

# The LORD and his servants

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[0:00] Well, if you're visiting, let me just explain. We've been going through the book of the prophet Isaiah, and we've got to chapter 41, which is read to us, and that's what we're going to look at this morning.

That's what we do as a church. We think what the Bible is saying and go through it. And these chapters are about the plan of God and the glory of God.

And they address quite fundamental questions, what sort of God is the true God? Can he be described?

Can he be praised? Is there a reason to praise him? Can he be known? And if so, how?

How can we know this God? Can he prove himself in any way? Can he demonstrate himself in any way? And the Bible is going to answer these questions, and it will say things like this.

[1:06] The God of the Bible has a name. A name is a description of the sort of person they are. In English, his name written down is Lord, L-O-R-D, and in English Bibles, the convention is to use capital letters because the equivalent in the original Hebrew is Yahweh, which means I am that I am, or something like that, or that I am.

That's the name of God, and he tells us what to associate with that name. He tells us that we can know him through what he says about himself, and through the way he does things.

And both of those things are needed. He's a God who acts, and he's a God who speaks. If he only acted and didn't explain in words, then we wouldn't know really the meaning of the actions.

If he didn't do anything but just spoke, we would wonder whether his words had any fullness or any power.

But the God of the Bible is a God who speaks, and a God who acts, and a God who therefore reveals himself so that we can see who he is, and relate to him in faith, and praise him because we see the sort of God he is.

[2:33] And in the chapters that we're looking at, and onwards from there as well, because these themes go on over quite a number of chapters, the God of the Bible is challenging the pretend gods, the idols, and says, look, let's argue this out.

Which of us is really God? Which of us really speaks? Which of us really does anything? And in particular, which of us can tell the future and then it actually happens.

There's a sort of contest going on between God and idols. You see in chapter 41, verse 1, Be silent before me, you islands.

Let the nations renew their strength. Let them come forward and speak. Let us meet together at the place of judgment. Let's work this out together. Or chapter 41, verse 21, Present your case, says the Lord.

Set forth your arguments, says Jacob's king. Bring in your idols to tell us what's going to happen. Let me paint a little bit of the plot of what's happening.

[3:48] If you watch things on the telly, quite often the plot gets quite long and complicated and goes on through episode after episode. And here we're in the middle of a plot.

Things are happening. Let me try and, without taking up too much, I'll just tell you where the plot line is going. The Lord has made promises to his people Israel.

And he's made these promises actually from way back before they were even a people, when there was just Abraham. And the promises say, I'm going to use this one nation to bless the whole world.

They're going to be a blessing to the whole world. And they will be a blessed people, a holy people.

They will have their own place. And it's put as a land and a beautiful city. That's what the terms in which the promise of God is made as it speaks into this world and into this world's history.

[4:51] But, at the time of Isaiah the prophet, Israel is totally failing to be a blessing to the nations.

She is totally failing to be a holy nation and a godly nation. Instead, she is being like the other nations around, the pagan nations.

She has idols. She has superstitions. She does fortune-telling, etc., etc. And instead of being loyal to her god, she is disloyal. So, God says, and he says it very, very patiently, over many, many hundreds of years, if you're not going to be loyal to me, you cannot enjoy the blessings of the security of having your own home and place and city.

And in the end, God says enough is enough and he expels them from their land. He has their city and their temple destroyed. And he sends them far away to a distant, strange land, the land of Babylon.

And that's part of Israelite history. You can read that on Wikipedia. For the people who end up in exile, and those are the people that Isaiah is addressing his writing to at this point, they must have all sorts of questions.

[6:10] Does this prevent that original purpose and plan of God?

Have we managed to stop God doing the thing that he said he'd do to bless the whole world through the seed of Abraham? Does this sin stop God doing what he said he'd do?

Does the power of Babylon stop God doing what he said he'd do? It's a question. And the answer is going to be, the God of the Bible is not stopped by anything or anybody.

He's not even stopped by the sin of his people. And he's certainly not stopped by the powers of Babylon or any other power. That's a truth about God.

It's a truth about his plan of salvation. If you're one of his people, he won't even let your sin stop him saving you. That's an amazing thought, isn't it?

[7:18] He has so planned that he said, I will bring that person to heaven and I will open their eyes, I will change their hearts, I will give them faith, I will bring them to myself and I will keep them and nothing will stop me fulfilling my promises.

And in the New Testament, gone on several hundreds of years now, that the Apostle Paul could say, this is absolutely something we know. And he will say something, he will say this exactly, I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's the determination and the strength of God's promises. And as Christian people, we're beneficiaries of that. It's a wonderful thing, isn't it? Isn't it? I think it is.

So let's go back into the particular plot line in Isaiah's time. Let me tell you about the participants, the players in this.

So there is the nation of Israel, one of the players in the drama. She has the promises, she has the destiny, but she fails to obey and in many ways fails to even perceive.

[9:01] And she's said to be blind and deaf and hard of heart. And that's Israel. What's God going to do about that?

I'm tempted to make a connection with Brexit. You think Mrs. May has a hard time fulfilling all the plans and promises and making it all work out for good in the end.

God has an even harder time. Look at what he's got to put up with. The nation of Israel, so they're hard. The nations, that's Syria, Babylon, all the other nations, they are intimidating God's people. They attack God's people. They make God's people afraid. They are defiant against God and his people. So Assyria, do you remember the field commander?

Don't trust the God of Israel. Do you remember him saying that? You know, I can smash him down the way I've smashed down all the other gods. and the nations that tempt God's people to trust in them instead of God.

[10:08] Do you remember Egypt coming to Israel saying, look, don't trust God. Don't have prayer meetings. Buy horses. You buy horses from us. You'll be strong and safe.

So that's a problem. And, notice this, as God has said that he will bless the nations. He will bring the nations to worship the God of Israel. How's he going to do that? Let's bring in another player. The idols. Now, the idols are the false gods of the nations. And, actually, Israel has been tempted to have idols and she, that's, something, that's a, a bad path that she's gone down to copy the nations in having idols.

They are created, they're powerless, they're ridiculous, and yet, they get worshipped. Anybody been to a Hindu country as a tourist and seen all the, the Hindu idols, sort of carved, literally, and people worshipped them.

How ridiculous. And then, as we shall see, as we look into these chapters, we have people, agents, that God uses.

[11:23] And there's a certain amount of mystery about this because God says, I do this alone and yet, he uses people or something. He uses the agents of the Lord and we shall find his servants.

And the question is raised, how many servants is he talking about? Has he got one servant? Several servants? One major servant? How does that all work out? And I'm afraid, I'm not going to give you all the answers to that because I think Isaiah wants us to think about it before he gives us the answer.

And the final player in this drama, of course, is the Lord himself. And he insists that he is not to be left out of this because he says, don't you know I am the creator?

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth and its people are like grasshoppers.

He stretches out the heavens like a canopy. This is the Lord, the creator and he calls himself the holy, the holy one and he calls himself the king and he calls himself the redeemer and of course he is the speaker because all flesh is as grass but the word of the Lord stands forever.

[12:47] Well, those are the players that we shall see interacting as we go through and this is the end game so if Brexit means Brexit, salvation means salvation, this is where it gets to.

The Lord will definitely ensure that his people Israel are brought back but it may be just a remnant of them but that will be still a fulfillment of that. The nations will be brought to God, the idols will be disgraced, the enemies of God and his people will be defeated, the Lord will be shown to be just as glorious as he says he is and he'll make that all happen and somewhere in the mix of how he does this is this servant who we're going to find described in these chapters and he's somehow the key to it all.

Okay, so I've sort of set the scene, it's taken a little bit of time to do that. Let's look at the servants of the Lord in, I think they're mysterious but let's look, 41 verse 2, who has stirred up one from the east calling him in righteousness to his service.

He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow. He pursues them and moves on unscathed by a path his feet have not traveled before.

Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning. I the Lord with the first of them and with the last I am he. And so who's this servant?

[14:28] Rather mysterious. He comes from the east. So that could be, he's talking about Abraham, he came from the east. Could be talking about Babylon, he comes from the east.

Could be talking about Persia, because Persia's in the east. This person comes from the east and he scatters. He scatters, what does he scatter? He turns them to dust.

He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him, turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow. So this person comes along and smashes his way through the nations.

Bang, bang, like that. And we ask, who is this servant? And we're actually not told. I can't see an answer. All the commentators say they're not quite sure who it is.

But one thing we are told is who is behind this person? And that is where the focus goes. Who calls him to serve?

[15:26] And the Lord says, make no mistake about this. It's me. End of verse 4. I, the Lord, with the first of them and with the last, I am he.

So the question was, who called him? Who sent him? Who helps him? And the answer from the Lord is, you don't know quite who it is, but be absolutely sure of this.

I'm totally behind this person. I'm the one who planned this and I'm the one who calls this person to serve. And we learn that whoever this servant might be, whoever this personage might be, the Lord God, sovereignly, meaning to say he didn't ask anybody's permission and nobody can stop him doing it.

The Lord God lifts this person, propels this person, gives him victory and the Lord is behind that. I think we can take comfort from this in our given, in our political situation that it's not, our political situation at the moment is not out of the Lord's hands.

He lifts up one nation, he brings down another, he sends a king this way, he sends an emperor that way, he sends a prime minister this way and a president that way. He has all the nations in his hands.

[16:43] So we can take comfort from that. And that victorious servant will, I think, crop up again, but we'll just move on from there. And look at another servant. Verse 8.

You notice that we've passed over the verses in which the idols are mentioned. The craftsman encouraging, the goldsmith, and the one who smooths with the hammer is making an idol.

Anyway, we pass by over that. Verse 8. Here's another servant. But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham, my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its furthest corners, I called you.

You are my servant. I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you.

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Did anybody spot the connection with the hymn that we sang? Yeah? We sang that, didn't we?

[17:51] I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand. That's what the writer was quoting. So we sang that to one another. He said, this applies to you, Tim Flood, and applies to you, Martin, because he was there singing it, and it applies to all of us.

I'd be interested to see how the passage goes on. All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced. All who oppose you will be as nothing and perish. Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them.

Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all, for I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand, who says to you, do not fear, I will help you.

Do not be afraid, O worm, Jacob. Ah, this servant is a worm. So that's us, apparently. I myself will help you, declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.

See, I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them. You will reduce the hills to chaff.

[18:59] You will winnow them. The wind will pick them up. A gale will blow them away. You will rejoice in the Lord and glory in the Holy One of Israel. So here is, I think, a different servant.

Maybe it's the same, but it seems to be different. And we're told, specifically, who this servant is. This is Israel. This is the nation, the people of God in the Old Testament there.

Jacob, whom I have chosen. And they, too, have come from the furthest corners. Of course, Abraham did come from Ur of the Chaldees over there.

And God's people were brought out of Egypt. So that was one corner of the earth. And in future, they'll be brought from Babylon. So maybe that's the reference there.

And this servant is chosen, verse 9. I have chosen you and not redacted you. And this servant is encouraged. I am with you.

[20:01] Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you and uphold you by my righteous right hand. And the thing that we're now told about Israel is Israel.

Israel is a worm. A little, wiggly, squashy, vulnerable creature with no power at all.

You wouldn't be afraid of a worm, would you? If a worm challenged you to a duel, you wouldn't be that worried, would you? You wouldn't... This servant is such a feeble, wiggly, vulnerable, that's how

this servant is depicted.

And you sang this to one another a little while ago. But what God says is I'm going to make this worm into a weapon. Verse 14. Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, for I will help you.

Verse 15. I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them and reduce the hills to chaff. It's an amazing thing, isn't it?

[21:11] God using the weak and the vulnerable and the small and the wiggly to work out mighty purposes, to do strong things.

That's what God's saying here. He transforms the worm into a weapon. And then in a similar vein in verse 17 and onwards, he transforms the desert wanderer into a garden dweller.

The poor and needy search for water, there is none. Their tongues are parched with thirst, but I, the Lord, will answer them. I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.

I will make rivers flow on barren heights and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into springs. I will put in the desert the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive.

I will set pines in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together, that they may see and know and consider and understand that the hand of the Lord has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it.

[22:17] So there's God saying, this is one of the things that I demonstrate. I take these poor, wiggly people and make them into something and I take the desert that they live in and make it a garden and that's me doing these redemptive things.

Fear not, I am with you, O worm Jacob. I don't know whether you feel at all, I hope you don't feel insulted by being referred to as a worm but personally I'd be quite glad to be called a worm if I knew God was with me and that's what it says here.

Fear not, O worm Jacob, I am with you. That would be a good place to be, wouldn't it? That would be a good place to be. The worm servant. Let's look now at another servant, verse 25.

Again, the idols in the intervening verses said, come on idols, you idols of the nations, you show us what you can do. Of course, they can't do a thing. Now that we come to the servant from the north, verse 25, I have stirred up one from the north and he comes, one from the rising sun who calls on my name.

He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if a potter treading the clay. Who told of this from the beginning so that we could know or beforehand so that we could say he was right?

[23:48] So again, we're not told who this servant is. As such, don't think we are. This one is from the north. He sounds like the servant from the east, actually.

Who is he? Well, we're not particularly told. But, God says, now who foretold this? You see, the emphasis comes on God and his sovereignty. Who foretold this?

Who planned it? Who told you ahead of time? Let's see what the idols say. Have you got anything to say, idols, about this? Nothing. Idols are rubbish.

The Lord foretells this and he makes a big point of it, doesn't he? No one told of this. No one foretold it. No one heard any words from you.

Verse 27, I was the first to tell Zion, look, here they are. I gave to Jerusalem a messenger of good tidings. I look, but there is no one, no one among them to give counsel, no one to give an answer when I ask them.

[24:48] They're all false. Their deeds amount to nothing. Their images about wind and confusion. Here is my servant. Let's come on to that in a moment. I hadn't realized when it says good tidings, verse 27, good tidings, means good news.

I have no idea why the NIV uses the word tidings. We don't use the word tidings. I don't think we do. Good news. We read that in Isaiah 40, good news of comfort.

It's more or less the first place in the Bible where good news is used in that sense. It's a totally new thing. And in the New Testament, when they look back and say, say good news, let's find out what Isaiah said about that because he was the one who told us about that.

And here it is in verse 27. I have invented this, says God, this good news. And I am telling you, and the idols are rubbish at this. So let's move on.

The Lord is in the business of planning the end from the beginning and all the days in between. That's one of the great things about God. He knows the end from the beginning.

[26:06] We don't, do we? But he does. Worth noticing that. He knows what's going to happen to your kids when they grow up. He knows what old age holds for you and me.

He knows what's going to happen to the church that's based here in the years to come. He knows what will happen to the gospel in the United Kingdom. He knows what will happen to post-Christian Europe.

He knows what he's doing and what he will do in China. He knows what he will do to Islam as he did to communism. He knows these things. He knows the end from the beginning and we trust him.

That's what we're supposed to do. Let's come to Isaiah 42. And here is a servant. Now this servant is the ideal servant. 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. Now what's that justice? Does this mean he's going to squash the nations because that's just or does he mean the nations are going to start acting justly?

[27:18] Well, we'll find out. He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break.

A smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice. He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.

In his word or in his law the islands islands in this case does not mean Isle of Wight it means continents. It means Europe, Asia, Australasia.

In his law the islands the continents will put their hope. So this is I think a different servant. It doesn't yet become clear but he is I think a different servant.

This servant has the spirit of the Lord on him. And this servant is obviously the one who sorts out the nations. So when God sorts out the nations he uses this servant to do it.

[28:28] Very interesting. Who's this person going to be? What's he going to look like? And against the kings who seem to be the kings who just go forward smashing things to pieces you know bang, bang.

this servant seems to be remarkably self-effacing and quiet doesn't he? Yes? He does not shout or cry out a bruised reed he will not break a smouldering wick he will not snuff out extraordinarily gentle extraordinarily gentle he doesn't squash worms incidentally a bruised reed he will not break but he's going to do this for the nations how is he going to do it I cannot tell how he will win the nations but he will anyway that's what it says here and he will be modest and kind and successful and who's behind him?

Well verse 5 this is what God the Lord says he who created the heavens and stretches them out who spread out the earth and all that comes from it that gives breath to its people and life to those who walk on it I the Lord have called you in righteousness I will take hold of your hand I will keep you and make you a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles so extraordinary what this servant is going to achieve a covenant for the people a light for the Gentiles and whereas my Israel servant my worm servant who we'll find out later is actually deaf and blind this servant is going to open the eyes that are blind and whereas the servant Israel ends up in captivity in the dungeon of Babylon this servant will free captives from prison and release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness their darkness shut away from the light of the knowledge of the Lord and this servant will release them and this is what

God says I'm going to make sure this happens I am the Lord that is my name I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols the former things have taken place new things I declare before they spring into being I'm telling you God's ability to foretell what's going to happen he says test me on this you idols what's going to happen nothing ask the Lord what's going to happen he'll tell you this is my plan I'm going to make it happen and it'll twist round about and there'll be lots of surprises but things will become clear and you'll see I did that he's going to open up blind eyes he's going to send the captives home he's going to release the ones in darkness and God says I tell you it before it happens that's how you know I'm God and I am unique in this the idols are rubbish but the Lord the maker of heaven and earth knows the end from the beginning and let's this little section introducing these various servants comes to a conclusion with praise and you get these bouts of praise that pop up after various sections and various things have been said and in verse 10 it says sing to the

Lord a new song his praise from the ends of the earth you who go down to the sea and all that is in it so if you're going down to the beach this afternoon you should be singing this you who go down to the sea and all that is in it you islands you continents and all that lives within them let the desert and its cities raise their voices let the settlements where Kedar lives rejoice it's going to go through a whole lot of things and says you should all be praising God praise the Lord for what he will achieve praise the Lord that he has planned and foretold it when no one else had any idea at all now then who are these servants well I leave it as a bit of a mystery as Isaiah does but I can give you a partial answer because we had this quote now just put your finger in that quote Isaiah 42 and get another finger into

[32:46] Matthew's gospel and it's in chapter 12 so if you've got a phone you need two phones to do this our lodger used to say the only people she knew had two phones were drug dealers so a bible and a phone maybe but two things to look at a bruised reed he will not break a smouldering wick he will not snuff out in faithfulness he will bring forth justice he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth justice meaning royal righteousness and compare Matthew 12 from verse 15 and here is

Jesus of Nazareth walking around in the towns and cities those hundreds of years later people plotted to kill him and in Matthew 12 verse 15 aware of this Jesus withdrew from that place many followed him he healed all their sick warning them not to tell who he was this was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah here is my servant whom I have chosen!

the one I love in whom I delight I will put my spirit on him he will proclaim justice to the nations he will not quarrel or cry out no one will hear his voice in the streets a bruised reed he will not break a smoldering wick he will not snuff out till he leads justice to victory in his name the nations will put their hope isn't that wonderful isn't that wonderful this much at least is clear that of those various servants one of them at least is Jesus and he is the key servant he's the one who brings all those various conflicting and puzzling and amazing promises to fruition isn't he brilliant he's the one who solves the riddle he's the one who concludes the negotiation he's the one who does the deal he's the one who makes it all right and the

Lord says I'm sending him and my praise I give to no one else the idols never told you this but I did and I think we should worship so wise and great a God he's so different from anything else the world has to offer he is so much greater and I think we should rejoice in Jesus as the secret key to God's saving plan we'll find out that this sort of secret weapon was hidden in the Lord's hand and then brought out and then he does all this and the apostle Paul would say this mystery long held people didn't understand is that Christ Jesus is the one through whom the nations are one and isn't he great he's so modest and gentle and he suffered so greatly but he's so powerful to bring all the nations to us and that's us different nationalities here this morning and I want to advertise to you whatever your nationality or ethnicity he's the saviour for you he's the one who's come for you he's the one that you need to say yes to him unreservedly yes whatever you say  
Lord come to know Jesus he is the wisdom of God God