

GOD'S PEOPLE SHALL PROSPER

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Isaiah 49:18–23](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Isaiah 49:18–26](#)

ISAIAH 49:18–23

- 18** “Lift up your eyes and look around;
all your children gather and come to you.
As surely as I live,” declares the LORD,
“you will wear them all as ornaments;
you will put them on, like a bride.
- 19** “Though you were ruined and made desolate
and your land laid waste,
now you will be too small for your people,
and those who devoured you will be far away.
- 20** The children born during your bereavement
will yet say in your hearing,
‘This place is too small for us;
give us more space to live in.’
- 21** Then you will say in your heart,
‘Who bore me these?
I was bereaved and barren;
I was exiled and rejected.
Who brought these up?
I was left all alone,
but these—where have they come from?’ ”
- 22** This is what the Sovereign LORD says:
“See, I will beckon to the nations,
I will lift up my banner to the peoples;
they will bring your sons in their arms
and carry your daughters on their hips.
- 23** Kings will be your foster fathers,
and their queens your nursing mothers.

**They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground;
they will lick the dust at your feet.
Then you will know that I am the LORD;
those who hope in me will not be disappointed.”**



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KEY VERSE

Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed.”—Isaiah 49:23c

PARTNERS IN A NEW CREATION

Unit 1: God Delivers and Restores

LESSONS 1–4

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List one or more ways by which people will know that God is the Lord.
2. Tell how the meanings of one or more lines of the text are clarified by a parallel thought(s) that follows.
3. Identify and share with others an aspect of your testimony that reveals your hope in the Lord.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Reversal of Fortune
 - B. Lesson Context: Historical
 - C. Lesson Context: Literary
- I. Promise of Restoration (Isaiah 49:18–21)
 - A. Ornamentation (vv. 18–20)
Desolation and Ruin
 - B. Disorientation (v. 21)
 - II. Explanation of Restoration (Isaiah 49:22–23)
 - A. Foreigners Called (vv. 22–23a)
 - B. Hopeful, Not Shamed (v. 23b)
Numble Pie

Conclusion

- A. Change of Address
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Artaxerxes	Are-tuh- <i>zerk</i> -seez.
Babylon	<i>Bab</i> -uh-lun.
Belshazzar	Bel- <i>shazz</i> -er.

Cyrus	<i>Sigh-russ.</i>
Darius	<i>Duh-rye-us.</i>
Diaspora	<i>Dee-as-puh-ruh.</i>
Ezra	<i>Ez-ruh.</i>
Gentiles	<i>Jen-tiles.</i>
Isaiah	<i>Eye-zay-uh.</i>
Jeremiah	<i>Jair-uh-my-uh.</i>
Jerusalem	<i>Juh-roo-suh-lem.</i>
Judah	<i>Joo-duh.</i>
Medes	<i>Meeds.</i>
Micah	<i>My-kuh.</i>
Nabonidus	<i>Nab-uh-nye-dus.</i>
Persians	<i>Per-zhens.</i>
Zion	<i>Zi-un.</i>

Introduction

A. Reversal of Fortune

Reversal of fortune has long been a popular topic for story plots. For instance, in the movie *The Princess Diaries* Mia Thermopolis finds out that she is the crown princess of Genovia. This information causes upheaval in her world, as she must decide whether to accept this role. In considering her duties, Mia receives the requisite makeover, etiquette training, and so on. Her reversal of fortune from the daughter of a single mother to the heir of an entire nation causes friction with her mother, newly discovered grandmother, friends, and classmates.

Change in fortune often results in a change in identity. From being an artist's only daughter, Mia became a princess. While it was an exciting change, it also came with great challenges that made Mia ask, Is it worth it?

God's people faced a reversal of fortune, as did the nations of the world. God's servant would offer a change of identity to all. There were great challenges for the servant, Israel, and the nations. So the question remained: Is it worth it to be part of God's great reversal?

B. Lesson Context: Historical

The first readers of the prophecy in today's text understood it as concerning a return from

Babylon, for Isaiah had earlier given the dire prophecy about being taken into exile there ([Isaiah 39:6–7](#); see [lesson 1 Lesson Context](#)). When Babylon fell, the Jews would return to Judah and Jerusalem ([Isaiah 40–48](#); [Ezra 1:5](#)). At that time Jerusalem would be rebuilt, and the foundation of the temple laid.

Jerusalem lost its inhabitants when the Babylonians destroyed the city in 586 BC. Jeremiah wrote that there were only 832 who were taken from the city at that time ([Jeremiah 52:29](#)), compared with 10,000 who had been taken earlier ([2 Kings 24:14](#)). Those who remained had endured the deprivations and starvation that occurred during the siege. This small remnant was taken away to join others already in Babylon. The city was a desolate ruin for almost 50 years.

On the night in 539 BC that soldiers of Darius the Mede captured Babylon, the Babylonian King Belshazzar was having a gigantic banquet that featured vessels from the temple in Jerusalem. The king was a co-regent with his father, Nabonidus, who was frequently absent from the capital. Belshazzar and his guests at the banquet were startled when fingers appeared and began to write on a wall ([Daniel 5](#)). Daniel was finally called to interpret the message. The last part of Daniel’s message was that the kingdom was given over to the Medes and Persians—that night! Babylon had been considered impregnable, and a large food supply was always maintained in case there was a siege.

The Babylonian Empire came to an end following its capture by the Persians and Medes under Cyrus. Cyrus the Great established the Persian Empire, which lasted about 200 years. The famous Cyrus Cylinder contains the decree that all captive peoples could return to their homelands and that they were to take their gods with them. The Jewish people were not specifically mentioned in Cyrus’s own edict, though his attention to Jerusalem is recorded in the Bible ([2 Chronicles 36:23](#); [Ezra 1:2–3](#)). The biblical account later refers to a separate proclamation that was made for them, and it became very important in the days of Darius the Great when opposition arose to the building of the temple ([6:2–3](#)). The Jews did not have gods to take, but they did have many items from the temple ([1:6–11](#)).

The first wave of exiles returned in 538 BC. It is assumed that the 50,000 people who returned first went to Jerusalem. Then they scattered to find their ancestral homes throughout Judah, as stated in [Ezra 2:1](#).

C. Lesson Context: Literary

The previous lesson ended with [Isaiah 49:13](#), and great joy was predicted to be expressed (compare [51:3](#)). Gentiles in all directions would rejoice as the Lord comforted his people. Five verses later is where this study begins.

Isaiah prophesied that a virgin would conceive and bear a son ([Isaiah 7:14](#)). That passage is

cited in [Matthew 1:22–23](#) as fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. The fulfillment was 700 years away. That same child would grow up to fulfill many other prophecies of Isaiah, not least the prophetic expectations linked to a person referred to as the suffering servant. Our text comes from the second Servant Song, the same discussed last week (see [lesson 2 Lesson Context](#)). The servant is the one who is the speaker for the text of this lesson. The servant is understood to be the Son of God. Some have suggested that the speaker is Isaiah, but the context indicates that the speaker is more than a prophet.

The mood changed from exuberance ([Isaiah 49:1–13](#); see [lesson 2](#)) to a lamentation that the Lord had forgotten his people and Jerusalem. It is easy to imagine Jerusalem stating that God had forgotten the city and the people (see [lesson 1 Lesson Context](#)). Metaphorically, Jerusalem sat in the dust wearing torn clothes or sackcloth and ashes, head bowed with sorrow and hopelessness (compare [Lamentations 2:10](#)).

The Lord asked rhetorically whether a woman can forget the child she gave birth to and nursed ([Isaiah 49:15](#)). Though an unhealthy mother might forget that child, even a mediocre mother cannot. In the same way, the Lord could not forget the people or Zion. To show his attention he assured Zion that the ones who had mistreated his people by taking them away were leaving. This provided opportunity for God’s children to hurry to return ([49:14–17](#)).

God had promised a return, and he also said that Jerusalem and the cities of Judah would be rebuilt ([Isaiah 44:26](#)). At least some of the people in captivity were aware of the passages in Isaiah about a deliverer named Cyrus, and that the captivity would last about 70 years ([Jeremiah 25:12](#); [29:10](#)). It is definite that Daniel was aware of the prophecy of Jeremiah ([Daniel 9:2](#)).

I. Promise of Restoration

(ISAIAH 49:18–21)

A. Ornamentation (vv. 18–20)

18a. “Lift up your eyes and look around; all your children gather and come to you.

The command to *lift up your eyes* is a call to a new posture, one of hope rather than desperation. Upon obeying the command, Lady Zion would *look around* and see to her *children* ([Isaiah 49:17](#), not in our printed text) returning to her.



Visual for [Lesson 3](#). Have learners pair up while discussing verse 20 and each take one minute to share a time when God has restored their joy.

18b. “As surely as I live,” declares the LORD, “you will wear them all as ornaments; you will put them on, like a bride.

Once again the image is one of extreme reversal. In contrast to the mourning clothing Zion had been wearing (see [Lesson Context](#)), *the Lord* promised that she would have reason to dress *like a bride* (compare [Jeremiah 2:32](#)). Brides then as now dressed to impress. In the modern Western world, it’s easy to forget how important marriage was in the ancient world. This was not the result of two independent adults choosing to pledge themselves to one another. Women had very little opportunity to care for themselves economically and usually left their father’s home *only* when they married. Their wedding day marked the day their economic fortune became their husband’s concern, not their father’s. It was also the day they could begin trying to fulfill one of the, if not *the*, most important roles for women: becoming a mother and raising her children. The end of a marriage—whether in divorce or widowhood—was a grave hardship on a woman, especially if her children were not grown

and in a position to care for her.

Dressing as a bride, then, is another analogy for turning toward joy instead of sorrow (compare [Jeremiah 33:11](#)). The appropriate “attire” for a bridal city is a thriving human population. Those who returned would be Zion’s ornamentation, the source and sign of her new-found joy.

What Do You Think?

What insight can embracing our shared identity as God’s “bride” give us regarding how to remain faithful to him?

Digging Deeper

What are some cultural expectations of brides that can serve as a warning?

19a. “Though you were ruined and made desolate and your land laid waste, now you will be too small for your people,

The people who returned would find desolation and ruins. Zion would be plowed, and Jerusalem would become heaps ([Micah 3:12](#)). The image of *waste* encourages the reader to think of the utter destruction of not only Jerusalem but all the *land*. Once-cultivated fields would be wild and overgrown, having reverted to their own natural state. Stones that had been walls would be strewn within and without the city limits (compare [Nehemiah 4:2](#)). The population would have dwindled to the point that the whole land was *desolate*.

Further evidence of the reversal of fortune would be in regard to the land that had been suffering with too few people. But the happy issue would instead be that the land was *too small* for all those who would return. Rather than emphasizing the current scarcity of the land, the prophecy instead focuses on its future when it will teem with life, be revitalized, and experience all the joys and thriving of human life within its borders.

What Do You Think?

How would you encourage someone who is going through a time of spiritual darkness?

Digging Deeper

What Scriptures speak to the sound wisdom of hoping in the Lord?

19b. “and those who devoured you will be far away.

The city and the returned exiles were assured that *those who devoured you*, the Babylonians, would *be far away* and thus unable to cause them further pain and terror. Even more important than actual geographical distance was to be the absolute loss of power Babylon experienced, positioning it as far as could be from causing any more sorrow in Judah.

DESOLATION AND RUIN

We who live in the western United States are feeling the growing threat of wildfires. Wilderness areas are most in danger, but wildfires often blow into inhabited areas, destroying towns and cities in the process. We have our “go bags” packed with irreplaceable possessions—family pictures, computers and backups with data that can’t be replaced, and the clothes we would need while displaced and awaiting the “you can go home now” announcement.

Following fires in residential areas, homeowners return to find widespread devastation, with whole communities reduced to a wasteland of ash and twisted metal. Rebuilding can take months or years, and sometimes the destruction is so complete that a community is simply abandoned. Those who do rebuild feel the happiness of restoration but do not forget the terror and grief of losing their homes.

The Jews returning to ruined Jerusalem must have felt similarly when they got the “you can go home now” news. But the Judeans could trust in God’s help in rebuilding Jerusalem. How does your faith help you when events in life destroy what you have built?

—C. R. B.

20. “The children born during your bereavement will yet say in your hearing, ‘This place is too small for us; give us more space to live in.’

The growth in the Jewish population during the captivity was significant. It is reminiscent of the growth that the Hebrews experienced when they were in bondage in Egypt for 430 years ([Exodus 12:40–41](#)). They went into Egypt as 70 people ([Genesis 46:26–27](#)); as the family of Jacob, and they left as a nation of about 600,000 men ([Exodus 12:37](#)), or more than two million people.

The ones who return to Zion are portrayed as her *children*. In the short term, these are primarily a new generation born in exile. Though some elders would return, many other returning exiles had never seen Jerusalem in its heyday, when the temple was standing ([Ezra 3:10–13](#)). As in Egypt, the population of the people expanded so that the land was *too small* to contain them all ([Exodus 1:6–7](#)). But unlike then, the people would not be oppressed because of their flourishing ([1:8–14](#)).

Although the temple would be rebuilt in Jerusalem ([Ezra 6:12–18](#)), the exiles in Babylon were dedicated to maintaining their faith while far from their center of worship. And some exiles stayed in Babylon, even after the way was opened to return to Judah. This paved the way for the rise of synagogues and religious leaders called rabbis. Jews scattered throughout the Mediterranean region during the second temple period (around 538 BC–AD 70), taking their faith with them. That Diaspora (“dispersing”) resulted in more territory experiencing Jewish influence (example: [Acts 2:9–11](#)).

This became highly important in the long term, when Gentiles would be welcomed into God’s family, regardless of religious or ethnic background or their geographical relationship to Jerusalem. The *place* where Zion’s children could *live* would turn out to be throughout the world, to its most remote locations ([Revelation 15:4](#)).

What Do You Think?

How might [Isaiah 49:20](#) encourage a church that appears to be declining?

Digging Deeper

What measures beyond numerical growth are important in order to gauge the spiritual health of a congregation?

B. Disorientation (v. 21)

21. “Then you will say in your heart, ‘Who bore me these? I was bereaved and barren; I was exiled and rejected. Who brought these up? I was left all alone, but these—where have they come from?’ ”

The change of fortune promised to Zion is so extreme that she will experience extreme disorientation when hearing it. Her reaction is not described as disbelieving exactly but incredulous or bewildered, afraid to hope that this can be true. Zion will have lost her children and become *bereaved and barren; ... exiled and rejected*, without a safe home to settle into. She will not be aware that any of her children had survived. Her experience would soon be that of Babylon, who had brought all this evil on Zion; Babylon would experience widowhood and the loss of her children in one day ([Isaiah 47:10–11](#); see [lesson 1](#)).

What Do You Think?

Is being surprised by God’s blessing a faithful reaction? Why or why not?

Digging Deeper

How would you encourage a friend who struggles to accept God’s blessings?

II. Explanation of Restoration

([ISAIAH 49:22–23](#))

A. Foreigners Called (vv. 22–23a)

22a. This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “See, I will beckon to the nations, I will lift up my banner to the peoples;

Zion is once again called to *see* (see [Isaiah 49:18](#), above). God’s beckoning *to the nations* and

lifting up his banner to the peoples reveals that God will use foreign nations to accomplish his will for Zion. It could also be that God was warning any people who would stand against his people. Language like lifting God's hand and setting up his standard is used throughout Isaiah to emphasize how the Lord chose to communicate with foreigners to draw them to him and to his will (Isaiah 5:26; 11:12; 18:3; etc.). We might think of the Magis' reading the sky to learn of Jesus' birth and where to go to praise him as an example of this (Matthew 2:1–2).

22b. “they will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their hips.

The Gentiles will provide help for the *sons* and *daughters* who make the return trip to Judah (Ezra 1:7–11; Nehemiah 2:8–9). The image is of parental care, unexpected from foreign nations but in keeping with what God required of them. The exiles would not be kicked out of their exilic homes and left defenseless to fend for themselves.

23a. “Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground; they will lick the dust at your feet.

The image here is one of both care and humility. Being provided for by *kings* and *queens* as *foster* parents reveals how important the people are to God—that the most powerful royals are to be called to nurture them. It also suggests the abundance of worldly resources that God will muster for the sake of his people. The image might remind us of how the daughter of Pharaoh cared for Moses (Exodus 2:1–10).

Darius, as well as Cyrus, arranged for several types of provisions for the Jews to be supplied from the royal revenues collected in that area (Ezra 6:8–10). This would have been about 520 BC. Later, Artaxerxes and his seven counselors gave silver and gold to the people who returned with Ezra in 458 BC (7:14–15).

The language of Gentiles being in submission points to the future when people from all nations will acknowledge that the God of Israel is the only God. Although in the past powerful people had set themselves up as gods, those who heed God's call will humble themselves to him and be glad to serve his people.

B. Hopeful, Not Shamed (v. 23b)

23b. “Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed.”

The phrase *you will know that I am the Lord* is used frequently in the book of Ezekiel (6:7; 7:4, 9; 11:10; etc.). Knowing starts with accepting the facts but requires much more. Then as now, knowing the Lord requires obeying him, first of all by rejecting all others who claim the same status (Exodus 6:2; Isaiah 42:8; etc.). Following closely after this is living in accordance with God's revealed laws, not choosing for ourselves what seems good or simply justifiable

([Psalm 22:23](#); etc.). And although knowing the Lord requires faith, he also supplies plenty of evidence to give us confidence in who he is.

Waiting on the Lord is rarely easy, but it is *always* worthwhile (examples: [Psalm 130:5–8](#); [Luke 2:25–32, 36–38](#)). Though his good plans may not be revealed in our lifetimes, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” ([Romans 8:28](#)). Between his past deeds, his demonstrated faithfulness to his promises, and his assurances regarding our future with him, we have every reason to *hope* patiently and know that he will vindicate our faith ([8:24, 38–39](#)).

NUMBLE PIE

Back in the 1300s, *numbles* was the term for the heart, liver, and entrails of an animal. These were fed to servants and the lower class, usually in a savory pie to make the servings go further. In time, *numbles* became *umbles*, a word that has a different etymology from *humble*. But the similar sound of the words and the fact that umble pie was eaten by those of humble station in life probably accounts for the shift.

Over the centuries, the phrase has become a figure of speech; eating humble pie today describes a person having to publicly admit to some past wrongdoing or failure. Isaiah might have described the Gentiles’ predicament similarly. After all, they offered assistance to the Jews as they returned to Jerusalem.

Whether current society should try to atone for the sins of past generations is a bigger issue than any of us can resolve by ourselves. But perhaps there are ways to say our ancestors were wrong. How do you think it should be done?

—C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. Change of Address

Jesus’ coming results in a change of fortune: though we were condemned, we are now promised eternal life when we choose to follow him as our Lord and Savior ([Romans 8:1–2](#)). And this change of fortune results in a change of identity: we who were once far away are now part of God’s family ([8:14–17](#); [Ephesians 2:13](#)). Essentially our address has changed from being in this world to residing in the kingdom of Heaven ([John 3:3–5](#); [Acts 28:31](#); [Revelation 12:10–12](#)).

This Servant Song is one of great hope for Israel and all others. Though Isaiah’s audience couldn’t know, the redemption promised here goes well beyond an end to exile in Babylon. It encompasses an end to exile *in sin*. Through Jesus we have abundant life; he can be trusted

with *all* our needs.

What Do You Think?

What in today's lesson encouraged you? How will you share that encouragement?

Digging Deeper

What challenged you? How will you meet that challenge in the week ahead?

B. Prayer

Almighty God, we are thankful for the promises that you made to your people. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Wait for the Lord,
who does not disappoint.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Begin class by inviting pairs to share a personal experience involving a reunion or homecoming event they attended. Have them respond to the following questions: 1–What emotions did you have when you saw all the people who came together? 2–What memories did the gathering bring up for you? 3–What evidence of change did you see in the group since the last time you were together? After a few minutes, ask volunteer pairs to share what their partners told them.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Bedtime Story” exercise from the activity page, which you can download, to be completed as directed alone or in pairs. Bring the class together and allow volunteers to read their completed stories before discussing the questions together as a class.

After either activity say, “In today's lesson we'll explore the promises God made to his people and how they responded.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read [Isaiah 49:18–21](#). Divide the whole group into small groups (or pairs). Give each pair a Scripture reference from this list: [Genesis 15:1–6](#); [Genesis 37:2–8](#); [Exodus 3:1–10](#); [1 Kings 5:1–11](#); [Jeremiah 29:10–14](#); [Matthew 16:15–19](#); [Luke 1:26–38](#); [Acts 9:10–16](#). *Option.* Allow all the pairs to review as many of these citations as possible in a certain amount of time.

Ask partners or groups to read their passage(s) and discuss: 1–What promise was made or assurance given? 2–Why did fulfillment seem impossible to those involved? 3–How did God fulfill his promise?

Ask a volunteer to read [Isaiah 49:22–23](#). Hand out blank paper to the pairs. Ask the learners to look back through the passages above and identify at least one thing that the people would see or experience that could remind them that God is the Lord. Ask the pairs to sketch an image that stood out to them in particular from [Isaiah 49:18–23](#). *Option.* Assure participants that their sketches will not be shared with the class unless they so volunteer. Have the pairs write down the significance of the image they chose before asking volunteers to discuss the images they sketched and talked about.

Ask the whole group to discuss: 1–How do the things mentioned in this passage help people know that God is Lord? 2–Why is it important to God that his people know that he is the Lord? Allow time for several participants to respond.

Into Life

If you used the first activity in the Into the Lesson section, bring the original pairs back together. Ask them to discuss what evidence of the Lord’s faithfulness and redemption they saw in the reunion they described. If none, ask them to imagine how the experience would have been different if God’s work had been more evident in that gathering. Allow volunteers to share with the class.

Alternative. Read aloud the following statement from the last verse of the text: “Those who hope in me will not be disappointed.” Then hand out copies of the “Waiting and Hoping” exercise from the activity page. Allow individuals one minute to jot down answers before they pair up to discuss their answers together. Invite participants to share these responses with a partner, and then pray for each other.

Encourage partners to consider and discuss ways they can share this testimony with others this week. Ask each learner to note any time they share their faith and how their testimony helped them connect with the person they were speaking to. End class with a prayer that each person would seek ways to testify to God’s gracious promise keeping this week and

be renewed in their own hope in his promises.