

The Lord's Servant and His Labour

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[0 : 00] And we may just read verses 4-6.

To bring Jacob back to him, so that Israel is gathered to him. For I shall be glorious in the eyes of the Lord, and my God shall be my strength.

Indeed he says, is it too small a thing that you should be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel?

I will also give you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be my salvation to the ends of the earth.

I want us to think about this in terms of the servant of the Lord and his labour. The servant of the Lord and his labour.

[1 : 20] And obviously we want to learn some lessons on the subject of labouring for the Lord. And where better to turn than the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the great servant of the Lord.

And yet, you notice, he says, Now, we're more or less at the harvest time.

There's still a bit of harvest to come in. No doubt in some corners of our own land. There's quite a bit still to come in. But quite a lot of harvest has come in already. And there's a reminder to us that there's something peculiarly uplifting about harvest time.

It is the time where those who labour on the land receive the fruit of their labour. And there's something uplifting at a very ordinary level.

There's something very uplifting to the spirit of a person who prepares the soil and plants the seed. Maybe bulbs or tubers or whatever.

[2 : 44] And tends his work and then eventually reaps the harvest. There's something uplifting when harvest time comes. And whether it is the flower or the veg garden or grain or other crops.

The sense of achievement at harvest time for the harvester is exhilarating. And I can think of somebody who will be hoping, if he doesn't already know, that he's had a good harvest in his veg garden.

And there's something exhilarating about digging your harvest and seeing the fruit of your labour. So I think you're nodding in approval.

You know the experience. When a good harvest is produced, then there's great pleasure taken in that. On the other hand, when the harvest is poured, there's disappointment, there's discouragement.

There's a sense of having been cheated somehow. I'm not saying anything about God's hand in it. I'm simply saying the feeling that things have combined and the result has been a poor harvest.

[3 : 58] There's something discouraging about that. The plain fact of the matter is there's something actually right about labouring for and expecting a harvest.

When you're planting seeds and bulbs and so on. There's something right about doing the work and expecting the harvest and reaping the harvest.

I would go as far as to say on the basis of the Bible that God himself has enshrined this in nature, in the cycle of life. He says himself, you remember he said post-flood, seed, diamond harvest, summer and winter, heat and cold, shall never end.

And seed, diamond harvest is as it were enshrined in the cycle of life. And that is exactly the same as regards the spiritual dimension as well.

Our saviour told us to pray the Lord of the harvest to raise up labourers for the harvest.

[5 : 06] He told his disciples at Jacob's well near the village of Sychar, south of Samaria, that I sent you to reap.

Others laboured and you are entered into their labours. And so our saviour was saying effectively, others did the hard work, the graft.

They tilled the soil, prepared the soil, they sowed the seed and you're getting the privilege. Although at that point they hadn't seen it, you're getting the privilege of harvesting.

And of course, post-Pentecost or from Pentecost on, you had a wonderful fulfilment of that in the very land of Israel itself.

And that's because you have this same principle that you see in nature and enshrined in it by God. You see it in the spiritual realm as well. And when Christian life and service seem to have little indication for us of fruitfulness, of harvest, it's easy enough to become discouraged.

[6 : 25] There's something that would be actually almost unnatural to us not to feel discouraged about it. And that's why the servant's view of things is helpful to us.

That's why the passage we're looking at is helpful. Because Jesus is the servant, as we shall see. And he says, prophetically but effectively he says it, I have said I have laboured in vain.

I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain. So, to begin with, before we look at his servant's discouragement, we've got to look at the servant who speaks.

We've got to make sure that we understand that it's right to say this is Jesus. It's in prophecy, it was spoken through the prophet hundreds of years before he came, that these are the sentiments, words spoken on the vertical between the son and the father.

The servant too speaks, first of all. We quoted it. I said I have laboured in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain or emptiness.

[7 : 49] Now both rabbis and Christian scholars have argued together that the servant spoken of here is the people Israel and not the Messiah, not the servant of the Lord.

They say that it's clear Israel is mentioned. Verse 3, look at it there together. And he said to me, You are my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified.

And so they've argued, this is not about an individual, it's about the nation Israel. Others have argued that it's not about the nation Israel, it's about the true spiritual Israel. comprising believing Jews and Gentiles. But I submit to you, there are good reasons to reject these views and to see the reference here to the servant as the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

This is in prophecy. And you can see it, if you think about it for a moment or two, that you've got a singular reference again and again You go back there, you see, to verse 1.

[9 : 09] The Lord has called me from the matrix of my mother he has called, he has made mention of my name.

The personal pronouns are singular. He has made my mouth like a sharp sword did again. In the shadow of his hand he has hidden me and made me a polished shaft and so on.

And therefore, we have to examine the reference to O Israel and we'll do that in a moment. But you see what I'm doing first of all, I'm setting out the stall that there are personal references there, they're piled up.

I, me, mine. These are used throughout. And what is being spelled out is that this servant has come from the loins of his men.

Interestingly, it is said exactly of Jeremiah the prophet and it is said also of Paul, Paul talks about himself, perhaps you're more familiar with that reference so I'll use it.

[10 : 30] He talks about himself in Galatians that God had separated him from his mother's womb and called him into the ministry in due time.

The New Testament, indeed the gospel, stress both Matthew and Luke stress the uniqueness of the conception and the birth of the Messiah, of the servant of the Lord, of Jesus, the Son of God.

It was imperative that he be born. It was imperative that he be born of the Virgin according to the scriptures as the seed of Abraham and of David.

And therefore, in the fullest sense, the servant of the Lord is the true Israel. Now we'll elaborate on that a bit more but I'm just asserting it here just now as something consistent with the promises made to Abraham and to David and in the fullness of time, the servant came forth born of the Virgin according to the scripture.

And so that makes sense, you see, verse 1, the second part of it, the Lord has called me from the womb. From the matrix of my mother he has made mention of my name.

[12 : 04] You remember how the word was proclaimed on Bethlehem's hillside. For and he was born this day, born this day in the city of David as Savior who is Christ or Messiah, the Lord.

There's a great stress on that. And the fact of the matter is and we'll show it as we go on, Jesus can be called the true Israel because he achieved what Israel, the people, failed to achieve.

To be God's messenger to the nations. To be faithful to God's covenant promises and to bring light to the Gentiles that sat in spiritual darkness.

Israel failed to do that. And what Israel failed to do, the great servant of the Lord, the righteous servant, achieved.

The Lord would display therefore his grace and his love and his covenant mercy in his own servant, the Messiah. And that's where you read, you see, if you go a little bit further down for a moment to follow the track, the train of thought.

[13:21] You see, verse 5, And now says the Lord, again, who formed me from the womb to be his servant. Now notice this, to bring Jacob back to him so that Israel is gathered to him.

Verse 6, Is it too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel?

Now we'll pause there. You see what we're doing here? We're showing ourselves that this person referred to I, me, my, the servant of the Lord is the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus.

the true Israel who would actually when he came bring back Israel to the Lord. So there's a distinction made here between Israel and Israel between the servant who is the true Israel and Israel the nation also called Jacob to bring Jacob back to him.

Verse 5, so that Israel is gathered to him. For I shall be glorious, he says, in the eyes of the Lord. Is it too small a thing that you talking to his servant, the true Israel, that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel?

[14:57] Verse 5, therefore, shows us that the reference in verse 3, you are my servant to Israel, Israel, can't be the nation because this servant who is also called Israel is going to gather Israel back.

And that's important to our understanding of what's going on here. The servant who speaks is the great servant of the Lord, the true Israel, who in the fullness of time, was known as the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Isaiah knew, you see, that he was writing to a rebellious people, both of Israel and Jacob, Israel being the ten tribes, Jacob referring to the others, and the people needed to be brought back to the Lord by no one less than the Lord himself.

Isaiah knew the captivity was coming. He knew there would be desolations in the land for many generations. But he knew that in Jew season God would remember Israel and gather Israel back. And there's more. I will also give you, verse 6b, as a light to the Gentiles that you should be my salvation to the ends of theirs.

[16:28] Now if you're following this you'll see that clearly verse 3's servant who is Israel is distinct from Israel the nation Jacob, the Jewish people and the Gentiles.

He's actually coming to restore the remnant of Israel and to bring light and salvation to the Gentiles. He is, as he is referred to here, my salvation.

And so the servant who speaks is undeniably the great servant king, the Messiah, the true Israel. He alone will accomplish the gathering of Jews and Gentiles.

And of course he did that initially himself and he did it in the second place through commissioning his apostles and he has gone on to do it down through the generations through his body, the church.

It's an ongoing thing. And that that is quite a clear and biblical and acceptable way of understanding.

[17:44] Remember that when Saul of Tarsus, Rabbi Saul, was hunting and hounding and catching Christians and having them imprisoned men and women, Jesus stopped him in his tracks.

There isn't Jesus, stopped him in his tracks. Remember what he said, Saul, Saul, why are you kicking against the goats? But he said something I missed and I hope you said it in your mind. Why are you persecuting me? Me. You're persecuting me when you're persecuting my people. Jesus goes on to do his work of gathering people from the nations through his church, his body. And therefore it's important to us that we listen to his voice in the word and that we learn from his experience.

[18:54] Because I'm singling these two things out at the moment because they're both important, they're perpetually important to us. To listen to his word, to learn from him, but also to learn from his experience.

Of course you're saying to me he's the sinless son of God, he's all that is perfection and he is the perfect man in that sense.

but to say that is not to say at all, he learned through his experience. In becoming man, he learned through his experience, he tasted and saw for himself many things and he did so for us.

That we have one who understands us, who empathizes with us, who draws near to us and helps us. we're to listen to him and learn from his experience.

That brings us therefore to the second point, the servant's discouragement, verse 4. Then I said I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and in emptiness.

[20 : 13] Now, when we use a word like discouragement with reference to the Lord, we're not to set off alarm bells in our head, you know, we're not to say we're going too far there, we're just wait and see and think about it.

We need to recognize that discouragement in itself is not sin, that we can be discouraged by the evidence that convinces us.

It's what happens beyond that. Do we sinfully react to it, as we often do, he didn't. Jesus himself went home to Nazareth in his public ministry, and of all the reactions to unbelief in all the towns and the cities or the villages and the towns and Jerusalem, in all these places to which he went and ministered, only as it said of Nazareth, he marveled at their unbelief.

It staggered him, having been brought up among them. And there were many experiences.

How often he said to the Jerusalemites, I would have gathered you, it was something that was profoundly difficult for him as man.

[22 : 00] It had its discouraging element. He taught his disciples again and again and yet they seemed so reluctant to believe, to understand what he had to say to them.

And therefore we can understand how it was possible for the Son of God, for the great servant, to be discouraged at the response of his own people to him he might well expect a positive response. If you flick back in your Bible to Isaiah 5, you will get a lovely picture there, although it's a very pathetic picture really.

And it is a picture about God, God's disappointing vineyard. that's the blurb in your Bible at the top, page 607.

Now let me sing to my well beloved a song of my beloved regarding his vineyard. And then we're told what the Lord did to make that vineyard fruitful.

[23 : 23] You see? I planted it with a choice as vine, verse 2, he built a tower in its midst and also made a wine press in it. So, he rightly, I'm adding that, expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild disappointment, discouragement.

Listen, and now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, please, between me and my vineyard. Notice what the Lord says, what more could have been done to my vineyard that I have not done in it.

Please tell me what I will do to my vineyard. This is the Lord speaking. See the point I'm making here. Disappointing harvest.

It was all wrong. Discouraging thing. We can use those words in a garden way. of the Savior.

We can think about his emotional response that was a sinless response because he could rightly expect a positive, fruitful response.

[24 : 47] and therefore in the real sense of the feeling of it, it was discouraging so that he can say in prophecy, I have labored in vain, to no purpose, nothing to show for it.

It's like vapour. And that that was true in the house of Israel to which he was sent, the gospels bear ample testimony.

In fact, were it not for the fruit in the cycle of Samaria, there would be little enough.

We're told in John 6, towards the end of the passage, after Jesus' hard saying, difficult saying, many of his disciples went back from following me.

You remember the bit where he said, will you also go back from following me? Many disciples went back from following me. The point I'm making here is that in his three year ministry of abounding labour, of superb preaching and teaching, we discover him saying, we get this insight into his heart, into this vertical communion with his father.

[26 : 24] I have laboured in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain. And we can detect discouragement, disappointment, with the people to whom he went.

And when you take that over into the believer's experience, we can learn from the Saviour himself. We can learn how to handle the business.

We must maintain the view that it's right to expect to harvest in season. Whether it's an individual, a brother or a sister, a family, other family member, a husband, wife, or whatever, when we're seeking to win them to Christ, it is right to entertain the expectation of harvest.

And we may rightly feel discouraged when we're not seeing anything. This is not taking issue with God's sovereignty. This is recognizing God's sovereignty.

But it's feeling that sense of discouragement when it's not happening. We just have to be careful that we don't transgress, that we don't go beyond, that we don't resent the Lord's way of doing things.

[27 : 55] Clearly Jesus didn't sin in this. he was fixed in his mind to do the will of his father who sent him.

And he was impelled forward. And we're to learn to do that, to keep going, and not to become dispirited, and discouraged, and resentful.

I say discouraged, and resentful, they go together. We have to guard ourselves. Discouraged yes, resentful no. And so for Jesus to be discouraged by the reaction of his people, by the evidence that faced him, was a natural thing, and a sinless thing, too.

He had good reason to expect a harvest. You think about the Jewish leadership.

Think about the demonstrations of his mighty power, his gracious words. We only know of one rabbi that came to faith, leaving Paul aside, and that's Nicodemus.

[29 : 10] Perhaps Gamaliel did, I think he did, but we're specifically told Nicodemus, the head rabbi, he came. But in the main, the rabbinical council's constant effort was to catch Jesus out, and to cast aspersions on his character, and say he's against Abraham, he's against Moses, he's against the law, let's get rid of him.

And yet he had filled the land with his wondrous works, and his beautiful words. And all they did was plot against him, because they remained unconvinced.

Indeed, they suggested that his miracles were done by the Prince of Devils. Their profound ill-mindedness, their ugly, blind, callous heartedness caused him, rightly, to be discouraged at the response.

We mentioned Nazareth, he marveled at their unbelief, we mentioned Capernaum, Chorazin, Bethsaida, he pronounced woes upon them, having labored among them so faithfully and diligently. He turned in a flash, and he commended the faith of the centurion to the Israelites. I have not found such great faith, no, not in Israel.

[30 : 48] See, how the Saviour was interacting in a living, working, meaningful way, and we can learn from him. It wasn't socket to them, and they've had it now, if you don't believe it, tough.

There was heart in it, tenderness in it, yearning, passion, and there was discouragement when a harvest was expected and it wasn't there.

Think about the slowness of heart of the disciples, how they stumbled and fell and misunderstood. The Saviour had a right to expect fruit, and after an all, he well knew this very scripture we are studying together.

Is it too small a thing, verse 6, Is it too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel?

On the face of it, it wasn't happening. See? Of course we know that wasn't the end of the story.

[32 : 03] What we're doing here is looking at this as he interacted with it at the time. And so we say again that on the face of it Jesus' experience was a normal, natural, sinless experience as man to such a poor, we may say, a beggarly response to his wonderful words.

And of course there's a sense in which we can't really get into the very depth of his heart on this. But we get enough when we read these words of prophecy, we get into his soul's communion with his father.

I have said I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and in vain. And it's good for us to realize just what a wonderful saviour we have, how he understands us, how he knows what it's like when things are not happening, in people that we're seeking to bring to Christ.

He understands our feelings of being discouraged and downcast, the pain we feel at times. He knows it well.

But lastly, and this is important, our time, I don't know where it's gone, it's gone, the last thing is the servant's sure confidence, and we can't leave this without noting it in verse 4b, yet surely my just reward is with the Lord and my work with my God.

[33 : 51] This, if you like, is the antidote to discouragement going into a sinful resentment. This is what steered him, even him, the Son of God, away from anything that would be tainted with sin.

We mustn't just because the Saviour was sinless and in a real sense wasn't possible for him to sin. That doesn't mean he knew nothing of the edge of what it was.

He came right up to it and felt its intensity far more than we will ever know. And this was his confidence yet indeed despite it all my just reward is with the Lord.

There is an answer to it all. There's another side to the story. My judgment is with the Lord. My work is with my God.

God's judgment matters. We had the Reverend Ken Cameron with us today. He was over to take his wife Joan home from the Royal.

[35 : 12] And I remember once his late father principal Cameron preached a sermon in Buclew I think it was and it was entitled The Opinion That Matters.

And it was about Christ. And it was about his opinion. And the importance for a Christian believer to be concerned above all things with what Christ thinks of me and of you.

That's what matters. We can't spend our lives trying to justify ourselves to other people. It's a loser. And you see that's exactly what Messiah says here.

For all that is true I've labored in vain. I've spent my strength for nothing on emptiness. Yet surely! is with the Lord and my work with my God.

He knew that the fruit would come in its time. He knew that the end of the story was not yet.

[36 : 16] And he knew that there would be an apportionment of reward for his labor. I'm not thinking about his atoning work. I'm thinking about his work as a preacher and teacher of the work.

And my dear friends, this is what has to encourage us. This is what gives us confidence. He knew he would have his reward.

He knew he would see of the labor of his soul in Jews and Gentiles. He knew that the father had said to him, ask from me and I'll give you the nations as your inheritance.

He knew it. But you see what I'm saying is when he confronted the evidence in the land, he was up against discouragement at the awful response of his own.

But he takes us beyond that. He takes us to the antidote for letting discouragement become bitter resentment. Because that can happen to us.

[37 : 22] couldn't happen to him and didn't happen to him, but it can happen to you and me. Let us be aware. we are to learn from him.

We're not to forget this, that ultimately if we live a godly life in Christ, our just reward is with the Lord and our work with our God, however little or much work we do in his name and for him.

And so we're not as it were to get ourselves into a mental tangle and an emotional stew. Though sometimes we do. We're not to do it.

We're to learn from him. If I heard once the words from people, Christian people I mean, and in my own heart, if I heard them a thousand times, I still need to hear them.

Let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

[38 : 40] We need to hear that again and again. And it is as we remind ourselves of this, that our reward is with the Lord, our just cause, our work is with our God.

And there will be a harvest in its measure and in its season. What we need to be aware of is becoming cynical and resentful that there simply isn't a harvest.

We are to remind ourselves that the word of God is true, that harvest will come in its season, and our work is therefore safe without God.

I remember words just now and they're opposite here. Set thou thy trust in God. In duty's path go on.

Walk in its strength with faith and hope. so shall thy work be done. And we're to remember Jesus, the great servant of the Lord.

[39 : 58] And how he resolved that discouragement and the disappointment in the harvest field, in the vineyard that he grew up in and ministered in.

We're to remind ourselves that if he said my just reward is with the Lord and my work with my God then that ought to be more than good enough for you and me.

Amen.