



Sunday School Lesson for December 4, 2005.
Released on November 30, 2005.

"God's Servant"

Printed Text: **Isaiah 42:1-9.**
Devotional Reading: **Isaiah 42:8-13.**
Background Scripture: **Isaiah 41,42.**

Time: about 700-695 B.C.
Place: Jerusalem

Isaiah 42:1-9

1. Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my Spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.

2. He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street.

3. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth.

4. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.

5. Thus saith God the LORD, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein:

6. I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles;

7. To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.

8. I am the LORD; that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.

9. Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare: before they spring forth I tell you of them.

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to examine a passage from Isaiah 42 that introduces God's Servant, the Messiah, and His work and purpose.

Principle: to show how God is to be glorified through His special Servant, the Messiah.

Application: to introduce students to Isaiah's prophecy concerning the Christ who was to come.

How to Say It

ASSYRIA. Uh-*sear*-ee-uh.

Introduction

Ironically, though the Messiah is a king, one of His greatest titles is "Servant." Jesus said, "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The mission of Jesus, the Servant, is outlined in this week's text in Isaiah 42, written around seven hundred years before Jesus' birth.

Though He is a servant and also gentle, Messiah will bring judgment and justice to the world.

Messiah would also become a covenant for Israel and a Light for the Gentiles. Jesus brought the new covenant and the knowledge of the God of Israel to all the nations, far and near.

How can the coming King, the Ruler of the whole world, be a servant? The mystery of the humility of God is wrapped up in this prophecy of Isaiah. God's ways are not our ways. Lording power over others is the way of sinful humans, but God, even though He is the supreme power of the universe, is the gentle Creator and Redeemer.

Lesson Background

Each of the four lessons for December has selections from the book of Isaiah, and the final two lessons of the month will also have passages from the Gospel of Luke. The book of Isaiah is usually dated over the period of 740-700 B.C. Isaiah lived and wrote during the reigns of four kings of Judah (see Isaiah 1:1).

Although Assyria was the dominant power in his day, Isaiah prophesied that the nation would eventually fall to the Babylonians (Isaiah 39:5-7). Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army ultimately destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C. As Isaiah begins chapter 40, the entire nature of the book changes. The prophet writes to provide comfort for people who will be in exile, and he instructs them to leave Babylon with joy when the opportunity comes (Isaiah 48:20).

But Isaiah also prophesies even greater deliverance. In so doing, he uses four poems about a special servant of the Lord who would come. These poems give new dimensions to the one who already had been the subject of earlier prophecies. (See especially Isaiah 7:14; 9:1-7; and all of chapter 11 for those prophecies.) Sections of each poem are noted in the New Testament as being fulfilled in Jesus.

The Call Of The Servant (Isaiah 42:1)

1. What is a common Jewish interpretation of the servant in Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1)?

The identity of the servant in this passage is debated. Not everyone thinks the servant is the Messiah or that this prophecy finds its fulfillment in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth.

According to *The Jewish Study Bible* (Berlin and Brettler, eds., Oxford), "In these lines God addresses the nations of the world while pointing to the servant, the nation Israel." The interpretation that the servant mentioned in Isaiah is Israel has a long tradition in Jewish thought.

There are forty-one occurrences of the word "servant(s)" in Isaiah. Many times the prophet used the word for a special servant of God, and most of these occurrences come within chapters 41 through 53, commonly called the Servant Songs.

While Christians commonly identify God's "servant" in these texts as the Messiah, Jesus Christ, Jewish scholars resist that conclusion.

2. How can we know that the servant is sometimes Israel and sometimes the Messiah?

In some of these instances the reference is clearly to Israel. However, the first nine verses of chapter 42 clearly points to the Messiah as the "servant." One evidence for the identity of the servant as Messiah is the fact that many such prophecies do not fit Israel. In verse 3 the servant is described as gentle, not breaking a "bruised reed." There is no logic in calling the people of Israel a gentle people, since Israel's history during Bible times was filled with war. Likewise, in Isaiah 53:5, when God claims that the horrible abuse endured by the servant would bring Israel peace, the meaning cannot be Israel. Israel does not bring peace to the world by suffering. Only Jesus brought peace to the world by suffering.

He also said, "Who is blind, but my servant?" (42:19). Obviously, this verse was an

indictment against Israel, not the Messiah.

The Character Of The Servant (Isaiah 42:2-4)

3. How did Jesus model a humble attitude while glorifying God (v. 2)?

Jesus did not go about in the streets proclaiming Himself as Messiah. He did not deny His messiahship, and He did make claims tantamount to it, but He was not in the habit of broadcasting it.

God said of His Servant that He would not "cause his voice to be heard in the street" (v. 2). A person who causes his voice to be heard is one who loudly proclaims a message. Though Jesus preached to crowds on the hillsides and in the temple, it is nonetheless true that He was a quiet voice. Unlike many false messiahs (before and after Jesus) who proclaimed themselves, God's Servant did not "cry, nor lift up" His voice.

4. How should we as followers Jesus treat hurting people (v. 3)?

A reed is a water plant that is hollow and brittle. A reed looks strong and resembles wood, but it is easily broken. When bent, it cracks easily, and the broken segment hangs by fragile fibers, ready to fall off at the slightest stress. The same phrase is used in II Kings 18:21. In that context, a messenger from Assyria warned Israel not to rely on Egypt as an ally. Egypt was a bruised, or crushed, reed, a defeated kingdom.

Isaiah said the Servant would not break a bruised reed. The metaphor refers to a person who is defeated, hurting, or weak. Rather than be harsh to such people, the Servant would be gentle so as not to crush them.

Many such people came to Jesus. A tax collector named Zacchaeus, who longed desperately for forgiveness, came to see Him. Although other rabbis had rejected him, Jesus said, "This day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost"

The "smoking flax" of Isaiah 42:3 refers to a lamp wick, usually made from the fibers of the flax plant. The Servant not only was gentle with the wounded but also knew how to keep the slightest spark of interest in God from being put out. The image is of someone who could reach people with the smallest inclination toward God and turn their spark into a flame.

One of the things that characterized Jesus was His supernatural ability to judge character. Jesus knew that the rich young ruler was not humble before God and needed to be challenged rather than encouraged (Matt. 19:16-21). He wisely perceived that the woman at the well was a wounded person and needed to be treated gently and led lovingly to the truth about God (John 4:7-29). Jesus is the Servant who would bring true justice for all who have been wronged (cf. Isa. 42:3).

5. What kept Jesus from being discouraged and failing (v. 4)?

If anyone had cause to be discouraged and quail at finishing his job, it was Jesus. The unworthiness of the people who surrounded Him, the pain of crucifixion, the agony of His separation from God—all these would have made any average person give up. The very people He came to save mocked Him while He was in the act of saving them. Few things are more discouraging than being rejected by those who are the objects of your love and sacrifice.

Yet God's Servant would be unfailing. There is no discouragement for God's Servant, who values God's will more than His own will. In this sense, the Garden of Gethsemane was a test for Jesus. Would He be discouraged and give up His mission because of the suffering and rejection He received from the people around Him? Would He be discouraged and fail to bring salvation to the world?

Although Jesus' sacrificial work is completed, He will keep working until there is justice on the earth. Even the furthest parts of the world, "the isles," will be under the rule of Messiah in the kingdom.

The Commission Of The Servant (Isaiah 42:5-9)

6. Why did God describe His power in Creation after promising the coming of the Servant (v. 5)?

God's promises that are difficult to believe. His promise in verses 1-4 was of a Servant who would be Judge of the Jews and the Gentiles and bring justice to the world while being so gentle that He would not break the fragile. A powerful promise like this needs a powerful God to deliver it. God listed His qualifications for bringing such a promise to pass in verse 5. Two things show that God can bring to pass anything He promises: the creation of the skies and the land and the giving of life and spirit to humankind. Both of these things came to pass in Genesis 1 and 2. God reminded Isaiah and his hearers of Creation theology from the book of Genesis. The God who can do those things can bring Messiah and set the world under His justice.

7. How was Jesus a covenant for the people of Israel (v. 6)?

God's relationship with His Servant Messiah is one of close intimacy and protection. First, God's call on the Servant is to righteousness. Even when standing before His accusers, Jesus could not be accused of violating any law of God or even of the Jewish elders.

Second, God would uphold His Servant. The servant has the assurance that He will be protected so as to fulfill His mission. To "hold" the "hand" expresses a constant affirmation of security and safety.

Third, God would make His Servant a "covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6). This promise speaks of Jesus' twofold role as Saviour. For Israel He came to bring a new covenant, the one promised in Jeremiah 31:33. For the Gentiles He came to be a Light and to bring the nations into the covenant.

revealed to Israel. Jesus came to be a Saviour for His nation and for all the nations, for the people of Israel and for the Gentiles.

8. What changes did Jesus bring for Gentiles in the world of the first century (v. 7)?

Jesus will cause "blind" eyes to see during His time on earth. But here figurative language means that the servant will eliminate spiritual blindness and "darkness," bringing freedom from the *prison* of sin.

His mission remains the same today and in the future.

9. Who has the authority to make these promises (vs. 8,9)?

The personal *name of the Lord* is behind all that is being promised (see the beginning of vs. 5, & 6). That name had a special significance at the time that Moses was called (Exodus 3:13, 14). Exodus 34:14 says that God is a jealous God. This is jealousy in the right sense: there are no real rivals to the one God. "Graven images" (idols) are worthless.

The former things, those that had been prophesied in the past, are fulfilled as predicted in the course of time. The Lord proclaims new blessings long *before they* are accomplished. It is indeed a blessing today for us to know that these really were predictive prophecies. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls with copies of the book of Isaiah proves that God truly had spoken these things centuries ahead of time. They came to pass just as He said. Fulfilled prophecy is a guarantee of truth; it is a vital part of the Christian's guarantee of eternal life.

Conclusion

Isaiah lived hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, but he foretold the coming of the Messiah, referred to in this week's text as God's Servant.

In this lesson we have examined the characteristics of this Servant who was to come. He would come in humble garb, but He would be entirely Spirit-filled and approved by God. He would fulfill God's covenant promises to Israel, and He would open the door to the salvation of the Gentiles as well.

As Christian believers, we look back to what Isaiah's original audience looked forward to. The Servant Messiah has come, has opened our eyes, and has set us free. Through Him we give God the glory that He so richly deserves!

Prayer

Almighty God, just as You have demonstrated Your compassion to us, we resolve today to make a difference in the lives of others by acts of love and kindness in the name of the servant whom You sent. In Jesus' name, amen.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

In next week's lesson we will be looking into verses that reveal God as Israel's strength. Read Isaiah 49:1 through 50:11.

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