

# The Servant Who Brings Justice

*Scripture Readings: Isaiah 42:1-9 (text); 2 Cor 5:14-21*

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## Introduction

The book of Isaiah was written to warn Israel of impending judgment by God on Israel because of their idolatry, unbelief and dependence on earthly kings. Isaiah's time in the 8th century B.C. was a time of uncertainty because of the threat hovering over the northern kingdom (which seceded from the nation of Israel after King Solomon's reign) from the Assyrian Empire. This is the background of the first 39 chapters of the prophecy.

Then in chapters 40-55, Isaiah turns his attention to the future, this time on God's judgment against the southern kingdom for the same sins that the northern kingdom was punished. Isaiah prophesied that the Babylonians would invade the nation, destroy Jerusalem and their Temple, and the people sent to slavery and exile in Babylon—a prophecy that came to pass in 586 B.C.

But Isaiah's warnings also came with a hopeful promise from God of a future restoration and glory. The LORD promised comfort to the exiles—a remnant of the Jews would return to the Promised Land. Although Isaiah's prophecy was intended for the Jews of his time under domination by the Assyrians and for the future Babylonian exiles, it also speaks of an even greater restoration and glory. In chapters 56-66, Isaiah assures all the people of God from his time until the return of Christ that new things and a glorious future await them.

Isaiah challenges God's people in different ways. To the northern kingdom during his time, God asks them to turn back from their wicked ways, *“In returning and rest you shall be saved ... But you were unwilling”* (Isa 30:15). To the future exiles from the southern kingdom, the message was the coming of the LORD and a glorious restoration, *“Prepare the way of the LORD ... and the glory of the LORD shall be revealed”* (Isa 40:5). And to all of God's people from the Babylonian exile all the way to the first and second coming of Christ, Isaiah has a promise of salvation and a challenge, *“Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon salvation will come”* (Isa 56:1).

Our text then is part of God's comfort to all of God's people—from the Babylonian exiles all the way to the Second Coming of Christ—that someone called “the Servant of the LORD” will come and bring comfort, forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and a glorious future. Most of all, our text says that this Servant will bring justice to God's people.

Throughout chapters 40-55, Isaiah's prophecy mentions the LORD's Servant, and four of these references are in the form of poetry or song. Isaiah 42:1-9 is the first of four Servant Songs, the others being Isaiah 49:1-13; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12. Who is this Servant? More often, it is a title for God's people Israel as a whole (41:8; 44:1-2; 45:4; 48:20). But other times, it refers to a specific person belonging to Israel who is called by God to represent and serve Israel and beyond (49:5-6; 50:10).

God calls Israel his “son” (Ex. 4:22-23), and its king, notably David, is also called God's “son” (2 Sam 7:14). If the Servant represents Israel, then the Servant comes from the Davidic line of kings. David himself is also called by God as his servant (Ezek 34:23; Jer 33:21). In the other Servant Songs which we will discuss in the next four Lord's Days, the Servant is also assigned the roles of prophet and priest. It is therefore right to conclude that the Servant of the LORD is a person with the three offices of Prophet, Priest and King—titles attributed to the Messiah himself.

In rapid succession in verses 1, 3 and 4, the Servant is presented as one who will bring justice to God's people and to the whole earth. In verses 5-7, God himself speaks of the Servant being commissioned for his work of bringing justice. Finally, in verses 8-9, God declares that through the work of his Servant, "new things" will come and the old will pass away.

## The Servant Presented

Isaiah opens the chapter with "*Behold my servant,*" a word of presentation and appointment to an office. Isaiah uses this word earlier to contrast his chosen Servant with other servants that the Jews were serving. In Isaiah 41:24, he presents their idols, "*Behold, you are nothing ... an abomination is he who chooses you.*" Later, he presents idolatrous nations, "*Behold, they are all a delusion ... their metal images are empty wind.*"

Why is this Servant different from idols and their worshipers? First, this Servant will not function in his own strength, but he will be supported and strengthened by God. Unlike idols and idolaters whom God hates, the Lord's Servant is upheld by God in all his work. In contrast to idols whom God abominates, his strength to accomplish his mission comes from God himself, because he is a delight to God. How does God uphold him? His Spirit rests upon him. Thus, the Servant will possess all the knowledge and power of the Spirit of God, "*And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD*" (Isa 11:2). The Holy Spirit will give him not earthly wisdom that comes from demons, but heavenly wisdom that comes from the all-knowing God (Jas 2:15-17).

Second, the Lord's Servant will bring justice not only to Israel, but to the nations. Justice is a key word in our text, mentioned three times in the first four verses. In the secular world, one definition of *justice* is "the establishment or determination of rights according to the rules of law or equity." As a Biblical theme, justice then means the administration of what is right in a manner consistent with God's moral law. In fact, justice is often interchangeable with *righteousness*, "*And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line*" (Isa 28:17; see also Psa 37:6; Amos 5:7, 24). It cannot be found in human kings and government, as exemplified by the unjust Assyrian and Babylonian kings. Since only God is perfectly holy and righteous, his justice is also perfect. God's justice is the only means to a perfectly just world, executed by his King who "*will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice and is swift to do righteousness*" (Isa 16:5).

Third, the Servant will rule with compassion to those who are weak-hearted. Instead of being proud, making loud proclamations of the great things he has done for his subjects (verse 2), he will humbly make himself a Servant to his God and his people. In the Old Testament, a "bruised reed" symbolizes the poor and the oppressed, who are in turn also represent those who weep and mourn on account of their sin. The Servant will heal and forgive them, and then strengthen their faith. A wick that is "faintly burning" means that the oil in the lamp is about to run out of oil, so the flame is on its last few flickers. Thus, it represents those who are hopeless, desperate, weak, and on the throes of death.

The Lord's Servant will not be like human kings who oppress and persecute their people for material gain, absolute power and acclaim. So instead of proudly "*lifting up his voice in the street,*" he will quietly help those who are weak in faith and forgive the sins of those who are repentant, "*to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite*" (Isa 57:15).

Fourth and last, this Servant will accomplish his mission in the face of great adversity. Lest anyone see him as weak because of his compassion and gentleness to the poor and the weakhearted, Isaiah says, *"He will not grow faint or be discouraged."* Instead, he will be a just and righteous king who will enforce God's law throughout the earth, including those nations beyond the great sea. He will be a Lawgiver better than Moses, because his Law is not for Israel alone, but all the nations will wait and desire his just and righteous Law. This he would accomplish in the face of great opposition from unbelievers, because he will not grow weary or be broken by their hostility.

Who is a servant like this Servant of the LORD? None other than the Lord Jesus Christ. At his baptism, the Spirit of God descended on him and his Father revealed from heaven his eternal Sonship, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased"* (Matt 3:17). Because of this, when he began preaching his gospel, he declared:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed"* (Luke 4:18).

This is why Paul says that in Christ *"are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* (Col 2:3). Where else will God's people mine the treasures of heavenly wisdom and spiritual knowledge but from the Servant of the LORD who alone possesses the Spirit of wisdom, understanding and knowledge?

His mission is to establish justice and righteousness on earth through his church whom he rules from his throne at God's right hand. The poor in spirit now hear the gospel. Those who are blinded by sin can now see the Light of the world and set free from Satan's slavery and oppression.

After healing many people, Jesus told them not to make his miracles known, because he knew that he was fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy in our text, saying that he did not come to proclaim his greatness or break a bruised reed and quench a smoldering wick (Matt 12:15-21). Instead, he came as a gentle and compassionate Shepherd, *"He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms ... and gently lead those that are with young"* (Isa 40:11). He invites all his people, *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest ... for I am gentle and lowly in heart ... "* (Matt 11:28-29).

He did not come as a proud and powerful king, but as a humble Servant to serve his people, *"[making] himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men"* (Phi 2:7). He knows all our weaknesses, *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin"* (Heb 4:15).

After Christ accomplished his mission, he exclaimed on the cross, *"It is finished!"* He persevered through all the hostility, ridicule, and God's wrath poured out on the sins of his people which he bore on the cross. In the end, Jesus will sit on David's throne, reigning in justice and righteousness over his kingdom forever. Make no mistake about this: Jesus's reign does not last for only one thousand years, but forever. And his kingdom is perfectly just and righteous, therefore, there will be no great rebellion after an imagined thousand-year reign.

## The Servant Commissioned

Verses 5-8 shifts from the Servant's presentation and appointment to his commission from God. The God who made the heavens and the earth and provides for his creation through the ages is able to keep all his promises to his people. Through his Servant, God is able to forgive them of their sins and restore them to himself.

The Lord himself does the calling, not any earthly king or authority. God who is righteous appoints his Servant and equips him with everything necessary to accomplish his mission: his Spirit to *"guide him by the hand."* This is how he is able to fulfill God's call to be *"covenant for the people"* (see also Isa 49:8), as the representative of God's people with whom God made a covenant. In this appointment, his mission includes opening the eyes of the blind so they can see God's Light and setting free those who are in prison. Although the image Isaiah uses is the captivity in dark dungeons in Babylon, this is a picture of the Servant's work in setting his people free from sin.

What is this covenant? It is the new covenant that God would make with his people. His Servant would represent God's people. In this covenant, God himself will provide what is necessary to fulfill his requirements for reconciliation with him: faith and repentance. The Jews were in unbelief, idolatrous, and did not turn from their sin. They were slaves of their sinful nature, and are thus unable and unwilling to return to God. In this new covenant, God himself will give them a new heart, enabling them and making them willing to repent and believe.

The covenant Lord is able to accomplish whatever he promises, because he is the Lord. Idols are useless and cannot accomplish anything, but the Jews trusted in them. They gave glory to their idols, but they were not able to prevent the idol-worshippers from being captured and enslaved by Assyrian and Babylonian invaders. Not so with God, he *alone* is the powerful Creator-God and Covenant-God, able to do whatever pleases him, and does not share his glory with any creature. He will fulfill *all* his promises through his Servant, for the sake of the glory of his holy name.

When the baby Jesus was presented to the Temple, Simeon declared upon seeing him that Isaiah's prophecy of the coming Servant was fulfilled, because the infant was *"a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel"* (Luke 2:32). Now, the whole earth will see the Light of the world, to set many people free from their blindness to God's glory and from their slavery to sin.

He is the Servant given by God to be a covenant for his people, fulfilling all that God requires to make a covenant with his people. As *Mediator* of the new covenant (Heb 19:5; 12:24), he revealed himself as its *Messenger* (Mal 3:1). Then, as our *High Priest*, he offered himself as sacrifice for the sins of his people, making himself our *Surety*, *"the guarantor of a better covenant"* (Heb 7:22) who signed with his body and blood to assume responsibility for all our debts owed to God (Heb 9:11-15).

Because the Jews broke the old covenant in their unbelief and idolatry, the Lord established a new and better covenant wherein the law will be written into the minds and hearts of the covenant people. In this way, they will be renewed, turn back to God, believe in the Mediator, and receive forgiveness of sins and be justified before God. As Mediator of the new covenant, he brings reconciliation between enemies—God and man. This is why as he took the cup in the

Lord's Supper, Jesus declared, *"This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"* (Matt 26:28; Luke 22:20).

And as the Second and Last Adam, Christ represented all the elect members of God's covenant people, *"For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous"* (Rom 5:19). Thus, Christ is not only the Messenger, Mediator, High Priest and Surety of the new covenant; he is also its *Covenant Head*. Christ is truly God's covenant gift to his people.

## The Servant Turns Old Things Into New

In giving Christ as a covenant to his people, God is *"declaring new things"* because *"the former things have come to pass."* God is making a new covenant in place of the old, *"In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away"* (Heb 8:13). In what way is the old covenant obsolete and vanishing away? It is because the old covenant consists in types and shadows of things to come—the Temple and its sacrifices, Israel as the chosen nation, and the Mosaic Law.

But the new covenant consists in the fulfillment in Christ of these foreshadows. He is the new Temple and the once-for-all Sacrifice. Those who are in Christ, whether Jews or Gentiles, are the citizens of the Kingdom of God and heirs of the promises to Abraham. And the Spirit of Christ writes God's covenant laws into the hearts of his people in order to enable them to be obedient to his laws.

This work of God of doing *"new things"* in the new covenant is two-fold.

First, God will make his people a *"new creation."* All of you were formerly blind and slaves to sin. Paul says that your minds were darkened, doing only the works of darkness rather than the works of light. You were slaves to sin, and this is why you commit sin. You have a sinful nature, which prevents you from repenting of your sins and believing in Christ. But the LORD's Servant Jesus Christ has opened your eyes to the truths of God and has set you free from slavery to your sinful ways. He repeats this prophecy later in Isaiah 43:18-19:

*"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing."*

The great milestone for Israel was their exodus from Egypt, *"the house of slavery."* But God will again accomplish another exodus—this time from the Babylonian exile. Isaiah tells them that they should not look back again and again to the exodus from Egypt, but they should instead look forward to a second exodus of a remnant from Babylon. Isaiah's promise of restoration was fulfilled when the Persian King Cyrus conquered the Babylonian empire, then allowed a Jewish remnant to return to the Promised Land. Israel's reconciliation to God began during this second *"exodus"* from Babylon.

But in applying Isaiah's promise of *"new things"* to Israel, Paul instead says that Christ is the one who makes things new,

*"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come"* (2 Cor 5:17).

This is an exact parallel of Isaiah's promises of restoration to Israel, and it is now finding fulfillment in the forgiveness of sins through the atoning death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the true Israel consists of those who are forgiven of sins in Christ, the Church.

Second, God will not only restore his people, but he will restore his whole creation. Before the world was plunged into the condemnation of sin and death by Adam's sin, all of God's creation was "very good." Since the Fall, *"the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth"* and waiting eagerly for its restoration. God has ordained a redemption plan before he created the world so that at the fullness of time, when Christ returns, *"creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption"* (Rom 8:21-23). Just as sin and death will be abolished, the whole earth will be restored to its pristine beauty and harmony as Paradise, with no more natural disasters, plagues, pestilences and famines.

The Servant of the Lord makes two new things: you as individuals and as the Church, and a new, uncorrupted world. Isaiah concludes his first Servant Song with an assurance: because God is able to accomplish all things he prophesies, he declares new things even before they are fulfilled. Now, you are commanded as part of these new things: live as "new creation" because the "old things" have passed away.

## Conclusion

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Isaiah's first Servant Song is not merely a promise of restoration to Israel. It is also a promise to you as God's people that the Servant of the Lord will bring justice to his people in all the nations of the earth. What kind of justice? It is God's just wages on sin: his Servant bore God's wrath on all your sins and all the sins of God's covenant people.

He came to release you from slavery to sin and from blindness to God's promise of salvation. He accomplished this by humbly submitting himself to his Father in his sacrificial death on the cross as your Substitute—his righteous life for your disobedience, his death for your sin.

While you were still sinners, he made you a new creation by giving you a new heart, enabling you to repent and believe in him. As a new creation, you are to live as such, because your former, old sinful self has died with him on the cross. Don't believe Satan's lie in "eternal security": that because your salvation is secured, you are free to "eat, drink and be merry" and sin more and more.

You are a new creation! Are you to continue in your former sinful ways? God forbid! Scripture exhorts you to "make your calling and election sure" as you live your lives daily in obedience to the commandments that your Servant has given.

And God will continue doing "new things" in you, until finally, he will make the last "new thing": a new heaven and a new earth, where his perfect justice will reign. In Revelation 21:1, John weaves together our text with Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 65:17 and Paul's "new creation" in 2 Corinthians 5:17 with this promise from Christ:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.*