

God's Secret Weapon

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Well, I don't know if you enjoy detective stories or spy thrillers in your spare time. One of the key ingredients of that kind of story, or movie maybe if you prefer, is suspense.

The author keeps you guessing, dropping in a detail there, a hint here, to keep us hooked, to keep us gripped, turning the pages as the suspense grows. I can remember being nine or ten and staying up way past my bedtime reading books like that, saying, just another chapter, and then you get to the cliffhanger at the end of that chapter and say, just another chapter, and before you know it, it's 3 a.m., and the alarm is due to go off very, very shortly. Because with every chapter, the writer is teasing you, just holding back that key secret that will unlock the whole mystery. And when that big reveal finally comes, right, it's a bombshell that knocks you off your feet. I never saw that coming, is what the author wants you to say. And then to go straight back to the beginning and read it all again and look for those clues that you missed the first time through. Well, this evening, Isaiah tells us that, in fact, the servant has sung to us that God is a master of suspense. His book, his story is a thriller. Last Sunday, we saw in Isaiah this figure, the servant, who we saw is, in fact, a king in disguise, God's chosen king. We saw to come to set us right with the truth of the gospel and rule over the world rightly. But if last week we heard God sing to us about his servant, well, this evening we get to hear it from the servant's point of view.

Did you see that? I wonder, in verse 3 this time, it's the servant himself singing to us. He, that's God, said to me, you are my servant. And the servant wants us to know tonight that he is God's big secret. In fact, he is God's secret weapon. Verse 2 says, like a sharp sword hidden in the shadow of his hand, or like an arrow hidden in his quiver. Okay, he is the bombshell.

And when he is finally revealed, that impact will be explosive. His light will be seen by kings and princes and people in the very farthest corners of the earth. Okay, a person and story so thrilling, it will make the cosmos sing for joy. But first, as in any good thriller, the suspense grows as we find that the servant, his glory is veiled. So, that's the first thing the servant wants us to know. His glory was veiled. He begins by addressing a global audience. In verse 1, listen to me, you islands, hear this, distant nations. I don't know if this kind of thing still happens, but before TV went digital, you'd occasionally hear this on primetime TV. We interrupt our normal programming for a party political broadcast. And then whatever party leader it was would speak to millions of people. They wanted the eyes and ears of the nation. Well, here is the servant interrupting our regular programming. He pausing our normal goings-on with a broadcast to the world. He wants everyone's eyes and ears, everyone's eyes and ears tuned in. Listen up, islands, distant nations.

And what is the broadcast? Well, we see it's a song about his special relationship with God. Before I was born, he sings, the Lord called me. From my mother's womb, he has spoken my name.

[4 : 1 5] Now, remember, this isn't yet a historical person. Again, what is the servant's name, verse 3? It is Israel. So, at this point, when Isaiah is writing, this image of not yet having been born, being still inside the bump is symbolic of a time before the birth of a nation, a kind of image of pre-existence. Now, here's a confession. Susie and I started talking about baby names on our honeymoon.

But it was a long time before there was any baby to speak of. And then we found out, and we started thinking harder, more seriously, and we came up with a name for a girl. And then we found out we were having a little boy. So, we thought even harder, and we came up with a name for him. But it wasn't long before we were calling the baby in the bump by name. But until he was born, there was a time where he was just our secret. And then when we couldn't hide him anymore, there was a time when his name was just our secret. Because knowing who he was calling him by name gave us a special relationship with him, an intimate bond before he ever came into the world. And the servant is saying here he had that relationship with God. Before anyone knew him, knew his name, knew he was there, that he existed, he was foreknown and foreloved and chosen before the beginning of the world by God. He was God's special secret. Now, fast forward 700 years, of course, and we know that when the servant whom these words foreshadow finally did enter the world, this image became reality, right? How long had God known the name of his servant? Well, certainly before he was born, God sends an angel, remember, to Joseph, Matthew chapter 1, saying, don't fear to take Mary as your wife, that which is conceived in her is from the Holy

Spirit. She will bear a son and you will call his name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. Jesus was his name, the new Israel, the true servant. How long had he been the plan?

Before I was born, the Lord called me. Image of pre-existence, before he came into the world, before the beginning of time God knew and chose and planned for and called his son to become his servant, to save us from our sins. And his son knew the plan and chose gladly to become a servant to save us.

That special bond in eternity. Sometimes we call it a covenant, the covenant of redemption. Eternity, the father and the son bound together in love for a fallen world.

[7 : 38] But for long ages, Jesus was God's special secret. Centuries and millennia passed before anyone knew his name, and yet God knew. And so sings the servant. He was, in fact, God's secret weapon.

Verse 2. He made my mouth like a sharpened sword. In the shadow of his hand he hid me. He made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. Sharp, but kept hidden. This language explains a little bit why in Revelation chapter 1, I wonder if you've ever wondered why this is, John sees Jesus risen from the dead, burning in glory. And he says, coming out of his mouth with a sharp, double-edged sword.

It's a strange thing to imagine, but this is where that comes from. Notice it's his mouth that has been weaponized. He made my mouth like a sharp sword.

And that ties in, doesn't it, to the beginning of this song. The servant says, listen, hear. And the end of the last song, where we found the servant wouldn't rule by force, but with his word in his teaching, will the islands put their hope.

Because the servant, when he was revealed, would rescue and rule when he opened his mouth and spoke words of grace and truth that would cut to the heart, as nobody else's words ever had before. So we could ask, not only how long has Jesus been the plan, but how long has his word, the gospel, been the plan? Well, at least as long as Jesus himself has been the plan.

[9 : 28] And that is forever. Forever. But however powerful and beautiful this servant is and his words are, however intimate and special that bond is, we find he was hidden. He tucked, kept out of sight, which creates a tension in the story. Suspense. Look, verse 3. He said to me, you are my servant Israel in whom I will display my splendor. But, verse 4, I said, I have labored in vain.

I've spent my strength for nothing at all. God promises through his servant he will show his glory. But the servant says, well, nothing seems further from the truth.

The word he uses for nothing is the same word we find in verse 2, chapter 1 of Genesis, where the world is described as shapeless, formless, empty, void.

And the word he uses for vain is the word we find right at the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes. He's a heavy mist, breath, vein.

I've worked my fingers to the bone, he says, but what is there to show for it? Less than nothing. It's like trying to catch smoke with my fingers. Like trying to bring order into a dark and chaotic and empty world.

[10 : 54] It's not totally despairing. Look, yet what is due to me is in the Lord's hand. My reward is with my God. The servant's trust is totally in God to do right by him.

And yet his glory is still painfully veiled. And do we, I wonder, not ever feel the confusion and the frustration of the servant there in verse 4?

Because sometimes God's secret weapon seems very secret indeed. Why isn't Jesus recognized by the whole world as our rightful and reigning king?

Why isn't his word trusted and listened to by all 7.8 billion people on the globe? Or even by half of that? Or why, I guess to bring this home to us, you know, why if Jesus is God's plan from before the beginning of the time, are you the only Christian in your workplace?

Or school? Or in your class? Why are you the only family or household on your street? He knows him and worships him. Where is his glory? Well, tonight the servant sings to us that though his glory is veiled, it is still true and lasting glory.

[12 : 19] Though his word is often held back and concealed, it is still sharper than a two-edged sword. And Jesus knew he lived in this tension, didn't he?

Remember his prayer in the garden? Father, if it be possible, let this cup be taken from me. The cross, the prospect of the cross did not feel glorious for Jesus.

And yet as he submitted himself to his father's will, not my will but yours be done. Well, true to his word on the cross, God displayed his glory.

A hidden glory, but the highest glory. As his servant carried out the plan laid before the foundation of the world that he should ransom people for God from every tribe, people, language, and nation by his blood and with his life.

Behind his greatest shame lay his greatest glory. Well, the servant would have us know that his glory was veiled.

[13 : 27] Next, the servant tells us God's promise to reveal his greatness to the world. Things are going to change, he says. So secondly, we see his greatness revealed.

If you'd have a read with me from verse 5. Notice the time shift. And now, says the Lord, he who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself.

For I'm honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength. He says now, it is too small a thing for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I've kept.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. This is God's answer to the servant's sense that he has worked for nothing.

Well, remember what you were sent to do, he says. He came with a remit to gather Israel to himself. And that's not a small task, is it?

[14 : 34] It comes with incredible honor. Remember, the servant isn't God's butler, but rather God's king. To bring God's people back to him is the work of a hero.

And so great is this mission that even Isaiah can see that the servant could not be the Israel that he knew of his day. Because the servant is there to gather Israel back, to save Israel.

So our sense that there's more to the servant than meets the eye is correct. Because he is not the Israel of history, or of today, or of any nation on the earth that has ever existed.

But rather the true and ideal Israel, the Lord Jesus. And so despite not having visible glory, his work is glorious. You remember, for God to bring his people back to him has been his great work since the first human sin.

He promised, didn't he, to do that. He created a family from Abraham to do that. But they were equally rebellious. And yet time and time and time again, God promises sin will not get the last word.

[15 : 48] You hardly had human beings turned from him. Hardly had the taste of their sin left their mouths. Before God promises to send someone to save them from their sin and its fallout.

And you just think how many times and how many ways God pursues his people. Promises again and again to bring them back, no matter how far they stray. And now here God is handing over that supreme work of his.

The work that he has staked his name on, his reputation. All his glory hangs on that saving work. And he gives that work to the servant to do.

Why? Well, so that his servant will share in his glory. Be given the honor. The name above every name. Having done God's work.

But then, okay, try and get your heads around this. The ratcheting up. Then the Lord says to him, verse 6, It's too small a thing for you to do that. You're bringing my covenant family back to me.

[16 : 57] That is small change. You know, that wonderful ancient eternal work. It's just not big enough for you. Hey, that doesn't carry enough glory and dignity and honor.

No, you deserve to do something that's going to give you fame and glory. Beyond anything this world is imagined forever. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

You just imagine somebody who is overqualified to save God's people. That is what God is saying about his servant.

And who but God could be so great that it's only once his work reaches the furthest reaches of the earth that it can be big and glorious enough.

And yet, this is why we read from the book of Acts earlier. This is what we saw, isn't it? Jesus has risen from the dead and he tells his followers, You will be my witnesses.

[17 : 58] You're telling people about me. Where? Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. He says, God will give you power to take my name to places that you've never dreamt of when he sends the Holy Spirit to you.

Who is worthy of such an honor? That his name be carried to the ends of the earth, to be God's light for the whole world, to ransom people of every tribe and language and people and nation to God.

Well, Isaiah says that honor belongs to one person. God's servant, the Lord Jesus Christ. Once he was despised and abhorred by the nation, the servant of rulers.

But now the Lord says, Kings will see you and stand up. Princes will see and bow down because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who's chosen you.

I don't know if you've ever seen videos of people being greeted by the Queen. They all stand in a line, don't they? And the Queen goes along and meets them one by one.

[19 : 12] And one by one, her guests bow to her, or curtsy to her, a sign of respect and humility. But who does the Queen bow to?

Who does she curtsy before? No one. There's no one higher than her to whom she must submit or humble herself. But for one person.

And he is a servant. And she, like billions of people in the world today, bow before him. Kings rise to sing his praise.

Rulers kneel before him in prayer. Because God promised that he would reveal the glory, the greatness of his servant Jesus to the whole world.

From the greatest to the least. And so he is doing to this day. You know, it's hard to imagine now in the world that we live in that there was a time when church leaders seriously debated whether it was right to take the gospel to places where it had never been heard.

[20 : 22] But that was only two or three hundred years ago when the modern missionary movement was born. And you know, we maybe look back on the glory days of the church as being the kind of first or second or third centuries or maybe the 16th century, the Reformation.

But do you know, the biggest period of church growth in history has been in the last hundred years. You know, one example of that that blows my mind is in South Korea.

The gospel first reached Korea in 1831, less than 200 years ago. And since that time, to date, there are over 10 million Christians in South Korea.

The first megachurch was in South Korea. And Korean churches are now sending more missionaries into the world than almost any country in the world.

And that is just one of so many places where the gospel of Jesus Christ has brought life to millions in the last hundred years as his name has been taken to the ends of the earth.

[21 : 35] Brothers and sisters, let that be a reminder to us that God is still in the business of revealing Jesus' greatness because that is what he has promised to do. It's the mission he gave his servant king, the Lord Jesus, and it's the mission that he's given us to be part of.

Remember his words, you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth. John Piper, his pastor in America, put it famously like this, mission exists because worship doesn't.

mission is our way of saying the joy of knowing Christ is not a private or tribal or national or ethnic privilege. It is for all.

And that is why we go, because we have tasted the joy of worshipping Jesus. And we want all the families of the earth included.

Why do we want people to know Jesus in this island far flung from when this gospel was first preached? Well, because God wants the world to see his servant's greatness because he has promised Jesus the endless and eternal glory of being the savior of the world, bringing his salvation to people everywhere.

[22 : 56] That is his honor. His glory was veiled, but his greatness is being revealed. And the result of that, finally, is that we, ourselves, receive his grace.

Lastly then, his grace received. So this is verse 8. This is now past the song. It's God's commentary on the song that the servant has sung.

So this is what the Lord says to his servant. In the time of my favor, I will answer you. In the day of salvation, I will help you. I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and reassign its desolate inheritances.

Say to the captives, come out. To those in darkness, be free. So this is God promising that great rescue that God has sent his servant to bring.

That God has delivered us, indeed, out of a kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of his beloved son. And look what receiving that grace is like for his people.

[24 : 04] Look what it's like for those who have been set free. They'll feed beside the roads, find pasture on every barren hill. They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them.

He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water. So we see here God's promise to glorify his servant and his promise to give grace to his people.

They're not two different things. They're one and the same thing. His glory is not at our expense, but his glory comes through our rescue.

That is his grace to us. And like the good shepherd that he is, he leads us and feeds us and keeps us from harm. He has compassion on us. And he gathers his flock from north and south, east and west.

And as Jesus says, he sits us down together in the kingdom of God. And so wonderful is his grace to a world that has turned against him that the whole creation is called to join in that song of the servant.

[25 : 14] You shout for joy, you heavens, rejoice, you earth, burst into song, you mountains. Now, this isn't the last time in these servant songs that Isaiah will describe us as sheep who have gone astray.

We have turned away from God and from his servant in sin. But what he wants us to know this evening is that this great and glorious servant has come to us at the very ends of the earth to give grace to those who have wandered from him, to gather back his dear people to himself, to have compassion on us.

And he calls us this evening to shout for joy and rejoice and burst into song with all creation at this good news of Jesus. John Piper, who I quoted earlier, goes on to say this, seeking the worship of the nations is fueled by the joy of our own worship.

You can't commend what you don't cherish. You can't proclaim what you don't prize. Worship is the fuel and the goal of mission.

So Jesus' greatness is shown to the world as our own sense of his greatness grows, as we receive his grace and are renewed by it day by day, as we recognize his glory in his suffering and dying in our place to bring us back to God.

[26 : 49] Worship fuels our witness. And I wonder sometimes, reflecting on my own heart, partly, if that is partly why we find telling others so difficult, because we are not taking the time to take him in ourselves.

you do we, as he has promised to do for us, feed on him and rest in him and follow him day by day. You are our hearts tuned to shout for joy at the thought of him, burst into song when we remember what he has done for us.

Even if we've been Christians for many years, trusting in Jesus and his grace, how much of our inner life is not feeding on Jesus and not resting on him or following after him.

But this is why the servant sings to us this evening, to remind us of what he is about, to remind us of his love and grace for us, the promises of God for him, of his glory, his honor in us, and to hold himself out to us again to take hold of, to put our trust in, to see him afresh and sing for joy at all that he has done.

Let's worship him together now as we pray. Let's pray together. Amen.