

Jesus and the Servant Songs

Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 53

Turn to Isaiah 42 please. In the first half of the book of Isaiah, we meet Christ the King. The government will rest on his shoulders, and he will rule on David's throne forever. Much of that has not happened yet. We will see that side of Christ at his second coming.

Last week we read Psalm 2, and Psalm 2 is also like that, God and his anointed ruler defeating rebellious nations and their kings. That also shows us Christ at his second coming.

The second half of Isaiah gives us the Christ of his first coming, the Jesus we know from the Gospels. The Christ of Isaiah 42–53 has nothing to do with government. The world needs a ruler like the Christ of his second coming.

But that's not all we need. We also need someone to turn people back to God, someone who was one of us, who would bring us to God. This is Isaiah's Servant. There are four servant prophecies in Isaiah 42 to 53. These four prophecies are called "Servant Songs." The fourth one is the famous Isaiah 53, Jesus suffering and dying in place of sinful people.

Today we'll read a part of each servant song. We'll see the Jesus that we know from the Gospels through the eyes of Isaiah, written hundreds of years before Jesus was born.

This Servant in Isaiah 42–53 is not like Immanuel, Mighty God, Everlasting Father. This Servant is an ordinary man who is completely devoted to serving God. Nothing more or less than that. These songs never tell us that this is the Christ. If we did not know the Jesus of the Gospels, we would not know that this was the same person as the anointed king of Psalm 2. But we do have the Gospels, so we know they are the same person. Now to Isaiah 42.

First Servant Song: God Introduces His Chosen Servant – Isaiah 42:1–4

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom I delight;

I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.

² *He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.*

³ *A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.*

*In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; ⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope."*

In this first Song, God himself speaks to us. God introduces his Servant to us. My Chosen Servant will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. My Servant will not be noisy, he will not try to be the center, he will not try to take charge. He will be quiet, gentle, doing his work without fuss.

A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not quench. No one is too damaged, no one is too feeble. He will not quit on the hopeless, he will be gentle with the people who are staggering and defeated. Does that not sound like Jesus?

He himself will not falter or be discouraged until he establishes justice on earth. God knows that his Servant will have reasons to falter and be discouraged, he will have reasons to feel defeated and walk away. But he will stay faithful, he will not stop until the earth is a just place. That's because God will put his Spirit on him.

In his teaching the islands will put their hope. In Isaiah, “islands” means “remote countries,” “isolated peoples.” This is us. We are the islands, the remote countries, the isolated people, who put our hope in his teaching. What will the Servant do, the chosen one with the Spirit on him? He will teach. In his teaching, the islands will put their hope. That is how he will bring justice.

That was the first half of the first Song, God introducing his Servant, who will gently teach and be faithful and bring justice. Today we'll stop here. In vv5–7, God speaks directly to the Servant to encourage him. “I will take hold of your hand,” God tells the Servant. “I will keep you. I will make you to be a covenant for Israel and a light for the Gentiles.” Now we'll look at Mark 1.

John Baptized Jesus, God Spoke to Jesus – Mark 1:9–11

Right after John the Baptist baptized Jesus, Jesus heard a voice from heaven say, “*You are my Son, whom I love; in you I delight.*” We just read from Isaiah: “*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him.*”

In Isaiah, God says, “*Here is my servant, in whom I delight.*” In the entire Old Testament, this prophecy in Isaiah 42 is the only time God says to a person “in whom I delight” or “in you I delight.” God uses similar language of others, but not those words. Isaiah 42 is the only place.

Jesus hears God say, “*In you I delight.*” God does not say this to the crowds. He says it to Jesus. Jesus needs to hear that he is the Servant that Isaiah foretold. Then in Isaiah God says, “*I will put my Spirit on him.*” Just before Jesus heard these words at the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit came down on him. So Jesus knows that Isaiah 42 is about him. He is the chosen Servant. At his baptism, God called Jesus to be that Servant, who is also the Servant of the other Servant Songs.

We going over these Scriptures for two reasons. One, so we'll know Jesus better. We'll have a better idea of what it was like for Jesus to be Jesus. He was the Eternal Son of God, but the Gospels describe him as not knowing that at all. He's figuring it out as he goes.

Two, Jesus is our example. Much of what God says about his Servant he also says to us. Jesus lived his life a lot like we live ours. God calls us in similar ways. Let's trust the Father and be faithful, as Jesus was.

Second Song: The Servant Speaks to the World – Isa 49:1-6

In this song, the Servant explains to us what God is doing with him. We need to hear these things coming from Jesus. This is Jesus, telling us what it was really like.

49:1–4 *Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations:*

Before I was born, the LORD called me; from my mother's womb, he has spoken my name.

² *He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me;*

he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.

³ *He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."*

⁴ *But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all.*

Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God."

Notice the contrast between revealed and hidden. God made the Servant something special and glorious, and then hid him, concealed him, so that people didn't get it. He made my mouth a sharpened sword, he made me a polished arrow, but then he hid me, he concealed me, he put a veil over me. God said he would display his splendor in me, but he's not! It is all for nothing.

49:4 *I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all.* Imagine Jesus saying, "I'm doing my best at this, Father, but it is not working. It's not doing any good, I'm not getting anything done." We know what that feels like, don't we. "I'm trying my best at this Father, but it is useless, it makes no difference." The Servant says, *I have labored in vain; I spent my strength for nothing at all.*

But where does he go from there? Faith. "*Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God.*" After we say, "I'm doing my best, Father, but it makes no difference," then we say, *what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God.*

49:5 *And now the LORD says [to me, the Servant]—he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength—⁶ he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may be my salvation to the ends of the earth."*

The Servant will bring the tribes of Jacob back to God, and he will also be salvation for the Gentiles. How will he get this done? His great power? No: *my God has been my strength.* That is the Servant's life. The opening line the first Song said: *Here is my Servant, whom I uphold.* The Servant gets things done because God holds him up and keeps him going. God has been my strength.

Jesus himself reads these things after his baptism, and realizes that this describes him. God his Father is calling Jesus to be this Servant. Jesus is hearing his call, and finding out the good and the bad.

Third Song: The Servant's Obedience, Suffering, and Faith – Isaiah 50:4–9

50:4 *The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.*

A well-instructed tongue. We've heard about the Servant's teaching before. The first song said, "In his teaching the islands will put their hope." The second song said that the LORD made his mouth a sharpened sword. And here, the Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue. Jesus of Nazareth was a remarkable teacher, and these lines tell us that God made him so.

The Servant will get daily instructions from the Sovereign Lord. The Sovereign God wakes the Servant each morning to pray and ask for guidance. How does Jesus always know what to say? Because every morning he listens to God teach him. In particular, what is the Servant learning?

"The word that sustains the weary." The Sovereign LORD tells the Servant what to say to the weary, the faltering, the discouraged, the stumbling. God educates the Servant, so Servant knows what to say to help these weary people along. *The Sovereign LORD has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.*

And then in verse 5 we move in a different direction, toward suffering. Now we are talking about the trial of Jesus after he was betrayed. ⁵ *The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears; I have not been rebellious, I have not turned away.* ⁶ *I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.* ⁷ *Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.* ⁸ *He who vindicates me is near.*

The Sovereign LORD tells the Servant, "offer your back to those you will beat you, offer your cheeks to those who will pull out your beard. Do not hide your face from mocking and spitting." We know from Gethsemane that it was very hard for Jesus to obey the Father on this, but he did not rebel or turn away.

These things will disgrace and shame Jesus, they will humiliate him. He knows this. How does he respond? "Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced.... I know I will not be put to shame, because he who vindicates me is near."

These enemies will bring charges against Jesus, and accuse him, and condemn him. How does the Servant respond to that? *He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me!* ⁹ *It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.*

The Servant responds with faith in God. Isaiah 50:7 *The Sovereign LORD helps me*; 50:8 *He who vindicates me is near*; 50:9 *It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me*. All that the Servant has is his faith and confidence in God. And for him that was enough. And my brothers and sisters, that is just what we have.

Again, we need to imagine Jesus reading these Scriptures at the beginning of his ministry, with the Spirit to guide him, and understanding that this was God his Father giving him instructions. And listen, people. The same Sovereign LORD promises many times to help us.

Fourth Song: The Servant's Suffering Explained – Isaiah 53:3–6

Isaiah's fourth Servant song is 15 verses long. We will just look at the four verses that are the heart of this song. Isaiah puts these lines in the mouth of a group of watchers. Imagine a group during his life that watches the Servant's suffering. They understand his suffering one way, and then God reveals to them a very different understanding.

*He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.*

*Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our
iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has
laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

“At the start,” say the watchers, “we saw his suffering, and we thought God was punishing him for his own sins. He must have done something very bad. We despised him and held him in low esteem because of his suffering and pain.”

*Surely he took up **our** pain and bore **our** suffering, yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.* The watchers go on: “He was actually carrying our pain and our suffering, but we thought God was punishing and afflicting him for his own sins. We thought we were righteous and he was sinful, since he was suffering, and we were not.”

*But no, that was wrong! He was pierced for **our** transgressions, he was crushed for **our**
iniquities; the punishment that brought **us** peace was on **him**, and by **his** wounds **we** are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has
laid on him the iniquity of us all.* We were the sinful ones, and he was the righteous one.

These are remarkable lines, and are right at the core of what the New Testament teaches us about Jesus. This is why we put our trust in Christ, because in this way, his humiliation and his suffering, he saves his people from their sins.

Those are Isaiah's four prophetic servant songs. They describe the Servant as an ordinary man who is completely devoted to serving God. He trusts God and he's obedient. Nothing more or less than that.

Based on how Jesus lived and carried himself in his earthly ministry, these four songs influenced Jesus immensely. They encouraged him to be a teacher, and they also told him that there was trouble ahead, and suffering. And after that, God his Father would exalt him, and all would bow.

We read these Scriptures because they are a window into the Lord's own life. They tell us what kind of thoughts and processes were going on in his own mind. We read them to know the Lord better.

And we also see here how Jesus was our example of simply trusting God and obeying him, no matter what happened, including disappointing times when the Servant did not understand what was happening. That's how we imitate Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER: God, these prophecies are amazing. Thank you for wanting to comfort us, to take care of the broken and hopeless. Thank you for doing in Jesus just what you told Isaiah long before that you would do. Thank you for making our Champion someone who knows what our lives are like. Thank you for sending the Lord Jesus, thank you for bringing us to him. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.

Footnote: In 49:3 God calls the Servant "Israel." In other places "Israel" means the nation. Remember that before "Israel" was the name of a nation, it was the name of a man, Jacob, named Israel by God after Jacob wrestled all night (Gen 32). At that point, the promise to Abraham, the blessing to all the nations rested on one man, Jacob, Israel. It seems best to see God calling the Servant "Israel" in that sense.