

# THE SERVANT OF THE LORD

by David H. Roper

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In preparation for communion, I would like to lead you in a brief study in the servant song in Isaiah 42. The book of Isaiah is divided into three parts:

The first section, Chapters 1-35, deals with Isaiah's times. He is speaking to his contemporaries. This section is set against the backdrop of the Assyrian period. Although Judah is powerful, wealthy, and influential, it is spiritually decadent. Isaiah speaks to these times and talks about the injustice of that period. Though God looks for righteousness and justice, what he sees is the cry of the oppressed, and Isaiah predicts that judgment is coming. "He will whistle [to use Isaiah's term] for Assyria." The Assyrians will be the rod that God uses to chasten his people. In those opening chapters Isaiah speaks very explicitly about the problems that exist in the nation and about the judgment that is coming.

The second section of Isaiah, Chapters 36-39, is a historical bridge between the first and third sections and introduces at least one of the causes of the Babylonian captivity.

In the third section, Chapters 40-66, Isaiah speaks about the Babylonian captivity, which is to take place at least 130 years after his time. He predicts its coming, tells them what it will be like, predicts the regathering to the land, the rebuilding of the temple, and the restoration of the nation in Judah.

If the theme of the first 35 chapters is condemnation, the theme of these final chapters is comfort. Isaiah prepares God's people for the exile well in advance, and he comforts them in advance. It is so much like the Lord to prepare us for times of trial and to announce comfort even before we enter into these periods. This is what he does through Isaiah.

In the closing chapters, 40-66, Isaiah talks about one who is designated as the Servant of the Lord, the Servant who will effect salvation, the one through whom God will accomplish his purposes in the nation. This one is very much the center of Isaiah's thinking, particularly in the section from Chapters 40 through 53. This song in the first four verses of Chapter 42 is the first of these references to the Servant of the Lord.

Just to give you a brief introduction to Chapter 42, I would like you to notice that Chapter 41 is a court scene. God calls all the Gentile nations to stand before the bar of judgment. God is the judge and prosecuting attorney and the jury. He asks these nations to present their case. He brings together two classes of Gentiles. There are the Gentiles off to the East (from Mesopotamia), and the Gentiles from the West (around the Mediterranean coast). The issue in this court scene is: Who can bring about justice in the world? Who can effect justice? Who can set things right? God calls on the nations to present their case, and then he presents his case. He describes his mighty acts in history, and how he is going to effect salvation, and then he asks the nations, "How will you set things right?"

You have to remember that when Isaiah was writing there were a number of large empires that were either in the process of being built or were already established -- the Assyrian and Babylonian empires were both established during this time. The city of Rome was founded shortly after Isaiah's time. This was the classical period of Greece, the Golden Age. So the nations are called upon to give an answer, a solution to the problems that face mankind. How can we heal a broken, suffering, struggling humanity? And they have nothing to say. These are the great thinkers of their age, the people upon whom most of our western thought is based, and they have no answer. In Verses 28 and 29 of Chapter 41, God gives his verdict:

**"But when I look [at the nations], there is no one,**

**And there is no counselor among them**

[There is no one who can give good counsel, who can lead mankind out of his circumstances]

**Who, if I ask, can give an answer.**

**Behold, all of them are false;**

**Their works are worthless,**

**Their molten images are wind and emptiness." {Isa 41:28-29 NASB}**

They have nothing to say. But then another figure is introduced into the courtroom, and he is the Servant of the Lord. First God calls on us in Verse 29 to behold the nations -- representatives from the East and from the West -- then, in Chapter 42, Verse 1, he calls on us to behold the Servant. He fixes our attention on the one he has designated here as his Servant. Of course, this is always the answer to man's problems -- fixing our eyes on the Servant of the Lord, getting our eyes off the thoughts and philosophies that are alternatives to the solution the Servant poses.

The question, of course, is, "Who is the Servant?" It seems very clear that in this particular passage the Servant is the Lord Jesus. The Jews recognized, long before Jesus' time, that this was a reference to Messiah. In almost all of their ancient translations from the Hebrew and Aramaic, they insert between the third and fourth words of Verse 1 the word *Messiah*: "Behold, My Servant, Messiah..." So, before Jesus came, the Jews knew to whom this verse referred. Matthew, speaking as an inspired apostle, applies these words directly to the Lord. For those of us who believe the Scriptures, there is no question. The Servant of the Lord here is the Lord Jesus. We are called upon to look at him as the solution to every problem. Now let's see how the Servant is described:

**"Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;**

**My chosen one in whom My soul delights.**

**I have put My Spirit upon Him;**

**He will bring forth justice to the nations.**

**He will not cry out or raise his voice,**

**Nor make His voice heard in the street.**

**A bruised reed He will not break,**

**And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish;**

**He will faithfully bring forth justice.**

**He will not be disheartened or crushed,**

**Until He has established justice in the earth;**

**And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law." {Isa 42:1-4 NASB}**

You will recognize immediately that the theme of this section is justice. In twelve lines he says three times that this one, the Servant of the Lord, will bring forth justice. In other words, this is the one who will set things right, because that is what the term "justice" means. He will establish things as they ought to be.

There are two terms that occur frequently in the Old Testament, and they are often found in conjunction with one another -- the terms "righteousness" and "justice."

The word "righteousness" in the Old Testament means to bring a thing into conformity with a standard or a norm. In other words, they would refer to weights that were accurate as "righteous weights." They would conform to a norm, to a standard. In the Old Testament evergreen trees are described as "trees of righteousness" because they always look as a tree ought to look. They do not drop their leaves during the winter, so they are "righteous" trees. The term basically means to bring a thing into conformity with what it ought to be, to establish it according to the right standard. In the Old Testament the standard is the character of God, so "righteousness" means bringing something into conformity with the character of God.

Justice is the outworking of righteousness. Justice is the application of righteousness. It is the action by which the king or some other person brings about a state of righteousness in the nation. Justice is the practical application of righteousness.

So when Isaiah says "The Servant of the Lord will bring about justice in the world," he is saying that he will establish things according to a right standard -- things will be as they ought to be. Whether we are talking

about our homes, or society, or ourselves, it is the Servant of the Lord who is the only one who can get things aligned with God's standard. No one else can. There is no alternative to the Servant of the Lord.

In this section we are told something of the resources that empowered the Servant, then we are told something of his manner, or his demeanor, and finally, we are given a word about his persistence:

First, let's look at the resources that enable God's Servant to bring about justice in the earth. He is described as the Servant whom the Father upholds. The term "uphold" means to take hold of something. It means to strengthen someone by taking a grip on them. That is what the Father does to the Servant, the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus derives his strength from the Father.

We normally think of the Lord, since he is God, as sufficient in himself. But the Lord himself tells us that his strength was derived from the Father. He was not strong in himself. He experienced all of the weaknesses and limitations of the flesh, apart from sin; therefore he understands our limitations. He himself had to depend on the Father for his strength. There was simply no other way that he could carry out the ministry that the Father had given to him.

In contrast to that, when the representatives of both the Eastern and Western worlds are under stress, they say, "Let's strengthen one another." In Chapter 41, Verse 5, we read,

**The coastlands** [referring to the western Gentile powers, those around the Mediterranean Sea  
-- Romans, Greeks, Egyptians]  
**have seen and are afraid;**  
**The ends of the earth tremble;**  
**They have drawn near and have come.**  
**Each one helps his neighbor,**  
**And says to his brother, "Be strong!"** {Isa 41:5-6 NASB}

This uses the same term that is found in Chapter 42 where it says the Lord upholds, or strengthens, takes hold of, his Servant. All of Eastern and Western philosophy is shot through with the idea that the way to handle crises (in this case it was the invasion of Cyrus from the East) is to say to one another, "Be strong!"

Haven't you heard that before? "Try again. Try harder! Take a grip on yourself. When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" That is the way we encourage one another. If you have a hard day tomorrow, just be strong -- instead of being strengthened by the Lord!

I saw a Peanuts strip last week in which Charlie Brown goes to Lucy for counseling. She is sitting in her booth under her banner, "Psychiatry -- 5 cents." Charlie Brown says, "Lucy, you know how I've tried -- tell me I've tried! I've tried and I've tried and I've tried to be good!" Lucy says, "Nice try, Charlie Brown. Five cents."

Second, we are told that the Servant is the Father's chosen one, who delights the Father. "My chosen one in whom My soul delights." I have three sons, and they all are a great delight to me, so I can understand this. The Servant was a Son whom the Father loved and had especially chosen. These are the words that were addressed to the Son at his baptism: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," {Matt 3:17 NASB}. Long before the Lord Jesus ever did a thing, before he worked a miracle, before he ever taught, before he engaged in any ministry at all, he was assured of the love, approval, and delight of the Father. That is what enabled him to endure the rejection of men. People were not delighted with him, but he could persevere in what he was doing because he was assured of the acceptance and love of the Father. Of course, the same is true of us. We are not always going to receive the praise and appreciation of people. They won't always understand. We won't delight them. But we, like the Son, are chosen, and we are a source of delight to the Father.

Third, we are told that the Servant is empowered because he possesses the Spirit: "I have put my Spirit upon him." In the Old Testament, the Spirit is the principle that gets things done. It is the animating principle; it is God at work. It is God. More than a principle, it is a Person. The Spirit is described in the Old Testament in terms that the people could understand. The same term that is translated *wind* or *breath* throughout the Old

Testament is also translated *Spirit*. People had seen the wind at work, although they couldn't see the wind. This is the way the ministry of the Son is described. He possessed the Spirit and the Spirit empowered him. Everywhere he went the wind blew. He could affect people's lives powerfully and change attitudes and have a great impact upon people because he possessed the Spirit.

These are the characteristics of the Son -- he is upheld by God, chosen by God, and he possesses the Spirit. This was the power he drew upon to carry out his ministry. The last line of Verse 1 tells us that because of the resources that he possesses in the Father "He will bring forth justice to the nations." He will set things right.

The second verse tells us something of the Servant's manner: "He will not cry out or raise His voice, nor make His voice heard in the street." He didn't demand recognition. He didn't publish daily reports in the Jerusalem Post. He didn't talk about what he did, nor did he necessarily tell people how he did it. He went about doing what the Father had called him to do. He didn't promote himself, but he quietly followed the will of his Father. Then we are told in Verse 3,

**A bruised reed He will not break,  
And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish. {Isa 42:3a NASB}**

This is a description of the nature of his ministry and the sort of people he was drawn to, the kind of lives that were most attractive to him. Somehow we have fallen into the mistake of thinking that God is only pleased with the strong, with those who have everything thought through spiritually, who handle all their problems and who do not struggle, or those who are in positions of leadership, who appear to have everything together. We think those are the people God is pleased with. We think God is sort of put off by the rest of us because we are struggling. This passage puts the lie to that thought. It is the broken and the bruised and the nearly extinguished that God ministers to.

This is a very graphic picture. I can see in my mind a slender reed, crushed, half-broken, bending over, or a little lamp with a piece of flax in it, nearly extinguished, merely a glowing ember. The Lord props up the broken reed, and he fans into flame the smoking flax. That is what he was called to do. He came, he said, "as a physician to the sick," {Mark 2:17 NASB}. Those were the people he was drawn to, the ones he ministered to.

We are fortunate here in our family to have a very fine heart surgeon, Ed Stinson. One thing I have noticed about Ed is that he never asks me about the state of my heart. Last time we talked he asked me how my beard was growing, but he didn't say a thing about my heart. He is not preoccupied with my heart; he doesn't call me up every day to ask if it is still plugging along. But when he meets somebody with a troubled heart, that is when he goes into action. All of his compassion and the skill of his mind and hands is brought to bear on healing that troubled heart. That is what attracts him.

If the truth is to be known, all of us have troubled hearts. All of us are broken reeds, despite the front that we erect. We are smoking flax. And that is what draws the Lord to our aid. He wants to minister to us, to fan us back into flame, prop us up, strengthen and encourage us. And that is the ministry that we are called to, as well.

We are to seek out the weak and the floundering and the struggling and to minister to them. And, by so doing, Isaiah tells us again, he will faithfully bring forth justice.

Then, in Verse 4, we learn of the Servant's persistence:

**"He will not be disheartened or crushed,  
Until He has established justice in the earth;  
And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law." {Isa 42:4 NASB}**

The term translated "disheartened" is the same word that is found in the second line of Verse 3, "a dimly burning wick." The term translated "crushed" is the same word that is translated "bruised" in the first line of Verse 3. The point is that, though the Servant ministers to the bruised and crushed, he himself is never

bruised or crushed. He doesn't catch the disease. He doesn't give up; he doesn't get fainthearted. He doesn't say to me and to you, "One more time and I'm not available; one more time and I won't forgive."

How many times have we said, "Here I am, Lord, back again, doing the same thing. Can you ever forgive me?" Certainly he can. He never gives up. He will persist until he will bring about justice.

That is the ministry that was given to the Servant. He was one submissive to the will of the Father. He is the one who ministers to us and to our needs. He had from the Father all the resources necessary to bring about justice and to set things right, and he set about doing it. Quietly, without fanfare, without drawing a large following -- certainly not at the end of his ministry -- he quietly and patiently ministered to the weak and lowly, to the oppressed, to the downtrodden. And though it appeared throughout his lifetime that his efforts were fruitless, he established justice. He laid down the basis for a righteous and just society.

That, of course, is the pattern for our lives, as well. He not only accomplished what he set out to do, he gave us the example. And he is the one who has called us to the same ministry.

I just want to encourage you with those words. I think Paul had them in mind when he wrote in Second Timothy,

**And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition. {2 Tim 2:24-25a NASB}**

That was the Lord's ministry, and that is our ministry as well. So if you are here this morning and you feel like a bruised and broken reed and your flax is about to go out, remember, it is the Servant of the Lord that you need to behold.

## Prayer

Father, it is good to know that you love us, and we thank you, Father, that you who are perfect sent a perfect give, the perfect Servant, into the world. None of us, even though we were created by you, is adequate. None of us could serve you as you are to be served, except through your Son, Christ. So we praise you and thank you that he who is with you in the beginning is alive and well and reigns. Amen.

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