

# The Song of the Servant

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Last Monday, during the most recent monthly men's study here, one of the preachers in attendance noted that brethren rarely preach from the Old-Testament prophets these days. Of course, I took that as a challenge, and I decided to examine both Isaiah 53 and the three chapters immediately preceding it. We're all familiar with Isaiah 53, but most Christians have not spent the same amount of time examining Isaiah 50-52. In many ways, this is an oversight. As with other places in the Bible, chapter breaks in that portion of Isaiah do not adequately define context. If we look at the entire context, we can come to a greater appreciation of what God is saying, both about Jesus and about His people. Let's look, then, at the song of the Servant.

## An Everlasting God

The first of the three rough sections within this context addresses the fact that God is an everlasting God and so can bring an everlasting salvation. First, though, Isaiah concerns himself with **INTRODUCING THE SERVANT**. Let's look together at Isaiah 50:4-9. Even though this is not one of the marquee Messianic prophecies in Scripture, we don't have too much trouble identifying it as such a prophecy. For one thing, the Holy Spirit identifies it for us. Part of this text is quoted in Matthew 26, where it explains the significance of the humiliation of Jesus during His trial.

Second, though, this is a text that could only describe Jesus. It identifies first of all His spellbinding ability to teach, then His willingness to hear and obey God. In obedience to God, He willingly endured humiliation and torment. He set His face toward Jerusalem, "like flint", Isaiah says, because He knows that God will be with Him. The enemies of Jesus, not Jesus Himself, would ultimately be put to shame.

Even today, there is a powerful lesson here for us, not only about our Lord, but about our own lives. Following Christ does not mean an easy road. He asks us to do things that the people of this world would never do. Sometimes, they have significant consequences. Whether we are willing to face and endure those things depends on our trust in God. Do we really, really believe that He is going to deliver all who serve Him faithfully? If we do, we will be indifferent even to the efforts of our enemies to humiliate and abuse us. Why be affected by that? The day is coming when we will get our reward from God, and they will get theirs.

The Servant then urges His audience, righteous and wicked alike, to **LISTEN**. For this portion, let's look together at Isaiah 50:10-51:3. This section contains two admonitions to the righteous: the first, to rely on God, and the second, to look to the past. Let's look at these one at a time. The first describes a situation that we find terrifying both literally and in metaphor—being in darkness without light. Once, when I was a kid, my family went on one of those cave tours, and I remember to this day what it was like when they switched off the lights. I could wave my hand in front of my face and not see a thing. Do you think that I went racing around the cave in the pitch blackness? Of course not! Even then, that sounded like a good way to break my fool neck. I didn't budge until the lights came back on, and I could see my way again.

In life, of course, the lights are never on. We never understand on our own. We don't know where our lives are going or how to wisely conduct them. We might think we do, like the people in the last verse of the chapter who try to light their way by kindling firebrands, but ultimately our human wisdom ends up destroying us. We spend our lives in darkness, then, and the only true illumination we can ever have is the light of Christ. Unless we are willing to walk by faith, not by sight, we can never reach safety.

Second, because God does not change, His dealings with men in the past predict how He will deal with the righteous today and tomorrow. Abraham and Sarah were childless and hopeless. Through Isaac, God gave them descendants too numerous to count. Hundreds of years after Isaiah's time, the Jews were carried off into Babylonian captivity. Their situation too looked hopeless, but God promised them that they would be returned to the land and then did it. Today, at least for myself, I can't say that my situation looks hopeless. However, there may be those here this morning who look at the future and do despair. Doesn't matter. Whether our problems are small or great, we can still rely on God to deliver His people.

Finally, in this section, the Servant emphasizes that He will bring **AN EVERLASTING SALVATION**. Consider Isaiah 51:4-8. This is one of those sections of the Old Testament that shows that something funny is going on. If you look at all the Scriptures in this section, they're all in first person. The

chapter break notwithstanding, this is all one context, without any obvious changes in speaker. However, the same Servant who is talking about having His beard plucked in Isaiah 50 is now promising eternal salvation and righteousness in Isaiah 51. This leaves us with two possibilities. One, the speaker is a megalomaniac and has a head filled with delusions of grandeur. Two, the One who is doing the speaking is more than human.

Of course, the fullness of time revealed which of these options was correct, but the language here shows us something vital about God. As all Chicagoans know, Daniel Burnham once famously said, “Make no little plans,” and in all of existence, there is no one who makes bigger plans than our Creator. It would have been enough for anyone else to make a nation out of Abraham and Sarah. It would have been enough for anybody else to restore captive Zion to the land. Those things, though, weren’t enough for God. His plan was to provide eternal salvation for everyone, and He wouldn’t rest until it was accomplished.

Today, God has big plans for us still. To all appearances, all of us here this morning are ordinary American citizens. None of us would generate a second glance walking down the street. However, as ordinary as we may look, we are extraordinary to God. He has loved us all with an everlasting love, and He has determined that we should inherit eternal glory. All we have to do is love Him and serve Him as best we can, and He will bless us beyond our wildest dreams, not because we are great, but because He is.

## Wake Up!

The second main section of this text comprises a threefold plea to various entities to wake up. The first of the three is **THE ARM OF THE LORD**. Isaiah explores this subject in Isaiah 51:9-16. To me, even though my Bible isn’t formatted this way, this section of Scripture reads like a dialogue. In 9-11, the speaker, who seems to be Isaiah now, appeals to the arm of the Lord to awaken and deliver Zion from captivity. In 12-16, we see God’s reply. He asks why Isaiah is so focused on the evil that men do that he has forgotten God. In the end, the oppressor will not triumph. Instead, as God has used Isaiah to predict, He will free the captives of Zion. The arm of the Lord doesn’t need to wake up, because it never really slept.

This is a message that we can take heart from too. Like Isaiah, we may worry that God has forgotten us, that He is sleeping on our problems and needs to be awakened. Often, we feel this way with much less justification than God’s captive people had! The reality, though, is that God is on it. He knows our situation perfectly well. He feels compassion on us in our sufferings, and He already knows how He is going to get us through it. This may not happen on our timetable. The Israelites had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years before they learned what God wanted them to learn. We likewise may spend a lot of time in the desert places of our lives until we have learned enough and grown enough that God is willing for us to move on. Maybe there’s going to be somebody in our lives 10 years from now that God is equipping us to help today. The possibilities are infinite, and none of us is wise enough to sort through them all. It’s not our place to try. It is our place, however, to trust God, and to remember that He has never forgotten His beloved.

The second wake-up call in the text is directed at **JERUSALEM**. It appears in Isaiah 51:17-23. The imagery here is vivid. God is comparing His people to a drunk, but they have had their faculties destroyed not by wine, but by becoming drunk on His anger. Just like a drunken man is foolish, uncoordinated, unable to defend himself, so Jerusalem has become an easy prey for her adversaries. To extend the metaphor, she’s passed out in the gutter, helpless to defend herself from anyone who wants to rob or take advantage of her. Isaiah reveals that the time has come for this to end. Now, God will turn His anger on her enemies instead.

There are still all kinds of people today who spend their lives drinking from the cup of God’s anger. For those of you here this morning who aren’t faithful to God at all, or who are limping along with one foot in the kingdom and one foot in the world, let me ask you. How’s that working out for you? Is that godless life fulfilling, satisfying, everything that you hoped it would be? Or, instead, do things never quite work out the way that you want them to? Do you feel like there’s some good event that’s always just around the corner, but every time you get close to it, your hopes are dashed again?

To you, as Isaiah said, I say, “Wake up!” If you are putting your hope on anything but God, if you are focusing your life around anything but God, you are going to be disappointed. Sometimes, the disappointments are going to be spectacular. I can remember times in my life when I thought I was going to find happiness through sin, but what I got was clobbered instead. Sometimes, the problem is what’s missing, not what’s happening. God can satisfy us, but all those other things can’t, and so we go through our days

with this hole in our lives that we somehow never manage to fill. That hole has God's name on it, friends, and the only way to fill it is to seek His kingdom and His righteousness first.

Finally, Isaiah urges **ZION** to awaken. Look at Isaiah 52:1-12. Obviously, Zion is just another way to refer to Jerusalem, but the content is very different from what we saw in the last chapter. This isn't about waking up from a drunken stupor. It's about waking up to go home. God is going to bring the captive exiles of Jerusalem back to the desolate city, so that everybody will know that He is God. Note too one of the neat rhetorical trips here. If you'll recall, the first wakeup call was to the arm of the Lord. Here, the arm of the Lord is doing the redeeming, because God has bared it to make His salvation known.

God's call for people to return to Him is still just as loud as it was 2000 years ago. Even now, those who have been held captive in the kingdom of sin can find freedom on His holy mountain. Once again, if we want to come to God, nobody can stop us but ourselves.

However, we have to pay attention to what God says to the returning exiles too. He urges them to come out from the unclean peoples in whose midst they have been living. They have to purify themselves. This is no less true for God's people in the church. Of course, we are not called to journey back to Palestine and live in Jerusalem. However, we are still called to come out and be separate. If we want to know freedom in God, we can't be like the people of the world around us. They indulge in all sorts of sins, but we must be righteous. If we are not willing to purify ourselves, we can only remain in slavery.

## The Servant

The last of these three interconnected sections in Isaiah concerns the Servant Himself. From everything that I've said so far, we might think that Isaiah is simply prophesying the return of God's people from Babylon, but the presence of the Servant throughout this text reveals to us that much more than that is going on. When I make applications about our spiritual freedom, that's part of Isaiah's message too.

In the first part of this text, the Servant is described as both **EXALTED AND AFFLICTED**. Read with me from Isaiah 52:13-53:3. Let's notice first of all that this reading begins in an unusual place. We recognize this context as one of the most important Messianic prophecies in the entire Bible, and we usually use the chapter citation—Isaiah 53—as a shorthand reference. However, it's pretty clear from the text that the Isaiah 53 discussion of the Servant actually begins in late Isaiah 52.

Within the first part of this expanded context, it's evident that the Servant is quite an enigmatic figure. On the one hand, a lot of positive things are said about Him. He is going to be high and lifted up and greatly exalted. He is going to sprinkle many nations, which in Old-Testament language means that He is going to purify them from sin. Kings are going to shut their mouths because of Him.

However, much of this prophecy is negative. His appearance and form will be marred, He's going to be ignored, He's not going to be very physically impressive, and He's going to be rejected by His contemporaries. When we put all of this together, it makes for a puzzling picture. It's no wonder that when Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch whether he understood this, the eunuch only expressed his bafflement.

I daresay that we would find this text equally baffling if we didn't also know the story of its fulfillment. Here, and indeed throughout the rest of the context, this contradictory description fits Jesus like a glove. In fact, I have trouble seeing any other explanation for this text than that it is a Messianic prophecy. I don't know what other sense you could make from it other than that it is foretelling the coming of the Son of God, who will die on a cross for the sins of mankind. Nothing else comes close to fitting.

The great specificity of this prophecy continues in Isaiah's depiction of **THE WORK OF THE SERVANT**. It appears in Isaiah 53:4-9. Here too, we see not just a vague overview of a future event that might or might not be Jesus. Instead, it is very clearly about Him. It predicts that He would be scourged, that when on trial, He would not open His mouth to defend Himself, that He would die even though He hadn't done anything wrong, and that He would be slated to be buried with the wicked, yet would end up being buried with the rich. I've read newspaper articles that contained fewer details than that!

Once we're in on the secret, though, this should remind us of a bitter truth about Jesus' coming to earth. From hundreds of years before He was even born, His course was set. He came here to suffer, to be rejected, and to die, so that through His suffering, we could be saved and healed.

This grim story, though, has a happy ending in **THE TRIUMPH OF THE SERVANT**. Read with me from Isaiah 53:10-12. Here too, there is much weirdness that likely made no sense either to Isaiah or

to any of his contemporaries. Apparently, it is God who will be inflicting all this pain upon someone who is righteous. What is more, this Servant is going to be some sort of human sacrifice. He's going to "sprinkle many nations" by dying for them. Then, after He's done dying, He's going to come back to life! Nothing like this had ever happened in the experience of any of the Israelites, and after Jesus, it would never happen again.

It's critical for our faith that we study passages like this. I admit, there are parts of the Bible that are hard to understand. There are spiritual topics where I'm forced to shrug and acknowledge I don't have all the answers. This passage, though—this is clear. As much as it must have confused Isaiah, it makes perfect sense to us. Jesus was not just a good man who died on a cross and stayed dead. The record of the New Testament is not some kind of elaborate fraud. Instead, everything that happened to the Lord happened according to the predetermined plan of God—a plan God spelled out in detail 700 years earlier.

I have a good imagination, but if I didn't know the story of Jesus, I don't think I could even make up a story that would fit this prophecy. The prophecy has too many fantastical elements, too many things that seem to contradict each other. God's going to kill the guy, then exalt Him? How's that going to work? Only divine wisdom could conceive such a plan in the first place and then see it through to success.

Before the Lord's Supper, all of this obviously gives us all kinds of fodder for reflection. It helps us see the intricacy and the subtlety of the mind of God. All of those centuries of Israelite history, of apostasy, exile, and triumphant return, were set up as a type of our own spiritual journey. We sinned. We were cast out from the presence of God, but God in His infinite mercy brought us back to Him. All of this is possible, though, only through Jesus, the One who was willing to suffer and die in our place. It boggles the mind that all this should be so, yet it is. Let's consider it now as we partake.