

Introduction

The quotation in 2 Corinthians 6:2 is from Isaiah 49:8. It is crucial for us to understand the meaning of the original context before we can dig into the passage before us in 2 Corinthians. Thus we start with Isaiah.

I. The Old Testament Passage: Isaiah 49:8

Isaiah 49:8 – Thus says the LORD: “In an acceptable time I have heard You; And in the day of salvation I have helped you; I will preserve You and give You as a covenant to the people, To restore the earth, To cause them to inherit the desolate heritages.”

1. What is the Overview of the Passage?

- A. God’s Call of the Servant, 1-2
- B. God’s Commission of the Servant, 3-6
- C. God’s Deliverance of the Servant, 7-8
- D. God’s Blessing on Israel Through the Servant, 9-13
- E. God’s Blessing Ensured Despite Zion’s Charge of Forgetfulness, 14-21
- F. God’s Promise that the Nations Will Bless Israel, 22-26

2. Who is the Audience?

Jews and Gentiles

Verse 1 tells us that the coastlands and people far off are to listen to this prophecy. Obviously the nation of Israel should hear this message as well since it deals so much with them and the blessings that they will receive. In fact, we know Israel *is* listening because in verse 14 they reply that they feel God has forsaken them.

3. Who is the Servant?

The Messiah

Isaiah 49:3 might seem to suggest that the Servant is the entire nation of Israel because it says “My servant, O Israel.” But 49:5-7 show clearly that this is not the case because the Servant brings Jacob and Israel back to God; He is glorious, He is sent to the Gentiles as a light; and He is despised by man and by the nation of Israel. None of these things could be true of the entire nation. So verse 3 has to be interpreted in light of that, namely that the Messiah is the Servant who stands in the place of Jacob and the nation (Israel). God’s chosen nation produced a chosen Son in Whom God was *really* pleased, unlike the nation as a whole which rejected God and with whom He could not ultimately be pleased.

4. What is the Servant’s Role?

- A. To carry a penetrating message, as indicated by the figures of the sharp sword and arrow (v. 2). This sounds like the Word of God in Heb. 4:12, doesn’t it?
- B. To glorify God (v. 3).
- C. To be rejected (v. 4a). Here the Servant proclaims his discouragement at his labor which brought rejection by the nation of Israel instead of fruit.
- D. To hope in God (v. 4b). Here the Servant reaffirms His hope in God that He will be rewarded according to His perfect work.
- E. To bring Israel back to God and to the land (v. 5).
- F. To bring the Gentiles to God through salvation (v. 6). The Servant’s work with Israel was considered too small a job, given the Servant’s greatness. So God gives him another task to save the Gentiles also. The apostle Paul and Barnabas quoted this verse as support for their charge from God to go to the Gentiles when the Jews rejected them (Acts 13:46-47). What a blessing that Christ was given as a light to the Gentiles, and we can be light-bearers, participating in that prophesied work as His ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20).

- G. To be glorified among the nations (v. 7). The Servant’s work would be a good success (not in vain) among the Gentiles. God appointed the Servant to this glory, particularly speaking of the millennial kingdom glory.
- H. Though the Servant was rejected (v. 4a), despised, and abhorred (v. 7), God promised to hear and help the Servant in the midst of His work, and cause Him to be preserved. The first two phrases of v. 8 emphasize each other. The acceptable time and day of salvation are referring to the same period.
- I. The Servant’s preservation would allow Him to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant – allowing Israel to inherit the land and experience all the blessings promised under the covenant program, including the New Covenant (v. 8b).

5. What is the Acceptable Time and Day of Salvation?

Several interpretations are offered in answer to this question. Some say it is a reference to the Jubilee year; some a reference to the return from the Babylonian exile; or some a reference to the millennial kingdom.

But it seems to me that the Servant, who is being addressed here, got the help in the midst of his ministry at the first advent, when he was despised and rejected. He did not come in Isaiah’s day so the help was not in the past, and in the kingdom he is the glorious, conquering ruler of all, hardly in need of help in the future in the sense that is conveyed here. He was preserved through the difficulties of his ministry and death. Through resurrection, he would see another day, a day in which He would become the fulfillment of Israel’s covenants. The Lord always committed his life to the Father, especially at the cross where he prayed to the Father, “Into your hands I commit My spirit.” God the Father answered these prayers and preserved the Servant.

The similarity of the “acceptable year” in Isaiah 61:2 and the Lord’s use of it to refer to the age in which his ministry commenced at the first advent (Luke 4:16-21) shows also that this does not refer to a point in time nor a 24-hour day, but a longer “period” or “age” of salvation introduced by the Lord’s first coming. We are still in that “day” today.

In this particular time period, God heard and helped the Servant by preserving Him in the midst of persecution from (what we now know to be) the Jewish leaders, the people of Israel, the Roman government, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Roman soldiers, etc.

6. Application

From this verse we can see that the Lord promises to preserve the Servant-Messiah and cause Him to fulfill the covenant with Israel. We can also draw out the principle that the Lord **hears** and **helps** those who call upon him. He does this during the time of his favor and the day of salvation.

II. The New Testament Passage: 2 Corinthians 6:1-2

1. The Plea for Grace-Operative Lives, v. 1

The phrase “workers together” causes us to think for a moment – together with whom? Well, with God, as the previous verses indicate. We are ambassadors and God is speaking through us, Paul says, so he sees himself as working together with God (1 Cor. 3:9). Again we can marvel at the privilege and the responsibility.

There is an additional idea here—since we are such workers, we beseech you with the authority and urgency of heaven. Our pleading can be properly interpreted to be God’s pleading!

Paul is addressing his urging to the Corinthian believers (understood “you.”) Please make sure to understand that this passage is not immediately addressing non-believers. Despite the common use of this passage exclusively for unbelievers, its first and direct application is to believers! It certainly does have application to the unsaved, and if you are not a real believer in Christ (and don’t fool yourself!) then you need to know that it is now the time for you to be saved. God’s favor is smiling upon you. But sometime, and possibly soon, it will be too late because there are no second chances.

This passage not suggesting that the Corinthians are repudiating God's grace, neither is it that they received it earlier but now it is in vain. Rather, the Bible urges them to not receive it without effect, in a less-than-fully-operational fashion, as it comes to them in the present. Some of them may actually be doing that. Others may not but are being warned—don't do it now or ever in the future. God's grace is always being supplied to us, and we can take it for granted and not make use of it in our lives.

So how do you waste God's grace? Not taking advantage of it to the ends God desires—growth, avoidance of sin, service, etc. God graciously provides those opportunities. You might miss an opportunity for reward at the judgment seat (5:10). God's supply is so rich. The question is do we take advantage of it, or do we even consider it?

2. The Reason for Grace-Operative Lives, v. 2

In verse 2 we see *why* the Corinthians should not let God's grace go under-utilized. God is the God who hears and helps in his acceptable time. This is the principle that we learned from Isaiah 49:8.

But Paul emphasizes that the time of his favor is not forever—it is NOW. It is this present age of grace, which will end abruptly when the rapture of the church occurs. God heard and helped us when we called to him for salvation. That hearing/helping does not stop then, because NOW is the favorable time and the day of salvation. We have God's help available now, and it is for this reason that we should not take God's grace for granted. God's grace is available NOW to transform you, to help you, to do something in you. But if you refuse it now or work against it now, ignore it now, "receive it in vain" now, then when will you get it right? There is no other period of time that you have. In fact, the NOW is not just limited by the age of grace and the rapture (a long time period thus far, you might say), but your life is only a few wisps of vapor. It is 70 years maybe, 80 by reason of strength. Don't take it for granted. Tomorrow may not be in your "NOW" to take advantage of God's grace.

By the way, God's grace is, of course, big, but in this context, we can see just one aspect of it illuminated brightly, and that is the imputation-exchange of 5:21. It is only God's favor that would allow such a swap, the just for the unjust, that we might come to God. We can receive that grace, but it ought not to stop there. It ought to issue in a grace-filled, transformed, holy life, demonstrating that God's grace is a working type of grace, not an empty one.

Conclusion

Remember the old saying that God helps those who help themselves? This, I think we might say, comes from an Americanized Protestant work ethic backed by a works-salvation mentality. It is just not true.

What is true is that God hears and helps those who call to him—for salvation in the initial, ongoing, or ultimate aspects of it. Even our Lord Jesus Christ committed His spirit into the hands of God for safekeeping as he died on the cross. So we can do the same for our whole lives—trusting that God will hear and help at the most favorable time. Trust and thus make use of God's present offer of grace to us instead of "receiving the grace of God in vain."

MAP

2 Corinthians

6:1 – We then [also?], *as* workers together *with Him* also plead with *you* not to receive the grace of God in vain.

6:2 – For He says: "IN AN ACCEPTABLE TIME I HAVE HEARD YOU, AND IN THE DAY OF SALVATION I HAVE HELPED YOU."

Maybe the "also" is better in 6:1 because it indicates that there is a switch of direction now to believers more specifically than unbelievers.

The sense in which this OT quotation fits in 2 Cor. 6:1-2: often used to simply say that believers must be saved TODAY, this very day. But it is "bigger" than just that. In the Isaiah context, this help comes upon request from the Servant in His ministry. It seems upon my first thought to be referring to gospel ministers—that the hearers should not receive the grace of God in vain because the deliverers are being helped by God in this day of salvation. This day is the whole church age. We do not know when it will end, of course, because of the imminent return of Christ, and this gives a "today" kind of urgency to the passage, but God is helping the ministers of the gospel throughout this entire "time of his favor." This is clarified by the last phrase in v. 2 which says that the accepted time and the day of salvation is NOW. It is said twice for emphasis. Now, today, and all the "hows" from the start of the church until the rapture are included in this day of salvation.

It could be (as it does seem) more emphasis on the help part than the "to you" part and so would focus on the hearers, that now is the time of God's favor when he will hear and help. That is now, the church age, and so we should not receive God's grace in vain.

The vain reception of God's grace, addressed as it is to an audience that may be mixed of believers (mostly) and unbelievers, suggesting first of all that the unbelievers not ignore God's grace and make it of empty effect for themselves. In addition, believers must not receive that grace and then have nothing happen in their lives. The "grace" is specifically the grace mentioned in 5:21 that allowed the imputation-exchange of sin for righteousness. Wow! But this necessarily leads on to changes in day-to-day living, not restricted to the realm of the abstract.