

See, My Servant

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[0:00] Now we're going to read from the Old Testament section of the Bible. from Isaiah. It's chapter 41, and we're going to read from verse 21 through to verse 9 of chapter 42.

Now, before we turn to this passage to read it and think about it, let's pray and ask the Lord for help. Lord, as we come to you, we thank you for the promise in your word that we've just been singing about, that you will give us instruction, that you will guide us from your word.

And so we pray that your Holy Spirit would do to us in our minds and hearts and wills what you promised you would do, that you would instruct us in your ways.

We pray that you would open our eyes, that we would be able to see wonderful things in your law and that we would live it out in our lives day by day. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

[1:16] Isaiah 41, verse 21. Set forth your case, says the Lord. Lord, bring your proofs, your evidence, says the King of Jacob.

Let them bring them and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome or declare to us the things to come.

Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are God's. Do good or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified.

Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing. An abomination is he who chooses you. I stirred up one from the north, and he has come from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name.

He shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay. Who declared it from the beginning that we might know, and beforehand that we might say, he is right?

[2:27] There was none who declared it, none who proclaimed, none who heard your words. I was the first to say to Zion, behold, here they are, and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good news.

But when I look, there was none. Among those, there was no counselor. Who, when I ask, gives an answer. Behold, they are all a delusion.

Their works are nothing. Their metal images are empty wind. But behold, my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, and whom my soul delights.

I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench. He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlines wait for his word.

[3:34] Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it.

I am the Lord. I called you in righteousness. I take you by the hand and keep you. I will make you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison, those who sit in darkness.

I am the Lord. That is my name. My glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare.

Before they spring forth, I will tell you of them. Amen. Amen. Amen. I don't know if you like poetry. As I said earlier on, I became a Christian when I was 18, through reading Mark. I had already sat, those of you in Northern Ireland will know, sat O levels and A levels, not fives and higher.

[4:49] I did English literature and failed it. It's the only exam I've failed my life. I hated poetry. You know, our English teacher loved Keats, and he used to read out Keats poems, and then get us to write what we thought Keats was meaning.

And I really thought, come on, guys, if this fellow spends 16 lines with an ode to a Grecian urn, he really does need to get out a little bit more. You know, it was just, I couldn't get into poetry at all. And then I became a Christian and discovered the poetry of the Bible, the Psalms, some of the prophets. And my favorite poems are four poems that are tucked away in the second half of Isaiah. They all focus on someone who's called God's servant, whom God calls my servant. That's why they're called the servant songs.

And tonight I want us to think about the first of those four servant songs. It's found in verses one to nine of Isaiah 42, the Bible passage we read a few minutes ago.

[6:07] But before we jump into the first servant song, we have to deal with the question of identity. Who is the servant of the Lord that these four poems are talking about?

Now, is it as some people have suggested, the people of Israel? Because they are referred to, the people of Israel are referred to, in Isaiah, God refers to them as my servant.

Or others have suggested, it's a Persian king called Cyrus, whom God calls his servant, because God used Cyrus's military conquests and political decisions to pave the way for God's people to return from exile in Babylon back to the land of Judah.

However, I think if you read the four servant songs, and the one we're most familiar with is the last one, we call it Isaiah 53, but it starts off in Isaiah 52.

If you read those servant songs, you'll discover that what the servant of the Lord will achieve is way beyond the pay grade of the people of Israel or Cyrus.

[7:26] The servant of the Lord is someone much more significant than they are. So, who then is the servant of the Lord? Well, we know who he is because we've read the New Testament.

And the New Testament is always the correct interpretation of the Old Testament. And the New Testament repeatedly tells us that Jesus is the servant of the Lord, the one who's described in this poem we're going to look at, speaking about who he is and what he's achieved.

So, as we read these poems, and even as we read the Psalms, the other poems of the Bible, they're all focusing in on who Jesus is. So, what does this first servant song, Isaiah 42, 1-9, tell us about Jesus?

Well, the first thing it does is to tell us how competent Jesus is, how competent Jesus is. Now, to understand this, we need to go back to chapter 41 and to try and work out the connection between the last bit of the chapter and the first servant song.

Now, twice, if you look at the Bible there, twice, at the start of verse 24, Isaiah 41, and the start of Isaiah 41, verse 29, God introduces what he is about to say with a small Hebrew word called, which is pronounced N-E-N.

[9:00] It's a marker word. It's a word when you come across it in the Bible, God wants you to sit up and pay attention to what's saying and what's coming next.

Now, the ESV translates it as behold. It's a bit old-fashioned. Behold. The NIV and other modern translations, they use a more contemporary term as in look, but I'm going to use the Northern Irish translation of it because in Northern Ireland, if somebody wants you to pay attention, they'll say to you, see here.

So, I'm going to use the word see for it. So, the word see, so, start at verse 40, 24, Isaiah 41, see, you are nothing, less than nothing.

Start at verse 29, see, they are all a delusion, all false. And we keep that in mind and then we come in to chapter 42.

At the start of verse 1, the same word pops up again and this is the connection between the last bit of 41 and this first servant song where God says, see, my servant whom I uphold.

[10:20] Now, what's that all got to do with how competent Jesus is? What's the behold, the two beholds in chapter 41 and the behold or see or look in the start of chapter 42?

What's the connection? How does it speak about Jesus' competency? Well, in chapter 41 in verse 24 and 29, God uses that Hebrew word, see, to draw attention.

It's a marker word, remember, to draw attention to the incompetence of idols. God's really scathing here about idols.

And in Isaiah, the way God is scathing about idols is by sort of challenging the idols to predict the future. He sort of says, okay, come on, tell me what's going to happen.

Come on. You can't do it, sure you can't. But He's a God who can tell the future. Idols are incompetent. And the problem was that the people of Israel at this stage had put their hope in idols.

[11:38] But these idols couldn't deliver the goods. So God says to them, look, there are zero gods. They're useless. They're incompetent.

He says, see them for what they are, less than nothing, utterly worthless, false, amounting to nothing, just wind and confusion. And then with all that in mind, in chapter 42, verse 1, the Hebrew word, see, comes in again and God uses the same marker word to draw attention to His servant, see my servant.

And in this contrast between the incompetent idols of Isaiah 41, the servant of the Lord is competent. He's able to deliver the goods.

The people that Isaiah was talking to at that time were going through a torrid time. The nation was going through a crisis. Up north, the big, bad, lean, mean, Assyrian war machine was making imperialist noises in Judah's direction.

And they'd steamrolled all the little nations around them and they had set their eyes on Judah and Judah was panicking. And what did they do?

[13:04] They turned to false gods, idols, to get them through the crisis and they discovered that their idols couldn't help them. They were emptied of all hope.

To these people who had turned in the wrong direction for help, God says to them, see my servant. Unlike the useless idols, he is competent, he's able to help, he's the only one who can restore hope. And I think in the light of this contrast between the servant of the Lord and the idols, we need to ask ourselves this question, to whom do we turn in a time of crisis?

do we put our hope in ourselves and trust in our own ability or know-how and connections to solve the problems we're in?

Do we put our hope and trust to solve our problems in scientists, the people with white coats? do we put our hope and trust to solve our problems in economists?

[14:30] Do we put our hope and trust in politicians, hoping that if we get the right people elected, everything will be fine? Do we put our hope and trust to solve our problems in technology?

Technology sees everything as a challenge, and we can get over these obstacles. Do we put our hope in that? Or do we put all our hope in Jesus, the servant of the Lord?

Now, I know as Christians that we, you know, when I ask the question, who do you put your hope in, we're automatically saying, oh, I put my hope in Jesus. And I'm asking myself as I ask you, really, do we?

if Jesus is our hope in life and death, then we discover that he's completely competent to meet all our needs and restore hope in us.

As we head towards the end of our service, let me draw your attention, see here, to the beginning of the service, are called to worship from Psalm 146.

[15:53] Do not put your trust in human leaders, mere mortals, who cannot save. They will die, and when they do, their plans will die with them.

however, blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, who depend on the Lord, their God, the Lord who always keeps his promises.

How competent Jesus is, the one we need to put our hope in all the time for life, for death.

The second thing that this first servant song tells us is this, how delightful Jesus is, how delightful Jesus is.

Not only competent, he's delightful. What's God's attitude towards the servant? Well, it's one of delight. See what he says, see my servant in whom I delight.

[16:56] Now, why does, why is God delighted with Jesus? Well, the answer is there at the end of verse 1 of Isaiah 42.

It's because he will bring justice to the nations. The answer is also there at the end of verse 3, because he will bring forth justice. And it's there again in the middle of verse 4, because he established justice on the earth.

So, this is why God's delighted in Jesus, because he establishes justice. Now, what is justice? Well, the Hebrew word is mishfat. It's a multi-layered word, can mean different things in different situations, but the setting of the first servant song is the courtroom, Isaiah 41, verse 21.

So, the meaning of justice or mishfat is, must be seen in that context. In a courtroom, legal verdicts are given.

Everyone is equal before the court, regardless of race or social status or gender or age, and everyone will be judged with impartiality.

[18:14] People will either be acquitted or punished on the merits of their individual cases. And through the servant of the Lord's activity and based on our response to him, everyone will either be declared not guilty or guilty in God's courtroom.

Now, how the servant of the Lord will bring about mishpat will be developed in the other three servant songs, and especially the last one. But at the moment, this first servant song is simply saying to us what Jesus will do.

He will establish justice. And because he will, God says, see my servant in whom I delight. Now, if you're saying to yourself, that sounds a wee bit familiar.

If you're saying to yourself that you're right, God, when Jesus was baptized, God the Father used similar language about him.

For example, Mark 1, verse 11, you are my son whom I love, with you I am well pleased. Now, when we think of Jesus' baptism, we really need to think about it in terms of a modern day press conference.

[19:42] Probably today they put a video on social media, but I'm old school. And you call a press conference. You know, a politician wants to, you know, we've had it recently with the new prime minister.

He's called people together and he's done interviews with different people and he set out his agenda for his prime ministership or whatever it's called.

press conference announced. something important and Jesus' baptism was his press conference. Jesus' baptism, strangely enough, is actually about Jesus.

And when he was being baptized, Jesus was saying he was going to go to the cross to die. That's why his baptism is followed by his temptation because he announced, publicly announced he was going to the cross to die and the devil immediately tempts him not to go to the cross.

So Jesus' baptism is his press conference announcing he's going to the cross in order to die. And by his death he's going to establish justice. And that's why the father is delighted with him because he's going to go to the cross.

[21:01] He's the one in whom the father is delighted or well pleased. And what Isaiah says about Jesus has got glue all over it because Isaiah and God the father when he says Jesus is well pleased with Jesus.

He's delighted with Jesus. He wants to stick us, it to stick on us too. He wants us to have the same attitude to Jesus as the father has.

The father says, look, see how delightful my son is. I think the world of Jesus and he wants us to say, yes, father, Jesus is delightful to us too.

We think the world of him. I wonder do you find Jesus delightful. The father does and he wants us to find him delightful.

So how competent Jesus is, how delightful Jesus is. And then the third thing this song tells us is how different Jesus is, how different Jesus is. There's a number of contrasts made between the servant of the Lord and other people and people groups and things here in this passage.

[22:23] We've already seen one, the contrast between the incompetence of idols and the competence of the servant. Now there's another contrast here and it's between the methods that Cyrus will use, the Persian king, and the methods that Jesus, the servant of the Lord, will use.

You get them, what, the verse 25 of chapter 41 about Cyrus, I stirred up one from the north and he shall come from the rising of the sun. He will call upon me.

And here's his methods. He shall trample on rulers as on mortar and the potter, and the potter, and as the potter clays tread, treads clay.

It's going to be smash and mash as Cyrus methods, military might. But what about the servant?

How does he establish justice? Well, the servant wrong-foots us because Isaiah tells us in 42 verses 2 and 3 that he acts in a completely different way.

[23:35] He doesn't mash and smash as Cyrus does, but here's how he establishes justice. He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning smoldering wick he will not snuff out. Do you see the methods that the servant of the Lord uses to establish justice to pull off his mission?

According to verse 2, he uses humble quietness. Jesus doesn't rant and rave. He's got no doubts about who he is, nor does he question what he is about to achieve.

But as Matthew 12 verses 15 to 21 with its quotation here from the first servant song, he says there's a humble quietness about Jesus' ministry.

Now there could be a distinction in the three verbs Isaiah uses here. The verb shout suggests words that frighten and threaten. Politicians are good at threatening.

[24 : 47] There's a big guy in Pennsylvania Avenue who's very good at threatening. Doesn't often carry out his threats, but he threatens. He's shouting. He raises his voice.

He cries out. He cries out means to shut down any conflicting voices or dissenting opinions. The verb raises voices, self-promotion.

He's always talking about himself. That's how Cyrus worked. That's how the world works. Dictators work.

Politicians work. However, one commentator suggests that the three verbs should be lumped together to create a culminative emphasis on Jesus not doing this, not shouting out and ranting and raving.

His quiet humbleness should be put together a quiet, unaggressive, unthreatening ministry. There's a humble quietness about Jesus, the servant of the Lord.

[25 : 51] And it's in that humble quietness he would achieve what God wanted him to do. He humbled himself. Paul writes in Philippians 2 verse 8 and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

God eternal, humbled to the grave. There's a humble quietness how different the servant of the Lord is. And the other method he uses in verse 3 is his gentleness.

Do you see that? No one is useless as far as the servant of the Lord is concerned. Not even a bruised reed which is useless for supporting anything or for anything else.

Neither is anything like a faintly burning smoldering wick of a candle too far gone for the servant. No one is hopeless.

No one is hopeless. Folks, Satan poisons our mind with his lies. He poisons our mind.

[27 : 01] He's called, he tries to discredit Jesus. He tries to give the impression that Jesus is harsh and hard and uncaring and demanding and unforgiving.

But isn't he so different from that diabolical distortion? there's one occasion in the gospels that Jesus describes his character.

It's in Matthew 11 verse 28 and he doesn't say he's mighty and majestic although he was mighty and majestic. When Jesus describes his character he says I'm gentle and I'm humble.

Jesus is a servant of the Lord who is strong and he's kind. Is that not the sort of savior that battered and crushed and vulnerable people like us need?

Jesus doesn't despise us in our struggles. Jesus doesn't mock us for our doubts. Jesus doesn't break us and crush us either intentionally or unintentionally.

[28 : 24] He's so different in how he deals with us. He knows that we're all damaged goods but he's gracious and compassionate and slow to become angry and overflowing in love.

love. If you're beginning sometimes to hear and think in your head that Jesus is harsh and uncaring and mocking will mock you, listen carefully to what you're hearing because you'll hear a hiss behind it.

It's the hiss of the devil. That's not Jesus. Jesus is humble and gentle. This is a savior that we can trust, isn't it?

This is a savior that we can come to and you can come to in all your weakness and fragility and when you're at the end of your tether.

And this is also a savior that we can praise and worship and love and commit ourselves to serve him all the days of our life.

[29 : 46] How different Jesus is. Strong, kind, gentle, humble. One more thing. The song tells us how successful Jesus is.

Will the servant of the Lord bring about all that he set out to achieve? The answer is of course he will. Of course he will.

He will bring justice to the nations. He will bring forth justice. In his law, the islands will put their hope. The servant success comes out in a word play in the Hebrew of Isaiah 42 verse 4.

It's totally lost in translation but let me point it out to you the word play. It says just as the servant does not crush a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick it says he will not falter literally not be snuffed out or be discouraged literally not be crushed.

until he establishes justice in the earth. And the reason why the servant will be successful is found in the middle of verse 1 where God says see my servant whom I uphold I will put my spirit in him. [31:14] Now the Hebrew verb upholds a very strong one. It means to grip fast. Think about the times when you were a toddler and you were about to cross a busy road and your mum gripped you by the hand.

And she maybe gripped you so hard you thought she was going to hurt you. But she gripped you fast and held you fast so that she might safely get you across the road without being knocked down by a car or a bus or a lorry.

That's the picture here. Jesus is gripped by the Holy Spirit's power and that's why he succeeds in what he set out to achieve.

And this certainty and inevitability of Jesus' success is not just seen in the big stage of him achieving God's plan of salvation for the world.

It certainly is seen in that. But it's also seen in the smaller stage of our individual lives. What success is success when it comes to our individual lives?

[32:35] Well surely Jesus tells us it's to bring us to know him and then for him to bring us safely to heaven with great joy.

John 6 40 here's success he says that everyone who looks to the son and believes in him shall have eternal life and Jesus will raise them up at the last day.

That success if you're a Christian tonight and you've got the hope of heaven that success Jesus has been successful he's brought you to know him you've got eternal life and he'll take you safely home to heaven but you know don't we often get scared that we'll we'll not make it to heaven you know perhaps as a result of our own stupidity and personal sinful weakness or Satan's malice or the world's seduction or our circumstances or all or a combination of all the above we might be stopped from reaching heaven do you not sometimes get worried but we will reach heaven we will succeed he who began a good work and you will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus because the same Holy Spirit who upheld

Jesus will grip you and me tightly and will bring us safely home to heaven all the resources that Jesus had available to him as a real human being all the resources are available to us the Holy Spirit will help us we will not be lost you see if we have Jesus the competent delightful humble gentle and successful servant of the Lord there is no one else or nothing else we could possibly need or want in life and death so God says to us tonight says to you he says to me he says see my servant pay attention to Jesus look to Jesus no matter where you are in your spiritual journey whether some of you are starting off in your spiritual journey or some of you are in mid life and maybe facing a mid life spiritual crisis or maybe some of us are getting near the end of our journey no matter where we are in our journey keep your eyes upon

Jesus let nobody else take his place so that hour by hour you might know his power until at last you have run the great race see my servant look to Jesus behold our God bearing the nails in his hands let's pray for a moment father when you say that you delight in Jesus your son the servant of the Lord it would be incredibly wicked for us if we did not have the same attitude towards him as you do help us to see that wickedness is not necessarily committing scandalous sins but it's just having a cold attitude towards Jesus so father help us by your Holy Spirit each day to obey your commands see my servant and as we look to Jesus as we pay attention to him as we see him as revealed in the gospels and especially in his death on the cross that our hearts our cold hearts will be set aflame for love for

[36:42] Jesus our saviour our master the servant of the Lord and the in whose name we pray amen