

A Bruised Reed He Will not Break

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[0 : 0 0] We start a new series tonight from the book of Isaiah on the servant songs. That's Isaiah chapter 42 to 55 and most commentators will divide the book of Isaiah into two or three parts but the first two parts are always chapter 1 to 37 which is often called the book of the king and then chapter 38 to 55 which is often called the book of the servant and in the middle of the book of the servant are these songs. They're called servant songs because they are songs. They are precise, beautiful Hebrew poetry. They were likely sung and the church has always recognized since the beginning that these songs are prophecies about Jesus Christ, about the Messiah to come and what that means is that the servant songs in the series we're gonna do in the lead up to Christmas is a Christology which is a study of Jesus Christ, a deep study of Jesus Christ. This is inspired holy poetry about Jesus and that means in the series we are really standing on holy ground here and so up to Christmas we're gonna look at this Christology in song if you will and when you look at a Christology in song there's really one main purpose, one main application and that's come and worship with me as we walk through it. Come and think about Jesus and worship with me as we think about this text. So let's dive right in.

We're gonna do four things. We're gonna ask why a servant. We're gonna look at the servant king, the problem of justice in the unbrewed yet crushed. So first, why a servant and really what I'm asking here is why the servant songs in the book of Isaiah. We're just thinking about the context for the whole series.

We're setting up the context here for the whole series very briefly. We're reading songs here about the Messiah that were prophecies that were given around 700 BC. That was a long time ago by the way and at the time Israel was threatened by Assyria, the nation of Israel, the people of God, had been broken into two kingdoms. One in the north which was called Israel and one in the south which was called Judah and in the north there was an enemy to the north called Assyria and Assyria was threatening the northern kingdom and the whole book of Isaiah is really prophecies and talking about what's about to happen in the northern kingdom and in fact it does happen during the time of Isaiah's life and 722 Assyria finally overruns the northern kingdom of Israel and captures Samaria, its capital that had been established by Ahab and Jezebel. But when we get to the book of the servant which is the second part, the part that we're in, the issue is different. Isaiah is talking to the southern kingdom, to Judah and basically Judah had gone on some dates with Babylon in order to protect them from Assyria. They had started kind of flirting with

Babylon a little bit hoping that Babylon in the end would protect them from any big foes that would come their way and destroy them and so what happens in the book of the servant at the beginning is Isaiah comes and tells the king Hezekiah that because he had gone on dates with Babylon that one day the kingdom of Judah itself would be crushed by Babylon. Babylon would come and take it because they had not trusted in God and so he says this actually in chapter 39 verse 5, Isaiah says to Hezekiah, hear the word of the Lord of hosts, behold the days are coming when all that is in your house and that which your fathers have stored up till this day will be carried away to Babylon.

Nothing will be left as the Lord and some of your own sons who will come from you whom you will father shall be taken away and they will be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. And so the great commentator on Isaiah, Alec Matier, he's probably got the best commentary out there on Isaiah. He said that the question then for 200 years until they finally escaped from Babylon was this, does Judah's, the southern kingdom's, Judah's fall to Babylon mean the end of the Lord's people? Have the people sin to a point where all is lost, where Israel will be squelched, its flame will go out. And in the book of Isaiah, Israel, Judah, Jerusalem even, the city is always connected with the rest of the world. In other words, the fate of that city, Jerusalem, is the fate of the world. This is where salvation will happen or it will not happen in the book of Isaiah. And whatever happens to Jerusalem

is what will happen to all peoples, all nations. And so the question is, a question for the whole world, is there any hope, can anyone be redeemed if God's people are just a smoldering candle in the midst of another nation, another foreign power about to be squelched? What is God's answer? The servant songs.

[5 : 36] Starting in Isaiah chapter 40, as soon as Isaiah says to them, Babylon's gonna take you and gonna crush you for your sins. The very next chapter, the first word, Isaiah 40 verse 1, if you have a Bible you can look at it, comfort, comfort my people, says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended. A prophecy saying there will be salvation, there will be hope.

So that's the context, that's why this is here. It's a prophecy, an answer to what looks like the end of the world, the end of the hope of Messiah.

So secondly, the servant king. This is about the identity of the person we read about in chapter 42. The specific answer to the question, is there hope for the world if Israel is about to go into exile, is answered in chapter 42 with the introduction of the servant. And this is a prophecy, it's about something that's gonna take place in the future. This happens in the 600 and 700 BC, but you see in verse 9, it's a prophecy. Behold, the former things have come to pass and new things I now declare to you. Before they spring forth, I tell you of them. This is the prophecy of the servant, and the servant is God's answer to this problem. Now, New Testament commentators will tell you that in the New Testament there are 27 direct quotations of the servant songs of Isaiah 42 to 55 or 53. And even more than that, they were pretty confident that there are 85 other direct allusions to a text in the servant songs in the New Testament. So over a hundred times the New Testament makes use of these hymns about a

Messiah. And so for that reason, theologians for centuries have been saying that these poems actually tell us something about the Christ that the Gospels doesn't even tell us. That actually after you read your New Testament, you can come back to Isaiah 42 to 53 and learn new things about Jesus that aren't in the New Testament. And so you can come here and get a Christology in song. And what else could it be but a song? How else could God have written it but a poem? So the first lesson, the first lesson from 42, is that the Messiah's identity is a paradox, a paradox, a juxtaposition. It's two things that come together that don't even really make sense when you look at them closely. So if you looked on at verse 1, he says, Behold my servant whom I uphold my chosen and whom my soul delights. Behold my servant. So he's a servant. This is a Hebrew word *ebid*. And *ebid*, servant is a nicer term for it. It's the word slave. So he says, Behold my slave. And this is specifically a word that typically refers to household slaves. So one that would be a servant in somebody's household serving their family, working for them, managing their business, things like that. But then verse 1 again, I put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations. So the slave will bring justice to all the nations or to the whole world. Now bringing justice to the nations, that's the work of a king. There have been very few servants or slaves in history that have brought justice to kingdoms. This is the language of the triumphant, of a triumphant king. So what we're saying is the identity of the servant is that he is both a servant and a king. That the servant songs begin by saying, We're looking for a servant king, a grand juxtaposition, a paradox of two things that don't go together. I will send a slave and he will do the kingly work of bringing justice to the nations. And we're not told how he's gonna do it, but we're told how he's not gonna do it. And this in the next couple verses, and this really continues the paradox, if you look at verse 2 and 3, this is poetry, this is a song. And in Hebrew, there's often a literary device called parallelism. And so this is a, both of these verses are cases of parallelism,

I'll explain that. Verse 2, this is how he will not bring justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the streets. He will not cry aloud, lift up his voice or make it heard. That's three ways of saying the same thing that's called parallelism. And what this is talking about is that normally if a king came and conquered a people group, if Babylon comes and conquers Israel, the king rides on his noble steed, his great white horse through the middle of the city. And he makes his name known. He cries out and proclaims who he is, the conqueror, the one who has come and defeated his people and brought a new age, a new kingdom, any king in the ancient areas that goes and brings justice to a nation, the first order of business is to desecrate all the old statues and put new statues in that have their face and name on it. And so it's to proclaim their name in the public square in the streets. We're looking for a servant who does not self-proclaim in the streets, who does not go into the public square and make his name known. A servant who is quiet, who is

humble, who does not write in to save the day on a valiant steed.

[12:18] We're looking for a servant king that is completely paradoxical, that does not come in and conquer kingdoms in any normal sense of the word. And then secondly, the second thing in verse 3, it tells us that he does not do, and here's another case of parallelism, verse 3, a bruised reed he will not break and a faintly burning wick he will not quench. Now that's two ways of saying the exact same thing. A bruised reed he will not break. What's a bruised reed? A bruise in this passage is not something that's black and blue. It's not a contusion, it's not getting punched and swelling or anything like that. Bruised, in other words for bruised, is bent. And a reed, the specific Hebrew word here for reed is actually a grain stalk. And so it's literally saying a bent grain stalk, he will not break off. Now a bent grain stalk, what's a grain stalk? A grain stalk is a crop that's supposed to give you grain, it's supposed to give you produce.

And when there's a bruised reed, that means that the stalk has been bent. And as a result, two things happen. One, it can't produce any grain. It's useless for its purpose. But also, it's on the brink of death. It's at the point of extinction. And so the second thing, it says in verse 3, a faintly burning wick he will not quench. It means the exact same thing. You can picture faintly burning wick. You have them in your houses. The fire is about to go out.

And the candle, it's just down to the dregs, the very last moments. It's on the brink of extinction. It's usefulness is about to be spent in the same way that a bent reed no longer can produce grain. It can't stay alive anymore. Now in the context, that means that the servant king is the type of king that doesn't come in to a kingdom and squelch out weak peoples. Exactly what happened to Israel by the hands of Babylon, that when they're in the land, when they're in exile, they are faintly burning. They are weak people and they come in and they get squelched out by other conquerors on the verge of extinction. And he's saying the servant king will not do that, but more deeply, it means that the servant is one who is out for the fragile. He's a man who's going to be for the bruised in the broken, for the faintly burning wicks of this world, the people who are barely holding on. He's a man for the lowly. He's a servant king, a slave king. He's a low man himself and he won't come into this world and break those who are on the brink of extinction. So no king in existence, not then or now, had ever, has ever brought justice to the nations. Nobody's done that. Justice has not been brought to all the nations, to the whole world. And at the very same time, no king has ever come into this world and truly cared about the lowliest of the low. The bruised, the fragile, the broken, those who are on the point of extinction. And so the point here is that the identity of who this, all of these songs are about is a paradox. He's a servant king. In the New Testament, Matthew chapter 3 and Luke 3, 700 years following this, there's a scene at a river and the spirit comes down upon a man and the father speaks from heaven and says, this is my son, the beloved, with whom I'm well pleased. Now, New Testament commentators will tell you that in this moment, God the father is quoting. He's quoting in the first part, this is my son, the beloved from Psalm chapter 2.

And in the second part, the one with whom I am well pleased, that's a quote in Matthew and Luke's Gospel from the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was translated about a hundred years before Jesus was born. It's called the Septuagint. But Matthew and Luke are quoting from Isaiah 42 verse 1 from the Septuagint where it says, this is the one, this is the son in whom my soul delights. And so Matthew and Luke are saying, Bible readers, beware, wake up if you've read your Old Testament. Bible readers, beware this boy, this young man from what's been called Nowhereville, Nazareth, the Poe Dunctown. This is the servant king. This is the fulfillment of Isaiah 42 to 53. And let me just say that it is critical, one of the keys to understanding the Gospels and unlocking some of the passages in the Gospels and really grasping what their meaning is actually to have the idea of the servant king, the paradox in your mind. It's one of the concepts that John uses throughout the whole of his Gospel is the paradox of the servant king, the crucified God, the grand paradox of all of existence. Jesus at the point of starting his ministry, he was baptized by an enemy of the state, John the Baptist, and he was the man, the boy from Nowhere, with no fame, no name, and this is what Donald MacLeod says about it. Behold the king. His appearance was nothing to look at. In John chapter 8 he was thought to be 50 years old at scarcely 30. He was poor beyond our imagining, owning nothing but the clothes that he stood in. He was homeless without a pillow for his head.

[19:02] He was oppressed by the crowds. He was often exhausted as when he laid down his head to the world in a tiny fishing boat. He was misunderstood by his family, the whole of his life.

They feared that he was insane. He was stalked by the Pharisees with undisguised hostility. His whole life followed a pattern of rejection. Rejection in his own country, rejection in his own city, Nazareth, rejection by the religious establishment, rejection by public opinion. He was rejected at the court and at last he was rejected by his friends. Behold the king of the world. This is not a normal king that we're reading about here in Isaiah 42. So thirdly, the problem of justice. Very briefly.

Now the passage doesn't only tell us about the identity of the servant king but also about his task. You'll see it in verse 1 again at the end. He will bring forth justice to the nations. That's a big job, bringing forth justice to the nations. It says in verse 4, he will do it faithfully. He'll be upheld by the spirit. Justice. It's the Hebrew word mishpat and what is it? What is justice?

It's one of those words that we use all the time in popular discourse and never actually know what it means probably. Justice. And the most common way that it gets used today I think is when people refer to social justice. So we talk about in the modern 21st century world doing things that are socially just or doing social justice. And what you basically mean when you say the phrase social justice is going out into society and making wrongs into rights. Making contexts that are broken or bruised into good context. And you do that in all sorts of ways. The government does that through punishment. So we call this rectifying justice when we go into situations and make them right by punishment. Government changes through philanthropy. There's all sorts of ways that people do social justice. But generally we call this rectifying justice. It's putting things that are wrong to right again. And one of the great examples of course is when the Allied powers decided to go to war against Germany in World War II they felt that they were just in doing it by the definition of rectifying justice. That they were going to make something that was very wrong right again. That is the wrongs of the National Socialist

Party, the atrocities against the Jews. Or in the south where I'm from in Mississippi. Another great example in history of rectifying justice is when the government finally changed the laws that said that African Americans can't eat with a white person in the same restaurant. Or sit in the back of a bus in the same seat as a white person could sit. That's a great example of rectifying justice. It's making wrong context into rights. Now the Bible and justice. The Bible often speaks of rectifying justice and even this word here is used sometimes for that type of justice. But here I think there's a different sense of justice and it's what the philosopher is often called primary justice. The servant will bring primary justice. What's primary justice? Primary justice is a situation where all is good. It's a context that doesn't need rectifying justice because it's already just. In other words the other word that the Bible uses for it is shalom, peace, well-being. It's a context in which the true, the good, and the beautiful are already reigning. And so there's no need for punishment. There's no need for any rectifying justice or social justice for government to do anything like it. And this is the type of justice that's being talked about in Isaiah 42. Now how do we know? Well if you look at verse 4, he will not grow faint. He will not be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth. Now when it says he until he has established justice in the earth, literally there, it's a little word in the earth, it literally says on the whole ground. He will not stop until he has established justice for the ground, for the ground. What does that mean? And what Isaiah is doing here is he's drawing actually from Genesis chapter 3, the curse. Genesis chapter 3 verse 17, God turns to Adam, the man, and he says, because you have eaten of the forbidden tree, cursed is the ground because of you. Thorns and thistles will grow up before you. In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. And theologians call this the curse of the ground. And the curse of the ground means this, that everything that human beings try to do in life, the natural order of things fights back against them. That no relationship can truly work in a perfectly just way. That there can be no shalom, no primary justice in this world except in little glimpses. That rectifying justice will always exist, that there will always need to be punishment, as long as the curse of the ground exists, that our work will be thwarted, that our work will never be perfect, that it will always get messed up, that every relationship you enter into will come underneath the curse of the ground. And here it's saying that the servant has come to bring justice on the ground. What does that mean? He's come to break the curse. He's come to break the curse of the ground. He's coming to break the curse of the ground. Salvation is being cast here in the mission of justice for the whole cosmos. It's big. It's not small. It's huge. And in Matthew chapter 12, just to end this point and then we'll close very briefly, in Matthew chapter 12,

Jesus is walking with his disciples and he's going through Galilee and he's healing all sorts of people. And they're coming to him, the sick, the fragile, the bruised and broken, and he's healing them. And then he's telling them, don't tell anybody. Keep it a secret. Don't tell people what I've been doing. And then Matthew quotes Isaiah 42 and says, this was to fulfill the prophecy that he would come and not break the bruised reeds, that he would not cry out in the streets.

[26 : 13] If the sick came to him, he would heal them. And then when they went to leave, he would tell them, don't tell anybody. Don't go make my name big. I'm a humble servant. We call it the messianic secret. But even more, there's another sense there that he fulfills Isaiah 42 and that's that Jesus miracles healing the sick, raising people up from the dead, making fishermen whose work was thwarted, who couldn't catch fish, into people who do catch fish, fixing their work. This was to fulfill his work as being the one who would end the curse of the ground, who would stop all things pushing back against us. Jesus miracles, in other words, their glimpses of what it might be like to live in a world of primary justice, a world that doesn't need rectifying justice, a world without broken reeds, bruised reeds. Okay, finally, the unbrews but crushed very briefly.

Seven hundred years before the Messiah, we know to expect a servant king. We know that this is critical for understanding who the Messiah would be. We know that he's paradoxical. We know his mission, which is primary justice, shalom, peace, the end of the curse. Is it too early to quote Christmas hymns? I don't think so.

Far as the curse is found, he comes to make the blessings flow, far as the curse is found. That's what we know so far. But how? How is he going to do it? And this passage doesn't tell us, actually. We have to wait, especially to the thunderbolt of Isaiah 53. But it does tell us one thing about how he will do it, and that's in verse 4, that he will be faithful, that he will do it, that it can't be quenched, it can't be stopped. He says he will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in all the earth and the coastlands wait for his law. And so that's all we know about how. But wait, there's more. There's always more. There's more here. If you look closely, actually, at verse 4, there's something else there. When he says in verse 4, he will not grow faint or be discouraged. Literally, that's an exact parallel of the same two verbs that he used in verse 3. Verse 3 says this, a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench out. Now, if you have one of these

Bibles, you can see in the footnote 3 there that it says, or be discouraged, there's a footnote, and it says, or literally bruised. And so this is what it says, a bruised reed he will not break, a faintly burning wick he will not quench. He will not faintly burn. He will not be bruised. You see? It's repeating the exact same ideas. So he won't come in and break bruised reeds. He won't come in and put out people that are barely holding on by a thread, and he will never become like that. In other words, he can't be bruised like them, bent away from his purpose like Israel had been. He's unstoppable. He can't be stopped. He can't be thwarted. He was unlike them, and that's why he came for them. But the first place that this word bruised, this verb appears in the Bible, same word, is also in Genesis chapter 3. And in Genesis chapter 3 15, after cursing Adam in the ground, God turns to the serpent, the one who brought evil into this world. And he says, the seed of the woman, a boy, a son, he will bruise your head, and you in the process will bruise his heel. Now when you read the two passages together, this is what it says, the servant, the servant king, the Messiah, he cannot be bruised, meaning he cannot be bent from his purpose. He cannot be stopped. He cannot be thwarted. He is faithful. Nothing can put him down. And he would go all the way to being bruised in order to complete his mission. When it says that the serpent will bite his heel, literally, I mean, just think about it. It's saying that what will happen to this boy, yeah, he will crush death. But in the process, a poisoned serpent will bite his heel, and he will be poisoned by evil itself. This man, the judge of all the nations, became the judge, the judged because of the sin of all the nations.

[31 : 32] This man, the bringer of justice, the shalom giver, he did it in the most paradoxical way by being crushed to pick up the language of Isaiah 53 to steal Derek's thunder from three weeks from now. He was crushed. One pastor says it like this, just to close. He fell under rectifying justice that our sin deserved so that he could deliver primary justice to the world. He will swallow up death forever, Isaiah 25, but only in the most paradoxical way by being swallowed by death for three days. This is the great paradox. He can't be stopped. He can't be bruised. He goes and gets bruised to deliver us into the presence of shalom, peace, true peace. Let me just quote close. This is literally the close. I've said it three times, but this is actually the close. Let me just close by saying, in the book of John, Jesus in John 17, the king's speech as we've called it here, is praying to God, the

Father. He does something that happens all throughout the book of John. He prays and says, Lord, glorify me. My hour has come. In the book of John, the cross is consistently presented as a throne. He's talking about the cross there. Glorify me. Lift me up. That's why the language of he must be lifted up is royal language. He must be raised up onto the throne. That, the cross, the paradox of all of history, where the glory of the Lord was revealed, the criminal, the servant king. Martin Luther said it like this in 1535. He bore the person of a sinner and of a thief, and not of one, but of all sinners and thieves. And all the prophets, including Isaiah, saw this, that Christ was to become the greatest thief, the greatest murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer that has ever been anywhere in all the world. And Donald MacLeod. Here, on the cross, he not only bears, but is, the sin of the world. And so here in solemn divine equity, the sword falls upon the king made criminal.

As for us, the crucified God, the servant king, all we can say is, come, Lord Jesus.

Let's pray. Father, we give thanks to you that the foolishness of, the wisdom of men is much more foolish than your foolishness. You set a paradox at the middle of history, the crucified God, the servant king. We just want to love Jesus tonight. So we ask that you would give us eyes of faith in this, this servant here.

And especially if somebody's never believed on this one, that they would know that six to seven hundred years before he came to the world, you sang a song about him. And that's amazing. And so, open our hearts, Lord. We ask in Christ's name. Amen.