

The victorious servant

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[0:00] I want to talk about the plan and purposes of the God who really exists.! So let me ask you how you cope when life throws things at you.

Some people actually have remarkable courage. I read about them in the newspapers. Some people have remarkable strength and resilience. Some people are remarkably clever. But I'm not sure that I'm one of those people. I don't know whether you feel that you're one of those people. It depends, doesn't it? It's all rather uncertain. But here is a better way. Here is the way for the people of God. To know that they have a God who is a God of remarkable dependability.

It's not a human strength but his divine strength. To know that God has almighty power and not be resting in human power, human strength, unpredictable as that can be, but upon the almightiness of God.

[1:12] Not trusting in human wisdom to sort things out. But resting in a God of unfathomable wisdom. Deep in unfathomable minds of never failing skill.

He treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will. And to live every day, indeed every moment, depending on this almighty God.

How do you cope? These chapters of the Bible examine a particular instance of people needing to look to God and to trust in him and indeed to have high expectations of what he will do.

And that's what we're going to look at just now. So you will know as we come to the book of Isaiah. Please have that open if you would in chapter 44 and onwards.

And you know that the background is that the Lord God, that's the God of Israel, Yahweh, Lord, spelt in capitals there, has a plan to bless all the nations of the world.

[2:31] And his plan is to bless all the nations of the world through one man, Abraham, and his descendants, his seed.

And God says he will use, as his servant in this matter, the nation that springs from Abraham. That's the nation, the ancient nation of Israel.

That's his plan. And we looked last time or time before at how this works out with three particular servants who serve the cause of his plan.

And they were as follows. Number one, the victorious servant, whom I've now painted in red with a spear. Number two, the worm servant. Worm.

Which we thought of as actually being the people. And thirdly, which we haven't yet come to, the ideal servant. This remarkable, brilliant servant.

[3:36] This is my servant in whom I, my chosen one in whom I delight. I'll put my spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. So we've got those three servants.

And they sort of, they look very similar to one another. A lot of similar things are said about them. The way they relate to one another is rather subtle. They sort of overlap and interlock.

But they're different. They're not exactly the same. It's not one servant. It's God's three servants as in this passage that we're going through. So I'd like us to look at the victorious servant today.

And you'll see him and Maria read about him. And we'll come to that in a moment. But let me just give you the background story. That this ancient nation whom the Lord chose and called is the ancient nation of Israel.

And he drew them to himself so that they could be obedient and holy and a witness, meaning to say an example and a spokesman, to the other nations, the pagan nations.

[4:44] But instead, instead of being a holy witness to the pagan nations, they became the same as the pagan nations.

Instead of Israel teaching the nations about God and how they should live, the nations taught Israel about their gods and their way of life. That was completely wrong.

One specific is that Israel takes on the idols of the nations instead of teaching the nations about the one true God.

And God had said to Israel, if you do this, if you persist in this, the thing that's at stake is your security in the land I've given you. And you will go into exile.

You will be expelled from the land. You will be removed far from the presence of the Lord into a distant country. And you can look in the history of Israel.

[5:46] And you will find that that's exactly what happened. And the nation was sent into exile in Babylon, which is nowadays, I think, Iraq, isn't it?

That sort of area. Not exactly the same, but that's the historical fact of it. And this part of Isaiah envisages that situation.

And here is God's people that God has had this purpose for, and indeed these promises to, and yet now they find themselves in Babylon. And that must raise enormous questions.

So one question is, has God's purpose failed? Because he was going to bless the nations through this one nation because of their holy example and their purity, and that completely seems to have failed.

Has God's purpose failed? Or you could put it another way around and say, when it came to that battle in which the Babylonians defeated Jerusalem, was it that the Babylonians were too strong for God?

[6:55] Were the Babylonian gods stronger than the Lord God? Is that really what happened? I'm sure there would have been little voices in their heads saying, that's really what happened.

And here's another question. Does this mean, sort of looking at it more spiritually, that their sin was too difficult for the Lord to cope with?

So that having made this promise to bless all the nations of the world, this promise has got stuck on the sin, on human sin, and God's promise can't get any further.

Well, those are the sort of things that these passages are addressing. And it says things like this. Actually, God's plan will succeed.

Because that's the sort of God he is. Actually, God will deliver his people. So he won't just abandon that ethnic group.

[7:56] Some of them will be delivered. Even if it's only a remnant. Do you remember? A remnant will return. God will deliver his people.

There's the worm servant. And God will bless other nations. And he will redeem and transform a whole people for himself.

He will do it. But the question is, how is he going to do it? And the answer is, by means of his servants.

So we're sort of agog. How will these servants do this? How is it all going to work out? I'm not going to answer that question all this morning. But we will look at one part of the answer, which is this servant, the victorious servant, the red one with the spear.

Right. So let me tell you three things about the victorious servant. And the three things start counting when we get to number one. So I'm going to smuggle in a zeroth point.

[9:02] And this is that, just to tell you, it's a sort of spoiler alert thing, the servant that's being referred to is Cyrus the Great. You can look him up on Wikipedia. He was a Persian king.

He was the first king of the founder of the first Persian Empire. And in his own language, his name is Kurush.

And we had a gentleman in the church from Iran who converted to Christ. And previously his name was Ali, which was one of the relatives of the prophet Muhammad.

And he wanted to change his name. And he changed his name to Kurush, meaning the same name as this ancient king whom we call King Cyrus.

And there's a picture I got off Wikipedia. There's the credit for it. I'm not sure whether this picture is a copy of a stone tablet or whether somebody just made that up. I didn't do enough research.

[10:00] But there's the real life Kurush. And there's my sort of cartoon version, which we'll keep in front of us just to pin a label on that. So that's who we're talking about. Cyrus the Great.

Kurush, in other words. Right. Let me tell you three things about him. Number one, his origin. Where does Cyrus the Great come from? And the Bible says, The Lord alone raised Cyrus up, having planned it all in advance.

Interesting point, isn't it? Look at the texts. So 46, 8 to 11. 46, 8 to 11. Remember this.

Fix it in mind. Take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago. I am God. There is no other. I am God. There is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning. From ancient times, what is still to come. I say, my purpose will stand. I will do all that I please. From the east, I summon a bird of prey.

[11:08] From a far off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about. What I have planned, that will I do. Amazing, isn't it?

God says, this guy Cyrus. And remember this is written before Cyrus is even born. God says, that's what I'm going to do. I've planned it. I'll raise him up.

I'll summon him. And he'll do what I want him to do. 44, verse 24. 44, verse 24. This is what the Lord says, your Redeemer who formed you in the womb.

I am the Lord who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who foils the signs of the false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, who carries out the words of his servant and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, it shall be inhabited, and of the towns of Judah, they shall be built, and of their ruins, I will restore them, who says to the watery deep, be dry, I will dry up your streams, who says of Cyrus, he is my shepherd.

He will accomplish all that I please. He will say of Jerusalem, let it be rebuilt, and of the temple, let its foundations be laid. And that's exactly what happened.

[12:41] The Lord, this is his origin, the Lord alone raised Cyrus up, having planned it all in advance.

We have a very wonderful God, don't we? We have a very wonderful God. And all the time there is this side swipe at the idols. The idols can't do this.

The idols are radically different, because they are part of this creation, whether they've been dreamt up, or whether they've been manufactured. They are part of this creation.

But our God is the creator. He is outside it. And he can bring into it anything he wishes. He can see how it all is going to work out. And he says, I'm going to raise up Cyrus the Great, and he will bring my people home.

He will defeat Babylon, and bring my people home. 46, 20 to 24. 46, 20 to 24. There isn't a 46, 20 to 24.

[13:43] I think it might be 45, 20 to 24. Gather together and come.

Assemble you fugitives from the nations, ignorant of those who carry about idols of wood, and pray to gods that cannot save.

Declare what is to be. Present it. Let them take counsel together. Who foretold this? Long ago. Who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the Lord?

And there is no God apart from me. There is none but me. Turn to me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth.

For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity, a word that will not be revoked. Before me, every knee will bow.

Before me, every tongue will swear. They will say of me, in the Lord alone, our righteousness and strength. And God says, there is only one choice of a God.

[14:46] No matter what nationality you are. It's me, the God of Israel. Turn to me and be saved. Your idols are just made up, and they're rubbish.

Please, can I ask you a question? When it says, before me, every knee will bow, who is the me? It's a real question. It's not a rhetorical question. Who is the me?

Before me, every knee will bow. Hold on. What does the text say? What does the text say? God? Which God?

Yahweh, the Lord God. Is that right, isn't it? The Lord God. That's who it says in the text, isn't it? I am God, there is no other. By myself I have sworn.

My mouth has uttered a word that will not be revoked. Before me, every knee will bow. That is the Lord God. Isn't that right? It's the Lord God as distinct from any other idle pretender, any other person.

[15:52] It is simply and purely the Lord God. That's right, isn't it? That's what that text says. And then, come, I know where you were going with this, but you got there too quickly. But then go to Philippians, that I read right at the beginning, chapter 2.

Philippians chapter 2. And just put yourself in the state of the enormous mental shift that takes place to take that text which is about Yahweh God, the Lord God, the unique, one and only Lord God, and for the Apostle Paul to write this and his readers to accept it, that at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Do you get that? That the things that are said specifically and gloriously about the Lord God are pinned without embarrassment, hesitation, but with wonder.

That's Jesus. That's a remarkable statement about who Jesus is, isn't it? That he is Yahweh God. He is the God that Isaiah was quoting.

Do you get that point? It's amazing. That's why I thought we would begin by singing, He is Lord. He is Lord. Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[17:36] That's the origin of Cyrus. Number two, let's think about the power of Cyrus. So we go back to chapter 44, the power of Cyrus.

And of the power of Cyrus, we say, the Lord helps him, even though Cyrus does not realize this, or know the Lord at all.

So 45 verse 1, this is what the Lord says to his anointed, come back to that word in a moment, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of.

I take hold of Cyrus, I take hold of his right hand, I would do it that way around. I take hold of his right hand. And look at all the things that God says he will enable Cyrus to do.

There's a whole list of them. To subdue nations before him, to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut. I will go before you and will level the mountains.

[18:41] I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron. I will give you treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who summons you by name for the sake of Jacob, my servant.

Well, that's right. Now, verse 4 says, I'm going to do all those things, but it says, I call you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me.

You do not know me. That's a thing, isn't it? God is going to do all this through this guy Cyrus and he will have no idea that it's God doing this at all.

He ought to, but he doesn't know God. In our language, he's not a believer, he's not converted, he's not a Christian, his heart isn't in this, he's just somebody that God uses and he's completely ignorant of it.

I will strengthen you, verse 5, though you have not acknowledged me. So here's the thing, isn't it? In this victorious servant, the power of this servant, the Lord God is not only the God of Israel, but he's also the God who directs the nations.

[20:12] So our God is not a territorial God who is just a God of English people or Western people. He's the God of all the nations and he can take all the nations' rulers, he can do this with Cyrus, he can do this with anybody, he can take the president of this and the chancellor of that and the king of so and so and the emperor of so and so and he can use them for his purposes and they may be completely ignorant of it, but he can use them.

God is not only the God of Israel but the God who directs the nations. They don't realize it but it's true and the reason he does this is specific, isn't it? For the sake of my worm servant.

45, verse 4, I do this for the sake of this other servant, Jacob my servant, Israel my chosen. There's a link between these.

The victorious servant is there for the worm servant. That's why God rules the nations in this particular way and this thought is amplified for us and focused for us in the New Testament where it is said about Jesus that he, I'm going to read Ephesians 1, verse 22, that he is raised and seated at the right hand of God in heavenly places far above all rule and authority, power and dominion and every title that can be given not only in the present age but also in the one to come and God has placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church. So there's a statement, a power statement that there are many powers and authorities in this creation. Some of them are political, some of them are spiritual. Many voices but Jesus is the supreme voice and of course the corollary of that is how dare we go and listen to other voices when we've got the supreme master to listen to.

[22:31] It's a problem with the iconography, to my mind, the iconography of the Greek Orthodox Church. Why are you praying to saints when you've got Jesus to pray to? It's an insult to Jesus to be having a row of saints and praying to them and kissing their statues and whatnot.

It's Jesus who rules and I got to that from the power of Cyrus and we just note, I don't know what will happen in the vote in the House of Commons whenever it's coming up, not too distant future. I don't know how the economy of the European Union will work out or anything else but I do know that it's in God's hands. I do know that it's in God's hands.

He is not defeated by politicians or the whole mindset of the West, the sort of, the way that the West, having been Christian, in some sense at least, the West and the East of the Roman Empire, all these nations being in some sense Christian, and now the West having gradually turned its back on Christianity, God isn't defeated by that.

This isn't that God is saying, oh dear, I didn't realize that was going to happen. God uses even men's sin for his purposes and nothing will stop him building his church.

[24:01] we pray that, well we pray that God will increase his church and bless his church. It's in his hands and in his hands are all the economies and I have to say, if we are thinking that the West is always going to be stable because, well, it just always is stable and we'll never have catastrophes and upsets like they did in ancient days.

I'm afraid we're a bit wrong on that, aren't we? God brought about huge, tumultuous changes in the fortunes of empires, not least the Roman Empire. There's no guarantee that he will bless our Western secular world.

He has been merciful to our world, for our society for so long and we have been as a society so ungrateful. There's no particular reason why God should say, oh, well, I'll keep you all going safely forever.

Anyway, I just offer that whatever happens it's in the hands of God. That was the power of Cyrus. Third thing, the status of Cyrus. So let's come back to Cyrus in Isaiah 44 and let's stop on that word that I jumped over before, chapter 45 now, verse 1.

This is what the Lord says to his anointed. Now, those of you who know your Bibles will probably have some little lights flashing there because anointed is the word for Messiah.

[25:46] It's not used a great deal actually in the Bible but it's certainly used here. Here's Cyrus, my anointed, my Messiah.

That's in Hebrew, Messiah. And you know what the equivalent Greek word is for Messiah, don't you? It's Christ. So let's retranslate it again.

Here is Messiah, sorry, here is Cyrus, the Christ. and you say, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, that can't be right.

That's what it says. In Isaiah, it's this word Messiah is used in another place. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He's made me the Christ to preach good news to the poor. And you think, ah, I remember that because that one it specifically says that's to do with Jesus. He's the Christ.

[26:46] So, yeah, fair enough. But we have a problem here, don't we, with Cyrus because it says here he's the Christ. So, just pause for breath. One thing this shows is the way these servants, actually, they sort of overlap and they blur into one another in some sort of way.

It does say, Cyrus is the Christ, but you're going to say, no, that's unacceptable. This foreign, pagan, unbelieving, ignorant, unregenerate person can't possibly be the Lord's Christ. It's unacceptable. And I'm sure the original readers thought that because Isaiah comes back at them in verse 9. chapter 45, verse 9, God says, what I'm doing, making this foreigner my Christ, I know what I'm doing.

And it is not an unclean thing to do. He several times says that this is a work of righteousness. But then he says to the people who are objecting, verse 9, woe to him who quarrels with his maker, to him who is but a pot sherd among the pot sherds on the ground.

I think a sherd is a little splinter, isn't it? It's like a splinter off a pot. Does the clay say to the potter, what are you making? And does your work say he has no hands or no handles?

[28:22] It's like saying, God is the potter, he makes what he wants, and what right is the clay to say, no, that's unacceptable, you can't do that. But God says, that's what you're doing.

If you're telling me I can't use Cyrus, if you're telling me that's unacceptable, who are you to say that? I can do whatever I want. Does the clay say to the potter, you're incompetent?

And in 46, verse 15, I think this is a reference to the same thing. Truly, sorry, 45, verse 15. Got my numbers wrong. 45, verse 15.

Truly, you are a God who hides yourself, O God and Saviour of Israel. In other words, this sovereign God, sometimes you can't quite see how he's working.

Have you ever noticed that? you can't quite see how he's working. And if you'd looked at Cyrus, you would, and somebody had said, what do you think God's doing through him?

[29:32] You'd say, I don't know. God is working through Cyrus and it becomes clear in the end that he says, you're a God who hides yourself.

God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps on the sea and rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable minds of never-failing skill, he treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will. And the text is just repeating and repeating.

God is so clever, he is so subtle, he can make things work in a completely different way than you thought, but he's at work.

God's ways are subtle and victorious. Let me just come back one thing about this Messiah. And this third point was the status of Cyrus.

[30:32] He's the Lord's anointed. So let me come back on this Messiah thing. He is the Messiah. He said he's the Messiah. He's the anointed one.

And he in many ways fits the pattern of Messiah. So just to give you a few bullet points on what a Messiah is like, verse 44, verse 4, no, I think I've, end of verse 4, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honour.

I think this idea of choosing the Messiah, he's empowered over the nations, chapter 45, verse 1, I take your right hand to subdue nations.

So he has international power. The Messiah brings redemption for God's people and judgment on his enemies. I subdue nations and I do this for the sake of my, for the sake of Jacob, my servant. and in the working of Messiah, the real power behind this Messiah is the Lord. Now that's what, that's true about Messiah.

[31:46] It's true about when we say Jesus is the Christ. That pattern fits. He's the Lord's chosen one. He's given all authority in heaven and earth over all nations.

He's the one who brings redemption for God's people and judgment on his enemies. And through him, the real person that's acting is the Lord. So Cyrus fits the pattern, but, and there is always a but.

Did I write a but? Yes I did. There is always a but. If there isn't a but, you've got the real thing. The only person of whom there isn't a but is Jesus. This Messiah, the but, is, all he can sort out is the geography.

What Messiah Cyrus does is enact a decree so that the exiles in Babylon go back to their home country.

He says, this is my decree, they're to go home, sign Cyrus, stamped with a stamp or whatever it is and off they go. And he can bring them back into their land. He can sort out the geography which is great, but he can't do the heart.

[33:10] Travelling from Babylon to Palestine doesn't change your heart. If you get travel sick, it might change your stomach, but it doesn't change your heart, does it? And the real Messiah we want is one who can not only bring people home, but transform people.

And Cyrus can't do that. So he's sort of the Messiah up to a point, but we still need the real Messiah. And I want to commend Jesus, the Messiah, to you because he truly can deal with that matter of the heart.

people who come to Jesus are born again. And Jesus made it very clear, you must be born again. So this is not just moving home, it's not just geography, and it's not just external, it's in the heart. Only Jesus can do that.

and I commend Jesus to you. If you're not a Christian, what you need is that change that only that Messiah can do.

[34:28] So let me add on one thing about Babylon, because I need to say something about Babylon. I said three things about Cyrus, and I'm going to put in something about Babylon. Babylon is the place of darkness, distance, and dungeon.

So there's the worm servant. Worm? No? And Babylon, the place of the Tower of Babel, by the waters of Babylon, and it's depicted as a place of chains, and a place of darkness.

Now, whether actually they were all in chains, I don't think they were. Some of them planted houses, planted houses, built houses, planted vineyards, but metaphorically it's a place of imprisonment, and it's a place of darkness.

And one of the things that Cyrus does is defeat Babylon. And I want just to point out to you some of the things about Babylon.

47.8. Babylon said, I am and there is none beside me. I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.

[35:38] To say, I am and there is none beside me, that's what Babylon said. That sounds very like what God says only of himself, isn't it?

And the pride of Babylon, as she thought she was a god. And she trusted in her own power and wisdom. That's in 47.10.

You've trusted in your wickedness. You've said, no one sees me. Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you when you say to yourself, I am and there is none besides me.

I think some politicians say, no one sees me. I can say what I want and I can contradict it and no one notices, no one sees that.

But God sees, doesn't he? God sees what we have said. God sees and we're accountable to him. And this Babylon felt nobody was watching.

[36:41] He wasn't accountable to anybody. And Babylon will be brought down, 47.11. Disaster will come upon you. And Cyrus is going to be the one that God uses.

And Babylon, this place where the exiles were, this place that will be brought down, is significant to New Testament Christians. Babylon is the place where God temporarily puts his people when he's scattered them.

But the thing about Babylon and the people of God is as soon as they have the opportunity to go, they will go. And that's why in 48.20, and we get a few texts like this, it says, 48.20, leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians.

That's what it's all about, bringing people back home. And the people in Babylon, as soon as they had the opportunity to come home, God says, you want to take that.

Because you don't belong in Babylon, you belong in Zion. And the New Testament uses that same logic to address us as we are now.

[38:05] Peter says to the Christians in the Roman Empire, you are God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout the regions of Pontus, Bithynia, etc., etc.

But you are exiles, he says, you are scattered. You are in the same situation as those exiles in Babylon. Babylon. You live there, you work there, you seek the welfare of the society that you are in, but you don't let it capture you.

You don't become Babylonish yourself. And Peter will go on to say, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.

you'll say, you need all the time you live in the place that you live to remember there is a God. He is the Almighty.

He is the Holy One. And you can't let Babylon dictate to you how you live. And that is so important because Babylon won't seem like Babylon.

[39:17] It won't have, oh by the way, this is Babylon written on it. So, for us as believing people, we will be engaged in a struggle to live not as Babylon people, but to live with hearts set somewhere else.

And that struggle will involve us when we're choosing what to watch on Netflix, when we're choosing what media to consume, when we're choosing our career choices, when we're choosing the hours that we work, when we're choosing whether when we get up we're going to first read our Bibles or whether we're going to do something else.

All these little itty-bitty choices spell out whether we belong to Babylon or whether actually our hearts belong somewhere else. Be holy as I am holy, says Peter to the exiles.

Remember, your true identity is holiness, not Babylonishness. We're in Babylon, but we don't belong to Babylon, or as Jesus said, you're in the world, but not of the world, and we're to live as citizens of another country.

Paul says the same sort of thing to the Christians in Corinth, and for them I expect the pressures were a little bit more obvious. they were invited to join in sacrifices at the pagan temples and join in with the idols there to fit in with the religion and spirituality of the culture they were in.

[40:56] And he quotes, not this exact text that I've got, but one like it, depart, depart, go out from there, touch no unclean thing, you who carry, I thought I corrected that, carry the vessels of the Lord.

It's addressed to Babylon, it says you're in Babylon, you have the opportunity to get out, you have the opportunity to take the things of God and get back where you belong in Zion and you have the opportunity to do that and not to get entangled with Babylon as if you say, well actually I quite like being here.

And Paul gives the same instructions to his people in Corinth, which we're receiving today. we live in a Babylon culture.

As soon as we have the opportunity to come out of it, let's get out of it. God has put us in this world until he comes or until we die. But we're not to get involved and enmeshed in the Babylon way of living.

Don't be contaminated by this ungodly world. And be ready to leave for home at a moment's notice. Let's sing together.

[42:16] Let's sing together.