bottom of the sea (43:17), no one will be able to find

the ones who rage against the Lord's people (41:11,12). What will last is God's salvation. Meanwhile we must suffer well and accept insults as the Lord did (Romans 15:1-6; 1 Peter 2:19-23). When we fear, we must choose well Whom we will fear (8:12,13). It must not be men who pass away (1 John 2:17). Speaking to persecuted saints throughout the Book of Revelation, the Lord emphasized that He is the Living One, Who is, Who was, and Who is to come (Revelation 1:8,18). All men are like grass (40:6). Endurance is inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

51:9-16 – The people of God pray with vigor, calling to God, "Awake, awake!" (v.9). He answers I, I am He Who comforts (40:1) you. They appeal, "O arm of the Lord" for action like His great show of strength delivering from Egypt. The Lord answers by making reference also to His past deeds (creation) and to a deliverance from an oppressor. They had prayed in line with His will. By putting such a prayer in Scripture, He shows us to pray that He will act again as He has long ago. The prayer asks for the arm of the Lord to be active. They want the destruction of their enemies. Such a prayer is really asking for Satan (not just Pharaoh) to be crushed under the feet of Christ (Genesis 3:15; Hebrews 2:14,15). God had promised blessing and salvation in vv.1-8, so a prayer to experience the promises is appropriate. Those praying may not have known they were praying about Christ, but they were. In v.16, the Father again speaks to His Servant, the One Who is the Arm of the Lord (53:1). Christ is the Lord's great answer to their cry for God's intervention.

51:9-11 – A Prayer for God to Act

God welcomes prayers to Him to keep His promises. This does not imply that He might not, but it brings a kind of fellowship between the Lord and His people. Such prayer is an exercise of faith. We have been told many times of the Second Coming of Christ, yet we pray for it (Revelation 22:20,21). The Lord does not change (Malachi 3:6). He is the same Lord Who acted in judgment and deliverance when He warred against Egypt. 'Rahab' is a term for Egypt (30:7); the imagery of a monster is also tied to Pharaoh king of Egypt (Ezekiel 32:2). This is a prayer that appeals to God to work in the present as He has in the past. God has chosen to be known, not only by His words, but also by His deeds (Psalm 103:7, Deuteronomy 3:24). The power of God was clear to other nations by His deeds (Joshua 2:9-13).

The Lord's salvation is one of redemption and ransom. For both words to hold their meaning, there must be payment to secure the result that follows. This payment was made by Christ Who redeemed by His blood (Ephesians 1:7). As a result, the ones ransomed by blood, will return "to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Hebrews 12:22-24). Isaiah's subject is not about a return from Babylon as much as a greater future salvation with the kind of singing to be found entering the Garden of the Lord (v.3).

51:12-16 The Lord's emphatic reply is as fervent as the appeal made to the Lord in vv.9,10. The great benefit in God's plan of not doing all at once in salvation, is that the delay makes us yearn and pray. *"It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD"* (Lamentations 3:26; see also Hebrews 9:28). God's comfort here is related to a review of the situation. Their oppressors are mortal men who are like grass (40:6-8). But who are His people? They are ones who have the Lord as their Maker. Their life as a people was at His initiative. The implication is, that if God is their Maker, He is committed to them. They must not forget (Deuteronomy 6:12). They may look either at the wrath of men or to their Lord Who made heaven and earth. Like grass in a hot sun those men are quickly gone.

The Lord directs their attention to His power and also to His promise. In 49:9 & 24, setting prisoners free is the liberating work of Christ (61:1). God points again to the same effect of His Servant's work. The Savior will not forsake His people. Their prayer in vv. 9-11 appealed to the Arm of the Lord Who pieced the Egyptian monster, so the Lord takes up a similar theme here when He refers not to dividing the sea but to churning it. Men are tossed about by a violent sea – it is even a picture of the turmoil of the wicked (57:20,21) – but God is the one who churns the sea. He will employ this same might to rescue His people. By His cross, Christ triumphed over and disarmed the powers that hold His people (Colossians 2:15). His Name is the Lord Almighty and He is everything that His Name is.

The One spoken to in v.16 is Christ again. Two 'markers' make certain that the same person is addressed here as in 49:2: 1) the words in the mouth and 2) being covered by God's hand. Christ is the ultimate prophet to come (Deuteronomy 18: 18,19; Acts 3:21-26). The hand of His Father, that hid Him from human view (49:2) till God was ready to reveal Him, is the hand that will be with Him in all His ministry. In conjunction with the Lord putting words in Christ's mouth and covering Him, He reviews His task. The activities described indicate what God will accomplish through His Servant.

The scope of the change to come is all of heaven and earth (Colossians 1:20; 2 Peter 3:13). *"I am making everything new"* (Revelation 21:5). The heavens and the earth are the setting of creation; it is man that God placed over His creation. Man fell into sin and lost his life and his place over what God had put under his feet. The picture is one of lost glory, but we see Jesus who suffered man's death and who is crowned with man's original glory. He is the One Who has won back for His people what Adam lost (Hebrews 2:5-9). Thus Isaiah combines reference to a new heaven and earth with rich covenantal language, "You are my people." The Lord created the heavens and the earth, and made man in His image, and called it all very good (Genesis 1:1, 31). By means of Christ His Servant, He will have it all back – the heavens, the earth and man, and all of these redeemed from the curse (Romans 8:19-23).

51:17-23 – The Cup of God’s Wrath

In Isaiah 12:1 salvation includes God’s comfort and His anger turned away; both themes reoccur here. God tells a people without help, comfort or hope that the cup of wrath is removed from them. In Jeremiah 25:15-38, Jerusalem had been warned of this cup, but they paid no attention, so the Lord made them drink it. (See also Ezekiel 21:31-34.) Now Isaiah announces that the cup has been removed. As he moves closer to speaking of the work of Christ in His sacrifice, he still does not say where the cup has gone – or Who drank it! The Lord Jesus understood keenly that this horrible cup is what He would drink for us (Matthew 26:36-42). It was not possible that the cup of God’s holy wrath against our sin could pass from His people and also from Christ. Someone human would experience the wrath of God for human sin. After Gethsemane, when Peter resisted Jesus’ arrest, Jesus said, “Shall I not drink the cup my Father has given me?” (John 18:11). This part of Isaiah 51 prepares us for the fourth Servant Song (52:13-53:12). In 51:1-3, the comfort is a return to an experience of Eden (paradise regained). That means the curse would be removed. Verses 17-23 provide more explanation; if the curse of the fall is gone, it can only be because wrath against sin has also been removed.

51:17-22 – Jerusalem had been asleep to her sin and its consequences. God tells her to wake up as He describes her calamity. The ultimate explanation for her trouble is not a bad military strategy, or walls not high enough, or a lack of water and food; the real reason is that from the hand of the Lord, Jerusalem had to drink the fury of His punishment on sin. The result of this is a state of confusion (Jeremiah 51:34) without sons to guide, without comfort. The city had ruin and destruction; the people had famine and death by the sword. God repeats the explanation emphatically; they had to drink to the dregs till they were filled with the wrath of the Lord. The scene is one of no hope. The emphasis on the plight of the sons shows they had no future.

In this hopeless context, God reasserts that He is Sovereign; the covenant keeping Lord; their capable God, and their defender in court. To “defend” here is not with a sword at the city wall, but by a lawyer defending as he pleads their case in a court of justice. It puzzles many that the gospel is that God takes on the need of His guilty people in court and guilty lawbreakers come out forgiven. Our justification is never that God declares us righteous because we are; because we are not. It is wicked people He justifies! (Romans 4:5). This can only be done if there is a transfer of the charge of sin (removing the judgment of “guilty” from us), plus a transfer of righteousness (to support the verdict of “righteous”). How God will remove His wrath is not given yet. We learn only that the same cup of wrath that came from Him is now removed, and that His people will never again have to drink it. With wrath removed at the cross, the one justified by faith cannot drink again of that cup which is now empty. It was emptied by the One Who drank it. The justified person cannot return to his original state of condemnation and wrath. Justification is final; it does not need to be maintained. Believers in Christ

enjoy a lasting peace with God (Romans 5:1), peace like a river that never stops flowing (66:12).

51:23 – This cup is not removed from everyone; there is no universal salvation. When God redeemed Israel from Egypt, at the same time He poured His wrath on the Egyptians. They were not substitutes for Israel to suffer wrath in their place. It was the Passover lamb that exhibited a substitutionary death. Jerusalem's tormentors will drink the cup, not because the heathen were worse sinners, but they had no Redeemer to take on their sin. Thus the kind of cup Israel deserved for their sin became the kind of cup that remained for Israel's tormentors. As in 2 Thessalonians 1:6,7, relief for God's people would come at the same time as trouble on their tormentors.

52:1,2 – Jerusalem is wakened to a life she has not known before, a life of true holiness. Before this all were in some way defiled with sin; now none will be. She is called 'the holy city'! (Revelation 21:2). From the beginning Jerusalem, the city of David, was the holy city in the sense of God's calling and their high privilege. Now Isaiah 52 presents Jerusalem as holy in her condition. Her broken chains in v.2 are not Egypt or Babylon but sin. The setting in vv.1,2 is the completion of salvation. *"Nothing impure will ever enter [the holy city] nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful"* (Revelation 21:27). As a captive, Jerusalem could not free herself from her bondage. It is God Who provides these clothes of splendor and calls her to sit on a throne. Aaron the high priest did not make his beautiful garments; they were made for him (Exodus 28:1-5). He wore them because he was a priest. Isaiah speaks of a status and life of God's people as priests in v.1 (see also Exodus 19:5,6; 1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:5,6), as rulers in 14:1,2 (see also Revelation 3:21; 20:6; 2 Timothy 2:12), and as holy in this chapter. 52:1,2 speaks of the state of glorified saints (Romans 8:18,30; 1 John 3:2).

Isaiah does not say where the wrath of God for Israel's sin went, or how it is that Jerusalem has become holy. The same point is found in v. 11; the people leave their sin and come out from where they were to be pure. By giving such a picture of perfection, Isaiah prepares his readers to wonder about the work of Christ. He will address that work in v.13.

52:3-6 – The mystery continues. They will be redeemed without money. The Lord then reviews the trouble of His people (vv.4,5). They suffered under Egypt and Assyria; the Lord took them out of Egypt and kept Assyria out of Jerusalem. Yet they had been taken into captivity later. After the command to leave Babylon in 48:20 and the terrible description of Israel – "There is no peace for the wicked" (48:22) – there is no further mention of Babylon. So the Lord reviews the plight of His people. Israel's rulers wailed in fear of the enemy, the Lord their God was affected. What happens to His people reflects on His good Name. If they are in captivity and shame, it appears that Israel's God does not care for His own. So the ungodly would think and speak of Israel's God. In this way His Name was

blasphemed. The Lord then declares that His people will know His Name, which means that He is going to do something to show Himself to them. Instead of the wrath their sins deserve, He has mercy on them so that they will know Him. These verses do not say what He will do, but it will be something. They will know later. He says, "Behold Me!" That calls attention in advance to some tremendous action. It means, "Watch what I am going to do!" V.13 will begin the fourth Servant Song with "Behold" and then He will reveal what He is going to do. In Hebrew the same word for *behold* appears in the end of v.6 and the beginning of v.13. (It is somewhat regrettable that neither the NIV nor the ESV maintains that connection in their translation.)

52:7-10 – We who live in modern times must remember how slowly news traveled in ancient times. Sometimes messages were sent by fast runners. Cities with walls had men positioned on top watching to see whatever might be approaching. If a messenger came running, the watchmen were expecting news of some kind. These verses give a message in short pieces. The news is good news and salvation. They cry out "Your God reigns!" If He continues to reign, that means He has not been defeated in the battle the runner just came from. The watchmen are elated at the news and shout for joy. Next, the Lord Himself comes into view, returning from conflict. Exactly what happened is not told.

The Lord said (v.6) that His people would come to know His Name. Now in vv.8,10 He stresses that they will see Him because He will enter Zion, and "*they will see it with their own eyes.*" Jesus is the Lord Who came, Who was seen with human eyes. He is Immanuel, God with us (7:14), God in human flesh, Who was seen and touched by human eyes and hands (1 John 1:1-3). Whatever He has done is described in Isaiah 51,52 as bringing comfort, redeeming Jerusalem, and showing His mighty arm. A bare arm is one with the clothing removed from being in the way so one can do one's work better. This Arm of the Lord will appear in the sight of all the nations. The effect of God using His mighty Arm, Jesus, will be salvation to the ends of the earth, obviously something much greater than leaving Babylon.

What is this great activity of God?

We have seen in recent verses that the Arm of the Lord is a description of Christ. This work is a redemption (v.9) that is far more than liberation from a foreign country; this salvation is from sin (v.10). Why is this so? The comfort of 51:3 meant Zion would enjoy a condition like Eden before sin brought God's curse on man. Comfort can only come when the wrath of God on sinners is removed (12:1-3). The Lord promised His remnant would never drink of the cup of His wrath again (51:22). This comfort means a terrible enemy (such as the monster of 51:9) has been defeated (1 John 3:8). It is a salvation that reaches as far as the ministry of Christ extends (42:4; 49:1,6), which is to the ends of the earth (v.10). Is there any doubt that the great work the runner comes to tell the

watchmen of Zion is of a victory wrought by Christ? God foretold that His salvation was on the way (51:5). He said His people would know His Name; then "Behold Me" (v.6) is followed by "Behold My Servant" (v.13). That Servant is Christ. In this way Isaiah builds up attention to the work of Christ on the cross. Isaiah even says the activity of our Savior will be in plain view. They will see it with their eyes (v.8); it will not happen in a corner (Acts 26:26), but in the sight of all the nations (v.10). John the Baptist said, "Behold the Lamb of God" (John 1:29). John was called to be a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord (40:3-5; John 1:23). His introduction of Christ included that *all mankind* will see God's salvation (40:5; Luke 3:6). Isaiah and the New Testament agree; the Lord would show His holy arm in the sight of all the nations (v.10) when He sent Christ to fulfill promises He made through Isaiah. The arm of the Lord was finally revealed; it is our Lord Jesus Christ (53:1). Christ is the reason wrath would be removed from God's people and the reason they would be holy. He is the One Who would drink the cup of God's wrath for His people.

52:11, 12 – The result of salvation is not merely relief from danger, but a genuine purity and separation from uncleanness. Zion is told to depart. The language of flight is not used here as it is in 48:20 and Exodus 14:5. They do not act in haste as if an enemy were pursuing (Exodus 12:11). They are leaving their sin. They are not to touch what will contaminate them, just as the apostle says to us in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. To be God's holy people, God's people must be holy. His salvation is not one of pretense (Hebrews 12:14). Jesus said, "Only he who does the will of my Father" will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21-23). They are the priests of the Lord who carry His holy things (Numbers 1:50). In these two verses, the place they leave is not identified. Though it is an exodus, it is not from Egypt or Babylon; all they are told to leave is whatever is impure. They are being taken from a life pervaded by sin to one characterized completely by moral purity. They have come home to the Lord; finally they are in deed as in name His holy people. The Lord their Deliverer leads them out and follows behind to protect His own. In completed holiness, they are fit to live in His presence. "He will live with them... the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:3,4). The reason why all of this is given as the happy prospect of the people of God is the next thing Isaiah will speak about in 52:13-53:12. The Servant will die for sinners.

It appears that I have affirmed that admission to the presence of the Lord is based on the life and obedience of the Christian. This must be put in perspective. We are accepted in Christ and only in Christ, washed in His blood not ours, recipients of the gift of His righteousness, which is perfect, while our very best is far below that standard. We are not justified by keeping the law, or by our conduct. Yet it is a vital truth, one needing far more emphasis, that when God forgives and clothes us in the righteousness of Christ, He gives His most powerful and diligent Holy Spirit to produce in us the likeness of Christ. If anyone is without actual holiness in his conduct, it would serve as conclusive evidence that such a soul is still in his sins. He will never see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). Without obedience our words are merely "Lord, Lord" talk (Matthew 7:21-23). All

who are justified have the beginnings of being made holy (sanctification). When our Lord comes, He will finish salvation in our lives, but He will not start it, because that begins in this life. He will bring salvation (obviously in the future) to those who are waiting for him (Hebrews 9:28).

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