

3. THE SERVANT OF THE LORD

“A LIGHT TO THE GENTILES” Isaiah 42:1-7; Isaiah 49:1-7

Isa 42:1 “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. 2 He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. 3 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; 4 he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.”

Is. 49:6 “I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth”

1. The Failure of Israel as God’s Servant

The early chapters of Genesis make it clear that the nation of Israel was intended to be God’s servant and a light to the nations. Its foundational call (through Abraham) was that “*all peoples on earth will be blessed by you*” (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18). Though this pointed ultimately to the work of its Messiah, it also pointed to the fact that Israel, having been adopted by God and having received the great moral code of Sinai, was intended to become a great and influential nation for the example and benefit of other nations. Moses was speaking of this when he warned the Israelites, “*Observe (the Law) carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear all about these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’*” (Deut. 4:6). It was to be “*holy nation*” before God and before the nations; “*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*”. This expressed intent of God to bless the nations through the call of Abraham and the Jewish nation is critically important for understanding God’s purposes for a fallen world. His grand design is to redeem the nations. The Jewish nation was an instrument to a greater end than its own salvation.

None the less Israel was intended and chosen to be that instrument, and thereby it was enormously privileged. There was, however, one crucial condition for this privilege: Israel had to live up to its destiny and be obedient to God and his Law. Failure to do so would mean that instead of placing upon Israel the divine glory that was intended for the edification and blessing of the rest of the world, God would judge the nation severely. Sadly the nation failed in the test of obedience. By the middle of the sixth century B.C., after centuries of apostasy and disobedience, it had become self-seeking, idolatrous, unclean, and bitterly divided, with the two sister nations, Judah and Israel bickering and fighting each other. It was, in other words, every bit as bad as the surrounding nations. No amount of prophetic warning could bring it back on track. Consequently the people were doomed to destruction and exile, the land promised to Abraham was to be lost. The servant had failed to do the task it had been given; it had in the words of Ezekiel “*profaned to name of the Lord among the nations*” (Ez. 36:23)

2. A New Servant Emerges

It fell to Isaiah, amongst others, to speak out the indictment Judah was to receive for its disobedience. Isaiah announced the end of Israel’s servant role (at least for the foreseeable future) saying that Israel had become a “*blind servant, a deaf messenger*” (42:18-19). As a consequence the nation would taste judgement through the flames of war and exile. As for the nations, they would lose a light that had been intended for them.

However, this same Isaiah, at the very time that he was called upon to proclaim Israel’s judgement, also received a series of prophetic messages about another servant figure that was to be raised up for the blessing of the nations. Israel may have failed as the servant of God, but God already has some one else in place who would not fail. We can see this figure emerging in Isaiah 9 where he is seen as a “*great light and mighty God*”, and he appears again in Isaiah 11 where he is seen as the kingly “*Shoot of Jesse*”. He then appears a further three times later in Isaiah (42; 49; 52-53) as the servant of the LORD. These are the great peaks of Messianic prophecy, and it is very obvious that the passages are pointing to one and the same person. They consistently and unitedly display him in his divinity, his humanity, his anointing, his kingship and his concern for Israel. But for the purposes of this pamphlet we need to note that he is consistently and markedly portrayed as one who has a profound ministry of restoration to the Gentiles and to the nations. He is a figure with nothing less than the restoration of the world in his view. This is the great Messianic hope for the world.

3 The Identity of the Servant.

Before addressing that theme it is worth examining the question of who this new servant is. It has been argued that the servant references could be still to the nation, Israel. It is pointed out that Israel is referred to explicitly by God in Is. 41:8ff as “*you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen ... I said ‘you are my servant and I have not rejected you’*”. Furthermore the expression, “*my servant Israel*” is actually used in the second Servant Song (Isaiah 49:3) in describing the new servant. There is, however, an insurmountable obstacle to the servant being identified with the historic nation of Israel: this servant that Isaiah announces is told that he was “*formed in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself*.” (49:5). Quite obviously, therefore, Isaiah’s servant is some one who stands outside the nation and is himself charged with the responsibility at some point of bringing back the Jewish nation to God. Moreover in the depiction of the servant in Isaiah 53 he is described as being a “*guilt offering*” (Is. 53:10), one who “*for the transgression of my people (i.e. the Jews) was stricken*” (Is 53:8). Here again, he stands outside the nation as one who suffered for the nation because it had transgressed. Pertinent to this, Isaiah 53:10 shows a servant without sin, for such is the implication him being a guilt offering. But Israel cannot in the least be said to be without sin: it is the gross nature of its sin that is Isaiah’s burden along with the judgement about to fall on it. If, then, Is. 41:18 addresses the new servant as “*You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour*” it can only mean that the new servant has now taken over Israel’s role and embodies all that Israel as a servant was intended to be.

Others have identified the new servant, not with the nation, but with Isaiah himself or some other prophet. However, Isaiah, if anything was called to preside over the destruction of the nation, not its restoration; he might prophesy of the latter but he would in no way effect it. Neither is there any way in which the prophet could measure up to the glory and majesty of the figure that the prophecies portray. Neither could any other figure of that time claim to be “*a light to the Gentiles*” or “*a covenant to the peoples*” or a “*guilt offering*” or “*mighty God*”.

History reveals no candidate other than Jesus

History has revealed no one remotely like the figure described in these great Messianic passages, except for the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, and he presents unmistakably in his person, his ministry and his death and resurrection an astonishing fulfilment of the great call involved in Isaiah's predictions.

4. The Mandate of the Servant

As we have stated previously, the main mandate that God gives to his new servant to be a "light to the nations". This particular phrase, "light to the nations", is used in the two servant songs of Isaiah 42 and 49. In Isaiah 42:6 we God said to him: "I will keep you and will make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth". In Isaiah 49:he said: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth". The mandate was nothing less than a world wide task. The servant was to be light to bring salvation to the very ends of the earth. This is a magnificent declaration of hope to a scarred and sinful world: God has made plans to redeem it. It is a mandate far beyond restoring the Jews, important though that is to God, for the servant is specifically told, "**It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob I will also make you a light for the Gentiles**".

This world wide salvation is the essential theme, therefore, of these two servant songs of Isaiah 42 and 49, but it is a theme by no means confined to those two songs. There is a very significant reference to the same theme in the song of the suffering servant (Isaiah 52 -53) where we are told (Isaiah 52:15) that the servant "will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him". The word "sprinkle" is used elsewhere in the Old Testament for hallowing people, for cleansing and for atonement. Thus the servant was intended to be a guilt offering for sin and to bring cleansing and atonement for the nations. This, we are told, would be a great shock to the rulers of the nations and render them speechless.

**"I will
make you
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Moreover, we find the same theme of world wide ministry when we look back to the Messianic passages of Isaiah 9 and 11. In 9:1 Galilee of the Gentiles is to be honoured by a great light and much joy, something that came to be fulfilled in Jesus' earthly ministry and pointed to the greater Gentile ministry that was to follow. The light that is depicted in Isaiah 9 as bringing unparalleled joy to people is the same light that the servant of Isaiah 42 and 49 is to convey to the nations. In Is. 11:10 the world wide theme is powerfully voiced in the words, "*In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him*", words which are repeated in 11:12. In a gloriously poetic statement Isaiah declares in 11:9, "*the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*".

This great prophetic hope is not even confined to these great acknowledged Messianic passages. It is a theme that readily surfaces in many other parts of Isaiah. To mention just a selection of examples, Is. 51:4-5 says, "*The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations My salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations*". Isaiah 52:10 says, "*The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God*". Isaiah 56:7 declares, "*My house will be a house of prayer for all nations*".

Some Key Words

There are three key words which are used in these passages to describe the blessing that God intends to bring on the nations; "**light**", "**salvation**" and "**justice**". As we have seen, the light which was to shine on Galilee of the Gentiles in Is 11 was a light that brought unspeakable joy; it was like the joy of harvest or full provision, the joy of freedom from oppression, war and hatred, the joy that came from genuine peace. That joy represents an essential part of the all embracing term "salvation", which means fullness of health in every dimension. Salvation embraces peace and contentment, well being and satisfaction in the fullest possible manner.

Justice is a word emphasised particularly (though by no means exclusively) in Is 42, where we are told, the servant was to "*bring justice to the nations*" (v.1); "*he will not falteruntil he establishes justice on the earth*" (v.4); "*in faithfulness he will bring forth justice*" (v.3). The immediate idea we associate with the word justice is doing "that which is right", or securing "righteousness" and "truth". Justice speaks of a moral law. The law that God gave to Moses on Sinai epitomised such justice. So the idea of bringing justice to the earth means enabling nations to do things the right way, to act out of genuine concern for others and in the best interests of others. However, the Hebrew word used here for justice has the wider meaning of describing the way God determined everything in his universe should be ordered. To bring justice to the nations was to bring in to being God's predetermined order and pattern for the life of the nations, to shape the nations, and their behaviour and relationships in exactly the way he wants them to be. God's justice is his decreed order of things and this is what the servant will re-establish. This would indeed be "light to the Gentiles".

The world-wide scope of this mandate of blessing is very striking on any account, but it is particularly so in the context in which it was announced by Isaiah, for Isaiah spoke at a time when the nations of that day were in confusion, when the ravages of Assyria (and later Babylon) were creating unprecedented fear and destruction and when there was little or no justice to be seen anywhere. Isaiah's message was one, therefore, of hope in a very dark hour. It was a re-affirmation in a most extraordinary way of the fact that God had always had in his heart a blessing for the whole world, and that, despite everything, he would in fact achieve it. "*The islands*" (v.4), and the "*ends of the earth*" would see his salvation. Though nations "would roar" and see much destruction the day would come when "*The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea*" (Is 11:9)

5. The Ministry that brings Justice

The characteristics of the new servant's ministry would be totally in keeping with his mandate. His mandate was justice and love: his ministry, therefore, was to be "quiet, non aggressive and non-threatening". He would not "*shout or cry out or raise his voice*" (Is 42:2). This triple description contains all the ideas of not shrieking at people, of not raising one's voice to dominate or shout others down, of not making some sort of self-advertisement. This was not a ministry of coercion, or of manipulation. It was ministry of deep sensitivity and gentle sympathy, eliciting a willing response.

His ministry would be noted by the manner in which it reached the "bruised reed" and the "smouldering wick" (Is. 42:3). Both of these expressions are very suggestive. A "bruised reed" is something that can scarcely support itself, and certainly cannot be much of a support to others. The phrase speaks of those for whom a very gentle touch is needed lest further weight be placed on them and they break completely. Likewise the "smouldering wick" brings to mind the person in whom any hope or strength or inner dynamic has virtually died out. The servant would not count such people as worthless, nor despise them as weak, but rather seek to fan the ember into flame again.

6. His Success This was to be a ministry that would have total and full success. It would ultimately change the whole world: "*He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth*" (Is.42:4). Where Israel failed he would not.