

The Lord's Servant and His Labour

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[0 : 00] And we may just read verses 4 to 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. In 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.

[9 : 04] You go back there, you see, to verse 1. 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.

[10 : 27] Perhaps you're more familiar with that reference so I'll use it. 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 unto he was born this day born this day in the city of David a saviour 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 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?

[13 : 54] 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 verse 5 therefore shows us that the reference in verse 3 you are my servant to 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 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 is quite a clear and biblical and acceptable way of understanding 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 or 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 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

[20 : 04] I have labored in vain I have spent my strength for nothing and in emptiness 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 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 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 expected it to bring forth good grapes but it brought forth wild disappointment discouragement listen and now 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 making here disappointing harvest it was all wrong discouraging thing we can use those words in a guarded 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 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 you remember the bit where he said will you also go back from following me many disciples went back from following him 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 his vertical communion with his father 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

[27 : 16] 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 clearly Jesus didn't sin in this he was affixed 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 perhaps Gamaliel did I think he did but we're specifically told Nicodemus the head rabbi he came but in the main the rabbinical counsel'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 Choraz and 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 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 what we're doing here is looking looking at this as he interacted with it at the time and so we say again that on the face of it Jesus' experience it 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

[32 : 51] 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 the last thing is the servant's sure confidence and we can't believe this without noting it in verse 4b yet surely my just reward is with the Lord and my work with my God 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 savior was sinless and in a real sense it 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'll 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 over to take his wife Joan home from the royal and I remember once his late father principal Cameron priest a sermon in Baclue 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 my just reward 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 and he knew 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 world 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 for 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 it couldn't happen to him and didn't happen to him but it can happen to you and me let us be 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 does it wear 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've 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 read if we do not lose heart 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

[39 : 17] God is true that harvest will come in its season and our work is therefore safe with our 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 his strength with faith and hope so shall thy work be done and we're to remember Jesus the great servant of the Lord and how he resolved that discouragement and the disappointment in the harvest field in the vineyard that he grew up and ministered in were 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