

Note: this reading is the 2nd in a 4-part series on Isaiah's portraits of the Messiah

Isaiah 42-50 – The Suffering Servant: Part 1

Isaiah, the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, gives us three panoramic prophetic portraits of Israel's coming Messiah. These portraits contain different elements, describing three distinct-but-interrelated roles that Messiah will play in His redemption of Israel and the whole world.

In a previous devotional, we covered Isaiah's first portrait of Messiah (chapters 1-37). He will be a righteous and just King, descended from King David, whose reign will bring unparalleled blessing and social justice to the nations. These passages are hauntingly attractive, but they raise a serious problem: How can sinful people be eligible for entry into this righteous kingdom? After all, much of the book of Isaiah indicts Israelites (and all of us) for our true moral guilt, and warns us this is a barrier between us and God.

Isaiah 59:1 Behold, the LORD'S hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull That it cannot hear. ² But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear. . . ¹² For our transgressions are multiplied before You, And our sins testify against us; For our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities . . .

It is because of this problem that Isaiah speaks of another portrait of the Messiah – the suffering Servant – who resolves this problem through His service so that, even though we are disqualified because of our sins, we can be forgiven and invited into God's kingdom.

Throughout Isa. 40-55, Isaiah speaks of two different "servants." The first he clearly identifies as the nation of Israel (see Isa. 41:8,9;



42:19; 43:10; 44:1,2,21; 45:4; 48:20). On the other hand, he speaks frequently in this section of another, unnamed “servant” (see Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). This “servant” cannot be the nation of Israel for several reasons:

- He is fully obedient to God (50:5; 53:9,11), whereas Israel is chronically disobedient.
- He is rejected by Israel (49:7; 53:3,4).
- He ultimately rescues Israel (49:5,6).

If these two “servants” refer to two different entities, why does God give them the same name? The answer is that both are related to God’s promise that from the *nation* of Israel would come the *One Person* who would bless all the nations. God calls both of them “My servant” because they have both been called to serve Him in the fulfillment of His redemptive purpose. But where Israel failed to live up to this ideal, the Servant would succeed.”*

In fact, while Israel suffered because of its sins, the ideal Servant (Jesus) suffered as an innocent victim. This theme of suffering becomes progressively clearer in each of the four Servant Songs. Let’s take a look . . .

A hint of discouragement

*Isaiah 42:1 “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. ² He will not cry out or raise His voice, nor make His voice heard in the street. ³ A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴ He will not be disheartened or crushed until He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law. ⁵ Thus says God the LORD, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who*

* See Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago; The Moody Bible Institute, 1980), p. 32.



gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it, ⁶ *“I am the LORD, I have called You in righteousness, I will also hold You by the hand and watch over You, and I will appoint You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations,* ⁷ *to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison.* ⁸ *“I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.* ⁹ *“Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim them to you.”*

Notice that this passage predicts the coming of the Servant as a *future* event (vs. 9). In fact, Isaiah issued this prediction over 700 years before Jesus arrived on the scene!

Notice also that although God’s Servant will be ultimately victorious in establishing justice on the earth (vs. 1,3,4), He will encounter opposition along the way. Isaiah implies here what he makes explicit in subsequent passages – that the Servant will be “disheartened (and nearly) crushed (vs. 4), although He will ultimately succeed in His mission.

Apparent failure & futility

*Isaiah 49:1 Listen to Me, O islands, and pay attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called Me from the womb; from the body of My mother He named Me. ² He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; and He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver. ³ He said to Me, “You are **My Servant**, Israel, in Whom I will show My glory.” ⁴ But I said, “I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely the justice due to Me is with the LORD, and My reward with My God.” ⁵ And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be **His Servant**, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and My God is My strength), ⁶ He says, “It is 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 make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”⁷ Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One, to the despised One, to the One abhorred by the nation, to the **Servant** of rulers, “Kings will see and arise, princes will also bow down, because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You.”*

Notice the contrast in evaluations of the Servant’s effectiveness and value. On the one hand, He affirms that God has chosen Him to be the One who uniquely reveals His glory (vs. 3). On the other hand, he laments that He has “toiled in vain” and “spent (His) strength for nothing” (vs. 4). He feels like He has utterly failed in His mission, yet in fact He succeeds so well that His salvation reaches the end of the earth (vs. 6)! God’s own people (Israel) despise Him and are appalled by Him, yet He redeems them, and kings and rulers bow down before Him as the chosen One of God (vs. 7)! Somehow, His apparent failure and futility is not the end of the story, but accomplishes a tremendous success.

Voluntary submission to torture & humiliation

*Isaiah 50:5 The Lord GOD has opened My ear; and I was not disobedient nor did I turn back.⁶ I gave My back to those who strike Me, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.⁷ For the Lord GOD helps Me, therefore, I am not disgraced; therefore, I have set My face like flint, and I know that I will not be ashamed . . .¹⁰ Who is among you that fears the LORD, That obeys the voice of **His servant** . . .? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.*

Here we learn that it was God’s will for the Servant to endure such suffering. God called on Him to submit to unjust beating and humiliating torture – and He obeyed willingly. He could bear this disgrace without flinching because He knew that God would help Him endure it and ultimately vindicate Him.



This passage poses the pressing question: Why is such terrible suffering God's will for His Servant? Isaiah answers this question in his final, climactic passage which we will study in the next devotional on Isa. 52,53.

**Come visit our Pacesetters Daytime Bible Study!
10AM Thursdays at Dwell Main Campus**

Copyright 2023 Gary DeLashmutt

DWELL
COMMUNITY CHURCH

