

The Reign of the Servant

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[0 : 00] My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentation. I hear the clear though far off hymn that hails a new creation.

No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

Perhaps you know those words, they're from an old hymn, perhaps they're new to you. But if we could ask Isaiah this evening how he felt as he wrote this book, this huge book, 66 chapters of the Bible.

Well, I wonder if this would be his answer. How could I keep from singing? Because at the very heart of his book are four songs known together as the servant songs.

And they're all found in the theological torso of this book, chapters 40 to 55, which are written to answer the question on everyone's minds back then, which was if God is really God, how is he going to save us out of this mess?

[1 : 18] After 39 chapters of sin and pride and idolatry and rebellion and confusion and chaos, God's people were left wondering, is God really going to save us this time?

And if so, how is he really going to do it? Well, from chapter 40 onwards, God begins to answer those questions. The first question is really easy.

It's a simple yes. God just takes one chapter, chapter 40, to say yes, he is willing and yes, he is able to rescue his sinful people, this time, now, forever and always.

But it takes God longer to explain how he's going to do the rescuing. So it's far harder for us to get our heads around. These servant songs, they run like a steady beat through this section, like a heartbeat, so that we can't lose the rhythm or the thread of God's answer.

Because he says, ultimately, his rescue will come down to a servant. He says, look at those four words at the start of this song.

[2 : 38] They're in chapter 42, verse 1. Here is my servant. As if we've been watching a terrible battle scene play out on stage, blood and carnage and chaos.

And then everything goes dark. Silence. And as the smoke clears, a spotlight falls center stage. And in the spotlight is one man. Here is my servant. In fact, the translation, our English translations, don't quite catch the power of that scene change.

Ross read to us earlier from chapter 41, where the Lord summoned the nations and their idols to court, to stand trial. We saw and see their self-love and their violence and pride being judged.

And God's judgment on them is given at the end of the last chapter, 41, verse 29, if you just glance up there, where God's verdict is this. See, they are all false.

[3 : 45] Their deeds amount to nothing. Their images are but wind and confusion. What's God going to do about it? Well, the next verse begins with the same word.

See, my servant. See, my servant. So if God is saying, see the problem, well, see my answer.

My servant king. And to give the game away a bit, we're going to be looking at these servant songs in the run-up to Easter, because that is where we see the work of the servant.

Now, perhaps you think, well, that's a bit odd, because didn't we hear back in chapter 41 and verse 8 that the servant is who? Just glance there, 41, verse 8.

Who's the servant? Israel, my servant. So is the servant Israel, or is it Jesus?

[4 : 47] Well, what Isaiah gives us in the servant songs is a vision of what has been called the ideal Israel. Or as one writer, Barry Webb, puts it, the servant seems to be a figure who embodies all that Israel ought to be, but is not.

You imagine Israel had fulfilled her calling to belong to God alone, to bring his blessing to the nations and the families of the earth. Well, that is what the servant shows us.

But for Israel at that time, that was only ever a thought experiment. And imagine if, because they had fallen so far short. But from the family of Israel came one who did fulfill and live up to that calling, his family's ancient destiny, who is a true and ideal Israel.

And so it is ultimately him that we see portrayed in these songs. Because in history, we only ever see the servant at his work in the work and the words of Jesus Christ.

And so God, this evening, invites us to see the reign of his servant. It's a paradox, isn't it? A servant who reigns.

[6 : 03] We see that firstly in verses 1 and verses 5 and 6. What is the servant given to do? Well, he, the job he is given is to rule rightly.

If you read verse 1 with me again there, here is or see my servant who I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.

Now, I said earlier, this is Isaiah's song, but who's really singing here? Well, it's God, isn't it, singing? This is God's song about his servant.

Now, when we think of the word servant, I don't know what image that kind of conjures up for you. For me, I kind of think of a big old house with a big staff of the help, ready to wait hand and foot on the master's every need.

It sounds a bit cold, maybe, or distant. But that's clearly not the relationship here, is it, between God and his servant? Because when God looks at his servant, he bursts into song.

[7 : 11] Look to all those eyes and myes. Here is my servant, who I uphold, my chosen one, in whom I delight.

It's so personal, isn't it? In fact, it's missed out in the NIV, but in Hebrew, we get the word nefesh, or nafshi, my soul.

And so God literally sings a song about one in whom my soul delights. Taking that even further, that word uphold, who I uphold, it has an intensity to it, to grip fast, to hold close.

We're to imagine a tight, and loving, and never going to let you go embrace, as between a father and a son. And so the servant is clearly not God's butler.

He makes God's heart sing for joy. So what kind of person could he be? Well, the clues are in the second part of the verse. God says, I'll put my spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.

[8 : 24] Now, if you think for a minute, it's not a quiz, a promise, but about the kind of people in the Old Testament God put his spirit on.

I wonder who comes to mind. Perhaps the judges. Some of the judges, when God raised them up to save his people, we read that the spirit of the Lord is on them, or clothed them, or rushed on them.

Othniel, or Gideon, or Samson. Or perhaps, maybe more famously, David, the king. From the day he was set apart to be king, we read, the spirit of the Lord rushed on David from that day onwards. It's a particular class of people, isn't it? Guys raised up to save and deliver God's people, and then to rule rightly. And God gave those guys his spirit to carry out that work.

But whose job description is that? Who does that? Saving and ruling. Well, it's ultimately the job of God's chosen king. That is first and foremost who God gives his spirit to, his king.

[9 : 39] Now, we can miss that sometimes or overlook that as Christians because it so clearly teaches us in the Bible that as Christians, we have God's spirit in us and with us always.

Whoever we are, we put our trust in Jesus, God gives us his spirit. But biblically speaking, that is only because if we're Christians, we are in Christ, united to his forever king.

It's as if God poured out his spirit like oil on the head of Christ, our king, in such fullness that it pours down his face.

He falls on us who bow before him. We receive the spirit of God from Christ, our king. But what does God give his spirit to his king to do?

Well, to bring justice to the nations. Again, here's Psalm 72 of Solomon, of the king. We'll sing it later in our service.

[10 : 43] Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son. So God is singing of a servant, but his words describe a king.

In this song, we find then a servant king. And you know for us as Christians coming to this song, it's a little bit like watching for the second or third or fourth times the Lord of the Rings trilogy.

Maybe I'm the only one who's done that. But you start the first film, you meet this mysterious figure, Strider, this dark character, this ranger from the north.

But if you know how the story ends, you know that under the cloak and behind the shadows, we are watching a king who is soon to step forward and claim the crown and sit on the throne.

A servant who is clearly a king in disguise. And so when is that moment in the Bible where the servant steps out of the shadows to become the king he is truly?

[11:53] Well, I wonder, can you think of a time in the New Testament where God pours out his spirit and delights over the one who he loves? This is Matthew chapter 3.

When Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water and behold, the heavens were open to him and he saw the spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.

And behold, a voice from heaven said, this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased. This is when the servant steps out of the shadows.

The servant king shows himself as he is, Jesus Christ. I don't know how you imagine God's voice to have sounded on that day when we read those words in our Bibles.

This is my beloved son. We can't know how it sounded, but it's quite something, isn't it, to think that in his heart, if not out loud, God was singing that day over his servant.

[13:02] See my servant, who I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights. This is my beloved son. But bigger and better still than that day, do you hear God singing about his son today?

Perhaps this evening you're here wondering simply if there is anyone who can rule rightly, who can put the world back together, who can right the wrongs. How deeply do the nations need to know the steady hand of justice and the firm voice of truth to know that there is a righteous king who can rule and reign.

We'll have a look at verse 5. Tonight, this is what God the Lord says, the creator of the heavens who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth and all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people and life to those who walk on it.

I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness. I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people, a light for the Gentiles.

This is God, the God of the whole world, of the universe, the God who gives life and breath, promising Jesus that he will be the light of the world.

[14:30] He will be the king of the cosmos. He will be the one who saves and delivers and rules rightly forever. And he makes that promise loud enough for the world to hear it.

Because here we find it is a promise that there is such a king. There is such a king. Living in a world of pain and darkness and sorrow, whether we see it on the news or we go through it ourselves, so many people wonder or give up on the idea that there can be any truth or any justice or any righting of the wrongs.

Or to those people, perhaps some of us this evening, God says, see my servant. See my king.

He is the one who rules rightly. This is how committed God is to this plan and this person. I have chosen him, he says. I uphold him.

I put my spirit on him. He will bring justice to the nations. That is God's promise this evening. But we want more, don't we?

[15:45] We want to know how. It's all well and good, but is that just a politician's promise? Well, secondly, God sings, the servant will bring justice, justice, but maybe not in the way we expect.

He will bring it gently, but surely. Gently, but surely. Have a read with me from verse two. He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets.

A bruised reed he will not break and a small ring wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice. He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on the earth.

In his teaching the islands will put their hope. Now what do we think it would take for justice to come in the world? Or maybe more specifically we prayed, didn't we, for Ukraine?

What do we imagine it would take for justice to be done in Ukraine? It's overwhelming, isn't it? It's something that our world is struggling to come to terms with and work out.

[16:51] But who on earth would point to these verses and say this is how? The king that God is sending will do what?

Hold high level meetings? Or send bombs? Or organise protests? No, none of that. Verse two, he won't shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets.

If Isaiah was writing today he might have said he won't have a Twitter account or address parliaments or organise global campaigns. He won't rule with strong words and sound bites and force.

This isn't a political or a revolutionary hero. Notice we're not told that he's going to fight for justice. Instead, he's going to bring forth justice.

Slowly, gently, quietly. Now I guess bringing this up to date for us as Christians we often say, don't we, Jesus didn't come as a military messiah to take back a country or to fight for our rights.

[17 : 59] Instead, he came as the servant. He calls himself gentle and humble in heart. He came not to be served but to serve, to give his life as a ransom for many.

But is there not a part of us that wonders just how is that going to bring justice? How is that going to put the world right?

Well, slowly, gently, quietly, one person at a time. Just look how much care he takes over even the weakest among his people in verse 3.

A bruised reed he won't break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. This is not a person in a hurry, is it? You know when you blow out a candle and it keeps smoking for a few seconds?

That is a smoldering wick. Think how weak that is. How close to being extinguished that is. This is Isaiah's way of saying there's no one too fragile, too broken, too close to being burnt out or suffocated to find a place in Jesus' kingdom.

[19 : 19] This is not a king who is calling together the strong and powerful to fight, but instead the weak and the lost, the harassed and the helpless, the weary and burdened together to give us rest.

and perhaps that is you this evening at the point of giving up, wondering what is going to keep you from tipping over that cliff edge. Well, God says to you this evening, see my servant.

Whoever you are, however finished you feel, Jesus is not finished with you. He can keep you growing, keep you burning, however broken or burnt out that you feel because he is slowly and gently bringing a world put right one heart at a time.

He does that ever so gently, doesn't he? But he also does it surely. What he starts, he will finish. How does he do that? Well, it's often said, isn't it, it's been said many times in the last few weeks that truth is the first casualty in war.

Every side has a different story, why we are right and they're wrong, propaganda wars, fake news and misinformation abound. And so to bring justice to the world, the servant first brings truth.

[20 : 43] Now, you're quickly becoming Hebrew scholars, okay? That word in the next line there is translated faithfulness. Well, the word in Hebrew is *emet*, which can also mean truth.

So one way to read it is that in truth he will bring forth justice, which is in fact how the servant deals with the issue at hand to God's people back then.

You remember those toothless idols that they trusted in and those proud rulers who came with their threats of destruction or the spiritual hopelessness of Israel at that time?

well, the answer that God gives to the chaos and the confusion, the idolatry, the rulers and despair is the truth that there is but one God that he rules over history, that he is powerful to save.

And so as the false gods and the rulers are called to stand trial before God, in walks the servant to present the truth. people waiting on the result of a big court case will sometimes say things like we just want the truth to be known because justice is when the world lines up with what is true and so he presents the truth and so he brings forth justice because the world is put right as it is brought into line with what is true.

[22 : 14] Notice, what do the islands put their hope in, in verse four? Not in his power but in his teaching. Literally, again, Hebrew, his Torah, that is the hope of the nations and the ends of the earth, what the servant has to say.

Again, he doesn't shout it in our faces, does he? Or say it just for the cameras? How does the servant bring us his teaching, his word? Well, as we read it in his word and as we share it with one another, as it's preached, as the spirit brings it home to our hearts because we have another name, don't we, for the teaching or the Torah of the servant.

We call it the gospel. The gospel, that is where we find the truth about God and ourselves and our world in the good news of God's servant king.

The gospel is how this servant will become a covenant for the people, a light for the nations. You just think, how many non-Jewish people did Jesus ever meet in his time on earth?

He didn't do a world tour, did he? He certainly didn't come to these islands. And yet, billions of people around the world from every nation call him today Lord and Savior, because his word, his Torah, his gospel has come, spread across the world, even to these far-flung British isles.

[23 : 52] And the result is hearts, people, families, churches, societies, slowly, gently, quietly, but surely put right by the word of his gospel.

By his word that opens eyes that are blind, that frees captives imprisoned in sin, that brings and releases those who sit chained in spiritual darkness.

He has done that for so many of us here already. Praise God for that. But if you're here tonight and your trust is not in him, you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, don't think that he's got a different plan for you.

Okay, we thought before, we touched on this, how committed God is to this plan, to his servant. While the servant is equally committed, he won't falter or become discouraged till he's established justice on earth.

He's not going to stop one day and just be done or finished with that plan, start doing something different. There is no plan B with the servant until he comes again.

[25 : 02] His work is putting his truth to us in the gospel so that we will be put right with him. That is the plan. And so, if you're here listening this evening, well, the plan is working, isn't it?

And if you come to him, you ask him to put your heart right, to trust him to do it for you, he will.

However, maybe outside or weak or finished or fed up or done you feel.

Remember, he will not break a bruised reed. He will not snuff out a smouldering wick. He will not pretend not to hear you. Interestingly, when it says he won't falter or be discouraged, in Hebrew it's the same words, bruised and broken and smouldering.

So, the things that stop us in our tracks will not stop him in his tracks. Jesus cannot be stopped bringing his truth, bringing his justice, putting the world right, one sore and sinful heart at a time.

That is what he is doing and that is how he is doing it. But finally, as we close, why? Why does he rule rightly and why through the gospel?

[26 : 23] Well, we see it is so that our hope would be in God. God, did you notice that in verse four? In his teaching, the islands will put their hope. And perhaps through all this you've been thinking, well, yeah, I know, okay, my heart, my life can be put right by the gospel, put right with God, but that's hardly a plan for the world to be put right.

And you're right in a sense, the Bible doesn't promise us a day that we'll wake up and everyone will follow Jesus. We're not kind of working our way up or ratcheting our way up to world peace.

But the gospel does give us hope for a day when the servant king will come again and draw a line under history. He will come to judge the living and the dead and the result will be perfect justice, a new world, a new creation.

It will be the world that we long for, the world put right, the world we all want. And Isaiah leaves us longing for that future hope.

The gospel tells us that Jesus is even more committed to the world that we all want than we are.

And so we might wonder, well, what's taking him so long?

[27 : 44] But he will bring justice. That is God's promise. Nothing will stop him. And so if we've taken his gospel to heart, if we live under his rule, we have a great and certain hope for the future of our world.

I guess the question that this begs in a way is, will we be part of that world? Do we have a place in the world that we long for? See, all the way God's concern has been to show his people that he can be fully trusted to save them.

That question, how are we going to be rescued this time? Well, in this song, God is saying, turn to me, all the earth. Don't turn to an idol, don't turn to the powerful, see my servant and turn to me.

This is verse eight, I am Lord, that is my name, I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols. So then, where do you hope justice will come from tonight?

You may be not an idol, but maybe not Jesus either. Maybe you are hoping for a political solution, wars, leaders, revolutions, maybe in a cultural shift, a better world, the way that people think, the things that people value.

[29 : 11] Maybe your hope is in economics, prosperity, followed by peace. Now, those things might happen and they might help for a time, but God sings to us tonight that our only hope for a world put right once and for all is in his servant king.

And if our hope isn't resting in Christ to bring that world, well, we might not find ourselves in it when it comes. Because God doesn't share his glory.

And we should not hedge our bets. He's given us the plan. He's told us what he's going to do, and he calls us to trust him fully to see it through to the end.

And the wonderful thing is, this evening, he has shown that it's true. He's told us about Jesus. This is hundreds of years before he came, and then he came.

And the world has never been the same. And we have heard his gospel, his teaching, and put our hope in it. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare, before they spring into being, I announce them to you, says the Lord.

[30 : 30] Well, that new thing he is telling us about is now an old thing. But that gives us all the more reason, does it not, to trust him with the new thing he is going to do.

A new heavens, a new earth, in which righteousness dwells, a perfect world, wrongs put right, pain, crying, death taken away, when the servant king comes once again to bring justice to the nations.

It's our hope in him alone this evening to do that. Let's join in prayer together. Let's pray. God, our Father, how we thank you for the promise of your word of a king who is true and good and right, who is just in all his ways, and yet who is compassionate, Lord, with the weak.

And, Father, we confess that we so often in the face of a world gone wrong, feel like broken reeds and like smoldering wicks.

Father, we pray that in our weakness you would draw us to Christ. We thank you that he is strong and kind, that he is gentle, and yet he will do his work to the end.

[32 : 02] Thank you that we can fully trust you, for we know what you have done in Christ, in his death, in his resurrection, in his everlasting life, the fact that he reigns this evening over heaven and earth.

So help us, we pray, to put our hope in him. Lord, for those who as yet have not done that, we pray that you would help them to trust you, to put their hope in Christ.

Lord, for those of us who do hope in you, we pray that you would help us to set aside all other things, all other hopes that might compete, Lord, for our trust, and help us to lean the whole weight of our hope for this future of our world on the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory.

Lord, for that day we pray, come, Lord Jesus, for we pray in your great name. Amen. Amen.