

# A SAVIOR FOR TURBULENT TIMES

by Doug Goins

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I love the Christmas season. I enjoy the festive decorations. My family had a great time a couple of Sundays ago decorating our own home for Christmas. Like me, you've probably already been to a number of open houses and Christmas parties. I had my own little personal epiphany in a drugstore this week while I was shopping. I heard Perry Como singing O Little Town of Bethlehem, and had a quiet little moment right there in the store; it was terrific.

Last week Candy and I enjoyed a Christmas concert at Crittenden Middle School, where two of our children attend. They played in the band and sang in the choir and, in spite of all the restrictions in public education, they sang the truth of Christmas, of Jesus coming to be a Savior, and I was delighted at the gospel message that came through.

However, if you're at all sensitive to the world we live in and the people that surround us, discordant themes are woven into that Christmas tapestry. There are men and women around us who are casualties of the Christmas season, if you will. Since Thanksgiving I have spoken with a number of individuals, Christians and non-Christians alike, who are struggling with all kinds of issues--estrangement in relationships, loneliness, painful conflict within families, and other disappointments. I've talked with people who are very fearful and apprehensive about the future of their own lives and their families. And in all the conversations, the Christmas season seems to add to the turbulence for each of those people. This particular time of year is especially difficult when you want family unity so much.

I heard on the radio recently about a national poll that was taken this season which suggested the tragedy of some people who are desperately trying to celebrate Christmas. The majority don't spend their time reflecting thoughtfully on the real meaning of this season. The poll said that people admitted that they spend most of the time bickering and trudging through malls.

LaVerne Hromec reminded me that I encouraged all of you a month ago not to try to do everything. Well, I didn't take my own advice. My family and I tried to do everything this year, so we have struggled, even up until yesterday, with a sense of being stressed out and overwhelmed by all the expectations and things that we're supposed to be doing.

I was reminded of a Jules Pfeiffer cartoon that I saw two years ago. A poor middle-aged man is illustrated in panels labeled, "Thanksgiving depression, followed by Christmas despair, topped off by New Year's anxiety attacks, none of which cuts into a ceaseless round of party-going, gift-giving, and seasonal cheer." In the last panel this poor man is being inundated with ashes falling all around him and piling up at his feet as he says, "Fa-la-la-la-la, la, la, la, la." We're surrounded by folks who will end up when this season is over standing in ashes, saying, "Fa-la-la-la-la."

The good news is that the word of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah crashes through that despair. Isaiah spoke seven hundred years before Christ was born, addressing the disillusionment that can undermine the joy and the hope of Christmas. This great prophet lived in a time just as stressful and turbulent as our own. The national economy was deteriorating. The religious leadership was corrupt and untrustworthy. Families were disintegrating. The political leadership was self-serving. In modern language, the infrastructure of that nation was collapsing.

Isaiah was given a vision for the future of the nation. The bad news that God gave him was that it was going to get worse. The nation was going to be swept away, first by the Assyrian invasion from the north, and then by the Babylonians, who would come in and take away Judah to the south. An entire nation of people would end up as exiles and aliens in a foreign country, Babylon. Isaiah wrote the last portion of his prophecy, chapters 40 through 66, to the exiles living under the oppressive regime of the Babylonians the next generation of his kinsmen. Look at what he commanded in verse 13 of chapter 49:

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;  
break forth, O mountains, into singing!  
For the Lord has comforted his people,  
and will have compassion on his afflicted.

He was commanding all of the created physical and human order to sing, because God speaks words of comfort and because God acts has acted and will continue to act mercifully and compassionately.

That compassion that Isaiah spoke of to Israel in exile is comforting as well to all of us here this morning who are fearful and afflicted and disillusioned, anyone among us who may be Christmas casualties. The reason we can sing for joy as we are commanded in verse 13 is because of the source of comfort, the agent of God's compassionate activity in life, which is introduced in the first twelve verses of Isaiah 49. We are going to meet the one person who can address every need of the human heart. He is the Christ of Christmas, the Messiah sent from God.

As we studied Isaiah 40 two weeks ago, we saw the Messiah who brought comfort as a Shepherd God. Last Sunday morning in Isaiah 42 he ministered compassionately as the Servant of God. Now Isaiah presents him to us as one who has been sent from God to bring salvation. It is mentioned twice in this paragraph. In the last phrase of verse 6 in chapter 49, God says to his Servant,

"I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Look at the opening phrase in verse 8:

Thus says the Lord:  
"In a time of favor I have answered you,  
in a day of salvation I have helped you;"

Isaiah's entire prophetic ministry of writing and preaching was focused on this issue of salvation. As a matter of fact, the apostle Peter, writing to Christians in first-century Turkey, and to us as well, said that all the prophets who wrote in the Old Testament were concerned with this issue of salvation. Peter says, "The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory" (1 Peter 1:10, 11).

Isaiah was searching for the salvation that was to come from God. In fact, Isaiah's very name symbolizes his ministry of inquiry because Isaiah means the salvation of Jehovah. This morning, Christmas Sunday, we're going to focus on a Savior for turbulent times, the one described in verse 6 of Isaiah 49 as the Savior of the entire world. Already we've seen that he's described as a Servant, but this time as a Servant of salvation. In the first six verses of this paragraph, the Servant himself is going to speak to us. He is going to talk about his ministry and his own perspective on what God called him to do.

Then in verses 7 through 12 God is going to speak, first to the Servant that he sends, then to the nations, and he will explain fully what he wants the Servant to accomplish in his work of salvation.

In the first three verses of Isaiah 49, the Savior, Jesus who is Christ the Lord, talks about how God prepared him for this work of salvation. The Servant says;

"Listen to me, O coastlands,  
and hearken, you peoples from afar.  
The LORD called me from the womb,

from the body of my mother he named my name.  
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.  
And he said to me, "You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

The Savior's message is addressed to the entire population of the earth. He is saying, "Listen, Jew and Gentile alike, in every remote corner of the globe...." And Jesus speaks in verse 1 about his calling from God, of the supernatural work that God accomplished divinely in the womb of his mother Mary.

And he talks about the name Jesus that was given to him even before he was conceived. God spoke through the angel Gabriel, who appeared to Mary and said, "I'm going to give you a baby boy, and you're going to name him Jesus." The angel also appeared to Joseph and told him that his betrothed was with child. And he said specifically, "You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." The name "Jesus" in your New Testament is really the Greek translation of the Old Testament name Joshua. It meant deliverer, redeemer. Our Jewish friends call him Yeshua.

I was struck a few years ago by an advertisement that *Jews for Jesus* took out in newspapers all over this country to deal with the name Yeshua, the work he would accomplish, and why it was so important to understand that name. Here's what they wrote:

Now many would have liked it better if the angel had said, "And you are to give him the name Santa Claus because he will bring you presents." Many people would rather not hear about sin, but it's a fact, it's a condition, it's a problem that needs a dramatic solution. The condition of humanity –p; call it sin if you have the courage –p; has been lamented for centuries. Oh, yes, there has been progress, but it is the wrong kind of progress because now a few desperate men pushing a few buttons can annihilate all life on this problem-ridden planet. Is that a solution?

God promised a Messiah, a deliverer, a problem-solver, and if there's anything more difficult to accept than the fact of sin, yours and ours, it's the idea that God solves our problem. But he can. He can make us want peace, give us hearts to care about one another, relieve guilt, mend broken homes, give meaning to our lives and diminish the din of the twentieth century with the music of his love.

God's dramatic solution is Yeshua. The news is going to make some people unhappy. Maybe you don't like Jews. Maybe you have a grudge against Christians. Maybe you don't like your sins, yourself, or the God who made you. Sorry about that, but it doesn't really change the truth. Before you dismiss what should be good news, remember that the truth might be so simple that it was overlooked by the people who should have known. The need was, and is, due to the human condition, just in case you're choking over that three-letter-word, sin. God's salvation is a sacrifice, a sin-bearer, a Savior, a mediator, a mentor, a Messiah. Yeshua is all that and more.

Jesus was called to bring salvation. Verse 2 of our paragraph talks about the care with which God prepared him to communicate, that life-changing message of salvation. It talks about how he spent years in obscurity growing up in the carpenter shop in Nazareth, learning radical biblical truth of the Old Testament, truth that would have the same cutting and penetrating effect as a sharp sword or a skillfully crafted arrow. Jesus' words of life would have an incredible impact on people, if people were open and receptive to those words. There's beauty here in verse 2 about how God protected him, guarded him, hid him away until the time was just right for him to begin his public ministry of proclamation of this truth of salvation.

Verse 3 suggests that during this period of hiddenness, Jesus gradually became aware of his mission and purpose as the Servant of salvation. During that time, through the Scriptures God taught him all about his own life and death and resurrection that ultimately would bring men and women to eternal life through faith in Jesus. And he also says that that life and ministry would honor God. It would bring glory to Yahweh himself, the One who was sending him.

Jesus clearly defined his saving purpose in Luke 19, where he sought out Zacchaeus, a Jew who was a traitor to his own nation, who was collaborating with the Romans, a man who was corrupt and greedy in the work of tax-collecting. Jesus singled him out and said, "I'm going to your house for dinner." Jesus was immediately criticized. People protested, "Jesus is spending time with a sinner." But Jesus' final words spoken to Zacchaeus were, "Today salvation has come to this house.... For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:9, 10).

The Servant Jesus confesses in this passage, though, that salvation would be won at a very painful cost and with great difficulty and struggle. Look at verse 4:

But I said, "I have labored in vain,  
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;  
yet surely my right is with the LORD,  
and my recompense with my God."

Here the Servant is talking about his rejection, the apparent failure, at least from a human perspective, of his mission on earth. He is speaking of the necessity of his arrest, his trial, his humiliation, his beatings, and finally his agonizing death by crucifixion.

In his journal entitled *Markings*, Dag Hammarskjöld says about this season of the year:

"How proper it is that Christmas should follow Advent. For him who looks toward the future, the manger is situated on Golgotha, and the cross has already been raised in Bethlehem."

But despite the despair that Jesus voices, there is confidence that God will accomplish his salvation. That confidence is amplified in verses 5 and 6. Again the Servant is speaking.

And now the LORD says,  
who formed me from the womb to be his servant,  
to bring Jacob back to him,  
and that Israel might be gathered to him,  
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,  
and my God has become my strength--  
he says:

"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 give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Jews clearly understood that God had restored the scattered, disobedient nation of Israel. Remember, this was written to them by Isaiah when they were in captivity by Isaiah, and he knew that God was going to bring them back to their homeland. But these verses described a world-wide ministry of salvation. Jesus did come to the nation of Israel, "the tribes of Jacob," and they did reject him. John writes in the prologue of his gospel of the rejection that Jesus experienced: "He came to his own home, and his own people received him not."

[v1:11] But because of that rejection, God was at work so that an even greater purpose would be accomplished, something much more significant than one nation being brought to salvation: All the nations of the world would come to faith through Jesus' life and death and resurrection. That process of redemption, salvation going out around the world, has continued unbroken for 2,000 years.

That was brought home to me recently. I was upstairs studying in order to preach this morning. A good friend from our body, Rick Thrasher, knocked on my door and said, "I want to introduce you to a new friend." Rick works as a computer consultant here in the valley. Through his work he had met a young computer specialist from Albania. He and Rick learned that they were brothers in Christ.

This young man, whose name is Josef Kurti, told him a wonderful story of salvation to the ends of the earth, even to the country of Albania. Joseph was raised a nominal Catholic. For twenty-two years, from 1968 to 1990, the Albanian communist dictatorship did everything it could to crush all religious life in the country, whether Islamic, Catholic or Protestant. For years there could be no worship and his family's Catholicism was very minimal, but every Christmas the family would have a traditional Christmas observance. They would shut all their drapes and lock the doors. They would have a Christmas dinner, and then they would listen to gospel music by playing Mahalia Jackson records. But he said that it wasn't really an act of faith, there wasn't really any spiritual understanding. It merely represented a cultural heritage, a kind of historic religion, that was being denied to them.

In 1990 the communist bloc dissolved and the doors were opened. Two years ago this month, Josef Kurti heard an evangelist from Korea preach. He gave his life to Jesus Christ. One year later, he and two other people started a little home church, and now, twelve months later, that church has grown to two hundred believers in his city who have come to Christ.

I chuckled when he told me about the leadership team. In addition to himself, there is a woman from Brazil who became a nationalized Albanian citizen about five years ago under the communists, and an American, a young man who lived here until he was fourteen, went through high school and college in Sweden, and then felt called by God to Albania. Under the communists, he got nationalized as an Albanian. Talk about an international community of spiritual leadership of brothers and sisters in Christ! This work of God bringing salvation to the ends of the earth is continuing unbroken.

Now God himself breaks in. He is so excited about the work of the Servant that he wants to endorse it and support it. Verse 7:

Thus says the LORD,  
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One....

God wants us to understand that when he speaks, his identity, the full authority of his personhood, is behind the word that he communicates to us. He says now, speaking to the Servant:

...to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations,  
the 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."

Jesus came into the world to be a Servant, to pour his life out for people. Yet almost universally he was despised by those who listened to him and those who watched his life. He was treated with contempt because they couldn't perceive any value or significance in this One sent from God. The text says that his life was abhorrent to most people who viewed it. That is where we get the word abomination. That attitude began with the nation Israel and has continued through human history; Jews and Gentiles alike still refuse to surrender

their hearts to this Servant of salvation.

In this verse Isaiah looks ahead to a great event in human history when there will be a reversal of power and authority. The apostle Paul says there will come a time when Jesus comes back to rule and reign, when every single tongue on earth will confess his sovereignty, and every knee will bow in submission before his authority. But until that time when Jesus comes back, the rejection of his person and the opposition to the salvation he comes to bring, will remain. Jesus said to the disciples, "If they hate me and despise me, they'll hate you as well." So don't be surprised at opposition when you commit yourself to the work of salvation on behalf of this Servant.

When we were at Nasuli in the Philippines this summer, I spent a good deal of time with a young husband and father of three children who had spent four years as a translator on a tiny island in the Sulu Archipelago, an island that was totally Islamic. He and his wife were the first Caucasians on the island and the first Christians to live there. They both felt called of God to biblical translation work, and had finished university and gone through the rigorous training that Wycliffe requires, taken their children at great personal sacrifice and risk, and relocated to this little island.

He told me how, for 3 1/2 years, he and his wife had poured their lives out for these people, trying to build relationships, getting involved in a community water project, in construction, in sports. He started a soccer team, and was greatly appreciated by the people on the island for organizing sports for young people. He talked about their commitment to friendship evangelism, to share Christ with people relationally.

He told me that the first 3 1/2 years were so much fun and so exciting that it was like a honeymoon. But, he said, the last six months had been a nightmare, and he was in Nasuli preparing to come back home for a furlough. He said, "I don't know if I can go back because of what has happened the last six months."

First, several boys from the soccer team that he coached broke into his house and stole money and a cassette player, and he felt that his friendship had been betrayed, the investment he had made in young lives had been violated. He felt great discouragement and disappointment.

Then he told of being publicly confronted in the square of the village by a visiting Muslim imam from Arabia who was a relative of somebody in the village. The man accused him of all kinds of awful things--terrible motives, wanting to proselytize, being a dishonest man, and trying to take advantage of the island people. He said the most painful part of it was that when he looked around, his friends had disappeared, and he was standing alone, publicly humiliated and embarrassed because of his belief in Jesus Christ.

But the worst thing that had happened was the most painful and the most frightening. Just before they were ready to leave the island his eight-year-old daughter had been sexually molested by one of the village elders. He said it was very clear to him that the purpose was intimidation, to run them off the island. In tears, he said to me, "I don't know if I can go back." I had to say, "You know, if I were in your position I don't know if I could go back either."

We wept together, but we also talked together about the certainty that triumph would come out of tragedy, even the personal tragedy that he had gone through. He could identify totally with the lament of the Servant when the Servant says, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." He could identify with this one who was deeply despised and abhorred by the nations, a "Servant of rulers," one who is helpless before authority, whether religious, political, or social. But the promise of God is that triumph will come out of tragedy. God wonderfully describes what Jesus is going to do. Look at verses 8 through 12:

Thus says the LORD:

"In a time of favor I have answered you,  
in a day of salvation I have helped you;  
I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people,  
to establish the land,  
to apportion the desolate heritage's;  
saying to the prisoners, 'Come forth,'

to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.'

They shall feed along the ways,  
on all bare heights shall be their pasture;  
they shall not hunger or thirst,  
neither scorching wind nor sun shall smite them,  
for he who has pity on them will lead them,  
and by springs of water will guide them.

And I will make all my mountains a way,  
and my highways shall be raised up.  
Lo, these shall come from afar,  
and lo, these from the north and from the west,  
and these from the land of Syene."

As God speaks through Isaiah and Isaiah prophetically looks into the future he sees three events that can be applied distinctly to these verses, three different historical actions of God. Most immediately, these verses promise the exiled nation that Isaiah is writing to that God is going to bring them home again. God will rescue them out of bondage, and will personally lead them like a shepherd back to their homeland. That prophecy was fulfilled.

Second, he also sees even farther into the future when Jesus the good Shepherd, Jesus the Savior and Deliverer, comes into the world and offers salvation first of all to the nation Israel. That salvation is rejected, but the offer of salvation is still being made. In 70 A.D. the Romans invaded Israel and once again that poor nation was scattered and dispersed all over the world.

And third, there is a time still to come when Jesus returns for the last time and restores and regathers once again that nation and brings them back together as a spiritual entity, calling them in righteousness into a nation that is holy to him. In all three of these historic acts, these verses are fulfilled.

We live between the second and third event--between the first coming of Christ or the incarnation, and the second coming of Christ. And we can apply all of this wonderful truth in verses 8 through 11 in terms of the saving work that Christ wants to accomplish on our behalf. He wants to restore the desolation that sin has brought in our lives and put us who are so fragmented back together. We can be freed from the prison of bondage to destructive attitudes and habits and lifestyles. We can experience Jesus as the light of the world so that we can see things clearly as they are. We can understand moral and ethical absolutes that he has given us for our good. We can experience the tender shepherd care that Jesus offers that nurtures us, protects us, guides us and directs us all through his word. We don't have to wander aimlessly through life. His promise in verse 11 is that he really will create paths of righteousness for us to follow so we don't stumble and fall and get lost.

Verses 8 through 11 reflect the richness of that biblical word salvation. Salvation means deliverance. Salvation means that the evil that has been done to us will be recompensed. That was the word the Servant used in the passage. It will be avenged. We don't have to avenge ourselves; God will do that. Salvation means that we will finally gain victory over opposition. We will be helped and preserved; we can experience health and healing in every realm of life. The full biblical meaning of that word salvation stresses that God saves us by forgiving our sins, by changing our very nature. Salvation is a dynamic force that brings spiritual life, emotional life and relational well-being.

It is important to do more than just listen to the message. In the 2 Corinthian letter the apostle Paul quotes verse 8 of Isaiah 49, applying it to the Corinthian Christians and to us as well. The verse says, "In a time of favor I have answered you, in a day of salvation I have helped you." Paul says there is an urgency to this message. If you're fortunate enough to hear the message of salvation, it's imperative that you respond to it in the day of salvation. He says it this way: "Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.' Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation'" (2 Corinthians 6:1, 2)

The acceptable time, the day of salvation, is this very instant as you hear the message. There is an urgency about it. This Christmas season is a great time of year to accept the salvation offered in Jesus Christ.

I had the great privilege a couple of years ago of praying with a friend two days after Christmas as he accepted Christ as his Savior and the Lord of his life. He had been driven to that decision by the pain in his life that was intensified by the holiday season.

I'm also struck this time of year by people who choose to reject the Savior who is Christ the Lord. I think that affects me more deeply at this time of year as well. The story of my friend in the Philippines touched me deeply because of the rejection of the gospel by the lost people of that little island in the Sulu Sea.

But I confess that when this Savior is rejected by people who are much closer to me personally, people who despise the Savior as Isaiah says, people that I love and am very close to, the pain is much greater. Right now I have two members in my family who refuse to accept the salvation offered in Jesus Christ. Their blindness, their captivity, and their unwillingness to respond to salvation in Jesus affect me more at this time of year. They see his gospel as too restrictive. They see the God of the Bible as being too harsh and too narrow. Although they don't understand this, they really want to fashion God in their own image. They want to strip Jesus of his full right to rule and reign in their hearts on his own terms.

With Isaiah and with the apostle Paul, I want to echo the warning of this passage to every one of us who is listening to this message of salvation. We can't presume on the message, and we can't presume on its timing--there is a limit; this day of salvation will come to a close.

My wife and I were talking about these issues as I was working on the sermon, and she reminded me that as far as the two members of our family are concerned, the story isn't over yet. God is really stubborn and tenacious in his efforts to get through to people, to get them to open their eyes and ears and really see and hear.

I was encouraged by a story from a Southern Baptist pastor named Arnold Prater. In his book, *Release from Phoniness*, he talks about a personal acquaintance of his. He says:

It was a man I knew who stood behind the second chair in a barber shop where I was a customer. The owner of the shop was a friend of mine, but this fellow in the second chair, a man who was about 65 years of age, was about the vilest, most vulgar, profane, wicked talking man I had ever known. He must have had some kind of fixation about preachers, for it seemed to me that every time I entered the shop he doubled his output.

One day when I went in he was gone. I asked my friend where he was, and my friend said, "Oh, he's been desperately ill," and for awhile they despaired of his life. Perhaps six weeks after that as I was entering the post office one day I heard a voice call my name. I turned and I saw the profane man. He was seated in a car so he could watch the people passing by. He was a mere shadow of a man, and his face was the color of death itself. He crooked a bony finger at me and I walked over to where he was. He said in a voice so weak I had to lean forward to catch the words, "Preacher, I want to tell you something." Then he went on.

"I was in a coma down there in the hospital. I couldn't move or see. They didn't know it, but I could still hear. And I heard the doctor tell my wife, 'I don't think he can last another hour.' Then his voice trembled, so it was a moment before he could continue. "Preacher," he said, "I had never prayed in my entire lifetime, but I prayed then. I said, 'Oh, God, if there is a God, I need you now.' And when I said that, I -p; I don't know how to put it into words, but all I can say is I was given an assurance that he was there." Then the tears welled up in his reddened eyes and he said, "Oh, preacher, just imagine. I've kicked him in the face every day of my life for 65 years and the first time I called his name he came."

Today is the day of salvation. Jesus calls and invites, this one who came to say to prisoners, "Come forth," this one who told those in darkness, "Appear." "At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you



on the day of salvation.' Behold, now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation." It doesn't matter how long you have been putting off, surrendering your life to Jesus Christ. Don't put it off any longer accept the only one who can calm the turbulence of your life. This is a great season for salvation.

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Doug Goins  
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