

A Walk in the Dark

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Well, we are coming this evening to the third of the servant songs in Isaiah. And thinking about these songs this week, I thought, you know, going through these songs, it's a bit like watching someone build up a collage piece by piece as they're putting together a picture of God's servants. By now, the pieces are coming together, I hope, into a recognizable portrait. Now, I have a picture of a collage here. It's produced by an artist with a cover of an old book that my friend was working on. He prints old books. And this is Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, written by this man, John Bunyan. And I don't know if you can see from there, but it's actually made up of bits and scraps of old books. And what's clever about it is that those scraps and pages are things that he wrote, bits of books that he wrote, or illustrations from his stories, from Pilgrim's Progress and the Holy War. And so what's clever is that it's actually his own words and pictures of his works that make up this picture of him, he is. And that's just what Isaiah is doing in these songs, gradually layering up for us the servant's own words, pictures of his works, piece by piece to build up this picture, this portrait of the servant himself.

And this third servant song from Isaiah 50 adds some really important pieces to that picture. That collage can come down now. It's not his most flattering medium, it has to be said. But we have a still more beautiful portrait to look at this evening. So far, we've seen in the first song from chapter 42 that God has chosen this servant of his to rule rightly over the nations in the power of his spirit. To faithfully, that is, slowly, we saw, but surely bring justice to the world through his teaching, his gospel. And in the second song last week in chapter 49, we saw for the servant, that means living in suspense. His words and his works are glorious, but they are often hidden and held back. And yet we saw God promised him that his greatness and glory would reach one day to the ends of the earth. But in this third song, we get the biggest sense so far that the servant's path to glory won't be a walk in the park. In fact, it will be more a walk in the dark, suffering, rejection.

And yet, through his suffering, he trusts God that he will see his promise through to the end. He will be seen to be in the right by those who oppose him and his loving rule. And tonight, Isaiah calls us, we who follow the servant this evening, to follow him in trust, to follow his faith, to obey his words, to follow his path, even though it might take us through deep darkness in this world. And so Isaiah gives us three more pieces of the portrait this evening, followed by one invitation, which is just another way of saying we have four points. So the first piece then, point number one, the servant is devoted to God's word. Now, one of the themes that we've seen throughout these songs is the relationship between God and his servant. And we know at the heart of any relationship is communication. And here we see that's no less necessary, but all the more true, in fact, between the servant and the Lord. We see that in verse four there. The servant says, the sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed. And so the servant starts each day by listening. And through his careful listening, he learns to speak. He listens as one being instructed. And so he gets a well-instructed tongue. Now, interestingly, that word taught or instructed is the root of the word disciple, which Isaiah has used elsewhere in this book. So here we're shown the ultimate disciple. Now, usually we think of someone who's a disciple, someone who follows God, who follows

Christ. And we will come back around to that idea shortly. But I want us to see here, who is it who's initiating, pursuing this communication? Okay, or for those of you who love grammar, who's the subject of these sentences? You look at the start of that first line in verse four, the sovereign Lord has given me. And then the third line, he wakens me morning by morning. So who is it who's beginning this conversation? Well, it's God himself, isn't it? God daily pursues his servant, his disciple. Every morning, he whispers in his ear, my mercies on you morning by morning. Wake up,

come, listen and hear what I have to tell you today. I've been reading a book on prayer recently with some other ministers called

Just Ask. It's written by a guy called J.D. Greer. And he tells this story about his dad that I think really captures this sense of God's desire to speak to his servant. So he says soon after his dad became a Christian, he finally determined he was going to get up 30 minutes earlier and have a prayer time if it killed him. He set his alarm for the next morning and asked God to help him get up when it went off. He woke up 15 minutes before his alarm went off wide awake. He thought, well, God, I said, help me wake up, but not this early. Then he said it was one of the times he felt the spirit of God and pressed something on him most clearly. God said, but I couldn't wait to get started. [7:02] I couldn't wait to get started. Now, perhaps that's not an experience you can relate to, but I think it just captures beautifully God's desire and eagerness in this song to speak words of truth and grace and life to his servant morning by morning every day. And not only to his servant, but as Alec Motier, a commentator, writes, this morning by morning appointment is not a special provision for the servant, but is the standard curriculum for all disciples. If you follow Jesus, this is how God wants to start every day with you. Now, I don't know when you set time aside in your day to read the Bible and pray. And in a sense, it's not important. The important thing is that we are finding time. But it's easy to think of that daily devotion as something that we have to kind of get on top of and do and plan, isn't it, to kind of keep up with God, to kind of keep pace with him spiritually, as if he's kind of off in the distance, beating the path and leading the way.

And we're just breathlessly kind of chasing after his coattails and trying to keep up. Or maybe we think, you know, if I don't snatch a bit of time to read some scripture to pray, well, maybe he'll just forget I'm after him at all. Now, does that sound like the God that the servant knows? Let's put it in New Testament terms. Does that sound like the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ? He wakens me morning by morning, sings the servant, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed. Hey, brothers and sisters, your daily devotion is not you trying your best to keep up with God. It is not that he has got up early and left before you have started the day. No, he is waiting by your bedside morning by morning because he can't wait to speak to you at the start of a new day. And if we follow the pattern of his servant, the Lord Jesus, well, we won't want to wait to hear him either. Mark writes of Jesus in chapter one of his gospel, rising very early in the morning while it was still dark, that Jesus departed and went out to a desolate place and there he prayed. This is a man, a servant devoted to God's word. And when he came back from that time with his father, well, he had words to sustain the weary. His disciples saw him coming. They wanted to know where he'd been, where he'd been gone. And he says, let us go on to the next town that I might preach there also, for that is why I came. He might well have replied, the Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. You've already seen, haven't we, that the servant's work in the world is done through his words. And here it is again. I have to go and preach, he says. And that sword of God's word in his mouth, polished and sharpened afresh each morning by word and prayer, well, what does it do? Isaiah tells us it sustains the weary. It upholds bruised and broken reeds. It breathes life into smoldering wicks. He has a powerful weapon at his disposal and he uses it to keep people like us going. It's his word that sustains us.

And how do we respond to that? Perhaps you remember after preaching a challenging sermon, Jesus turns to his disciples, people have walked away from him and he asks, are you going to go too?

Where else shall we go? Asked Peter. You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God. Wonderful words that we can take as our response this evening, as we commit ourselves to the servant and to his words ourselves. You have the words of eternal life.

Firstly, then the servant is devoted to God's word. And secondly, we see as an outcome of that, the servant is devoted to God's way. He's devoted to God's way. Verse five, the sovereign Lord has opened my ears. I have not been rebellious. I have not turned away. That's the natural flow, isn't it? The servant hears God's words. So he speaks God's words and he lives God's way.

[12:17] Now to see why that's important, just glance up, if you would, at verse one of our passage. We began reading at the start of the chapter because there God is reminding his people, Israel, that the reason for their breakup in their relationship isn't his fault.

It says, show me my signature on the certificate I gave you when I divorced you. Show me the receipt from when I sold you to my creditors. Show me where you get the idea that it was me that

wanted to leave you. Now those are rhetorical questions. There is no certificate. There is no receipts because the reason for the breakdown in their relationship wasn't God's unfaithfulness, but their unfaithfulness.

Verse one, because of your sins, you were sold. Because of your transgressions, your mother was sent away. When I came, why was there no one? When I called, why was there no one to answer? He's saying it was their sin that drove them apart. So much so that when God came back to save the relationship, he came back to an empty home. But he should walk in behind him to stop putting that house, that relationship back together. But the servant, the sovereign Lord has opened my ears.

I have not been rebellious. I have not turned away. See that contrast between unfaithful Israel and the unfaithful servant. And we began in the first song by defining the servant as the ideal Israel, all that Israel ought to be, but was not. But as one writer puts it, by this point, several chapters later, we see the servant is all that Israel ought to be, but refuses to become. Servant's obedience stands in ever sharper contrast with Israel's worsening stubbornness and rebellion. The servant, he is totally devoted to God's way through and through. And as the unfaithfulness around him gets worse and worse, we see that in a world in rebellion against God, he suffers for his obedience as he stands his ground. See that in verse six, I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Now this beating on his back suggests the kind of flogging that would be sentenced from a judge to a criminal. Pulling out of his beard suggests a kind of torture, mocking and spitting, a kind of public humiliation. And this is what the faithful, obedient servant receives at the hands of a disobedient and unfaithful world, because he is standing firm on God in a world that has turned its back on God.

[15:31] But notice the servant isn't a victim here. Again, if you're a grammar geek, here's the subject of verse six. Verse six, I offered my back, my cheeks. I did not hide my face. The servant is the subject. He gave himself into the hands of the mob. He didn't put up a resistance. He didn't hide away. He didn't run. He offered himself to the beating, the mocking, the humiliation, the hatred. And in a moment, he's going to tell us why it is he could do that. But just now it's worth pausing on this. It was his obedience to God in a disobedient world that led to this suffering. And we've seen this, haven't we, play out as we've gone as a church through John's gospel together. It's been impossible to miss. Why did the religious leaders want to kill Jesus? Because he did the work that the father gave him to do.

He healed people's bodies on the Sabbath. He told the truth about God. He raised the dead. And these wonderful works that God gave Jesus to do and that he faithfully carried out, began the conveyor belt that was to end with Jesus being convicted under false charges and beaten by the palace guards, stripped and spat on and humiliated and nailed to the cross.

One writer observes that we're not told the identity of the servant in this song, but he writes, where there is this threefold suffering, the beating, the torture, the humiliation. There we see the servant. There we see the servant. Because he stayed faithful to God, he suffered. And he did so willingly, obediently, even to the point of death, even to the point of death on a cross.

And he says to his followers, then, this crucified and faithful Lord in John chapter 15, if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.

[17:55] God's, loving God's word, loving God's way, they don't come without a cost for the servant or for his disciples. How then can the servant, how can we, his people, faithfully and obediently follow Jesus and bear up under that kind of pressure?

Well, thirdly, we find the servant is devoted to God's verdict. God's verdict. Have a read, if you would, for verses 7, 8, and 9 with me. And just notice that phrase that gets repeated.

Why can the servant go through with this? Because the sovereign Lord helps me. I will not be disgraced. Therefore, I have set my face like flint and I know I will not be put to shame.

He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other. Who is my accuser? Let him confront me. It is the sovereign Lord who helps me.

He will condemn me. His trust is in the sovereign Lord who helps him. Namely, the one who helps him in the courtroom.

[19:04] This is that language. Who will bring charges? Who will accuse? Who will condemn? All words used of prosecutors in a trial. And unsurprisingly, and not coincidentally, they're the same words that we heard earlier, aren't we, from Romans chapter 8.

One of the best known passages in the Bible has a lesser known source because Paul is simply remixing the servant's ancient song.

And the point of both the servant and Paul is the same. If God is for us, who can be against us? And the only difference, the important difference, is that whereas for us, God is for us in Christ, well, for the servant, God is for the servant, for who the servant is in himself.

See that verse 8? He who vindicates me is near. Again, that's a legal word. If you're vindicated, you're proven to be in the right. The prosecution has failed to pin any charges on you.

The judge has found no fault in you. You are seen at the end of the trial to have been in the right all along. And the servant's confidence through his obedient suffering is that in time, God will prove him to have been in the right.

[20 : 31] His devotion to God's word and his way will be seen not to have been a crime, but a wonder. He's suffering not to have been deserved, but a travesty.

He will be seen not to have been guilty, but righteous. And he is saying, if that is God's verdict on his servant, well, who can argue with that?

Because the sovereign Lord helps me, I won't be disgraced. It's the sovereign Lord who helps me. Who will condemn me? He who vindicates me is near. And so the servant's willingness to obey and to go on obeying through suffering at the hands of a rebellious world, it's based on these two things. His confidence in his own right standing and his confidence in God to recognize his righteousness and publicly vindicate him. And if both those things are true, well, who can possibly condemn him? And that was true of Jesus, wasn't it? He went to his death knowing that he did not deserve to die. Three times he told his disciples, the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests that teaches the law.

[21 : 52] They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later, he will rise. What does Jesus trust in?

He who vindicates me is near. He went willingly to his trial, trusting in God to vindicate him by raising him from the dead. But I'm sure you're wondering, where does that leave us tonight?

We who cannot stand on our own righteousness, we who cannot say that we do not deserve to suffer, to die. Who could be so bold to say, you know, I'm so confident in my right standing that I'm willing to suffer because I know in the end God will prove me to be blameless?

Well, the twist is that we can be that bold if our trust is in this servant, in Christ, if we are united to him.

That is Paul's point in Romans chapter 8. Not that we are good enough in ourselves to stand trial and not be found guilty, but that Christ is good enough for us to cling to by faith through the trials, through the temptations, and still be declared righteous.

[23 : 12] Not because we have a righteousness of our own, but the righteousness of Christ given to us through faith. If Christ is righteous and God is just, then who can bring any charge against those who are justified in his sight?

God's servant, Jesus, was devoted to God's verdict. And in Christ, if our trust is in him, we can devote ourselves to that same verdict, righteous, vindicated, case closed.

And the point of the servant is that if we are confident in that verdict of God and our lives in Christ, then we can stay firm in our following of him, in our faithfulness and obedience, though we may be opposed for it.

We can give ourselves over to suffering unfairly for our faith, knowing that no one can ultimately charge or condemn us. We can choose, can't we, not to seek vengeance on those who would stand against us, knowing that God's verdict is final and he will make that plain in the end.

that is the servant's confidence and that is our confidence tonight if our faith is in him and not in ourselves. And so three pieces of the portrait added, the servant is devoted to God's word, his way and his verdict and Isaiah closes finally with one invitation for us tonight on the back of the song.

[25 : 00] In the light of the servant's devotion, he invites us to devote ourselves therefore to God. He's looking in verse 10 for a response, isn't he?

Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? I see there are two ways to walk through this darkness, says Isaiah. One is to follow the servant who has gone before us, who has trod on the path of devotion to God.

See that in verse 10? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God. But the alternative is to create our own light, to find our own way.

That's verse 11. But now all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you've set ablaze.

and what Isaiah wants for us after building up this portrait of the servant is for us to give up on verse 11, to give up on our own light, making our own way, and devote ourselves instead to verse 10, to the Lord and to the word of the servant.

[26 : 17] The one who has listened so carefully is the one now that we must listen to obey the word of the servant, his gospel. It's called to follow the servant's pattern of listening, trusting God through the darkness, whatever the consequences of that might be.

He has blazed the trail for us through this dark world, through our own dark hearts, for us to follow in his footsteps, his faith, and an obedience to God.

Now following him will still take us through the dark, look. It doesn't mean that life will be easy, that we won't suffer for following him as he suffered first.

Being a Christian is not the path of least resistance. It is the road less traveled, it is the hard and narrow way, but the promise of this song is that to walk the path of the servant is the path that will bring us out into the light of day.

When we are vindicated because of who he is and not who we are, when our true identity in Christ is made public with his return, our hope will not put us to shame.

[27 : 36] And we know that because our forerunner Jesus, he trusted in his father, he obeyed him even to death, and he has been vindicated and raised from the dead.

and so when we feel, brothers and sisters, that we have lost our way and that we do walk in darkness and have no light, let us not make lights for ourselves.

Let us not press on in our own way, our own sense of meaning or purpose or direction, but rather, rather let us keep following the voice of the servant Jesus.

Let us look again at this beautiful portrait of him. Let us gaze at his beauty, let us hear his voice, let us share his trust in the Lord, rely on his God who has become our God, his father who has become by grace our father.

Now that might not sound like a foolproof strategy for navigating life through this world, heart. And it's tempting, isn't it, to think that if we do our own thing, it won't be as challenging, maybe we won't walk through such darkness, maybe we'll be more in control of where we're going, but just look at where that strategy ends, says Isaiah at the end of verse 11.

[29 : 02] Go walk in the light of your fires, of the torches you've set ablaze, says the Lord, this is what you shall receive from my hand. You will lie down in torment.

We might look at this suffering servant tonight and wonder whether God's way is really best for us. But God says to do it our way is suicide.

You might walk in the light of your own path in life, but it will end in outer darkness. And brothers and sisters, let that not be us.

don't let the promise of self-made meaning and purpose and direction mislead us into a false sense of security, for it leads to a dead end, says the Lord.

Tonight, let us follow the servant, let us listen to his voice, walk in his way, trust in his God, and know that our faith will be proved right in the end.

[30 : 05] That is God's invitation to us this evening, to look at his servant Jesus, and to devote ourselves to him, body and soul, in life and in death.

Let's pray together now. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you, we praise you, we worship you, for you are the light of the world.

you and you promise that whoever follows you will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. And Lord, we confess that we need your light.

Lord, how often have we walked in darkness, in the darkness of our own sinful hearts, in the darkness of our own minds? Lord, how often have we hidden in the darkness of this world?

how often have we sought the comfort of sin? Lord, forgive us, we pray. We thank you for your word that calls us back to you time and again.

[31 : 20] Father, we know that in ourselves, we are like unfaithful Israel. Lord, we whose sins and transgressions have taken us away from you.

Lord, we who at times have not trusted you to do what is necessary to bring us back. But we thank you that there is one who is like the servant, who did not rebel, who did not turn away, but who trusted, who lived, who obeyed, who suffered and died and rose again from the dead, so that we,

Lord, sinful people as we are, might come to him and have life eternal.

Father, help us to do that, we pray, and help us in the coming week, we ask to continue to listen to him, to follow him, to love his word, his ways. Lord, help us, we pray, when we doubt your verdict on our lives, to come back and see him and trust again that you are for us, not because of who we are in ourselves, but because of who we are in Christ.

Lord, give us this confidence, we pray, and keep us following hard on his heels, for we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.