

Isaiah Part 24: “Behold, my Servant...”

Isaiah 42

The four ‘Servant songs’

Recalling the outline of the Book of Isaiah, Section 3, containing Chapters 40 to 66, focuses on The Messiah:

- Isaiah 40 to 48: the purpose of the Messiah
- Isaiah 49 to 57: the suffering Servant
- Isaiah 58 to 66: the reign of the Messiah

Chapter 42 introduces us to the first of the ‘Servant songs’, in which Isaiah describes God’s ideal Servant, and in so doing, draws a perfect picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. There are four ‘Servant songs’:

1. Isaiah 42 verses 1 to 9
2. Isaiah 49 verses 1 to 9
3. Isaiah 50 verses 4 to 9
4. Isaiah 52 verse 13 to Isaiah 53 verse 12

The Lord’s chosen servant (Isaiah 42 v 1 to 9)

“Behold, my Servant” (v 1) – the New King James Version capitalizes ‘Servant’, because the context demonstrates this is a clear reference to Jesus. Matthew (12 v 15 to 21) quotes verses 1 to 5, and clearly states it is a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus. So, with these opening words, God commands all peoples to focus on Jesus.

Jesus described himself as a servant in Matthew 20 v 25 to 28; Matthew 23 v 11, 12; Mark 9 v 35; and Mark 10 v 43 to 45. Peter, in the sermon recorded in Acts 3, gives the Lord the title “his Servant Jesus” (Acts 3 v 13, 26), and in Acts 4 the praying people of God speak of “your holy Servant Jesus” (Acts 4 v 27, 30). But Jesus isn’t just ‘a servant’; he is ‘The Servant’, and everyone should “behold”, as God says, “my Servant”.

“My servant, whom I uphold” (v 1) – this was certainly true for Jesus, but it is true also in the way God deals with all his servants: he promises to uphold them. A servant is required to give devotion and obedience to the master; but the master is required to take care of that servant. “My chosen, in whom my soul delights” (v 1) – while Jesus ultimately is the ‘chosen one’, God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1 v 4). God ‘delights’ in Jesus, but he also delights in us, his ‘chosen ones’ (Colossians 3 v 12).

- In this picture of God’s ideal servant, Isaiah perfectly portrays the person and ministry of Jesus Christ (see Matthew 12 v 15 to 21). What does he say concerning (i) his relation to God; (ii) the equipment for his task; (iii) the purpose and scope of his mission; (iv) the qualities that characterize him; (v) the method of his ministry; (vi) his endurance; and (vii) the final fulfilment of his work?

“A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench” (v 3) – this is a reference to the gentle character of Jesus. A reed is a fragile plant, yet if a reed is bruised, the Servant will handle it so gently that it will not break. And if a wick, perhaps used as tinder to start a fire, does not flame but only smoulders, he will not quench it, or extinguish it. Instead, the Servant will gently blow on the faintly burning wick, fanning it into flame again! Often we think that God deals roughly and impatiently with our weaknesses and failures, but just the opposite is true. He deals with them gently, tenderly, helping them along until the bruised reed is strong and the smouldering wick is in full flame. As stated in Psalm 103 v 14, “He knows our frame, he remembers that we are dust.”

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“I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you” (v 6) – specifically, this is a promise from God to the Servant, Jesus Christ. What encouragement Jesus must have received from passages like this when he faced difficult and trying times during his earthly ministry! “I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations” – God is saying, in effect, ‘You will bring salvation, not only to your people, but also to those afar off, who seem beyond salvation.’ “To open the eyes that are blind, to bring... from the prison those who sit in darkness” (v 7) – God is saying, ‘I will use you to do miraculous works of healing, both physically and spiritually. You will be used to bring sight and freedom to many.’

“My glory I give to no other” (v 8) – first, no one else can fulfill these promises, because God will not share his glory with any other. But it is important to understand that Jesus shares in the glory of the Father. Jesus prayed in John 17 v 5: “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed”. “Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare” (v 9) – God is master of both the past (the former things) and the future (new things): being master of both the future and the past, God has the present well in hand also.

Sing to the Lord a new song (Isaiah 42 v 10 to 17)

We have seen that God’s purpose, through his chosen Servant, is to bless all nations (v 1, 6). In order to accomplish this, God will rescue his people from their plight (v 13 to 16), putting to shame those who trust in idols (v 17), and calling forth from near and far a joyful song of praise (v 10 to 12). “Sing to the LORD a new song” (v 10) – this is like a psalm (e.g. Psalm 33 v 3; 40 v 3; 98 v 1), because it is a song of praise. Who the Servant is and what he does is so glorious, it has to bring out a new song of praise. “You... coastlands and their inhabitants” – Who should sing this new song? Everyone who has been touched by the work of the Servant. Since even the coastlands were blessed by the Servant (v 4), they too should praise him!

- What does God promise to do for his people Israel in their distress (verses 16, 17)?

“The LORD goes out like a mighty man” (v 13) – this day of praise is a day of victory for the LORD over all false gods. He shall prevail against his enemies. The difference between “He cries out, he shouts aloud” (v 13) and “He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice” (v 2) shows the difference between the First and Second Coming of Jesus. The First Coming was meek and lowly; the Second Coming will be loud and victorious!

No obstacle can get in the way of God’s work. “Mountains and hills” (v 15) can't get in his way. Rivers and pools will not stop him. Even the blindness of others will not prevent his plan. In the end, it is certain that “they are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols” (v 17).

Israel’s failure to hear and see (Isaiah 42 v 18 to 25)

“Hear, you deaf, and look, you blind, that you may see” (v 18) – who are these deaf and the blind referred to here? They are the deaf and blind among God’s people. God has already spoken to the blind among the Gentiles (v 16): now he speaks to the blind that he calls ‘my servant’, and the deaf whom he calls ‘my messenger’. Clearly, a blind person will not be a good servant; a deaf person will not be a good messenger.

“Who gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers?” (v 24) – Isaiah’s answer is shocking: “Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned?” God allowed this low, defeated place of Israel as discipline for their sin, for their chosen blindness and deafness. We can be sure God only used these measures after he had exhausted gentler ways. Yet even these sharp measures did not work. “It set him on fire all around” (v 25) – this correction from God felt like fire to Israel; yet they did not respond to it (see 1 Peter 4 v 12 to 19).

Prayer – Lord, you have promised that you lead the blind along right paths, and that you guide them in your ways of righteousness, justice and truth. Lord, in so many ways we too are blind, and we do not see clearly the way ahead. Lead us and guide us, we pray. Turn our darkness into light, and the rough places into level ground. Do not forsake us, Lord, as you have promised. We ask this all in Jesus’ name, Amen.