

The Servant for the Weary

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Date: 19 November 2017

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- [0 : 0 0] So on Sunday evenings in St. Columbus over the last few weeks we've been doing a wee series in the book of Isaiah. We've been looking at the servant songs. So if you have a Bible with you, you might want to have it open in Isaiah.
- We're in chapter 50. It's on page 6, 1, 1. Isaiah chapter 50 verse 10 says this, Let him who walks in darkness and has no light, Trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.
- We're now at a point in the year where the days are beginning to feel extremely short. When you leave in the morning, it's dark. When you get home in the evening, it's dark.
- And we're rapidly approaching what's called the winter solstice, which is the shortest day of the year. Last year in Edinburgh on the winter solstice, sunrise was at 8.42 in the morning and the sun had set by 3.40 in the afternoon.
- It's bleak. That's only six hours and 58 minutes of daylight. And if you think that's bad, there's a city in Finland where sunrise is at 11 in the morning and it sets at 1.20 in the afternoon.
- [1 : 1 9] It's grim. The point is that darkness feels bleak. We don't like darkness. Human beings are not made to thrive in the darkness.
- You might have heard of SAD. It's a seasonal, affective disorder or depression. And it affects a lot of people at this time of year. It leaves people feeling a lack of energy. It's tiring. It gives people a low mood.
- It leads to despair and lethargy. And I wonder if you can relate to that in your spiritual life this evening, of what it means to walk in darkness and have no light, to feel as if all the lights in your life have been turned off, to know real discouragement, to experience weirdness that goes deep.
- And God knows that sometimes you will feel that way. Sometimes His people will feel like they're in darkness. Well, the good news is that if you feel that way this evening, then Isaiah 50 is good news for you.
- So what's this chapter all about? Well, it's the third of our servant songs that we're looking at. The first song we looked at was in Isaiah chapter 42, where we have this great image of the servant king who will bring ultimate justice to this world.
- [2 : 4 2] And then last Sunday night in Isaiah 49, Derek looked at the servant who will bring peace through restoration. See, what these servant songs are doing is they're giving us a unique portrait of Jesus Christ.
- They're giving us this great window into the life of Jesus that we don't really have in the Gospels. They're poetic songs full of wonderful imagery, but they're also deeply Christological.
- They're telling us stuff about Jesus. And tonight in Isaiah chapter 50, we're giving a little more insight into what the servant is going to do.
- Isaiah 50 is this great picture of Jesus as the one who comes to be the perfect, obedient servant for people who are imperfect, people who are disobedient, people who are flawed.

He comes as the one who brings light to people who are in darkness. So we're going to look at this picture of Jesus by asking two brief questions. The first is this, what kind of people does the servant come for?

[3 : 48] See, what we find throughout the book of Isaiah is that he comes first and foremost for flawed people. He comes for sinful, rebellious people.

He comes for people who are messed up and broken. Right at the beginning of Isaiah in chapter 1, God speaks about this great problem. He says, my people don't know me.

He says, my children have rebelled against me. Now remember the context to the servant songs that we're looking at. God's people face the exile. They face being taken from their land, from their homes, from their families, from their place of worship, and they're thrust into this unfamiliar alien land of Babylon.

It's an incredibly dark and bleak point in their history. And it's clear throughout the whole book of Isaiah that the exile is God's judgment on their sin.

See, their relationship with God, the people in the Old Testament, was likened to that of a marriage. And in a sense, throughout the Old Testament we find them being spiritually unfaithful on God.

[4 : 58] They were constantly turning to the gods of other nations, despite God's faithfulness, despite God's goodness to them. So that's the context, right? The exile, Israel's sin.

God has allowed his people to be taken away to a foreign land. And we find, as Derek reminded us last week in Isaiah 49, the people feel broken. They say in verse 14 of that chapter, the Lord has forsaken me.

My Lord has forgotten me. Now look at what God says in verse 1 of chapter 50. He says here, where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away?

Now that's a strange metaphor for us to get our heads around. What does this mean? Well, in Old Testament law, a divorce, a certificate of divorce, was the thing that declared the finality of a separation.

See, once you had this certificate of divorce, there was no hope of getting back together. And God's chosen people had spiritually cheated on him time and time again.

[6 : 02] They deserved to be forsaken. They deserved to be thrust away. But the point here in verse 1 is that there is no certificate of divorce. He's saying that they aren't too far gone.

He's saying despite all of their faults and their failings and their inconsistencies, God in his grace has not walked away permanently. He has not issued them this certificate of divorce.

The point is that the relationship God has with his people is far from over. He's saying to his people in verse 1, how can you think that? How can you possibly think that after all that I've done for you?

He goes on to say, or which of my creditors is it to whom I've sold you? You see, in the ancient world, if you couldn't pay off a debt, the person you owed money to, your creditors, they might come and take your children into slavery as payment for that debt.

And you would be utterly powerless to get them back. But the idea that God has creditors is absurd. It's ridiculous.

[7 : 07] The idea that anyone might have power over such a big God is absurd. And God goes on to say that his people are in exile purely because of their sin, not because God is powerless to stop it.

That's what he's saying in verse 2. He's saying, why when I came was there no man? Why when I called was there no one to answer? He's saying, you guys didn't listen to me. But the point he's making here in these opening verses is that they are not too far gone.

He says, is my hand shortened that it cannot redeem? Have I no power to deliver? Behold, by my rebuke, by a word, I dry up the sea.

So what does all of this mean? It means that no matter how dark or how discouraging your situation might seem, no matter how flawed and inconsistent you might be as a person, no one is beyond God's redemptive reach.

No matter how bleak life might feel at any given point, we have a God who is powerful and able to redeem and to restore and to renew.

[8 : 16] So that's setting the context for this third servant song. The servant comes for people who are flawed. He comes for people who keep getting it wrong. He comes for people like the Israelites.

He comes for people like you and me. He comes for people who are broken by sin. People who are weary from the darkness of life. Now in verse 4 we have the beginning of the actual servant song.

So the servant is painting this great picture of himself. It's the servant himself who is speaking from verse 4 down to the end of verse 9. This is Jesus.

This is Jesus speaking about himself. He is the promised servant of God, the one who will ultimately restore his people, who will bring justice to the nations.

We read verse 4. It says, I have given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word, him who is weary.

[9 : 18] See the servant comes for people who are weary. There are weary people here this evening. Many of us are weary. We live in a world, we live in a society that is weary.

Remember from this morning, the world's response to suffering and darkness in life is often to seek hope in material things. If you weren't here this morning, go listen to the sermon.

It's excellent. The point Corey was making this morning was the stuff of this world couldn't help naming. No matter what amount of wealth or success or power or fame, none of that could do anything.

No matter what you've accomplished in life, there are still times when you find yourselves at the end of the rope. The problem in looking for an answer to the darkness and weariness of life in things and getting more stuff in material possessions is that it's never enough.

The wine always runs out. And as I was listening to the sermon this morning, I was reminded of this guy called John Rockefeller. You might have heard of him.

[10 : 25] He was in the 19th century a man who controlled almost all of the oil in the United States. He was a man who was incredibly, incredibly wealthy.

If you adjust for inflation, Rockefeller was worth over 300 billion pounds today. It's mind-blowing. This is a staggering amount of money.

And this guy was asked a question. He was asked, how much money is enough? How much money is enough? And his answer was just a little bit more than I have.

And that's so often the answer of our culture. Just a little bit more. I don't want much. I'm not greedy, but just a little bit more and then things will be fine. Then my life will be sorted.

Then life won't be dark anymore. There's a German philosopher in the 19th century as well called Friedrich Nietzsche. He said that God is dead.

[11 : 26] God remains dead and we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives?

Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?

It's not the greatness of this deed too great for us. Must we ourselves not become God simply to appear worthy of it? And then commenting on this, David Mitchell, the English comedian from Mitchell & Webb & Peepshaw, he captures this feeling of bleakness and darkness that just permeates our culture.

He said to change so quickly from a society which most people used to take comfort in, to being told that death is not the end, to one where many proclaim that it is, it will have an incalculable impact on our state of mind, bleakness.

You remember what we saw with Naaman this morning? Real hope, true hope comes with the reckoning that no matter how successful we are, we are deeply flawed.

[12 : 44] That's the kind of people the servant comes for, people who are weary and flawed, people who feel like they're walking in darkness. And we listen to the words of this servant in verse 4.

He is able to sustain with a word those who are weary. And that's what we have in the words of Jesus himself in the Gospels. He says in Matthew chapter 11, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

A few weeks ago we were looking at the first servant song in Isaiah 42. And you remember the image there of the bruised reed, the bent grain stalk.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not snuff out. Corey reminded us that it's the idea of a bruised reed is something that can't produce any grain.

[13 : 48] It's useless for its purpose. A faintly burning wick captures the same idea. Its usefulness is about to be spent. In Isaiah 42 we see that the servant is one who comes in and does not crush weak people.

So that's the first point, the kind of people the servant comes for. He is a servant for the flawed, a servant for the fragile, the bruised and the broken. Secondly, what does he do to fix them?

Well the picture that we're given in the rest of this song is that he's going to do what its people couldn't do. He's going to be obedient. He's going to be one who listens to God.

He's going to be one who is faithful. Verse 2 sets up this great contrast in the chapter for us. It says there why when I came was there no man? Why when I called was there no one to answer?

And then we have in verse 4 onwards, morning by morning he awakens. He awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The Lord God has opened my ear.

[14 : 51] I was not rebellious. I turned not backwards. The point is that this servant comes to be the faithful one for unfaithful people.

The servant doesn't disobey. The servant listens to God. He comes to do what we in our sinful condition could never do. He comes to live the life that we could never live.

And the song just goes on to illustrate this for us. Verse 6 speaks of what this obedience will look like for Jesus. I gave my back to those who strike and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard.

It's an interesting metaphor. Maybe you've never had your beard pulled out. But the picture it's painting is one of pain, suffering.

What it's saying is that this servant's obedience will lead to incredible pain and suffering and ultimately humiliation. We see in the New Testament in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples there, Who do you say that I am?

[15 : 57] And we see that they're beginning to grasp that Jesus is fitting this picture. That he is this Messiah, the servant king who was promised. Peter says, you are the Christ, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

But Jesus then goes on to explain what that means. It says in Matthew chapter 16. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and ultimately be killed.

The point is Jesus is saying that by human standards and by human expectations, his ministry is not going to end well. It's going to result in pain. It's going to result in humiliation, suffering and ultimately in death.

And see if we were to make a list of what our great world-saving king would look like, it probably wouldn't be like this. I wonder if you've heard of Justice League. It's a movie that's in cinemas just now.

Our culture today loves superhero films, Marvel, DC and so on. And most of these superheroes, they have extraordinary abilities and powers that they can use to defeat evil.

[17 : 08] And then Justice League, you've got Superman and Batman and Aquaman and Wonder Woman and Cyborg and all these cool guys. Now you might not be a fan of superhero movies, but you get the general idea.

All these characters can use their powers, their abilities, their strength to crush evil. And the storylines are usually pretty predictable. Some evil power threatens the world and the superheroes come along and after a fight, managed to overcome and everything's lovely again.

So we spoil most Marvel movies for you. But what we read here in Isaiah is that this world-saving figure, this servant king who's going to bring justice and put all things to right, will be someone who doesn't fight back.

This justice-bringing servant will be someone who takes a beating, someone who allows their beard to be pulled out, someone who does not hide their face from disgrace and from spitting.

This doesn't really fit in with our world's image of a hero. I think Jesus would struggle to find a place in the Justice League.

[18 : 23] Paul says in Philippians chapter 2 in the New Testament, verse 6, Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, a thing to be used to his own advantage, but rather he made himself nothing.

He took the very nature of a servant and being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient.

And how far did that obedience extend, well, Paul says, to the point of death, even death on a cross.

He gave his back to those who strike. He gave his cheeks to those who pull out the beard. He hid not his face from disgrace and spitting. Matthew goes on to tell us in his Gospel in chapter 27 that before his death Jesus was flogged and utterly humiliated.

The whip that the Roman legionnaires used in flogging was not the kind of whip that we would imagine. It was made up of nine heavy leather strips, and each one was embedded with small bits of glass and stone and bone.

[19 : 38] And this was brought down against Jesus' back with full force. This is what being king meant for Jesus. This is what being the Messiah looked like. This is the kind of coronation he received, a crown pushed into his scalp, a crown of thorns.

The Gospels don't go into detail about the physical pain that Jesus experienced, but we know from scholars that crucifixion is one of the cruelest and most painful deaths you can imagine.

Next week we'll be looking at Isaiah 53, which really goes into the suffering that the servant will endure. So I don't want to say too much just now. But in crucifixion the Romans would drive huge five-inch nails through the wrists and the feet.

The arms were slowly wrenched out of their sockets. Pain unimaginable. See, to take a breath you'd have to push yourself up on these nails and then sag back down into a hanging position.

So for Jesus on the cross every breath was agony. Let him who walks in darkness and has no light. Well, Jesus experienced the full reality of that.

[20 : 53] Of a moment where there was not even a glimmer of light. On the cross Jesus took on the ultimate darkness, not only physically but spiritually.

He felt what it was like to truly be abandoned, to truly be forsaken. So the point is that God intervenes to rescue his disobedient people through the obedience of his servant Jesus.

And that finds its climax, its ultimate expression in the cross. In the place where Jesus swallows the ultimate darkness for his people.

Now the rest of the song goes on in verse 7 to say that this isn't the end of the story. The cross is not the end. But the Lord God helps me, verse 7.

Therefore I have not been disgraced. Therefore I have set my face like a flint. And I know that I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near.

[21 : 52] Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. Behold the Lord God helps me. Who will declare me guilty?

Behold all of them wear out like a garment. The moth will eat them up. This is how the song comes to an end. With complete confidence and trust in God.

In the face of that unspeakable darkness. And just as we close, Isaiah challenges us in these final few verses of chapter 50.

Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant? Let him who walks in darkness and has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.

Behold all you who kindle a fire, who equip yourselves with burning torches. Walk by the light of your fire and by the torches that you have kindled. This you have from my hand, you shall lie down in torment.

[22 : 56] So what does this mean? Well, Alec Mottier, who's wrote a great commentary on the book of Isaiah, says this. He says that it means that those who continue in their own way, who try to deal with the darkness of life by a kind of do-it-yourself remedy, they're doomed.

The picture here is of people seeking to equip themselves out of earthly resources to deal with the dark and difficult experiences of life on their own.

So there's two responses here, right, at the end of Isaiah chapter 50. You either place your trust, your hope, your confidence in God. You acknowledge that you are in darkness.

Or you try and walk by the light of your own fire. It's painting a picture of self-sufficiency. I know what to write. I'll figure out my own way.

Remember the context of this passage. He's writing about the terrible things that are going to happen to God's people. An unspeakable, unimaginable darkness.

[24 : 00] The temple would be destroyed. Jerusalem would be destroyed. Their way of life, their hopes and everything that made them them, was going to be taken away. They're facing tremendous discouragement.

And at times, as God's people, we face discouragement. See, the gospel doesn't say, you need to be more like the servant, and then you'll be fine. You need to obey more. You need to listen better.

You need to get your act together. The gospel says, don't try and rely on your own light. Trust in the name of the Lord and rely on God.

Trust in the servant who takes the darkness head-on for you. Do you feel weary this evening? If you're conscious of how flawed and broken by sin that you are, then these words in Isaiah chapter 50 are for you.

Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God. Let's pray.

[25 : 08] Lord God, we thank you and praise you for all that you've done for us through this servant. Lord, we praise you for all that you've done for us in the gospel.

We thank you, Father, that you shine the light of your gospel into the darkest places in our lives. Lord, we pray that the light of your love, of the transformation we've experienced in you, would shine through in our lives in every situation you place us.

Father, help us to point others to you in our work, in our studies, in our leisure. Lord, in the time we spend doing anything this week, Lord, help us to be salt and light in a dark and weary world.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.