

The Coming Glory - The Lord's Servant

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it's always been my desire to do an Advent series, not in the New Testament, not in the Gospels, not in the first three chapters of the Gospels.

And so we're doing this. We're looking through the second half of Isaiah from chapter 40 to 66. This is our second week. Last week we looked at chapter 40. Well, I've got a pink outline in the newsletters. It wasn't by design. The Chinese congregation left the pink paper in the photocopier.

But I think it's rather fitting for Christmas. So maybe that's, by God's providence, a good touch. Anyway, keep your Bibles open on Isaiah chapter 42.

Well, everyone knows that if you want a job well done, you have to find the right person, the right person for the right job. So don't send a boy to do a man's job.

And if you have a class of rebellious students, you don't send the work experience teacher in. Is that right, Sine? Or if there's something strange in your neighborhood, who are you going to call?

[1 : 1 1] That's right. And if you want a garden makeover for your backyard, you call my wife, Alyssa, for advice. Not me.

Who once diligently and efficiently pulled out his mom's newly planted flowerbeds, thinking they were weeds. Well, who do you call if you need to fix a nation?

Who does God send to fix Israel? Last Sunday, we saw the mess Israel was in. She turned away from God, sided with the superpowers of her day, worshipped their idols, only for them to let her down and to leave Jerusalem in ruin.

But we also saw last Sunday that the Lord promised to come in power to restore the city of Jerusalem because only he could do it. Now, you would expect God then to send a warrior king, perhaps a King David or Joshua.

Instead, tonight, we find that the Lord chooses a mysterious figure, someone he calls my servant. Now, it's a strange title, but very fitting because this person is coming to do the will of God.

[2 : 2 4] He's the Lord's servant, and he will not have a separate agenda of his own. And as we read the first verses of chapter 42, we see a very close bond between the Lord and his servant.

So in verse 1, here is my servant, the Lord says, whom I uphold. And the word uphold here means to sustain and to support. So picture both of God's hands holding him up as he goes about God's work.

And he is to be handpicked for the job, my chosen one in whom I delight. Like the footy coach who chooses his trusty fool forward and then goes on to see him kick 10 goals in the grand final.

Now, God empowers him for the job because he then says, I have put my spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. Now, this is very significant because very few in the Old Testament are anointed by the spirit.

And for God to do this meant that the job was actually very important. Now, it's not easy to work out who this servant is. And scholars have spent years doing that and hundreds of years and not come to a conclusion.

[3 : 36] And yes, we know that Jesus eventually fulfills that role. But that's to read the New Testament back into Isaiah with the benefit of history.

We'll get there eventually. But I think to start with, we need to try and work out who this servant is to the people in Isaiah's time. Now, when you read the rest of Isaiah, there are numerous people that are called God's servant in that prophecy.

So God calls Isaiah himself his servant in chapter 20 and verse 3. And in chapter 22 and verse 20, Eliakim, someone who served under King Hezekiah, was also called God's servant.

And many times, too, Israel herself is called God's servant. So in one sense, the Lord's servant is simply anyone that serves the Lord. But in Isaiah, there are four places, the so-called four servant songs, and you have the references in your outline, where the servant is actually described in very exalted terms.

Elsewhere, God may sometimes even lament his servant's failure. So he, for example, calls some of the servants blind, for instance, in other parts of Isaiah. But not here.

[4 : 49] In the servant songs, the servant achieves God's perfect will, and he is faultless in character and conduct. So tonight, we'll look at the first song, which is chapter 42.

And then next Sunday, Matt will be looking at the fourth with us. But together, all four of them give us a fuller picture of who the servant is. And he is God's ideal servant.

And in one sense, he's who God wants all of us to be, all his servants to be. Now, eventually, it becomes clear that this servant will only be fulfilled in the one individual.

But it remains a mystery until it is revealed who that person is. Because in a sense, when you read it, no one would be able to live up to it. Now, even though we don't know who the servant is just yet, his mission is very clear.

So it's there at the end of verse 1, if you look there. The servant's mission is to bring justice to the nations. Pretty explicit. To build a world where there is fairness and equity, where the weak are not oppressed, and every human is given his or her dignity.

[5 : 58] And it seems like mission impossible. But actually, what is even more surprising is how the servant is going to achieve this. Now, in general, justice can be, I think, achieved in one of two ways.

The first is by external enforcement. So all the laws in our land are a bit like that. Whether you like it or not, whether your motivation is right or not, we are asked to obey these laws or else to suffer the consequences.

So I may not feel like keeping to the speed limit, particularly if I'm running late. But I still obey grudgingly because I don't want to lose my license.

But external enforcement can only go so far. Certain things can't be legislated. So you can't force people to love. And you, to a large extent, can't force people to be kind to the poor.

That sort of justice can only come through internal motivation from the heart, which is the other way to achieve justice. And in many ways, that form of justice, things like compassion and kindness, are actually by far the more important type of justice.

[7 : 15] And all of us prefer the second way of justice. We prefer that at work or at home or at church, everyone just does the right thing because we have the right attitude.

We prefer not to have rules telling us what we can or can't do. But the fact is that rarely works, does it? Because we, too, have other motivations, namely selfishness, laziness, just to name two.

And this is true in society at large as well. We want justice, I think, to spring from everyone's internal motivations. But often, governments just find it easier to wave a big stick and use fear to keep people in check.

But as we look at the passage, that's not the servant's approach at all. His is the way of grace. He will do it not by brute force or coercion, but with patient transformation.

So verse 2 says this, He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets. Rather, those who show penitence and humility, a bruised reed, he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not stuff out.

[8 : 28] In other words, he will nurture and not break their hearts. He will not snuff out their spirits, even if there's only the fainters of hope in them, just like a smoldering wick.

He would work with them. As long as they are willing to change, then it doesn't matter how bad they are, the servant will work with them, patiently fanning righteousness into flame, however long it takes.

Now, we all know that changing attitudes and motivations is hard. We only have to look at our own lives, our bad temper, our sharp tongue, the way our thoughts just run to evil.

These are hard things to change, aren't they? But how much more difficult it is to try and change someone else. But the servant will continue for as long as it takes.

In verse 3, it says, In faithfulness he will bring forth justice. He will not falter or be discouraged. So he will work until lives are transformed, not just in Israel, but until he establishes justice on the earth.

[9 : 40] And those in the far-flung islands put their hope in his teaching. And Jimmy, I think this is a reference to New Zealand. Now, why would God give the servant such a mission?

Why this enormous and near impossible task? Well, the reasons are to be found in the second half of our passage. So in the first four verses, the Lord, if you like, presents the servant to the audience.

And now in verses 5 to 9, he instructs, he talks to the servant directly. But before he does that, he reminds us that he is the creator of the universe.

Verse 5, This world is his, the nations and the islands. So he spreads out the earth and all life that springs from it, giving breath to the people and life to those who walk in it.

God's plan for creation has always been for a just world, a world that reflects who he is, for he has made us in his image. And he desires for people to relate to each other in the same way he relates to us.

[10 : 43] Now, of course, because of sin and rebellion, our sin and our rebellion, this is not the world we live in. And so God sends the servant to restore creation to what he intended.

That's the first reason that God has sent the servant to restore creation. The second reason is found in verse 6. God sends the servant because he is a covenant-making God.

He will make the servant a covenant for the people, he says in verse 6, and a light for the Gentiles. So he has sent the servant in order to fulfill his covenant. Now, to make a covenant is to establish a relationship based on promises.

So marriage, for instance, is a classic human-to-human covenant. The promises are what holds the covenant together, the making and the keeping of those promises.

And here God is saying that he remembers his covenant with Abraham, which he made way back in Genesis. That covenant, too, was all about restoring creation.

[11 : 45] And so it's certainly not a new idea here in Isaiah that God is bringing. So back in Genesis chapter 12 and verse 2, and I've got the verse up on the screen, God says to Abraham that, I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you.

I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse. And all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you. And so God is saying that he's still committed to that covenant, committed to restoring creation, even though Abraham's descendants had failed to keep their side of the promise.

And by sending the servant, God is, in a way, recommitting himself to that covenant and refreshing it for the people in Isaiah's time. Part of that covenant, of course, is that through Abraham, the nations will be blessed.

And so it is, we read here in verse 6, that the servant will also be a light for the Gentiles. Light meaning truth, righteousness, and justice. And we find out also that, and this is a new thing, that the servant will be the covenant for the people and a light to the Gentiles.

That is, God is sending the servant not just to do something, but actually to be someone, a mediator between him and the people. So the servant is not just going to bring blessing, he is the blessing, both for Israel and for the nations.

[13 : 10] God calls him in righteousness, verse 5, because God is motivated by his own character, his absolute commitment to do what is right. And part of that is keeping his promises. But as we read verse 5 closely, we are reminded that it is God doing the work.

So he's the one that is doing all the heavy lifting. He calls the servant in righteousness, he takes hold of his hand, he keeps him, and he makes him a covenant for the people. As we've already seen in verse 1, God is not going to be a hands-off God, but he will be intimately involved, upholding his servant and keeping him on his mission.

So we see God is motivated to bring justice to nations, first, in order to restore creation, secondly, in order to fulfill his promises, his covenant, and now third, in verse 7, in order to free the captives.

God is moved by compassion for the injustice that he sees in the world. Injustice, which has left people blind, sitting in darkness, in prison, and in dungeons.

Part of restoring creation requires humans to be freed from blindness and bondage. So this is spiritual blindness that God is talking about. Injustice is the result of moral blindness.

[14 : 34] And that's why the Gentiles need the servant to be their light. And when God talks here about captivity, I don't think he's just talking about those who are oppressed, but he's also talking about the oppressors as well.

For they too are in captivity. They are under bondage of sin. And that's what's causing them to inflict injustice on others. None of us are wholly one or the other, are we?

Yes, we suffer injustice. And, you know, we're quick to notice that. But we are also capable of doing injustice to others.

For that, though, we're often slower to admit. And if you think about it, conflict in this world often gets worse and worse because one side responds to injustice by inflicting injustice themselves on the other.

It's what we call revenge. And so we see it at the global level between the Palestinians and the Israelis. We see it in Melbourne with the gangland murders.

[15 : 41] And I think if we looked at our own lives, we'll see some of that as well. But worse, even sometimes when we see that we're doing the wrong thing, we are powerless to stop ourselves because all of us are captive to sin and sitting in moral darkness.

Well, friends, we know that the servant is fulfilled in Jesus, God's son. Christians know that God sent his servant, Jesus, to set the captives free.

So in our Matthew reading tonight, we find God anointing him from heaven above. This is my son in whom I love. That was in Matthew chapter 3, but that was a direct reference to chapter 42 and verse 1.

But we don't just see God calling Jesus as his servant. If we look at Jesus' life, we see him doing exactly what God said the servant would do. So you just look at the Sermon on the Mount and you can see exactly what Jesus thought and taught about injustice.

Not external enforcement, but internal transformation. Obeying the law, he said, was more than just about outward show. And that was his main criticism of the Pharisees.

[17:05] And so he thought it wasn't, he thought it wasn't an eye for an eye, but turned the other cheek. And he thought that it's not just what you do that matters, it's the thoughts in your minds as well.

The heart matters, not just external obedience. But Jesus himself didn't just teach justice and righteousness, he practiced them too.

He was the true light that shines in the darkness because he practiced justice. So he did not raise his voice in the streets or break a bruised reed or snuffed out a smoldering wick.

Everywhere he went, he practiced what he preached. And as we will see next week, he went so far as to suffer injustice himself for our sake that it became bruised for us, giving his life for us on the cross without so much as raising his voice.

And it is this act, his death on the cross, that actually frees us from captivity. Because justice requires not only that those who are oppressed be freed, it requires that those who have done wrong be punished.

[18:17] But if all of us have done wrong, then how can any of us be saved? If each of us is guilty of injustice, then we too cannot escape the hand of punishment.

But because Jesus took our punishment for us, then we can be free even though we are guilty. The sad thing though today is that many people think that we can have justice without Jesus.

They think that all you need is education or awareness and things, people will become just. But friends, our problems run much deeper than that.

We're not just ignorant. Even if we can see the wrong that is in us, we can't free ourselves. We're actually under bondage. God's power and what strikes me too is that Jesus himself, even though he was perfect, needed God's spirit to be on him to do his work.

So how much more we who live in captivity, how can we even think that we can live in justice without God's power and spirit? spirit? Now the passage finally ends up with verse 8 and 9 and God sums up his ultimate goal in all of this.

[19:39] That is, to what end is God restoring creation? To what end is he bringing justice to the earth? It's not so that creation can then go its merry way without him.

No, it's so that everyone will see his glory and worship him and enter into a right relationship with him. It is he who has created us and everything that we live in.

So in verse 8, God says, I am the Lord, or I am Yahweh, that is the name which I have made myself known to Israel, that is my covenant name on which I have made my promises.

And if you have read through chapters 40 and 41, that was exactly God's point, that over and over again, God is asking Israel to assess him, and he even allows himself to be measured against the idols, and he says, who is capable of saving you?

Who is true to his word? And the answer is blindingly obvious. It's not the idols, but God. And so it is God alone who deserves our praise and glory.

[20 : 42] My glory I will not yield to another, is what he says. For him to do that would be to imply that there was something more praiseworthy than he is. It would mean that he isn't God.

And that would be a lie. And for God to condone that would be to go against his very character. Well, last week I said that one of the key ways God shows his glory is by speaking before he acts.

And again, we're reminded of that here in verse 9. It reads, See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare. Before they spring into being, I announce them to you.

Now, we're not sure what the former things are. Perhaps they relate to God's warning of judgment, or to promises of blessing, which is fulfilled. But whatever they are, God is saying that they have taken place.

And God is then saying that he's doing that again, declaring new things before they come to pass, and telling us of the servant before he comes. Last week, we learned that God speaks before he acts so that we can take God at his word and trust him.

[21 : 52] Well, this week, we learned that in addition to trusting him, we should also respond in praise and give God the glory. See, unlike the people of Isaiah, we have the privilege of seeing the things come to pass.

We have seen that Jesus has come, that he is the Lord's servant, and that he has already begun to bring justice on this earth. Those of us who trust in Jesus no longer sit in darkness.

We are freed from the captivity of sin. true, we may not have seen justice done for everything that has gone wrong to us or to others, but just as he has announced it and it will come to pass, that day will come, it will happen, just as God has said.

And so we need to trust him in that and give him the glory. But for now, God is saying that we are to trust in him to put our hope in his teachings and to give him the praise and glory that is due to him.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you've sent your son Jesus as your servant and that Lord, he has come to bring justice and he has done the most important work, that of the work on the cross.

[23 : 16] Jesus, and that one day all heavens and earth, the whole of creation will be restored to a just world.

And we praise you that that will happen and we give you glory that that will happen. Help us, Lord, to continue to hope in that and to trust the day of that coming.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.