

Satisfaction in Serving the Lord

Three Principles from the Prophecy of Isaiah

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Satisfaction in Serving the Lord

Reading: Isaiah 49:1–7; 53:10–11; 55:1–3

May God give us to feel the heartbeat of these verses as we begin our meditation on the satisfaction there is in serving the Lord—the servant’s satisfaction.

When I was a youth the idea was quite widespread amongst devoted Christians that the only work of the Lord that was true and proper was that which we didn’t enjoy doing; work that we found disagreeable and never would have chosen if we had the option. We would find it constantly frustrating and irritating, but it was good for the flesh to be thus subdued and engaged in such disagreeable work.

That wasn’t right, surely? If you were to take that view seriously it would be a slander on almighty God. Who would he be, and what kind of God, if his work always meant that it went against the grain and produced in us disagreeable dissatisfaction? That cannot be so. It is true of course that in the service of the Lord there will be much pain and much warfare and battle. You’ll have found it already; if you haven’t you very soon will. You can’t take up even what looks like an innocent task for the Lord but presently it turns into a battle, for the reason of our own stupidity and because of the opposition of Satan and the fragility of our fellow servants. There will then be much sacrifice and sorrow; days and perhaps months when we keep going for God’s sake, simply because we do not demand that his service shall be unclouded sunshine.

But when you’ve said all you can say in that direction there remains a profound satisfaction in serving the Lord—we have our Lord’s authority for it. When he said to his disciples, ‘I have food to eat that you do not know about . . . My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work’ (John 4:32–34), he didn’t just do it because he had to. He didn’t do it simply because it was a pleasurable pastime; he did it because to him he lived on it. Not that he earned wages and got a good fee for every sermon he preached, but to him it was life and it was food. How could he live without it? ‘My food’—not just ‘my duty’—‘is to do the will of him that sent me and to finish his work.’ In the next breath he went on to tell his disciples about the opportunities that faced them: ‘The harvest is ripe and ready for harvest.’

Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour. (John 4:35–38)

Whether we be sower or reaper, we rejoice together in the satisfaction of working with the Lord. It was appropriate that he taught them that lesson on this particular occasion, for he had just been talking to a Samaritan woman by a well side of that lovely satisfaction that the gospel brings to those who first begin to taste its never dying well of living water—'Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again' (v. 14).

Oh, what a lovely message that is to preach to a world around us that is hungry and thirsty; for whom their sinful pleasures lead not to satisfaction of thirst, but to an increased, unquenchable craving. We gladly preach it, but then, just at that point when we've stopped preaching and gone home and Monday morning dawns upon us, there comes the test. It's all right, isn't it, to tell the unconverted man that if he trusts Christ, Christ can satisfy him? But unless we are finding satisfaction ourselves in the service of the Lord, the thing could become a contradiction. Listen to me behind the scenes: 'Do I have to do this?' Well, it depends on how you look at it, I suppose; but that's a different sort of attitude from our Lord's, 'This is my food and I couldn't live without it.'

Can you live without serving the Lord? Well, perhaps you will then—but you can't, can you? It's our very food to serve the Lord and to do his will. Whether apparent success follows it at once, or whether we must wait to the dawn of eternity to see the reaping, just in the doing of his will lies sustenance to our spirits. As the old cleric said, 'To labour, and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do thy will.'¹

And so I want to meditate with you for a few moments on the satisfaction of serving the Lord and I'm going to suggest that there are three elements among many, many, many others that we could consider. To find true, real, deep, profound satisfaction in serving the Lord,

1. we have to have a task big enough for our abilities—a task commensurate with our gifts and not too far below them;
2. we shall need a settled conviction that there shall be a reward adequate to compensate us for the sufferings and sacrifices we endure;
3. we shall derive a tremendous amount of satisfaction if we have a gospel that is enough to satisfy the thirst and hunger of a perishing world around us. Beware of tiny gospels and little gospels—we need a gospel big enough to satisfy our intellects as well as our hearts and to satisfy the enquiring minds, searching souls and unfulfilled spirits that are all around us.

1. We need a task big enough, a horizon large enough to challenge and bring forth our gifts

Our example is our Lord Jesus Christ. I take it that Isaiah 49 is one of the songs of the Servant of God and through the voice of Isaiah the prophet we hear the voice of Messiah himself. I like his stirring beginning, when Messiah, being of the seed of David, talks generally and firstly to Israel (ch. 48); but this time here is Messiah calling our attention as Gentiles, 'Listen, O isles, unto me' (49:1 KJV).

¹ Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556).

In those days Israel was the centre of the world. They knew there were other places, little islands offshore in this vast world, but they didn't know that one of those islands was America, either South or North! But that's who we, the Gentiles, are—'the isles'. 'Give attention, you peoples from afar,' says the Lord, as he begins to talk to us about himself as the Servant of the Lord. He tells us of the movings of his heart and the feelings and the motivations, and the longings that he found in his heart as the Servant of the Lord par excellence. It's a good thing to think about, isn't it? We rightly celebrate the tremendous work he has done on our behalf, that infinitely precious work. But how lovely it is, and what sacred things these are, to be allowed an insight into his heart as he was doing the work; what he felt like and some of the thoughts that went through his mind, and his ambitions.

The Servant of the Lord, Isaiah 49:1-7

First of all, he reminds us of his call: 'The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name' (v. 1).

Then the equipment of his gifts, his divine gifts and his gifts as Jesus of Nazareth: 'He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away (v. 2). God kept him close and by his divine ordination, anointed with the Holy Spirit, our Lord went about doing good.

Next, God's tremendous satisfaction with his servant. 'And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified"' (v. 3). Remember the joy, and if I dare use the word of God himself, the *excitement*, with which God could not refrain himself, but tore the heaven apart on more than one occasion to announce his pleasure in his Son. He was the first man on earth ever, who truly and without exception and without sin did the will of God perfectly.

But now listen as Messiah speaks again: 'But I said, "I have laboured in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right [judgment RV] is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God"' (v. 4). As verse 7 will later explain, as he served the Lord so impeccably and gloriously, bringing forgiveness and ease of soul, rest and satisfaction to men and women, he met with enormous official opposition; the nation, particularly through its theologians and priests, opposed him and the vast majority in Israel rejected him.

Do you suppose our blessed Lord had no feelings about it personally? We cannot suppose that he said, 'Well that's okay. Poor little people, I don't take much notice of them whether they like me or don't like me' — can we? No, no! To have preached and gone about doing good, to have shown the magnificent grace of God and then be rejected, called a blasphemer and betrayed by the nation and put to the cross, Oh, how he felt at the end of his labours — to have laboured for nothing, humanly speaking. One thinks of his divine ability, being God made man; the gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit, anointed with the Holy Spirit and power; and coming to such apparent negative end — 'It's all been in vain.'

It was not merely tears over Jerusalem that flowed through his eyes, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!' (Matthew 23:37). Amidst his agonies it was not only the rejection of Israel, but the falseness of Judas. And that band, upon which he had spent so much time personally disciplining them, that they should prove to be such a poor, spiritually poverty-stricken, broken, feeble, weak lot of cowards — what must he have felt like?

How could that kind of result have satisfied him? 'My judgment is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God' (v. 4 RV). There is not the slightest quaver of a doubt in God or complaint against him. He trusted in God and God would see that true justice was done and his recompense would be with God. There was no doubt in his mind about God and he reports to us the assurance the Lord gave to him.

Says the servant, 'It is there that I am honourable in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength. I am his servant to bring Jacob again to him, and that Israel be gathered unto him—that is the purpose that God had for me' (v. 5).

But then the Lord has spoken, 'Ah, but it's too small a thing—it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light to the Gentiles, that you may be my salvation to the end of the earth' (v. 6).

That magnificent task of bringing Israel back was far too big for any but him, God's infinite Son. But just to bring Israel back couldn't be enough to satisfy him; what did it need to be? 'I couldn't give him so small a thing,' said God, 'I'm going to set you as a light to the Gentiles'—the whole earth shall hear of his fame.

Oh, how lovely a task has been given to the Son of God, God's holy servant—*big enough for his divine capabilities*. As I listen to him summon us Gentiles to hear what he's got to say about his service for the Lord, I find gratitude rising in my heart because I have a personal interest in it. Very selfish, I know, but I am so glad he wasn't content just to save Israel; aren't you? To come from heaven to be called from the womb to bring back Israel and Jacob, that's what he was formed for. Had he gone back to heaven having done nothing more, what right had we to complain? But I thank God he couldn't be content with such a small thing. To be honest with you, we don't add a lot compared with the multimillions he has saved, but he couldn't be content without us. Oh, thank God for the horizons of the blessed Lord Jesus.

The outcome of the servant's task. And one day, the man whom men despised and the nation abhorred, who seemed to be but a servant of rulers, 'Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you' (v. 7). He shall come to be admired amidst the ten thousand times ten thousand (Rev 9:16); and then you will see the aim of the task that he so gladly accepted.

This then is our Lord; and would it be altogether wrong for us to lean upon his breast and hear his emotions and his feelings, and in our tiny little level echo them? You will find profound satisfaction in serving the Lord, so make sure the Lord opens your eyes to *a task big enough for your abilities*. Don't be content with too small a thing.

We're not all built the same and there are some unfortunate people who can't do anything unless it's a colossal thing. They're not content to preach anywhere unless you can guarantee them an audience of a thousand—they would have missed the Samaritan woman by miles!

Yes, we must be prepared to do small things and our Lord washed his disciples' feet a few hours before he died for the salvation of the world. But the other possibility is also true; *we could be content with doing too little and have a little, small, restricted horizon*. I am persuaded that the Lord's people often have bigger gifts than they realise! Nobody has taken them by the hand to show them how they could develop their gifts and when it comes to work for the Lord they'll need a large horizon. Yes, the people in remote islands need the Saviour, but so do

intellectuals in atheistic universities. The third world needs the Saviour, but in the sophisticated cities there are hundreds of thousands who don't know God and have no Bibles.

Make sure, my dear brothers and sisters, that we don't let our horizons be too restricted. We need to catch a wide horizon and copy the Saviour who gladly took the task of restoring Israel in spite of all its opposition; and despite its apparent initial defeat he gladly assumed the larger task that God entrusted to him as well.

To find satisfaction then, we need a task commensurate with our gifts. That is not a selfish and foolish ambition. God himself, as Messiah points out, gives us the gift and the ability. He's known us from the womb and prepared us for this moment; and maybe God, who has foreseen all and given us the preparation and gifts that are bigger than we imagine, is ready to show us bigger things than we have already.

2. To find satisfaction, we must also be assured that there will be a reward adequate to compensate us for the sufferings and sacrifices we endure

So it was with our blessed Lord. Crucified by his nation, crushed by God, despised and rejected of men, considered to be dying under God's disapproval (so his nation thought), yet it is written, 'He shall see his offspring . . . Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied' (Isa 53:10–11). To my mind, these are astonishing words, bordering on the incredible. 'Satisfied' — the infinite Son of God satisfied?

The same prophet in chapter 40 asks what could possibly satisfy God. Even to sacrifice the whole beef stock throughout the world as a burnt offering, that couldn't begin to satisfy him. The nations are like the dust left after potatoes have been put into a woman's bag to take home and you're left with the dust in the pan that weighed them (Isa 40:15). That's all the nations are to God and his hand is big enough to measure all the distance of space, how then could you satisfy him? And here it speaks of the Son of God himself, 'He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied' (53:11 KJV). It borders on the incredible that I'm to be part of that satisfaction, but there it is.

You say, 'It's not just you, Gooding, it's going to be the multimillions of the redeemed.' But even if you take me and multiply me by 3 trillion you don't get much, do you? But you see, I'm looking at it from my point of view and I shouldn't do that, should I? It's a question of what he's going to make of me and that's a different story. The glorious thing is this, that when he gets us home at last, perfected — not only redeemed, but perfected and matured and made like himself — he shall be satisfied not only with the work of his hands, but compensated for the sacrifice and the suffering that he's entailed. For it is written, 'Who for the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame' (Heb 12:2) — the shame he counted as but nothing.

It was different with the cross — it wasn't despised and it had to be endured. Who of us can say that, during those dark hours of enduring the cross, the thought wasn't in his mind of the joy of having his redeemed perfected and with him forever?

You say, 'It is not good to compare our little sufferings with his.' Well in a way that is true, for his sufferings were atoning sufferings, were they not? Ours can never be that; but in 1 Peter

2, Peter exhorts us with the thought that our sufferings are in some sense to be like his, for he has left us an example that we should 'follow in his steps' in his suffering.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. (vv. 21–24)

What Peter is talking about is his innocent suffering and his vicarious suffering; not his atoning suffering so much, but his vicarious suffering. It means suffering on behalf of somebody else so that they may be saved. His sufferings, I repeat, were atoning—he atoned for their sins, without which none could be saved.

Because his sufferings are innocent suffering, calculated to lead men and women to repentance, there's another sense in which they are an example for us. When he suffered he did not threaten, he didn't retaliate and how grateful we may be that he didn't. Had he joined Peter in cutting off not only our ears (as Peter did in the garden), but our necks, then we never should have been saved, should we? He put up with all that abuse and crudity and sadism and ignorance and envy and strife. Not that he said it didn't matter, 'He committed himself to him that judges justly' (v. 23).

One day all that will come up for review and God himself will deal with it righteously. Confident in the fact that God would deal with it, then he was free himself not to deal with it—not to retaliate, not to take revenge, not even to threaten and 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree' (v. 24). Men and women had a chance then to repent, instead of being cut off forthwith; having been brought to a different frame of mind thus to take advantage of his atoning suffering.

Does that have any message for us? Well of course it does! 'Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust' (v. 18). Says Peter, 'When you are beaten and it isn't fair and just and you are innocent, I want you to take it for God's sake as a testimony to the Lord whom you serve.' That's a mighty big demand for Peter to make. I'm imagining some of the early Christians saying, 'It's alright for an apostle to say it. He never was a slave, he never felt the lash of an unreasonable taskmaster. When the slave has done the very best he could all day long under a burning sun, this miserable, half-drunken taskmaster comes along and brings his lash down upon his back. 'That's alright for you, Peter. You've never felt it.'

So Peter stands aside and says, 'It's Christ who's left you the example, my dear brother.' And I notice the pile-up of words; he doesn't say, 'He bore our sins,' although that would be true. He says, 'He *himself* bore our sins.' It was not by proxy; he did it himself. And not content therewith, he continues, 'He himself bore our sins *in his own body*.' It's difficult for a Christian slave to argue now, isn't it, for Christ felt the lash and scourge with its knots of bone and iron that furrowed his very back; and he felt the thorns and he felt the slap across the face and he

felt the cross. 'He himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree,' and what a mess they made of his body, didn't they?

It wasn't just the scourge that hurt, it was the envy of the high priest that dictated it.

Blow, blow thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude.²

Behind the physical suffering there's the sadism and ignorance of the soldiers, 'they scarce knew what they did'; the mockery of the priests as they went by and the failure of his disciples. Oh, how that hurt. How easily he could have retaliated justly, but he didn't. He took it. Like a blanket will stop a bullet better than a brick wall, he took it and absorbed it. Why? To give those people a chance, in spite of their sin, to come to repentance and to get saved, '[so] that we might die to sin and live to righteousness' (v. 24).

Then Peter had a word with some of the Christian women, whose husbands were not yet converted (3:1-2). I wouldn't have liked to have been some of those women, with unsaved, pagan husbands and no law to protect them from the abuse they had to put up with. 'But you see,' says Peter, 'Christ has left us an example that we should follow his steps. If you're prepared to absorb that kind of suffering without retaliation and show a meek and gracious spirit, then you know, my dear sister, that if your husband can't be won by your preaching to him, he could be won by your behaviour.' That'll take some grace, won't it, and courage and endurance, and they didn't have any guarantee of a recompense.

We come back to the blessed Lord Jesus, who wanted to be sure of a recompense that would be adequate to the suffering he had endured. *Nothing shall ever be suffered for God's sake in this world and for the sake of Christ but will find eternal compensation over and above all that we can ask or think.* If you want it in mathematical terms, it's a ten thousand per cent reward, according to our blessed Lord.

3. And finally, if we're to find satisfaction in our service for the Lord, we need a gospel that is enough to satisfy the thirst and hunger of a perishing world around us and big enough that we won't be ashamed of it

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? (Isa 55:1)

Why do you labour and spend your money on stuff that cannot satisfy you when God is offering such a magnificent salvation? It is here described in the terms, 'I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David' — 'Even the sure mercies of David' KJV (v. 3).

² From a song by William Shakespeare (1564-1616).

To give a little Hebrew lesson, the psalmist says, 'For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption' (Ps 16:10). That is a Hebrew word *hesed* and its basic meaning is a servant that is utterly devoted. And here again it is prophetic of our blessed Lord. He is the devoted servant of God; absolutely devoted and not a centimetre short. It was impossible that he should see corruption, God would not allow it because it would have cast aspersions on the moral character of God. For the Lord to have been so utterly devoted to him to the last centimetre, so to speak, and for God to have deserted him in the grave, what kind of a god would that have been? Indeed not! 'God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it' (Acts 2:24). The universe would grow dark and God's character would be charged with moral imperfection.

That would never happen, because if Christ was devoted to him then the Father was devoted to him likewise. 'I will give him *the sure mercies,*' that's another form of that same Hebrew word *hesed*, 'the loyal mercies', if you like, because if Christ was loyal to the Father, the Father would be loyal to him. As Paul was preaching in the synagogue of Pisidia in Antioch, he quoted the verse that evidenced that God had raised him from the dead, 'You will not let your Holy One see corruption,' (Acts 13:35). You're allowed to say 'Hallelujah' because the resurrection of Christ is the first fruits. This is a morally stained universe and there is a God who cares for moral justice. 'But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ' (1 Cor 15:23).

In the coming day of the restoration of all things God isn't going to be defeated. God isn't going to say, 'Well I made the world and Satan messed it up, so I'll scratch that.' No, no, not even at that level. There will one day be a new heaven and a new earth, but God was going to renew this one anyway, 'Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rom 8:21). It makes you want to hop for joy, doesn't it? These 'earthen vessels' break and the world itself grows old, but Christ will take the precious dust and freshly mould it. It won't be starting from scratch, he's going to take the old things and renew them. There's going to be a resurrection, '[He] will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself' (Phil 3:21). He'll bid the whole creation smile and hush its groaning.

Why do we spend our cash and labour on things that don't satisfy? At best they will perish with the grave. What fools men are, aren't they? Some of the brightest intellects that have ever walked the earth labour for fifty years and come up with the result that their tremendous intellect has achieved. Do you know what it is? The result they come up with is that 'intellect' in the end is insignificant! Mindless, purposeless forces will destroy it and when they've destroyed it they won't even know what they've done. Odd, isn't it, how that could be intellectually satisfying to know? I think I'd rather not know it! What a lie Satan has sold people; and there are millions out there without any hope or satisfaction, for in their atheism they deny the very possibility of ultimate satisfaction.

And we have a message about Christ that filled Paul with joy, even in his prison cell.

Says he, 'You'll never believe it, but I've got a free gift from God.'

'Oh, yes, Paul, didn't you write somewhere, "The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"?' (Rom 6:23). So that's what's got you dancing for joy?'

'Well, yes, in its way,' says Paul, 'but I was thinking of another delightful gift. This is absolutely superb.'

'What is that then?'

Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. (Eph 3:8 KJV)

He uses a funny Greek word, 'the least', *elachistoterō*. He makes a comparative even at the superlative, 'I am the least of all saints and he's committing it to me. If he committed it to some of you that wouldn't be so bad; but to me, *the very least* of all saints!' So the man is full of delight. If somebody discovered the cure for cancer and gave it to you to go round the world and tell everybody about it, what a delight you would have, wouldn't you? *We have a gospel big enough to satisfy every nook and cranny of the redeemed human heart* and what satisfaction there is in being allowed to take it to a dying world.

The Lord use our meditation to stoke again the fires of our devotion and enthusiasm and to enlarge our imaginations and our horizons so that, even here in this sorry old world and long before we get to glory, we may find the satisfaction that he taught us when he said, '*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.*'