

The Trial of the Servant

Songs of the Servant

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Today we're going to read the passage that you'll find printed from the prophecy of Isaiah 50:4 through 10. This is the servant speaking again, and this particular song of the servant is rather noteworthy because the whole song, actually, is a song in which the servant speaks about himself. In the other songs that we have looked at, there are usually other persons involved, the Lord is speaking to the servant, Isaiah is talking about the servant, but here the servant is talking about himself.

4 The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. 5 The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. 6 I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. 7 But the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. 8 He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. 9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps me; who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up. 10 Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.

This is the third of our series of talks on the four poems that we've seen appear in the second half of the prophecy of Isaiah, and in those four servant songs we see a figure appear in Isaiah's vision as he looks into the future who not only parallels another figure he sees appearing, but clearly surpasses that other figure. The other figure is Cyrus, the coming king of Persia. Isaiah is looking into the future when God's people will have been taken from Jerusalem and from the surrounding land and they will be in exile in Babylon, days that we are familiar with, perhaps most of all from the stories of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar and Shadrach and Meshech and Abednego, and Isaiah is looking into the future of these people who are in the far country and he sees that in the future God will raise up a pagan king, Cyrus, and Cyrus in the providence of God will be the

instrument of delivering the people from their strange experience of exile from the Promised Land. Isaiah also, perhaps chiefly because he has seen this about himself, there is no figure in the Old Testament Scriptures other than perhaps King David who saw into the depth of his need, and there is a sense in which Isaiah saw even deeper than King David did. You remember his famous experience in the temple when he saw the majesty and holiness of God and the seraphim crying out, "Holy, holy, holy!" and made this confession, "I am a man of unclean lips! I am a man of unclean lips!"

Now, what is so profound about that is there actually is no author anywhere to be found in Scripture who rises higher in eloquence than the prophet Isaiah. There are no passages in Scripture, I would daresay including Romans 8, where there are such magnificent expressions of the heights of human eloquence, and what Isaiah has discovered is, as alas too few of us discover, that the place where sin lurks in its most sinister fashion is not in what we regard as our weaknesses but in what we see as our strengths. It's there that it tends to hide itself and so someone who has discovered that the chief manifestation of the sinfulness of his life is actually in the greatest of his gifts in his lips, is someone who has surely plumbed the depths of his own sense of sinfulness, and you remember how he describes himself in that passage as being absolutely undone in the presence of God. It's actually the great need of the times for the Christian church, the very reverse of what the Christian church believes it needs. The Christian church today believes it needs to be strong and to be heard and to be treated with dignity. They are actually, if Isaiah is anything to go by, what we need to discover most of all is the absolute murky depths of our sinfulness.

And it's because he saw that and you see the relationship here between what an individual knows about the need of their own heart and how clearly they will see the nature of God's grace, these two things are inextricably intertwined. Show me the person who thinks little of God's grace day by day, and I will show you the person who knows very little of the corruption and sinfulness of their own heart. There is no escape from that correlation and this is the reason why Isaiah is an instrument fitted, equipped, prepared by God to see something that others don't see, to see this servant coming over the horizon who is going to bring about a much deeper, more lasting, much more necessary deliverance than the deliverance that King Cyrus is able to bring.

Actually, this is a huge test of us as middle-class conservative Christians, whether we think our greatest need is for a great President or whether we see that our greatest need is for a great Savior. And one of the ways that will emerge in our lives is whether we talk more about politics than we do about the Lord Jesus. It's a very simple test. What excites me more, what makes me feel, "This is what my country really needs. If only we had a great President everything would be different." Do you know nothing about your history? Do you know nothing about the history of the nations? When you realize that kingdoms and rulers rise and fall and the best of men at best are but men and none of them can actually answer the needs of the times. Politics, as they say, is the art of the possible but we need something that is impossible. We need someone who is able to come and deliver us from our sinfulness and our selfishness and our waywardness and our alienation and rebellion against God and Isaiah sees all this because he has learned not to put his trust in

princes and he has seen the corruption of his own heart, and it is that that has prepared him to be the mouthpiece of God.

It's this that has prepared him to be able to see into the future and grasp this amazing series of portraits of this servant figure who will appear and with 20/20 hindsight as people who have the New Testament in our hands, we realize that he is actually talking about our Lord Jesus Christ. So when we turn to the pages of the New Testament, we find these poems quoted in the New Testament about Jesus. When we look, for example, at that famous incident when Philip, the evangelist, is spirited away and he meets an Ethiopian royal treasurer in the desert who happens to be reading these servant songs in the copy of the Hebrew scroll of Isaiah that he has purchased, he is reading these very chapters. And Philip gets up into the chariot with him and asks him if he understands what he's reading. He says, "How can I understand them unless somebody explains? This is all a mystery to me." And we are told that Jesus began to appear to the Ethiopian eunuch in the songs of the servant as Philip said, "I want to show you how these songs are fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ."

And this is one of the most exquisite descriptions of the Lord Jesus in the pages of the Old Testament Scriptures, and as you read it, it may actually remind you of words in Isaiah that are even more famous than these words. These words aren't actually very famous but anyone who has ever been at church at Christmas time will have heard the words read from Isaiah 9 about the child who is going to be born and how he would be a Wonderful Counselor, how he would be the Mighty God, how he would be the Prince of Peace, and there are little echoes here in what is said about this coming servant of that earlier prophecy, and this later prophecy, as I think is very evident, is wonderfully and, on occasion, literally fulfilled in the Lord Jesus.

So let me suggest that we can look at it in this way. First of all, Isaiah begins to see how the servant is going to become a Wonderful Counselor. You notice what he says here at the beginning as the servant speaks, "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught." As you read through the Gospels, one of the things that is very obvious about Jesus is that he spoke in an entirely different way from all of the other contemporary teachers. People said things like, "The words that come from his mouth, they are so gracious. He speaks with such graciousness. And, yes, he speaks with such authority. He speaks as though he had come from the very presence of God with the word of God, and the way in which he speaks seems to meet precisely where we are. It's as though he could see right into our souls and bring a word to bear upon our lives that is perfectly matched to who we are and what our needs are."

Well, how did Jesus learn to do that? Well, here is the answer, "Morning by morning he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught." Did you ever think that about the Lord Jesus? He didn't suddenly appear 30 years old able to do this. For 30 long years, every single morning he had been awakened into the presence of his heavenly Father and said to his heavenly Father, "What are you going to teach me today?" For 30 years, well,

certainly for 25 of those 30 years, he had been memorizing the Hebrew Bible. Day by day in the presence of God he had brought to the front of his memory passages from Scripture just like this passage from Scripture and said, "Now, Father, teach me how this applies to me. Teach me how I'm going to work this out in my life. Teach me what this means about my ministry." He had been wholly absorbed in what his heavenly Father was going to teach him. We know that, actually, from the end of chapter 2, don't we? That Jesus grew in wisdom and in favor with God. Just as if you were a father or a mother and you teach your children and you see them grow, then of course your heart swells with satisfaction that they are growing up, they are learning, and they are beginning to apply what they are learning. That's why Jesus was such a master teacher and why his words were so full of grace.

And you notice particularly what he says here, this is so very striking, isn't it? "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary." I think that's probably the most difficult thing in the world to do, isn't it? What do you do with somebody who is overcome with a sense of weariness and depression? Just say, "Pull yourself up, man"? Well, that's a counsel of despair, isn't it? The weary can't pull himself up. What do you say to somebody in whose mind that sense of depression lies? The depression is right there in the very instrument that they are using to think about life. That's why everything in life seems to have gone pale. But Jesus knows the words to speak to those who are weary.

Does that remind you of something? You maybe never thought about this at all but you have known these words, if you're a Christian you have known these words for decades. "Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest." And this, of course, is what his word does. His word comes to us and in the weariness we have with ourselves in the way which we have sinned, and some of us the weariness we have with the world, and he is able to put his word right into our minds, right into our hearts. Have you ever experienced that? Been in a situation? I've been in the situation where I have felt no one in the world, even those who have known me best, has any idea of where I am just now. And then you sit and listen perhaps to the exposition of the word of God, and the word of God comes to you with an accuracy and profundity and relevance that no one else in the world could possibly give to it because nobody knows exactly where you are, and these words seem to have this power to lift you up. And we are being told here, therefore, how it is that Jesus became a Wonderful Counselor.

To whom do you go when you need counsel? Yes, it's appropriate that you go to other human beings but it would be a tragedy if you didn't go first to the Lord Jesus and say to the Lord Jesus, "Lord, you're the one who knows how to speak a word to those who are weary and I am weary." And to say this in passing, one of the things that I think has become a curse in our society is I discover so many people who want counsel but they don't want to place their lives under the ministry of the word of God so they don't really want life-changing counsel, what they want is life tidying-up counsel. So to whomsoever you go for counsel, here is rule 1: you need counsel from somebody who is able to get the word of God right into your soul and the only person that is able to do that is the Lord Jesus, and the chief way the Lord Jesus does that among his people is in the fellowship of

the saints and the worship of his house and in the ministry of his word. That's A, B, C Christianity and we need to understand it in a nation and a Western world that has gone profoundly badly wrong into becoming what the sociologists today call the therapeutic culture. You need more than therapy, you need a Savior. That's what you need and here Isaiah is seeing into the future and it's just amazing what he's seeing. Imagine there being a Counselor who knows me through and through.

But then as the poem goes on, we learn something else. Not only how the servant becomes a Wonderful Counselor, but also how the servant suffers, and behind this, and it will become clear next week, the servant suffers in order to become, of course, the Prince of Peace. Now, in the first section, the servant had said, "The Lord awakens me day by day to listen to what he wants to teach me and that enables me to speak into the souls of others." But now he's going a little bit further and you and I need to learn not only from his teaching but also from his example, "The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious." All very well to have counsel but getting good counsel is not the same thing as turning away from your rebellion and following the counsel.

And this is something, isn't it, the language is so interesting. "The Lord GOD has opened my ear." I never read these words without thinking of what a slave could do in the days of the Mosaic law if he didn't want to leave his master's house because his master provided for him, perhaps his wife and family were there in his master's house and he could go to his master and say, "My master, I love you. I do not want ever to be free from you." And the master would take him to the post of the house and he would get a nail and then he would hammer that nail right through the slave's ear. The first pierced ear mentioned in the law of Moses. You know, so many men you see nowadays have got a pierced ear, some of them two pierced ears, and surprising numbers of them are professing Christians. I always want to go to them and say, "Do these two pierced ears mean that you are utterly bowed before the Lord Jesus and saying to him, 'My Master, I love you. I never want to go free.' Or are they simply decorations?"

Well, the heavenly Father, what a picture this is, the heavenly Father opened the ear of the servant and he was not rebellious, and what follows is almost literally fulfilled in the Gospels, isn't it? "I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting." And there are passages in the Gospels that I can hardly read without feeling sick in my stomach, what men did to our beloved Lord Jesus, spitting on his face, playing their miserable games with him. Why was he willing to do this? Why did he enter into this world of appalling dispeace and chaos? Now, some of the things we read sadly about that take place in the military in all nations, well, they took place in the military in Jesus' time, in Jesus' experience, and why all this? Because the servant had come to bring peace and so in order to do that, he had to enter right into, right underneath the dispeace and the moral chaos of the world.

You need to understand Jesus this way, my dear friends, when you feel ashamed of what you read of takes place in the military among the most disciplined of people. Notice that, the most disciplined of people, people who are taken away and for months and years trained in the most rigorous disciplines and with what foul sinfulness they sometimes

treat others. And it's true in every nation. Every nation. And it was true of our Lord Jesus, he was the victim. He became a victim so that there would never be a victim in the world who could say to the Lord Jesus, "Nobody understands me." Perhaps you are a victim. Of course, we live in a society of victims. We're all victims of something: victims of being Scottish, or victims of being Southerners rather than Northerners, or victims of being Northerners rather than Southerners. We are all victims. It's never our fault. But some of you may actually be victims, victims of the cruel and offensive treatment of others, and this is all to say to us you can go to Jesus and say to Jesus, "I know you can bring me peace because you were so profoundly victimized. You understand me."

That's the difference with Jesus. Do you know, I think this is probably true throughout the whole Western world: an amazing number of people go into the therapeutic and social professions to try and sort their own lives out. I'm amazed how often that happens. But you see, if you are in need, you don't need somebody who is trying to sort their own life out by going into the profession that's supposed to be there to help you, you need somebody whose life is sorted out, who went through the victimization, came out on the other end with not a tinge of resentment in his soul. That's Jesus, isn't it?

And then, of course, there is this third little element in the picture. He becomes a Counselor, he suffers because he's going to be the Prince of Peace, and then we get this amazing picture of him triumphing because he is the one in whom the might of God is going to be seen, and it's a wonderful picture of vindication. Verse 8, "He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Behold, the Lord GOD helps me; who will declare me guilty?" Have you ever noticed that in the Gospels? Everybody who declares Jesus to be worthy of crucifixion also declares Jesus to be not guilty of any crime. It's the most amazing thing.

And then these words, "Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up." I went with a friend when we were students, around little churches across the north coast of Scotland where my family comes from, some of them there would perhaps just be a service once a month, the rural remoteness of it made that just how life was. And we went into one church that had that kind of musty, non-used smell, and we actually went right into the back of the church and into the minister's room. I guess we were maybe about 20 or 21 at the time but we were almost like naughty schoolboys because, well, I was a naughty schoolboy, but there was a cupboard in the room. It was like Narnia, you know? "Let's see what's in the cupboard," and I remember opening the cupboard and there was a minister's robe hanging in the cupboard and I said to my friend, "Look, it's a minister's robe." I put out my hand and touched the minister's robe and it just crumbled at the touch because the moths had been there. I never used so little energy to effect such great destruction. I just touched it and it... And that's the picture here, isn't it? It seems at the end of Jesus' life that death has overtaken him, that the enemies have won, he is taken and buried in the tomb, but it just takes a touch for the Lord Jesus to destroy all of his enemies so that like a moth-eaten garment, they are destroyed because he actually is the Mighty God.

And even when we have got here, even when Isaiah has seen this amazing picture so wonderfully fulfilled in Jesus, he has still not yet taken us to the heart of the matter, and the heart of the matter is where we will go next time. But he has taken us far enough to see that Jesus is the Savior we need and he is a very great Savior, and he is the Counselor we need. So let us, first of all, go to him.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given the Lord Jesus to us as a Prince and a Savior. We thank you that he has such perfect wisdom and that he also has perfect power and that he always uses both his wisdom and power in order to lead us on. Lord, we are so deeply insecure in ourselves that we reach out sometimes for straws in order to find security in this world and we either mistrust the Lord Jesus or we know so little of the wisdom that he is able to give us, we turn to secondary means of life transformation instead of turning to you. And we pray that you would work in our hearts, that you would speak a word right into our hearts that tells us you know me through and through and draw us, we pray, ever nearer to the Savior. And as that happens to us, we pray that then in turn we may become like Jesus and able to speak the word of grace to those who are weary. Give us the ability to do that and the desire to serve them and this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.