

The Servant

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we ask now that you would draw near to us, that we would draw near to you. Shine the light of your glory into our hearts and give us the hope that we so deeply desire.

In Christ's name, amen. Amen. Well, if you would open your Bibles back to Isaiah 42 on page 602 that Alita read for us.

We're taking a short break from the book of 2 Corinthians. And as we come up to Christmas, we're looking at some of the most important Old Testament passages preparing us for the coming of Jesus.

This book of Isaiah, 700 years before the coming of Jesus. And I hope you noticed as Alita read Isaiah 42, 1 to 9, just how positive and hopeful and the whole taste of it is uplifting.

And I think that's the purpose for why it's here. We're supposed to chomp on it, as the acolyte said, and it's supposed to nourish and feed our hope.

[1 : 22] Now, I don't think hope is in large supply today. I don't think we live in a time of hope. I know there are people, hundreds of thousands of them, gathering downtown to welcome Santa.

But that's not really what I'm talking about. The leading media tell us that we're increasingly embracing a culture of cynicism. We've shifted from irony to distrust.

And those who are graduating from university and colleges have named themselves Generation Nixed because their hopes are basically nixed.

The job market will bring disappointment. The real estate market will bring powerlessness. And all the big crises in the world just seem unsolvable.

You know, the refugee crisis, the global climate crisis, the violence and terrorism crises. And I think it generates within a lot of us in the West a sort of self-protective disillusionment where it's just easier to disengage and gradually step back from things and put our hope in small things like making some money or having a good meal at Christmas.

[2 : 39] I think it's difficult to sincerely be hopeful in a culture of criticism. Cynicism, sorry. I mean, I think cynicism is a technique where we protect ourselves from more disappointment.

It's easier to be a critic on the sideline than to be passionately engaged and be disappointed again. It's hard to long for justice, for example, if you've told yourself there is no such thing as justice.

It's very difficult to want what is right if you say there's no such thing as what's right. And I think the two key questions about hope are always what can we hope for and why should we hope for it?

These are the hope questions. And the reason I raise it is because the people to whom Isaiah 42 was first written were asking exactly those two questions. They were facing different crises, but they had a distinct loss of hope.

Powerless, in exile. Their country had been invaded and captured and destroyed and they'd been dragged off. And now on the horizon there was a new and much more vicious and powerful tyrant rising, Cyrus, with all his violence, who crushed people underfoot, as it says in the previous chapter.

[4 : 04] So the people of God did what most of us do. We try to take things in our own hands. You find that when your prayers aren't working, you try different options.

So they did. They turned to things that seemed more powerful and visible, other nations, other gods, and they put their hope in these things. And so throughout Isaiah, God has been showing and just destroying these other things because what they do is they provide false and deceptive hopes.

So God tells us nothing but the truth about them. Look at the last verse of the previous chapter, verse 49. This is after a long condemnation. God says, verse 29 of chapter 41, behold, he says, they are all a delusion.

Their works are nothing. Their metal images are empty wind. Empty is this sense of chaos and danger. And then chapter 42 begins on a really happy note.

Look at verse 1. Behold, my servant, whom I delight, my chosen, in whom my spirit delights. I'll put my spirit on him and he shall bring forth justice to the nations.

[5 : 24] And God speaks directly to the two hope questions. So that's what I want to do today. I want to ask those two hope questions in this passage. In verses 1 to 4, the question is, what is our hope?

What can you hope for? And the answer, very simply, is a person. And in verse 1, we are introduced to this singular servant who's going to reverse hopelessness and emptiness.

He's going to undo the darkness that we have created. And immediately there is a sense of joy. You know, the first word in Hebrew, the word behold, is the word hey.

Hey, God says. Look, look at my servant. And God points his finger to one unique human being. God says, I hold this one in the deepest affection.

Not just because of who he is, but because of the work that I am giving him to do. He is coming to do something unique. And the servant's mission is very simple.

[6 : 31] It's mentioned three times. In verse 1, if you look down at it, the last phrase, he will bring forth justice to the nations. In verse 3, last phrase, he will faithfully bring forth justice.

And in verse 4, he will establish justice in the earth. Big claims. I think if we are marinating in a culture of cynicism, we would say to this, really?

One person is going to establish justice in the earth? That is such a massive claim. If I begin to believe it and I begin to hope in this, surely it's going to open me to more disappointment.

There's a great deal of talk about justice today. There's massive talk about it. There's so little real justice ever done. And I heard this week that in church circles, Christians tend to gather around justice and avoid justification.

Or justification and avoid justice. But I want to talk about this just in a more basic level. I mean, you think about it.

[7 : 43] There were 14 people killed in a shooting in Los Angeles earlier this week. How can you possibly bring justice for those people? The shooters were killed.

But what about the victims? Will they ever receive justice? And if they did, what would it look like? Take corporate malfeasance of any shape or form.

You could lock the perpetrators away for the rest of their natural lives. You could impose massive fines. You could pay back those who had been ripped off. It doesn't bring true justice.

It doesn't make it right. I don't think we ever see true justice in this life. We don't have the power. If Hollywood is to be believed, we can see revenge.

Sometimes we see the feeding of the hungry. But every attempt that we make, every attempt we make, even though they're good attempts, bring more corruption in the end.

[8 : 48] And all our noble goals and aspirations can't undo what lies behind. It doesn't matter whether you're talking about distributive justice or retributive justice or restorative justice.

In the end, we cannot wind back time. We can't go back and heal the past. We can't raise innocence. We don't have the power to do it. And that's just as true for us as individuals.

I can never make right the people I've hurt. I can never be fully healed of the things that have been done to me. What is our hope?

Before we look at it, it's just very interesting, isn't it, that Christmas is not disconnected from real life. This passage, which is preparation for Christmas, is not just about, you know, the manger and music.

It's about God establishing justice on earth through his servant. This word justice is used in all sorts of different ways. In the Bible, it involves decision, judgment, authority to make that decision, true perception of what really is going on into the motives of the heart.

[10 : 03] But at its core, the word means what is right. Not just what is right going forward, but setting to rights everything that has happened in the past.

And God says that this servant will establish justice, not just for one or two people who believe in him, but for the nations, for the whole earth, or as it says in verse 4, the coastlands, the islands, the west coast of Canada, for example, wait for, long for his law.

So that all the peoples of the earth, no matter where they're scattered, find their true hope for what is right and for setting things right and for true justice in this servant. It is monumental.

I am aware this is utterly staggering. And God's servant doesn't just announce this justice. He doesn't talk about it. He doesn't give us a model of it.

The text says he brings it forth. Literally, he brings it about. He causes it to happen. It's very helpful because it means that true justice, even though that's a very good thing for us to be engaged in, won't arise from us in the end with the biggest minds, the most careful study, and all our ingenuity.

[11 : 25] It's God's servant who will establish justice on earth for humanity. He is our hope. And I hope you're asking in your mind, how on earth is he going to do that?

What possible force, muscle, power is he going to do to ensure justice on the earth? I have a source at home who tells me that the Justice League of America has failed to do it.

That was a little joke. They can't even agree on what's right to do. But all the best armies in the world and all the best judges in the world can't do it.

How can this one servant make sure as he brings true justice that he's not going to miss something, you know, a secret motive of the heart? I mean, how could this servant bring about justice without using coercion, force?

How's he going to stop all the corruption in the world without becoming corrupt himself? And what follows in the passage in the first four verses are seven little negatives of how he will operate.

[12 : 30] This is a lovely thing the Bible often does. It tells us a great positive by telling us, by negating the opposite. We do this all the time. We say something like, you know, Andre Bocelli, not a bad singer.

Well, he's one of the world's most famous singers. Or we say, it's not rocket science, which means it's simple. Or we say, it's not too shabby, which means it's really good.

So look at verse two. When God says, he will not cry aloud, he will not lift up his voice, he will not make it heard in the street. What that means is that this servant will bring justice through ultimate humility.

He's not going to come on a big wagon and steamroll over everyone. He's not expecting other people to serve him. He is coming to serve. And he's not going to shout out and dominate other people.

He's going to act with humility and quietness. A lot of people think the church ought to be out there making more noise. A lot of people thought that about Jesus as well. His way is the way of humility and kindness.

[13 : 40] And his gentleness is seen particularly to those who are under pressure. He doesn't trample or exploit or oppress them. And verse three gives us two very lovely pictures of how this servant is going to deal with people under pressure.

Just look down at verse three. He says, a bruised reed he will not break. Now reeds are the commonest thing.

You know, there are millions of them beside the road and they're useful and cheap. You pick them and you can use them as they use them as pens or something in a musical instrument or you make a bit of a broom out of them.

They're weak and they easily bend. That's their usefulness. But once a reed bends in half, it has a weak spot. It has a bruise at the center of it. And you know what you should do with it?

Just throw it out. Get another one. And God is speaking about all those who are bruised. All of those who have a folding point in their lives, who feel they're full of doubts about themselves, who may have slipped into cynicism because of the need for self-protection.

[14 : 52] Those who find the injustice of the world and the pressures on themselves just so difficult because they know their own breakability, they can't imagine that God looks at them and sees them as valuable.

And the verse says that the servant doesn't have any throwaways. That the person who's bruised, he doesn't break them or trample them. He does the opposite. He binds them. He strengthens them.

He stands behind them and holds them in place. And the second picture in verse 3, a faintly burning wick he will not quench.

So, you know, wick is a piece of string or flax or these supersonic wicks we've got in these candles. You put it in a candle and you light it. And over time, as the flame burns down, the wick gradually stops working.

The fire dims. It stops giving off light and gradually goes out. And have you noticed that just before it goes out, it gives off this smoke? That's what this is.

[15 : 54] The faintly burning wick is the smoking wick. And it's not going to get any better until someone steps in. And I think that's a picture of the loss of hope. Here is a person whose hopes have been doused and soaked and blown on by the wind again and again and again.

The flame burns low, so low that it feels like it might go out. And all you do is you sit in the corner smoldering and smoking and giving off an acrid smell. I mean that symbolically.

The servant does the difficult thing. He takes great care and effort and he fans the wick into flame again, graciously, gently, giving this person reason to hope because he gives himself as utterly trustworthy.

Because I think true justice in the biblical picture is always accompanied by love. And this servant is absolutely qualified to do it.

Not just because God delights in him, but because he experiences the same pressures we do. If you look down at verse 4 in the text, the same two words, faintly burning and bruised, are used of the servant.

[17 : 11] In verse 4, you can see he will not grow faint. That's the faintly burning word. And then you see discouraged and a little tiny three there for those of you who need reading glasses, trust me.

There's a three and down the bottom it says bruised. Yep. Yep. Yep. The servant, the work of the servant is going to face massive opposition. And he is not immune from suffering.

In fact, it is his capacity to suffer which is crucial to his work. It is through his suffering that he will establish justice faithfully.

And it's very interesting when we turn to the New Testament and to the first gospel, Matthew's gospel. Matthew quotes this first paragraph entirely. It's the longest Old Testament quote in Matthew.

And it comes right at the point when Jesus' enemies have decided to kill him. What does Jesus do? He withdraws. He heals many. He asks them not to advertise his power.

[18 : 16] And Matthew says this was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. Which means not just that Jesus is the servant, but that his suffering and his imminent death are the way in which he's going to establish justice.

I need to move on. What is our hope? Hope is this person of Jesus Christ who God says is going to establish justice on the earth in humility, kindness and suffering serving.

And the second obvious question, and much more briefly, why should we hope? Verses 5 to 9. My favourite atheist philosopher is Nietzsche.

He's the most honest philosopher. He goes further than cynicism. He says hope, and I quote, is the worst of evils. It prolongs the torments of man.

He says every hope is false. He's wrong, of course. But he says there's no real hope for love and justice. But he does have a point, doesn't he? I mean, there have been so many grand promises of justice through history.

[19 : 17] And where have they got us? Why should we put our hope in this servant? And the simple answer in verse 5 and toward 9 is not just because of the power of who stands behind him, but because of the goodness and gracious givingness of the God who stands behind him.

You see, if you look at verse 5, the key word is the word give. And creation itself testifies to the giving goodness of God.

Probably don't think about it this way. We take creation for granted, do we? I mean, have you been complaining about the rain or cold or the heat? That's basically what we do with creation.

And it says here that he created the heavens and he stretched them out. You know, he put them in place. And he holds them in place, the tense of the verb is, so that where they are now, he's doing it.

He did the same with the earth. And every living human being has been given life and given breath by God. So the breath that's in your lungs right now, it's an active gift of God.

[20 : 29] If God did not have you in mind, you wouldn't be breathing. The breath you're going to have in five minutes, hopefully. Same. We're not independent, self-made creatures.

Creation itself is going to be caught up in this great establishment of justice. And the reason to trust in this servant is because God is full of mercy.

You see, if God just had power, he could quite easily just stop everything. Start again. But he gives.

And if creation is a wonderful gift, there is a greater gift that he speaks here in verse 6. In verse 6, God says to his servant, We use the word covenant today of a contract between equals.

It's not what it means in the Bible. Covenant is always a gift of God. Covenant is always a gift of God where he takes responsibility for bringing blessing and goodness to others. He binds himself to a promise and he brings about something that wasn't there before.

[21 : 46] Restoration, his presence. And this whole Old Testament is the story of God renewing his basic covenant with his people. This is different. Now he provides a person who will be our covenant.

So that all the blessing and all the hope and all the justice and all that's right that God has is embodied in this person, the servant. And the justice that we desire, it's not separate from him.

It is him. And to receive the servant, to receive Christ is to receive all the promises of God. He's not only God's servant, he's our servant. And that is why ultimately we may hope.

God says, I call him in righteousness. He's absolutely right for this. I've taken him by the hand. I give him to you as a gift, as a light for the nations, to open our eyes, to lead us out of prison, to lead us out of darkness.

And the reason why the servant can be a covenant comes to us in verse 8 is because the servant is God. See verse 8.

[22 : 56] God says, I am the Lord. That is my name. God says, my glory. I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.

I think we have a hint here of the incarnation of the Son of God, his birth and crucifixion. Do you remember in the Gospel of John, as Jesus approaches his death, he gets signals that his death is about to happen.

And as he does that, he says that the glory of the Father and my own glory are the same thing. So when Judas Iscariot leaves the room to betray him, the next words are, Jesus said, now is the Son of Man glorified.

God is glorified in him. And if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and glorify him at once.

That's what it means. In Jesus' mind, as he's going to his death, it is his death that is going to reestablish the glory of God. And you have to reestablish the glory of God if you can have a hope of reestablishing justice.

[24 : 10] Because the ultimate injustice, the ultimate wrong in the universe, is that we've exchanged the glory of God for a lie. And we've given the glory due to him, we've kept it for ourselves and given it away to others.

And that is the root of every injustice in this life. But our hope rests on the glory of God in the death of Jesus Christ, because that's where the light shines most brightly.

That's where grace and justice meet together. And the amazing thing, and I commend this to you to think through, is that in the cross, God shows true justice.

We have the beginning of justice being established on earth. Because it's there, God justifies those who are unjust, as well as punishing the injustice.

It's through his death that Jesus is able to make just everyone who is ungodly, both victim and perpetrator. Those whose lamps are burning low, those who are suffering at the hands of others, those who are perpetrating and causing suffering in others.

[25 : 14] Jesus comes with healing in his wings. And why, we hope. We see it in his death and resurrection. And I think this all leads us to the last verse, which I'll finish with quickly.

And it helps us prepare for Christmas. In verse 9, God says this. Spring forth is a great phrase.

The idea is you put a seed in the ground and it stays in the ground and it begins to do its work. You don't know it's doing anything. There's no visible sign until it springs forth.

When it comes above the soil, you know that the good work has happened. And that's exactly the picture of the night of Jesus' birth. Jesus didn't decide, God didn't decide to send Jesus the night before.

He planted these promises 700 years before and many others. And they were quietly growing in the soil of humanity. And on the night of his birth, that seed pushed through the surface.

[26 : 24] And the servant of God was born to begin the work of bringing justice by serving us. And that, God says, is why I tell you this beforehand. For us who stand now, we have seen that seed spring forth, confirming these old and ancient promises.

And in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we've seen the beginnings of true justice. But now we wait in hope. Until the day Christ will come again and finish that great work.

It will spring forth. It is now at work. Or as James says, be patient, brothers and sisters. Until the Lord's coming.

See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop. How patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too be patient and stand firm.

The Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers and sisters, or you'll be judged. The judge is standing at the door. Behold, it springs forth.

[27 : 31] I tell you of it. Amen. Amen.