

BEHOLD MY SERVANT (Part 1)

Isaiah 42:1–9

Key Verse: 42:1

“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

What’s your favorite thing to look at? It might be beautiful gardens, a stunning sunrise or sunset, or a starry night sky. Some people have a favorite tv show they like to watch. Sometimes, if we’ve got time to spare, we might even like to sit down in a public place and just “people watch.” It can be very interesting. Nowadays our smartphones can tell us how much screen time we used the past week, because we may be spending more time than we realize surfing videos, pictures or shopping apps. It’s an escape from the demands and stress of life. Today God tells us to look at someone actually worth our time—in fact, he’s the best place to fix our gaze. God says to all of us, “Behold my servant.” When we look at this servant of the Lord, what does God want us to see? What do these things about him mean? And what difference does it make in our lives to look at him? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

Today’s passage is the first of four “servant songs” in Isaiah that prophesy about Jesus.¹ This first song is actually the climax to chapter 41. There, Isaiah warned his people in Babylonian Captivity of a coming conqueror (1–4)² who would get people so scared they would frantically begin making idols (5–7). Isaiah reassured the Israelites not to be afraid (8–16) and said God would help them get through the dry wilderness back to the promised land (17–20). In the last part of the chapter God summons people’s useless idols to court and exposes them all as frauds (21–29). In verses 24 and 29 God used a powerful word: “Behold!” He meant, “Look at how *nothing*, how *delusional* your idols are!” We all get obsessed with our own versions of idols. They may not be statues, but

¹ Matthew 12:15–21 clearly states that this passage is talking about Jesus.

² Most likely Cyrus the Persian (Isa44:28; 45:1; cf. 2Ch36:22–23; Ez1:1–2,7–8, etc.).

our idols are just as real; they're whatever or whoever we turn to for comfort and security. Now, in contrast to all our empty human idols, God calls us to behold someone else.

Read verse 1. "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." First of all, God calls this person "my servant." He is indeed nothing but a servant (Php2:7), but God is most proud of him. The word "uphold" literally means to grasp or hold fast. In history, whenever God exalted one of his servants, sinful people always tried to knock him down. But God is not going to let that happen to this servant. As we're going to see in the other servant songs, this servant is going to suffer beyond imagination and be crushed (49:4,7; 50:6; 52:14; 53:3–11). But God will support and sustain his servant, no matter what, all the way to final victory (52:13,15; 53:10–12). God calls him "my chosen." He even says his soul delights in him. To God, he's the dearest and best. God is *thrilled* with his servant. Why?

Read verse 1b. "I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." This servant is so pleasing to God because he carries out God's will for the world. God's servant, the nation of Israel, failed to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation as God wanted. So did David and his royal lineage. But at last, this is the servant who actually is going to accomplish God's will for the world. He has "the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD" (11:2). It's not human knowledge or smartness, but wisdom and knowledge from the Spirit. And in this case, God put his Spirit on his servant to empower him to do his work. He would work not with human ability or strength, but with the power of the Spirit. This prophecy was fulfilled at the baptism of our Lord Jesus (Lk3:21–22; 4:14; Ac10:38).

And what is the servant's work? It says, "...he will bring forth justice to the nations." No wonder he needs the power of the Spirit! This world is so chaotic, so full of misinformation and deception, stubborn pride, rebellion and injustice. Some people talk well and promise great changes, and their listeners get swept up in the aura and the rhetoric. It's nothing but hyped-up propaganda. Such so-called leaders are nothing but fallen men, powerless to effect any change in the world. But this servant is full of God's power to bring justice to the nations. He will

bring righteousness to the poor, equity to the meek, punishment to the wicked (11:4).

And notice how God repeats the word “justice” (1,3,4). In fact, Isaiah uses this word “justice” 29 times,³ more than any other Old Testament author. Justice is a major theme in Isaiah. Here, bringing justice to the nations is God’s mission for his servant. If that’s the case, we really need to know what this justice means. In 1:17 God says, “...learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.” This is our common understanding. But in Isaiah’s context here, justice primarily has to do with idolatry. For Isaiah, idolatry is the greatest injustice. Verse 5 reads, “Thus says the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it...” He says in verse 8: “I am the LORD; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.” In these chapters, over and over again God declares, “besides me there is no god.”⁴ Isaiah says when we worship anything other than God, it’s an “abomination” (41:24; 44:19). The psalmist also warns that when we worship idols, we become just as foolish and useless as they are (Ps115:8; 135:18). On the other hand, when we love and worship the living God, we grow in his righteous and just character. This is why our world is so full of injustice. People don’t know God. They don’t really love and worship him. Until human beings, whom God created and sustains, begin to truly worship God, this world will remain full of injustice.

So how does the servant begin to bring God's justice? Read verse 2. “He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street...” It’s surprising that the servant’s justice starts with such quietness. Usually when people have a sense of injustice, they rush out into the streets in protest, shouting. But this servant never gets involved in social upheaval. He doesn’t argue or debate.

Then how does he bring justice? Read verse 3a. “...a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench...” This, too, is surprising.

³ 1:17 [2X], 21, 23, 27; 5:7, 16; 9:7; 10:2; 16:3, 5; 28:6, 17; 30:18; 32:1, 16; 33:5; 40:14; 42:1, 3, 4; 51:4; 56:1; 59:8, 9, 11, 14–15; 61:8

⁴ 44:6, 8; 45:5, 14, 21–22; cf. 2:11, 17; 37:16, 20; 44:24. Isaiah rebukes idolatry in 14 chapters: 2:8, 18, 20; 10:10–11; 19:1–4; 30:22; 31:7; 40:19–20; 41:7, 22–24, 28–29; 42:8, 17; 44:9–20; 45:16, 20; 46:1; 48:5; 57:13; 66:3–4.

A single bruised reed refers to one person who is so fragile. A single, faintly burning wick depicts one person barely functioning, barely even surviving. God expresses his justice in his servant's gentle, tender, patient care for such damaged, worn out people. Isaiah understands God's heart for human suffering. Throughout his prophecies he uses the words "compassion,"⁵ "gracious" or "favor."⁶ He also frequently describes the "afflicted,"⁷ literally meaning those who've suffered violence, who've forcibly been put down or humiliated.

In the context of these chapters, the "bruised reed" and "faintly burning wick" refers to the Israelites in Babylonian Captivity, suffering as slaves in a foreign land. They were in so much anguish, it seemed they might not make it. But people are still like this. Today, even in affluence, people go through various kinds of violence or abuse. Sometimes, being "afflicted" has to do with our health. In his Gospel, Matthew quotes this verse after Jesus heals a man with a shriveled hand (Mt12:15–21). But it's not only physical or social brokenness. "A bruised reed" and "faintly burning wick" also describe people deeply wounded and damaged by a life of sin. They've barely got any strength left. They seem totally hopeless.

Who can understand them? Jesus. No one understands us like him. Verse 3 shows us why God wants us to "behold" his servant. Why does he treat broken, hopeless people like this? It's because he was made like us, fully human. The Apostle John summed it up in one simple, profound phrase: "The Word became flesh" (Jn1:14a). It means God the Son, who enjoyed eternal glory with the Father, entered into our humanity. He came to understand our limitations and weaknesses. He experienced firsthand our sorrows and grief (Isa53:3a). He understands our deepest wounds, our discouragement, our exhaustion. He was made like us "in every respect" (Heb2:17), so he's merciful and faithful to us. He can "feel for" us, and his grace helps us when we're in need (Heb4:15–16). He's not official, distant or demanding. Isaiah describes him as he "who binds up the brokenness of his people" (30:26b). If we look at this servant of the Lord, he becomes our healer.⁸

⁵ Hebrew "rawkham": 9:17; 14:1; 27:11; 47:6; 49:13,15; 54:7,8,19; 55:7; 63:7,15

⁶ Hebrew "khawnan": 26:10; 27:11; 30:18,19; 33:2

⁷ Hebrew "awnaw": 14:32; 30:20; 48:10; 49:13; 51:21; 53:4,7; 54:11; 58:10; 60:14; 63:9

⁸ (Isa19:22; 53:5; 57:18–19; 58:8a)

But how is this related to justice? It's justice in real life—redeeming and restoring broken people, one at a time. With this purpose, God's servant is so gracious and tender, even toward the weakest one. He's so careful not to extinguish, not to break, but to patiently, lovingly nurture her or him back to life and health. It may sound nice, but it's incredibly hard to do. Frankly, helping bruised and fainting people can wear us out. But not this servant. Helping the bruised and faint, he doesn't get bruised⁹ or grow faint. So verses 3b–4a say, "...he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth..." Faithfulness is such a crucial quality in this servant (11:5; 16:5). Faithfulness is what wounded people need most. Through his faithfulness to us, we're healed, and that's how he establishes justice in the earth.

When God sends such a servant into the world, what happens? Verse 4b reads, "...and the coastlands wait for his law." In 42:10 and 12 Isaiah depicts these coastal peoples singing to the Lord a new song and declaring his praise. It's so exciting! In fact, in this book Isaiah repeats the word "coastlands" 13 times.¹⁰ They are "earth's remotest nations."¹¹ They also represent those living in abandoned, overlooked places today that nobody pays attention to, the most neglected, forgotten people. But God doesn't forget them; God sees them and longs for them to know his servant, to find his justice and his healing.

God has been talking *about* his servant; now he turns to say something *to* him. Read verse 6. "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations..." God promises to protect him and accomplish his purpose for the world through him. God promises to give him as a covenant for the people, to restore our broken relationship with him. In Luke's Gospel, when Simeon holds the baby Jesus in his arms, he mentions this prophecy (Lk2:32). In the next servant song Isaiah develops further that this servant is "a light for the nations" (49:6). As a light, what does he do? Read verse 7. "...to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." Blinded eyes, a dungeon, darkness—they all refer to people living in sin, under Satan's rule. Who can get us out? Nobody. But Jesus can. No

⁹ The Hebrew word for "discouraged" in verse 4a is the same as "bruised" in verse 3a.

¹⁰ 11:11; 24:15; 40:15; 41:1,5; 42:4,10,12; 49:1; 51:5; 59:18; 60:9; 66:19

¹¹ From the missionary hymn "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" by Reginald Heber, 1819.

matter how blind we are, how deep our dungeon is, how depressing our darkness may be, the Lord's servant Jesus, who is our light, can get us out. And with faith and hope in him, we can pray for anyone. It's so inspiring.

Read verse 1 again. May God help us to behold God's servant Jesus until we can experience his healing deeply. May God also help us grow in his image and bring his justice and healing and light to people in darkness all around us.