

Isaiah 48

New things demand faith

1. Introduction

The second section of Isaiah, Chapter 40-66, consists mainly of a proclamation of the coming salvation for the people of God. Not without reason this section is often called the book of comfort.

But the words of Chapter 48 do not exactly sound comforting. Instead, God comes with some serious accusations against his people. They are stiff-necked and unbelieving; they refuse to acknowledge God as their Redeemer. And God has to exert himself to make them understand his words.

He points to prophecies of old: all God's promises in the past have come to pass. If Israel would stop to think about this, would they not acknowledge God? Now God is proclaiming new things but does God's promise meet with faith?

This is something we too have to remember. What do we expect from God? Are we strengthened on our way when we consider the long road God has travelled with his people thus far?

2. General remarks

1. God points to himself

It is remarkable in Chapter 48 how often God points to himself. God demands to be acknowledged by his people. He does not want the praise due to him to go to someone else. What he has done should not be attributed to the idols. He is the Redeemer of his people and no one else.

It also becomes clear that Israel cannot take the credit for their deliverance. In fact, Israel has forfeited everything because of their unfaithfulness. But also here the name of God is at stake. God defends his reputation: the ultimate reason for salvation which God brings about, is not the people themselves, but the name of God which must be glorified.

God's work of deliverance demands a song of praise to the glory of God's name. Therefore the chapter concludes with a call to profess the name of God with exaltation. The honour of God is at stake.

2. New things

In 48:6 the LORD proclaims "new things" to come. This proclamation of new things to come is an important theme in the second part of Isaiah's prophecies.

God is going to do something entirely new for his people. He will do something that is unheard of; something that goes beyond all expectation, his work in the future will be a great surprise.

This new thing that God is going to do has been mentioned in Chapter 42:9 as well as in 43:19. In contrast to the judgement that God caused to come over his people, deliverance beyond all human expectation is now at hand. But it is also in contrast with God's earlier deeds of salvation: the new thing

that is coming surpasses the old in glory. In the end of Isaiah we read about the new heaven and the new earth God will create (65:17; 66:22).

The new things that God will bring about are the theme for the second section of Isaiah's book, even if the word "new" itself is not used. The messenger of good tidings heralds God who is coming to deliver his people (40:9-11; 52:7). God announces what is to come (41:21-29). God raises up Cyrus; he call s him to life (see chapter 5 of these outlines).

These "new things" mean salvation for God's people. But what really is this new thing all about? It refers to a chain of events in salvation that God will carry out. First of all we can think of the appearance of Cyrus and in connection to that, the deliverance from exile. But the coming of the Servant of the LORD (see chapter 3 of these outlines) also belongs to this new thing. Chapter 42:9 alludes to this new thing in connection with the work of the Servant as well as the coming of the new heaven and the new earth. Ultimately it means that God will bring eternal salvation for his people. God will make all things new (Revelation 21:5). Isaiah's preaching is meant to arouse great expectation among God's people: God's work of salvation in the coming ages will be amazing.

It becomes evident that through the judgement of the exile, God has to make his people receptive for the new thing that is to come, because they are a stubborn people. But in contrast to this judgement, the new things will be all the more glorious.

3. Cyrus or the Messiah

Two figures present themselves throughout the second part of Isaiah. Both have the task to deliver God's people. Repeatedly we hear about Cyrus who allows God's people to return from exile. But repeatedly our attention is also drawn to the Servant of the LORD, the Messiah, who will come to save God's people. It is not always clear which of the two is meant. This is also the case in Chapter 48. Verse 14-15 refers to Cyrus, but according to some, verse 16 may also refer to the Servant about whom Chapter 49 speaks extensively.

Both Cyrus and the Messiah have their own place in the salvation God wants to grant his people.

Therefore we cannot and should not always make a distinction, and definitely not a contrast, between these two. The deliverance from exile, for which God used Cyrus, is not independent from the rest of history. The national and political restoration of Israel is not the important thing. The main thing is that God reaches his goal for his people. Cyrus may pave the way for the fulfillment of God's promises. His work is subject to the work of the great Redeemer who is coming.

The words of the prophets often are obscure. They "searched intently and with the greatest care" for the grace that was to come (1 Peter 1:10). In light of the fulfillment, we see all the more clearly how wonderfully the parts of God's plan of salvation fit together.

3. Annotations to the text

Verse 1-2

God exhorts his people to listen: "Listen to this, O house of Jacob". These first words already have a tone of reproach: Now you listen to me! This exhortation sets the tone for the rest of the chapter. God

wants to make clear to his people who have little faith, what they can expect from him.

For this people has a good testimonial: they call themselves “by the name of Israel”; they “come from the line of Judah”; they often “take oaths in the name of the LORD”; they call themselves “citizens of the holy city” Jerusalem; they rely on their God and call him “the LORD Almighty”. But their faith does not have any depth. It does not go much deeper than external piety. Actually the people do not really trust their almighty God. They do not expect salvation from him anymore, which becomes apparent in what follows.

Verse 3-6a

The LORD himself speaks now. These verses serve to prepare them for what follows. The LORD points out to Israel all the things that have happened in the past. It had been foretold and has come to pass. Israel has to be honest enough to admit this. What has been foretold and come to pass requires faith for the future.

We are not told exactly what “the former things” are. We should probably think of salvation, of redemption given by God in former times. God mentions these former things in order to arouse Israel’s expectation of new works of salvation by God.

In former days God purposely announced things beforehand. He knew his people; he knew they were brazen enough to attribute God’s work to the idols. The neck as iron sinews and the forehead of bronze refer to the stubbornness and the impudent unbelief of Israel. Now that God has emphatically pointed to himself as the One who would do these things, the people have no choice but to acknowledge the LORD.

As so often in this part of Isaiah, there is the central theme that God does not tolerate competition. Idols are dumb pieces of stone or metal. It is in vain to set your hope on them (see also Outline 4).

Verse 6b-8

Now that God has proclaimed the coming of “new things”, he also expects that his people will trust him for the future. These “new things” speak of the future redemption. This brings to mind the work of Cyrus, but also of the Servant (see Section 2).

Up to now these new things were “hidden things”. God has waited to reveal them until this moment. He had reasons for this. Israel should not become too complacent and think: surely the LORD will rescue us again. God’s people were already unfaithful and stubborn, which had become apparent in the years past. Verse 8 tells us that they did not listen to God but were unfaithful and disobedient ever since childhood.

This people may not take God’s deliverance for granted. God brings his people in dire straits. Who will help them now? And then God finally makes known that he himself will rescue his people again.

God’s judgement and the following proclamation of salvation, which was beyond all expectation, are meant to bring the people back to faith, to acknowledge God. Not: “Yes, I knew of them” (v.7), but “How gracious a God we have from whom we may still expect this!”

Verse 9-11

The fact that God is still willing to save is not due to the people themselves. God was entirely justified in cutting them off, because of the many transgressions and their unfaithfulness. It is for his own honour that he does not do this. The people have to be well aware of this: they have absolutely no right to God's mercy anymore. They deserved the judgement, because of the many transgressions against the covenant. Their existence is only due to the fact that God defends his own honour. The fact that God is still willing to continue with his people shows even more the glory of his name. Also here God says: "I will not yield my glory to another". God's name is at stake; therefore his people continue to exist. If God would let his people perish in exile, all nations would think that God was no match for the gods of Babylon.

The gods of Babylon may not gain the victory. Note how Isaiah in Chapter 46 ridicules the impotence of the Babylonian gods. Through the restoration of God's people, God's omnipotence will become visible to the entire world.

It does not mean, however, that God spares his people, but the punishment will purify them. The "furnace of affliction" may refer to the exile. It is difficult to explain the meaning of: "I have refined you, though not as silver". It could mean that the process of purification was unsuccessful.

When silver is put in the furnace, it is easy to remove the impure particles. What is left is pure silver. It is possible that despite the afflictions Israel did not repent sufficiently. It is also possible that the process of purification that the people had to go through could not be compared with that of silver. In that case, it is not mentioned what it could be compared to.

Verse 12-13

Verse 12 is the beginning of the second part of Chapter 48. The tone in the first part is especially reproachful: the stubborn people should trust in God. In the second part the tone is more persuasive: God points to himself and to the salvation that he will bring about in order to make his people believe.

God calls his people by the name of "Jacob" and "Israel". God calls to mind the distant past. Israel has been God's people for such a long time. God himself called them, and he will not let go of them. After many years of unfaithfulness on the part of the people, God still continues. He continues to claim them as his own, he keeps appealing to them.

God summons them to listen to him, and in doing so he expressly points to himself. He is always the same. He remains true to himself and to his Word. He is "the first", the Creator of heaven and earth, but he also is "the last" (cf. Revelation 1:17). Even now God is present with his almighty power. Also the "new things" are from his hand. In these chapters of Isaiah we are repeatedly reminded of the works of creation, in order to awaken in us the confidence that God also governs history.

Verse 14-16a

In these verses the call to listen is repeated. The LORD tells the people to come near to him. He does not hide what is going to happen. And when it happens, it will be his work; he will be there (v.16a). Israel will not be able to deny any longer that it is God who is at work here (cf. the notes with verse 3-6a).

This announcement of the LORD refers to the work of Cyrus (see Outline 5, particularly Section 3.7). Cyrus is the instrument in God's hand to bring about the ruin of Babylon and the Chaldeans. In this prophecy the downfall of Babylon is described as a fact, even though it still has to happen.

Cyrus is presented here as "the LORD's chosen ally". The fact that the LORD has chosen Cyrus as an ally does not imply that the LORD is pleased with all that Cyrus is doing. It means that the LORD has chosen this Cyrus as his instrument and that he makes his way prosper. With no great effort Cyrus gains power over the Babylonian empire.

Verse 16b-19

Verse 16b speaks in the first person singular. The question is who is speaking here. Some think it is Cyrus, of whom the previous verses speak, but it could also be the Servant of the LORD. This Servant has received the Spirit (see Isaiah 42:1; perhaps Isaiah 61:1 is also speaking of this Servant).

Yet it probably is the prophet himself, who points out that the LORD who enabled him by his Spirit to do his work sent him. This prophet speaks in the name of God: "This is what the LORD says". We do not find this expression in the passages that deal with the Servant of the LORD, but the prophets commonly use it.

In the previous passage God announced the deliverance by Cyrus, but here it becomes clear that this deliverance does not merely pertain to the national and political restoration of Israel, but also and especially to their spiritual restoration. The people have to learn again to walk in the ways of him who is the Holy One of Israel and who claims his people for himself again. Only an obedient people can receive God's blessing. But Israel has been the unfaithful party for years in the covenant that God had made with Abraham.

They are also reminded here that the promises God gave to Abraham are still valid: God made an eternal covenant with him; he promised to make him exceedingly fruitful and numerous like the sand on the seashore (see Genesis 17:1-7; 22:16-17). These promises remain, as long as the people will walk in the ways of the LORD. The prophet exhorts them to do just that: let the exile not have been in vain, but return to the LORD; then you shall be richly blessed. Peace and justice shall reign again. The people will again become numerous as the sand on the seashore. This is an incredible promise for a nation that was almost wiped off the face of the earth and was only a small ethnic minority in the Babylonian empire.

Verse 20-22

God rescues his people from Babylon, but now they must be willing to leave. That is what the prophet is urging them to do: "Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians!" There was an inherent danger that the Israelites, who already expected so little from their God, did not even want to leave Babylon. They might not even see God's work of redemption as an invitation to be rescued.

Isaiah points out how marvellous this salvation is by putting a song of praise on the people's lips. The entire world must hear the praise for God's salvation of his people. The name of God has to be glorified (cf. the notes with verse 9-11).

This song of praise compares the exodus from Babylon with the exodus from Egypt ages ago. That means quite something. The exodus out of Egypt was regarded as the climax in the history of Israel, but this new deliverance equals the first exodus. Also now God's people may depend on his marvellous care. As God, in ages past, gave water from the rock (Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:7-11), so now he is able to provide his people with everything they need.

Chapter 48 ends with the words: "There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked." How does this verse, which seems a somewhat strange conclusion, fit in with the previous verses? In Isaiah 57:21 we find almost exactly the same words. On account of both verses, the second part of Isaiah is sometimes divided into three sections of nine chapters each. However, when we look at the contents, this division has little merit.

We may take these words as an admonition by the prophet, who is now speaking himself again. Despite the fact that God is going to save them, the wicked in Israel still cannot expect their way to prosper. Thus this chapter concludes with a serious warning.

4. Application for today

In Chapter 48 God strongly appeals to his people. He knows from experience that Israel is a stubborn and stiff-necked people, yet the LORD urges them to return to him in faith.

There is every reason to trust: has not the LORD shown them often enough in the past what he can do for his people? The salvation which God gave in the past should also give them confidence for the future. Considering the circumstance of their exile, there was, humanly speaking, little reason for optimism. Israel would never be able to restore itself. But since when does the continuity of God's people depend on human strength and resourcefulness? Was the future not equally dismal for God's people in Egypt? And did the LORD not rescue them with a great show of might at that time? Would he not be able to do that again? When human paths come to a dead end, is it not the LORD who breaks open the way to the future again? There will be a return from the exile. Not by the people themselves for they are completely dependent on God's salvation. Throughout the book of Isaiah it becomes more and more clear that God gives redemption through his Servant, and because of this Servant salvation will be accomplished. Ultimately the fullness of God's kingdom is meant for God's people. God's work of salvation exceeds all human expectations. We see new things that no man could have imagined, but God gives them. Throughout the ages God's people have the privilege to live in the brilliant light of God's glory.

God's salvation remains amazing and refreshing and invigorating. This calls for faith and trust, also today. Do we not have every reason to trust God? He has proven his love in the gift of his Son; will he not graciously give all things with Christ (Romans 8:32)? The more we see God's work of salvation in the past, the more reason we have to believe in God also for the future.

The question is how much room we still have for that faith. Do we still expect anything from God? Or have we actually done away with him?

Maybe we are so caught up in our personal little lives that we don't have an eye for the future that God has in store for us. Then we are just like the Israelites, who forget to leave although the exile has come

to an end, and the gospel of our salvation leaves us neither hot nor cold.

Perhaps we see problems everywhere. Problems for the future of the church and for the coming generations. Problems because of increasing secularization. Problems because more and more questions arise about topics that never needed to be discussed among us before, such as the dividing lines between churches, the authority of God's Word, marriage or living common-law, the offices in the church, etc. Maybe all these problems make us gloomy and cause us to think that there is no future for God's people. On the other hand, perhaps we think that an innovative and active attitude is the answer to solve the problems. But in both instances we first think of ourselves, of our own possibilities or impossibilities. However, we will have to look to God in the first place, for he is the one who keeps gathering and defending his people. The fact that he has been paving the way for his people for such a long time already, should be enough reason for us to put our trust in him for the rest of the way. The first thing his people have to do is to continue in obedience and in full confidence, on the path the LORD has set out for them in his Word. We may and must expect many things yet from the LORD. The new things have not yet been exhausted. There is a future for those who believe, there is perspective for a church that remains faithful. God prepares a way through a desert full of problems from within and without. We may never think small of this God. Do we still trust sufficiently and do we still expect enough?

Do God's new things still awaken in us a great expectation?

5. Suggestions for the introduction and preparatory study

1. Discuss the theme of the "new things" in Isaiah 40-66. Use a concordance to pay attention to the use of words like *new*, *to raise up*, *future*, and so on. The *new things* deal with the entire work of redemption by God; therefore check the use of the word *new* in the New Testament also.
2. Note how Isaiah 46 and 47 speak about the fall of Babylon. With respect to this, look at Revelation 17-19 about the judgement on Babylon and the salvation of God's people.
3. Compare the similarities and the differences between the exodus from Egypt and the return from exile in Babylon.

6. Ideas for the discussion

1. We often hear: the doctrine of the church is all right. Is there not a great danger that in theory our ecclesiastical documents are sound, but that we lack greatly in trusting in the LORD? Is it not true that our Confessions often function only as a theory, while we do not always heartily agree with the contents?
2. How does God's work in the history of salvation and the history of the church influence our faith? Do we often not fail to meditate on God's deeds in the past? What could we do to correct this? (Cf. Joshua 4:20-24; Psalm 78:1-8.)
3. Through the judgement of the exile Israel had to be made receptive for the salvation God still wanted to give his people. Can you point out if Israel indeed was receptive?

4. God also has many promises yet for us. Are we receptive for what God is ready to give to us? What could we do to make ourselves more receptive?
5. The existence of God's people is not the work of man. Do we not put our trust too much in human activity? May we and can we find a solution to all the problems (think for example of the division of churches)? Or should we wait till the LORD gives a solution? What should be the relation between God's care and our activity?
6. May we simply trust that there is a future for a church that is living in obedience to God?
7. God's name is glorified in the continued existence of his people. Are we not often obstructing the glory of God's name?
8. Isaiah exhorts Israel to proclaim God's great deeds worldwide. What should the church do today in order to make God's greatness known to the world?
9. The "new things" call for new songs (v.20). In view of this, do we have enough hymns in the church that proclaim the glory of the new facts of salvation?

Herman Pieter Dam