

The Servant Songs: The Servant for All

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[0:00] We're going to read again from the Bible, God's Word, the Old Testament section. We're going to read from the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 48, verse 17, through to chapter 49, verse 6.

Now let's pray and ask for God's help as we turn to His Word to read it and listen to it.

Everlasting Lord, you are righteous, and so your law is righteous and true and fully trustworthy.

Give us understanding of your statutes. May we not forget or ignore what you say to us.

Instead, help us to love and obey your instructions. We thank you, Lord, that you are good and upright, and you reveal your way to the humble. So we humbly ask that you would open our eyes, that we may see wonderful things in your law, and we do so in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. So it's Isaiah, chapter 48, verse 17. Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go.

[1:38] Oh, that you had paid attention to my commandments. Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. Your offspring would have been like the sand, and your descendants like its grains.

Their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me. Go out from Babylon. Flee from Chaldea.

Declare this with a shout of joy. Proclaim it. Send it out to the ends of the earth. Say, the Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob. They did not thirst when He led them through the deserts.

He made water flow for them from the rock. He split the rock, and the water gushed out. There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked. Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar.

The Lord called me from the womb. From the body of my mother He named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword. In the shadow of His hand He hid me.

[2:44] He made me a polished arrow. In His quiver He hid me away. And He said to me, You are my servant, Israel in whom I will be glorified. But I said, I've labored in vain.

I've spent my strength for nothing and vanity. Yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God. And now the Lord says, He who formed me from the womb to be a servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him.

For I am honored in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has become my strength. He says, It is too light a thing that you should be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to bring back the preserved of Israel.

I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth. Amen.

The story is told of the young student minister, and it wasn't me that the story was told about, who turned up to preach in a country church one very snowy Sunday morning.

And he found that there was only one person there in the congregation, and he was an old farmer. What do you want me to do?

[4:14] The student minister asked. Well, your reverence, the old farmer replied, This morning when I went out with my bucket of chicken meal to feed my hens, because of the weather, only one turned up.

But I still fed her. Okay, got it, responded the student minister, and then proceeded to go through the whole service.

Singings, prayer, sermon, you know, the full Scottish breakfast. Your reverence, said the old farmer on the way out.

When I said that I still fed her, I didn't mean that I gave her the whole bucket. Isaiah doesn't do what that student minister did.

He doesn't dump everything he wants to say about the servant of the Lord in one poem. Instead, he spreads it out.

[5:20] He rolls out the information that we need to know about Jesus, the servant of the Lord, and all he achieved, and how he achieved it, in four poems, one poem at a time.

And a couple of weeks ago, when we looked at the first servant song in Isaiah 42, 1-9, it focused on the servant's identity. We discovered how competent and delightful and different and successful the servant is.

And tonight, we want to focus on Isaiah 49, verses 1-7, the second servant song. And it rolls out something else about the servant.

It talks about the servant's mission, what he would get up to. And I want us to notice a few things about the servant's mission that this second servant song tells us.

Here's the first thing it tells us. It talks about the servant we need. The servant we need. Now, the scope of the servant's mission is set out in verses 5 and 6 of Isaiah 49.

[6:30] And as one commentator put it, it's no small potatoes. God wants them, you'll see there, first of all, to be involved in restoring work.

Sorry, I'm not using the ESV. I'm using the NIV. But you'll get it. In restoring work, verse 5, to bring Jacob back to himself and to gather Israel to himself.

But God thinks that that's too small a thing. It's not grand enough for someone like Jesus. So he wants him also to be involved in rescuing work, verse 6, to be a light to the Gentiles and to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

So the servant's mission is going to have a global, worldwide reach to it. Because Jesus is going to meet the needs not of one specific ethnic group of people, the Jews, living in one specific location and at one specific time.

But Jesus' mission is to meet the needs of everyone living everywhere at all times. Now, you see the servant's mission has this global reach because, first of all, everyone everywhere needs Jesus restoring work.

[8:03] What was it that the Jewish people to whom Isaiah was speaking needed they needed restoration? They were far away from their home in Judah.

They were in exile in Babylon hundreds of miles away. And as the start of verse 18 of Isaiah 48 implies, they were there because of their refusal to do what God wanted them to do.

God, sort of, in a moment of anguish almost, says, oh, that you had paid attention to my commandments. But they hadn't paid attention to what God wanted them to do.

And they thought that doing what they wanted to do would bring them satisfaction and well-being.

But as verses 18 and 22 of Isaiah 48 point out, it hadn't brought them any peace.

It had robbed them of their peace. There is no peace for the wicked. If you'd obeyed me, God says, your peace would have been like a river. But it wasn't.

[9:15] In Babylon, they were alienated from God. They were eaten up with anxiety and dissatisfaction. However, through Isaiah, God promises that he will repatriate them to their home, bringing them back to Judah from exile in Babylon.

And in the chapters in between the first two servant songs, God says that this physical, political restoration will be spearheaded by a Persian king called Cyrus who would defeat the Babylonians militarily and create the right political environment to allow this restoration back home to Judah.

And if you want to read about it, you can read about it in the book of Ezra. But God's plan was not primarily to bring his people back from a geographical exile in Babylon.

But God's plan was the servant would bring his people back to him, to God himself. You see, a physical restoration to Judah wouldn't be of any value at all if there wasn't a spiritual restoration to God.

As long as the people themselves were not changed, all the coming home would do would be to relocate the problem of their alienation from God.

[10:48] They would still be far away from God. They would still not experience satisfaction and well-being if their hearts were not changed. changed. They needed to be restored spiritually to God much more than they needed to be restored physically to their land.

And the second servant song tells us that the servant of the Lord would do just that. Verse 5, he would bring Jacob back to God and gather Israel to God.

He would bring them out of spiritual exile and spiritually restore them to God. But Jesus restoring work has to go global and nationwide and worldwide rather because everyone everywhere is just like the Jews to whom Isaiah was speaking.

we're all very aware of all the physical issues that bring dissatisfaction and anxiety and deprive us of our well-being.

You just have to open your news feed and your phone and you see what it is. But do we understand where the real issue lies?

[12 : 11] we often think of our problems as being physical. You know that we're in the wrong place or in the wrong job or in the wrong relationship or in the wrong church or even today in the wrong body.

But our problem is that we are in the wrong place spiritually. That we're far away from God and we're in spiritual exile.

Our need is not of that of political liberation or economic relief or social freedom to break off from the constraints of the past.

We need spiritual restoration to God. Like the Jews to whom Isaiah was speaking, we too imagine that ours is simply a physical problem, our location, our situation, our circumstances.

But God sees that our biggest problem is our sin. And in his love and mercy towards us, he sent Jesus, his son, the servant of the Lord to carry out this spiritual restoring work in our lives.

[13 : 34] He brought us back to himself, as we'll probably see in the fourth servant song, by means of Jesus' death, that through trusting in Jesus, we enjoy God's blessing instead of his judgment and his peace and well-being instead of anxiety and dissatisfaction.

mission. But the servant's mission has a global and worldwide reach, not just because everyone everywhere needs Jesus restoring work, but everyone everywhere needs Jesus rescuing work.

Let me ask you this. Normally, I know it's a wee bit different than Tuesday with the eclipse of the sun, but normally, when do you switch the light on?

Not a trick question. When it's dark. When it's dark. Verse 6, if the servant of the Lord is going to bring light, it implies that the people to whom he will bring light, are in darkness.

You don't need to bring light if there is light, but you need to bring light if there's darkness. Now, throughout the Bible, darkness is a symbol of God's judgment.

[15 : 00] Think of the ten plagues, what we call the ten plagues, God's judgment on Egypt and our gods for Pharaoh's refusal to let his people go.

what was the ninth plague? The ninth plague was that Egypt was enveloped in a thick darkness that could be felt.

You can read about it in Exodus 10, 21 to 29. Think of Jesus' death on the cross as he bears God's judgment for our sins.

What happened between noon and three in the afternoon on the first Good Friday? Answer, the land was blanketed in deep darkness.

Mark 15 33. It wasn't a solar eclipse apart from the fact that it didn't last as long, much longer than a normal solar eclipse.

[15 : 58] The world record for a solar eclipse is 11 minutes, not three hours. But at Passover time, the sun and the moon and the earth are not in the right alignment as they were on Tuesday for a total eclipse.

It was a sign of God's judgment in Jesus as he bore our sin. So people who need light in their darkness are people who are under the judgment of God.

In the second part of Romans chapter 1, Paul describes a world that is under God's judgment. It's a world in which people's thinking becomes more and more illogical and irrational and bizarre.

And listen to the word picture Paul uses to describe this way of thinking which increasingly ignores the obvious. Romans 1, verse 21, their thinking becomes futile and their foolish hearts are darkened.

And then Paul starts to outline how this sort of darkened thinking leads to dark behavior as all sorts of nasty and horrible and selfish and distorted and harmful actions and attitudes and words rear their ugly heads.

[17 : 25] But if you read Romans 1, the second bit of it from verse 18 to the end of the chapter, what is most disturbing about what Paul writes is not this dark thinking and dark behavior.

What is most disturbing about what Paul writes is a phrase that he uses three times in Romans 1. It's in verse 24, 26, and 28, and it's the phrase, God gave them up. God gave them up. God gave them up. Those are chilling words, chilling words. This is God's response to a world that deliberately chooses intellectual and moral darkness over the light of God's truth and righteousness.

God basically says, okay, if that's the way you want it, then have it your own way. And when God says that, it should make us afraid, very afraid.

People will sometimes say to me, all that's going on in the world today is bound to lead to God's judgment. But do you see what Paul is saying about the darkness?

[18:50] darkness? He says that all this dark way of thinking that results in this downward spiral of dark actions and attitudes and words is God's judgment already happening.

thinking. And when we read Romans 1, we realize that Paul is not simply describing his world. He's talking about our world at the start of the 21st century.

we live in a world where people's thinking is dark, where people's actions and attitudes and words exhibit all the signs of darkness, a world that's under God's judgment, where people to whom and society to whom God has said, well, have it your own way.

And we need to be rescued from God's judgment. And that's exactly what Jesus does. He comes, John 8, verse 12, and he stands up and he says, I am the light of the world.

I am the light of the world. He steps into a world dominated by the darkness of our futile, foolish, thinking, and the darkness of our rebellious actions and attitudes and words.

[20:22] And he comes to die and he bears the judgment of God for our self-centered disobedience and he rescues us.

So no matter where we live, no matter who we are, we need someone who will restore us back to God and who will rescue us from God's judgment.

And Isaiah tells us that there is only one person qualified to do all this and that is Jesus, the servant of the Lord, the one that everyone, that you and I need.

So here we have the servant we need. Let's move on. second matter I want you to notice is this, it's the salvation we proclaim, the salvation we proclaim.

We're told in verse 2 of Isaiah 49, how the servant will do all this rescuing and restoring. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword and he made me into a polished arrow.

[21:32] Language like this is used in the New Testament about God's word in general and Jesus preaching in particular. The servant would be a preacher.

He wouldn't be a general, he wouldn't be a politician, he wouldn't be a social worker, he would be a preacher. So again and again when we read the gospels we hear Jesus announcing what he had come to do, that he had come to seek and to save the lost, Luke 19, 10.

And he tells everyone that this restoring and rescuing work would culminate in his death on the cross as he gave his life a ransom for many, Mark 10, 45.

Now as far as we can work out, Jesus did not travel too far or too often outside the geographical boundaries of first century Israel, what was known then as the Roman province of Judea.

And if that was the case then we ask the question, how did Jesus take his message of how he had come to restore people back to God and rescue people from God's judgment as the end of verse 6 of Isaiah forms us, to the ends of the earth.

[22:58] earth. So if he didn't travel outside the boundaries of Israel, how did he take it to the ends of the earth? How did he take it to Glasgow? How did he take it out to the Wild West and Argyll?

This is where we come into the frame because Jesus preaches through us as we proclaim the message of his salvation.

The expression the ends of the earth, does that not sound familiar? I'm sure it does. Acts 1 verse 8, according to Luke, the last words Jesus spoke before he went back into heaven, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

When he was preaching in a Jewish synagogue in a place called Pisidian Antioch, somewhere in southwest Turkey to us today, Paul says something quite astonishing.

In Acts 13 verse 47, he applies Isaiah 49 verse 6, what Isaiah 49 6 says about Jesus the servant of the Lord, he applies it to himself.

[24:21] And by implication also to us as well. And what he's basically saying there by applying Isaiah 49 verse 6 to Paul, to himself and to us, Paul is saying that when we, the servants of the

Lord, servants with a small s, proclaim the gospel, it's as if Jesus, the servant of the Lord, with a capital less, is proclaiming the gospel through us.

It's through us that Jesus brings his salvation to the ends of the earth. Here's how one writer puts it, the mission of the servant becomes the mission of the church. The servant who accomplishes the world's salvation by his death entrusts to us the mission of making his salvation known and bringing the good news to the ends of the earth.

We have a gospel to proclaim, good news to all the earth. Often, sometimes we can moan as Christians about being marginalized and neglected and things weren't like they used to be in the good old days, which probably weren't as good as we thought they were, but we can moan about that.

But hold on a minute, folks. Jesus, the servant of the Lord, has given us servants to the Lord with a small s, something absolutely glorious to do.

He's entrusted us with his message. He wants to speak to your world and my world through you and through me.

[26:05] He wants us to be involved with him and being the ones through whom our family and friends and neighbors and colleagues and community hear the good news so that people at the ends of the earth will fear him.

I wonder is Jesus' words being heard by, from your lips, is the integrity of Jesus' salvation being backed up by the servant-like humility and gentleness of your life.

We have a gospel to proclaim. Jesus wants to speak through us. That's a glorious thing, isn't it? I'll get you out of bed tomorrow morning to tell people about Jesus, to hear from you, and to see Jesus in your life.

There's a third matter here in the servant song. It's the success we experience. How will the servant's mission go?

Well, look at the end of verse 7, and it tells us it is going to be a roaring success. Something to sing and shout about. Kings will see and rise up to show their respect.

[27:28] Princes will see and bow down in honor. Jesus will be given global and worldwide worship. That's what's happening to date, isn't it?

There are people who've already worshipped Jesus and are tucked up in their bed in Australia. At least I hope they are. We're worshipping here, and there are people in the West who still haven't got to the morning service yet.

Global worship is given to Jesus. It's going to be a success. And what's the servant's success down to? We're told in verse 2, it's the potency of the words the servant uses to carry out his mission.

Jesus' words, Isaiah says, are like a sharpened sword and a polished arrow. Here's how one commentator puts it, the sharpness of a sword is its effectiveness.

A polished arrow is rubbed free from its roughness and unevenness which might deflect it in flight, hence its accuracy. The sword wins victories close at hand and the arrow hits distant targets.

[28:35] And this is what will bring us success as we proclaim the gospel, carrying out the mission that Jesus has assigned to us. As we tell people about Jesus and call them to worship him, that Jesus uses our words to restore people back to himself and to rescue them from God's judgment.

judgment. Now, I know that we live in a highly visual world. You know, Facebook is boring because it's all words basically.

Emails, well, they're something out of Jurassic Park because they're just all words. Instagram is becoming a bit boring. You know, if you have to be hip and happening, you've got to use TikTok because it's visual.

It's visual. So we live in this visual world in which we live. And sadly, in this visual world in which we live, image is usually more important than content.

Substance is less important than style. And in our seeing-as-believing world, we live, the world in which we live, it's more, people say it's more important to see something than to hear it.

[29:56] So most people think that low-key, low-tech, speaking the gospel, well, it's a waste of time. I wish I had had 20 pounds for every time somebody has told me in my years as a minister, oh, you really need to get a bit more visual, Roger, and get technologically advanced and just stop relying on preaching.

If I had been, they got 20 pounds for every time somebody told me that, I would have retired long ago to the Bahamas or somewhere nice like that. But, you know, that's what people say, oh, don't

use words.

You've got to use more than words. They need something bigger, bolder, with more appeal. I think we should put our fingers in our ears. We need to keep on speaking to people about Jesus because there's nothing more powerful and effective and success-bringing and potent with which to carry out our mission of restoring people back to God and rescuing people from God's judgment than the sharpened sword and polished arrow of God's word and Jesus speaking through us.

But I wonder if you've detected something else in the second servant song, something that runs alongside the experience we, the success we experience.

It's the struggles we encounter. The servant success, you'll notice, doesn't come without struggles. Verse 7, personally, he's deeply distressed and abhorred.

[31:41] His preaching is described in military battlefield terms in verse 2. I think it's Alec Mateer in his commentary on Isaiah calls it the warfare of the word.

You see, as he preached, Jesus was involved in a spiritual battle. He had to deal with people's superficial responses, the constant demand that he should do something spectacular to prove who he claimed to be, and even his disciples' slowness to grasp his mission.

And as the start of verse 4 indicates, all this took an emotional toll on Jesus. I have labored with no purpose. I have spent my strength in vain and on nothing.

I wonder if you find those words very strange at the best and perhaps even shocking. That Jesus would say, I've labored for no purpose. I've spent my strength in vain and on nothing.

But Jesus was not a robot. He wasn't a computer program that talked. As well as being God, having a fully divine nature, Jesus also was a real human being with a fully human nature.

[33:11] He wasn't, as a fully human, immune from, immune emotionally from angry rejection or blind unbelief or irrational prejudice or a logical misunderstanding that is preaching stirred up in those who listen to him.

in the face of all the opposition he encountered, Jesus often got very emotional, expressing disappointment or sadness and even anger.

And what's true of Jesus, the servant of the Lord, is true of us, Jesus followers, the servants of the servant of the Lord. Yes, we will experience success as we tell people about Jesus.

people will become Christians, people we prayed for, maybe for a long time, they'll be restored back to God and rescued from God's judgment and that encourages us and we praise God for that and it encourages us to speak more about Jesus.

But we'll also face opposition and struggles. We used to be ignored as Christians, sidelined as irrelevant, but now things are different.

[34:34] We're mocked and shamed. We used to be put down as do-gooders, but now we're the bad guys because of what we believe and how we live.

Things like prayer and forgiveness forgiveness and change from harmful ways of living to life-affirming ways of living, things that lie at the heart of the Christian gospel, forgiveness and prayer and conversion.

These things are now seen as being oppressive and are in danger of being made illegal. struggle.

This struggle we will encounter to fulfill Jesus' mission is a very real struggle and at times it's going to wear us down and it's going to take an emotional toll on us.

But there's one more matter we need to take on board from this second servant song and it's the strength we receive.

The struggle takes its emotional toll on the servant. That's what the first bit of verse 4 is about. I've labored in vain. I've spent my strength for nothing and in vanity.

[36:08] However, verse 4 is a verse of two halves and it pivots around the word yet. Yet. The servant's struggles are real yet he's not overwhelmed by them.

Yet surely my right is with the Lord and my recompense with my God. He looks to God to be his reward. He looks to God to strengthen him in the midst of his struggles.

He's the assurance that God will be faithful to him. Verse 7. He he's he's sure that God will do what he promised him.

We saw in the first sermon song a couple of weeks ago that God would uphold him by his spirit.

That God would grip him tight and strengthen him and help him and we will encounter struggles as Jesus did.

We mustn't forget that. I do like football. I do like football and you ladies will be thrilled to bits that today was the start of the football season but I like rugby more.

[37:31] I like rugby more. And we used to play rugby many years ago, decades ago, centuries ago. When I played rugby in training we played unopposed rugby.

Unopposed rugby. There was nobody in front of you. And I was really brilliant. I am really surprised I never got capped for Ireland when we played unopposed rugby.

But it was a different matter on a Saturday afternoon when somebody who was much larger than I came at me and ran over me, you know, the Maori sidestep, just straight over you.

Folks, I have met too many Christians who think the Christian life and witnessing for Jesus and service is unopposed rugby. It isn't. It isn't. It's a battle.

It's a warfare. Polished arrows, sharp swords. It's a battle. It's a struggle. And sometimes we will feel beat up emotionally by the opposition and the setbacks we face.

[38:37] Sometimes we'll think no one understands us and we'll throw a pity party for ourselves. struggles. But Jesus understands he has not only faced the same struggles we encounter, but worse, more intense struggles than we will ever encounter.

He understands, the Bible term is, he sympathizes with us. And because he understands, he's able to help us. yes, we encounter struggles, but in those struggles, we receive strength so that we will be more than conquerors.

So when we feel the same emotions as Jesus, the servant of the Lord, did in his struggles, the first half of verse 4, we need to follow his example and move into the second half of verse 4 and how God strengthens us in the midst of our struggles.

And if we look to God, we too will discover that the Lord is faithful and he's the one who upholds us by his spirit so that we can, like Jesus, the servant of the Lord, carry out the mission that he's given to us.

So folks, as we step out into this new week and we have our mission of proclaiming the gospel by our words and our lives, of glorifying God, we know it's going to be a struggle, we know it's going to be hard, we're not stupid, we're not naive, but we know that the Lord will uphold us and the Lord God will be our reward and our recompense and as he strengthened Jesus, he will strengthen us to honour him.

[40:21] Let's pray for a moment. Grass withers and flowers fade, but your word our God endures forever. may the sharpened sword and polished arrow of your word always be the main theme of our speech so that others might hear the gospel from our lips and respond positively to it and so be brought back to you, our God, and rescued from your just judgment.

May the faithful promises of your word, our God, strengthen us in the midst of our struggles and when we encounter opposition so that we might be upheld by your Holy Spirit day by day.

Hear us for we pray in the name and for the sake of Jesus, the servant in whom you delight. Amen. Amen. Amen.