

# The Equipping of the Servant

*Songs of the Servant*

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To our passage today, I want to read it first of all and then I want to give some background to both the passage and the little series that we are starting today. This is from Isaiah 42:1-10, or as they say in Scotland and I think in Wales, Isaiah 42:1-10, but I'll try and be culturally sensitive during the course of everything else I say.

1 Behold my servant, whom I uphold [this is the LORD speaking], my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. 2 He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. 5 Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: 6 "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, 7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. 8 I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. 9 Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them." 10 Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth

Now this little series that we are embarking on today, "Songs of the Servant" will take us through today and the following three Wednesdays until, as Neil Matthias said, we have our break. And this series is entitled "Songs of the Servant," and our four studies all come from the second half of the prophecy of Isaiah, from chapter 42, 49, 50 and chapter 53.

They are all songs. No one knows whether they were actually ever sung, I have my doubts, or poems, and they all speak about a figure who in the first instance seems rather unusual, shadowy, not easily distinguished. And then as we go on through these poems, certainly as people who know a little about the New Testament, it becomes clearer and

clearer to us, I think, that both Jesus and the apostles recognized that ultimately these four songs were actually about the Lord Jesus Christ. And there are verses here and there in these songs, there are actually verses in this first song that are picked up and used in the New Testament to point us to how it is that Jesus fulfills these songs of the servant. In other words, if we were to ask Isaiah the question, "Who is this servant?" he would be bound to say, "I have no idea whatsoever who he is. No idea whatsoever who he is." Remember how Peter reflects on that at the end of 1 Peter 1 when he says that when these Old Testament prophets wrote about the Messiah who was to come, they didn't know who he was or when he would come. They were in the dark. They were just seeing the light coming over the horizon and a figure that they recognized there was sent by God to bring grace and salvation to the world, but exactly who he was awaited his actual appearing.

So we are going to try and look at these four poems or songs in order to ask ourselves the question, "So what do they tell us about our Lord Jesus Christ?" Or perhaps we could put that another way: when Jesus himself reflected on the Old Testament, his Hebrew Bible, we know that he could not possibly have afforded a Bible of his own, but we also know that from his earliest days simply because of the kind of education he would have had, from his earliest days most of his education apart from what happened in Joseph's carpenter shop was probably an education that was based entirely on the text of the Old Testament Scriptures, and I think there is enough evidence in the Gospels to lead us to the conclusion that Jesus probably knew the whole of the Hebrew Bible off by heart. That would seem to us to be a prodigious feat of memory but in a culture where people don't read, don't have books, then memory is all you have, and I think it's fairly clear from some of the more obscure passages that Jesus picks out of the Old Testament Scriptures that he knew them completely and that he had reflected on them very deeply.

So we want to make connections between how Jesus thought about himself, how Jesus saw the blueprint for his life and ministry in the pages of the Hebrew Bible, and how then later on as the apostles had found the key to the Hebrew Bible, they understood that these different books in the Hebrew Bible that all seemed to be so different were actually so many different colored mosaics and when they stood back from the whole of the Hebrew Bible, they began to see that the key to understanding it actually lay in the fact that all these different colored pieces of stone, as it were, actually portrayed the face of Jesus Christ. Someone said to me just yesterday as we were talking together, how the Old Testament had seemed to them a bit of a mix, a match, a jumble of things, and then they began to realize there was actually a key and the key is Jesus himself. Jesus' contemporaries, many of them didn't understand that. You remember how he says recorded in John's Gospel to his contemporaries, "You search the Scriptures," by which he meant the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, "You search the Scriptures and you think that's the way to eternal life. Your problem is you don't have the key to the Scriptures because you won't come to me and then you would have eternal life."

So what we're looking at in these songs is the way in which the key to understand the whole is hidden within the part. The key to understanding the whole is hidden within the part. And this servant figure emerges in a particular context at the end of the first half of

Isaiah chapters 38 and 39 which serve as a kind of bridge between the first part and the second part. Isaiah has been prophesying the doom and judgment of Jerusalem. He has been speaking about the fact that people will be taken into exile in Babylon. And then as you turn the page to chapter 40, then Isaiah begins to look into the future under the direction of God's Spirit, and he begins to see that God is going to do a new work and that new work is going to bring the people back from their exile in Babylon to the Promised Land, to the city of Jerusalem about which many of us have been thinking together on Sunday evenings in church in our studies in Ezra and Nehemiah, and actually Isaiah specifies the particular ruler who is going to be the divinely appointed deliverer. He wasn't a believer but he became an instrument in God's hands, in God's providence, of delivering his people from their exile and bondage in Babylon and bringing them back to the Promised Land, his name was Cyrus, the great Persian ruler.

But as he sees this, obviously there is another dimension of spiritual penetration that emerges in what Isaiah has to see and then to say, and that is he grasps the fact that a political deliverance, physical and geographical relocation from exile in Babylon, does not solve the real problem. The real problem that underlay the people's exile in Babylon was not political or geographical, it was personal and it was sinful. So what we find in the context of the promise of Cyrus being raised up to be a servant of God to bring them political deliverance is the promise that God is going to raise up a different kind of servant who will deal with the deeper exile in the hearts of men and women. They are not only in the far country geographically but like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable, and this is where the language comes from, they are spiritually in the far country. They are far away from the heart of the Father. They are alienated from God and they need to be reconciled and they, therefore, need a different kind of deliverer, a different kind of Savior if that is going to take place. So over the horizon out of the darkness that surrounds the future and makes it impenetrable to the human eye, this first of all shadowy figure and then startlingly clear figure begins to emerge in Isaiah's vision of what God is going to do in the future and he is described all the way through these passages as the one who is the servant of the Lord.

And in this passage, there are four things to be noted about him. The first thing is this and you see it in verse 1, it's the description Isaiah gives to us of the servant's relationship to the Lord. "Behold," he says, "my servant." Actually in the previous verses there are a series of "beholds" where God says, "Behold the idolatry and behold the idolaters and their ultimate emptiness," but now in the light of that, "Behold my servant." And he gives this beautiful description of the servant. We can think about it in terms of the relationship between the Lord Jesus and his heavenly Father.

He says he is "my chosen, in whom my soul delights." I wonder if you remember the words that were spoken from heaven when Jesus was baptized. They almost certainly echo these words as though God were a great composer quoting from one of his earlier compositions. "You are my Son. You are the Beloved One." So right at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, these words are, as it were, rehearsed to him to reassure him that he is on the path to fulfilling the purposes of God and that he has this unique, exquisite relationship with the Lord Jesus so that the Father will put his Spirit upon him

in order that he may bring – now notice the word – justice to the nations. Justice to the nations.

Justice in the Bible doesn't mean the same thing as justice in the law courts. It means something far bigger in the Bible. There is a connection, of course. What does justice in the law court do? It seeks to but can it ever adequately right the things that are wrong? That's what justice is there for, it is to right the things that are wrong but justice cannot actually right the things that are wrong, can it? Justice cannot undo the past. Our law courts cannot legislate transformation of life. They can do their best but the law never has the power to transform. It has the authority to punish, it has the authority to declare that an individual is innocent, but it has not the power to transform the human heart. But when the language of justice is used in the New Testament as well as in the Old Testament, it means something far bigger than simply what the law courts can effect. We mustn't think here that the servant has come to be a kind of omnipotent lawyer or an omnipotent policeman administering the law, for that matter, or an omnipotent judge, but that he has come to take the things that are deranged and at fault and misshapen and take them and by his power transform them back into what they were created to be, and then more than that, to bring them to what they were initially intended to be by God.

I'll give you an illustration. You own an expensive painting and when you are away at the beach, somebody comes in and steals the painting. You come home, you are distraught about the painting, partly because you forgot to insure it, and then two days later a policeman returns and he says, "Sir, I have good news for you." And you say, "Is it about my painting?" He says, "Sir, we have caught the criminal who stole your painting." But that's actually relatively incidental to you so you say to him, "Have you got my painting back?" "No," he says, "justice, we will pursue justice to its limits and we will make sure this criminal is punished." And you say, "That's all very well but I want my painting back." And the policeman says, "Well, I'm very sorry, sir. There doesn't seem to be anything we can do about your painting but we did catch the criminal." And you say, "But what I really want, I don't care what happens to the criminal, I want my painting back." Now I think I can put it this way: God wants his painting back in your life because he has painted his image into your life. That's what Genesis tells us right at the beginning, he painted his image into man and into woman and what has happened? Well, the image has been stolen, hasn't it? It has been defaced. And God is not simply saying, "I want this criminal caught," God is saying, "I want justice in the sense of restoring life to what it was meant to be."

Those of you who know the "Narnia Chronicles," or at least have read "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," remember the little poem that is used in the land where it is always winter and never Christmas? Isn't that right, always winter and never Christmas, and it is ruled by the ghastly white queen or whoever she is. But this is not C. S. Lewis's best piece of poetry but it makes the point. Here is the rhyme that the people have passed down through the generations,

"Wrong will be right when Aslan comes in sight,  
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more.

When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,  
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again."

Now, that's a real need, isn't it? It's winter without Christ and Christmas never comes without Christ, and he comes to establish justice, to put things right, and not only out there which one day he will do, but to put things right in here. And this all comes out of this special relationship he has with the Lord.

Now, why is that so significant? It's significant because of the second thing Isaiah points us to and that he is, of course, in verses 2 and 3, his special relationship to others. These are among, I think, the most beautiful words in the whole of the Bible and they are specifically quoted about Jesus in the twelfth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, so we are on solid ground from the Bible's point of view in saying this ultimately points us to Jesus, what is Jesus like. Actually, that's one of the most important questions in all the world. Whether you're a Christian or not a Christian, it's actually one of the most important questions in all the world, "Do you know what Jesus is really like?" Here he comes with this enormous strength to put things right. Aslan's roar is like a pussycat's meow compared to the power of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But listen to what he's like. "He doesn't cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street." He's not loud. He has a quiet spirit. He doesn't in what he says and does shriek about himself. And then these amazing words, "a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench." I mean, just think about the picture. He is walking along and he sees this reed that, you know, it's been bruised with the heavy rain and the wind, or he's walking along and there is the dying embers of fire or a light that is about to be extinguished. What does he do? Remember what you did when you were a child? I know I did when I was a child, "Bruised reed, you will become broken reed in my hands. Dimly burning wick, I will extinguish you." Why would I do that? Because that was a display of strength, isn't it, a display of mastery? How different is the Lord Jesus' display of mastery.

And see yourself in this. I hope you see yourself in this because certainly in Matthew's Gospel, we are taught to see ourselves when he quotes these words about the Lord Jesus. At the end of the day, we are all bruised reeds. We are damaged goods. If you're not, if you don't understand you are damaged goods, I noticed that two of our counselors in the room, I can afterwards quietly tell you who they are and if you don't understand you are damaged goods, you desperately need spiritual counseling. Desperately need spiritual counseling. We are all damaged goods. We are all bruised reeds and the bruising takes place in all kinds of ways. Life isn't fair. There isn't justice in the world. There are unspeakable losses in our lives, some recently, some have taken place decades ago, and we never get over them and we are bruised. He comes and he takes bruised reeds and he begins to support them and heal them and dimly burning wicks and he cups his hands around them and he [blows] until a little flame reappears. He has a gentleness that is beyond human language to describe and that's actually what we need if we have any, any spiritual sensitivity at all. We understand this is precisely the combination I need in a

Savior. I need someone who is strong enough to save me and someone who is gentle enough to want to save me and to embrace me in my failures and sins.

Then there is a third thing Isaiah says: his special relationship to the Lord, his special relationship to others and then in a very interesting turn of language that's not very well brought out in our translations and it may be impossible to do it very well in the English language, he said he also had a special relationship to his own trials. Look at what he says here in verse 4. Just take verse 3, "a bruised reed he will not break," and then, "He will not grow faint or be discouraged." And what will help us to grasp the magnificent thing that Isaiah is saying here is to understand that the two statements he had made in verse 3, "a bruised reed he will not break, a faintly burning wick he will not quench," it's those two verbs that he actually picks up in verse 4 and now he uses them about Jesus. He won't be broken. He won't be quenched. Do you see what he saying? He's saying we are bruised reeds and we are dimly burning wicks and he knows what that means. He knows what it means to taste sorrow and pain and enormous disappointment.

I was thinking just the other day about those words of Jesus in the last hours he spent with his disciples in the upper room and Philip asks him a question and do you remember what Jesus says to him? "Philip," he says, "have I been so long with you and yet you still don't know who I am?" Three years teaching them who he was. How slow, how dim we are but never discouraged, pressing on in the midst of the sorrows, the pains, the discouragements, he presses on because that's what qualifies him, actually, to be a Savior who can really understand and save us. If he were just strong, it would be nice to think that he would be gentle towards us, but when we know that he has been in the darkness, that he has felt the pain, then we know that when he comes to us and says, "My child, I understand perfectly what you're going through," we're able to turn to him and say, "Do you really? Do you really understand me like that? Then I will trust you with everything."

Then, of course, there is the fourth thing: what he is in relation to the Lord, in relation to others, in relation to his trials, and then in relation to his mission, and this takes up the rest of the passage but I only need to say two things. First of all, his mission extends to the whole world. That must have been a stunning thing to hear in Isaiah's day when he is looking forward to a people who are going to be in bondage and in slavery, essentially, and he says, "I'm going to raise up a Deliverer for you and his mission will be a mission to the whole world. He will be a light to the nations." Do you notice he says that?

And then there is not only the extensive character of his mission but there is the intensive nature of it. "I will give you as a covenant for the people," verse 6, "a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, and to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon." Does that remind you of a hymn, those of you who are Methodist? Hands up if you are Methodist. That should remind you of a hymn instantaneously. It reminds you of whose hymn? Well, if you're a Methodist, most of the hymns you sing are Wesley's hymns, Wesley's great hymn,

"And can it be that I should gain  
An int'rest in the Savior's blood?"

Died He for me, who caused His pain?  
For me, who Him to death pursued?

"Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee."

And that's what he's speaking about here, isn't it? And the result, this is so interesting, what is the result? Well, look at verse 9 and then verse 10, "Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare," therefore verse 10, "Sing to the LORD a new song." What are the new things? Well, there is the new covenant in Christ's blood. There is the new birth that the Holy Spirit gives to us. There is the new creation of which we become part. And there is the new song that we have begun to sing. And he makes everything new. You could be 90 years old today and he can make everything new. Or you could be 25 years old and be a very bruised reed and a very dimly burning wick and he is able to make it all new.

What a Savior, isn't he? What a Savior. You read this and you hear this or you speak this and you think, "Surely people must be out of their minds not to trust him." But, of course, that's exactly the point the Bible makes, by nature we are out of our minds but when we are brought to see and to trust him, then we are in our right mind and everything, absolutely everything, becomes different because you are now a citizen of his kingdom and there everything tastes new. So, are you new?

Let's pray together.

*Our heavenly Father, we thank you for these portraits of the Lord Jesus that you have given to us in the pages of the Old Testament so many different places. Especially today we thank you that Jesus does not break bruised reeds and he doesn't quench dimly burning wicks and we know in our heart of hearts that that is precisely what we are. We pray, Lord Jesus, that you would place your saving arms around us and strengthen us and that you would blow your Holy Spirit upon us with your own breath, and that by your grace, we may be able to taste and enjoy all the new pleasures that you give to your children. And we pray this in our Savior's name. Amen.*