Studies in Isaiah

Study 2 – Servants as a light to the nations – Isaiah 41:21-42:17

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Study 2

Servants as a light to the nations – Isaiah 41:21-42:17

Introduction

The whole people of God enjoy the privilege, the status and the position of being "the servant of the Lord". In this section, Isaiah goes on to describe what it means **to be** a servant of the Lord. He gives us a job description. This was the calling that the Old Testament People of God were supposed to fill, but they failed to do so. This was the role that was completely fulfilled by the Lord Jesus:

"Here is My Servant, whom I have chosen, My Beloved on whom My favour rests. I will put My Spirit upon Him. And He will proclaim judgement among the nations. But He will not argue or shout nor make any loud speeches in the streets. He will not break off a bent reed or put out a flickering lamp. He will persist until He causes justice to triumph and all peoples will put their hope in Him." (Mt. 12:15-21)

This is the task that has now been given to the church – to us. This passage (42:1-9) is often called **The First Servant Song** because it is written in beautiful rhyming Hebrew.

The job description is contained in two prophecies. In verses 1-4 the servant is described. God is talking **about** him. In verses 5-9 God is talking **to** the servant and telling him about his role. Both passages are accounts of how God commissions His servant. Similar themes recur in each.

Sound management principles relating to job descriptions indicate that the individual should know his role – his job description – and **others** should also know what he is to do. God does both of these in this job description. But it is unique in management terms in that it is written in beautiful poetry!

Both parts of the job description begin with a summary of past statements:

In v. 1: ***"Here is my servant …."*** – a review of Isaiah 41

Look back to 41:10. In effect God is saying, "You remember the servant we are speaking about, … the one who is afraid. The servant I chose (41:8) – the one in whom I delight."

Also, ***"Here is my servant"*** or ***"Behold my servant"*** is God's call to look at **His alternative** to idolatry. God is saying, "The idols are nothing – you have looked at them (41:24) and they can do nothing. Choosing them is worse than stupidity." So the contrast that God brings out is between two alternatives – worthless idols and thoroughly irrational idolaters (41:29) and ***"His servant … in whom my soul delights".***

In verse 6 God is speaking directly to the servant:

"I am Yahweh. … Remember how I called you (41:9) with a righteous purpose (41:10). Remember I took you by the right hand (41:9) and kept you."

God begins His job description for the servant by reminding him (and others) of the position He has given to His servant.

His servant is:

- loved by God
- chosen by God
- called by God
- held by God's right hand – implies a very tight grip
- upheld by God
- kept by God

This is a terrific affirmation of the servant.

We come from cultures that put a very high premium on **success**. Our whole identity is tied up with being successful. Failure is the unforgivable sin! Success in life is usually measured by wealth or power or prestige. We workers rarely get wealthy! Power is a greater problem. Prestige in Christian work is usually the measure of how successful we are.

Our problem in the Muslim World is that results are slow in coming and much of our ministry gives little sense of prestige. So often we have to hide our identity. What little success there is can't be talked about for security reasons. One of the major reasons why workers leave Muslim ministries is a feeling that they are failures!

People don't **feel successful** unless they are affirmed by "a significant other" in their lives. In childhood, this is usually their parents. Recall the affirmation a baby receives when taking his/her first steps. In teenage years, affirmation is looked for in a peer group. As adults, few identify "the significant other" in their lives. They look for affirmation in the nebulous "them". This never comes so they are driven people!

The sad fact about most cultures is that affirmation is **only** received when we have achieved something. We have to work in order to be successful. This is the way we are conditioned to think. As Christians, we have made a deliberate choice that our "significant other" is the Lord Jesus. When the Lord Jesus tells us we are successful and affirms us, **then we feel successful**. God's affirmation is the most significant thing in our lives.

Here in Isaiah 42 God's job description of what the servant of the Lord was to do **begins** with a terrific affirmation. Why? He hasn't done anything yet! The amazing fact about God is that He affirms us quite independently of our performance! He says we are successful before we start! Why? Because of grace! It isn't **our** performance that counts, but **His**. His cry on the Cross, ***"It is finished"*** guarantees our success. In this way, the Cross disarms the principalities and powers as they try to bring us into bondage and legalism by manipulating our passion for success and affirmation. (Col. 2:15)

Every worker needs to receive affirmation from God at least daily. He/she needs to know without a shadow of doubt, that they are loved, chosen, called, held and kept by God and that all this is totally independent of their performance. But notice that these words of comfort are **in the context of a job description** – a task! We can just bask in the sunshine of His love! We ought to do this, but there is more. To be chosen and called by God has as its object – **work**.

In the eleventh century, the French produced an amazing tapestry. It is called the Bayeux Tapestry. It is a pictorial history of the conquest of England by William Duke of Normandy in 1066 A.D. There is a rather amazing picture of King William the Conqueror sitting on a horse behind his foot soldiers who are advancing on the Saxon army. William has a large spear in his hand which he appears to be using to prod his soldiers on into battle. The title of this picture is, *"King William comforts his troops"*.

God loves to comfort us, to give us love and affirmation. But this experience should prod us into battle, for it gives us new resources and new strength with which to serve God.

So God is totally committed to the servant. Are the servants committed to the task?

1. The job description of the servant

"I will put My Spirit on Him and He will bring justice to the nations." (v. 1)

"I will keep you and will make you a covenant for the people and a light to the nations." (v. 6)

The servant is God's means of bringing to all nations and all peoples everywhere:

- judgement
- a covenant relationship
- light (understanding)

In Isaiah there is much background to these roles – briefly note:

- There will be a day when **all** nations and **all** peoples flock to God to learn His ways. (2:2-5; 42:4)
- War between nations will end when God brings judgement. God's judgement is His authoritative decisions concerning all the affairs of all nations. (42:1,3-4)
- Walking in God's ways is walking in the light. (42:6)
- Isaiah speaks of a new David on whom the Spirit of God rests. (11:1-10). This new king is able to exercise judgement fairly and faithfully.

Isaiah saw the present in his day as all peoples and nations were in a state of chaos and disarray with no purpose or meaning – like the primeval state. They were in the dark as to how they should live. They had no assured relationship with God. In this situation God wants to:

- Bring them **judgement** – i.e. the sorting out of rights and wrongs that make true life possible. God's law is not restrictive but actually brings order out of chaos.
- Give them **a relationship** with Him that they can completely rely on – a covenant like the one He has with Israel. Isaiah 25:6-9 is lovely in this regard.
- Give them **the light** of His revelation.

Isaiah goes on to say that "the coastlands" (perhaps the lands bordering on to the Mediterranean or at least remote places) are **waiting expectantly** for this: God's judgement, God's light and a personal relationship with God. Are they doing this consciously? Probably not!

In order to make life tolerable, most people hide from facing that which they do not have and cannot obtain. They evade the admission that they have no clue as to what life is really about and they have no idea where the world is going and what is the purpose of their existence! But still **subconsciously they long for answers**!

So the job (the task) of the Servant of the Lord is to bring to all peoples and all nations everywhere:

God's judgement – God's rule

God's covenant

God's light

It is a world-wide missionary commission!

How all this is to happen is not explained in the passage. Isaiah 2 and other passages in Isaiah offer some suggestions:

- The Old Testament People of God will/should bring light to the world by letting God's light shine through their own lives. Notice the appeal in 2:5 – ***"Let us walk in the Lord's light"***. One only becomes transparent to God's light by walking in the light.
- The People of God should demonstrate to the nations what it means to live in a covenant relationship with God. The joy and the freedom of living under covenant should be evident to all. To Abraham, God promised under covenant to bless him, but that was not all! God would bless him in order that all the families of the world would be blessed. Abraham was spectacularly blessed so others could **see** what living by faith would do for a man. (Gen. 12:1-3) What was true of a man – Abraham – was to be true of a nation – the People of God.

So if Israel let God light up its life, then it would be a beacon that would attract all nations to it. The nations would flock to Jerusalem to find out how to live under the rule of God. Zechariah expresses this very nicely, ***"Thus says the Lord of Hosts, 'In that day ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of the Jews saying we want to share in your destiny because we have heard that God is with you.' "*** (Zech. 8:23)

So the Servant of the Lord brings God's light to the nations **by attracting them**. The Old Testament doesn't picture God's servants going out into the world telling the world about God. Just as the sun doesn't bring light to the earth by coming to the earth, but by staying where it is and shining. So the Old Testament view of mission is not hard-sell proselytising, but attracting people by the wonder of

their lives. Israel is to show in her life what great things God can do for a people. This is so amazingly attractive, that others too will seek out living under the same covenant and blessing.

Now we are the New People of God. Jesus did commission us to **go out** into the world, but this is in addition to – not as a substitution for – the missionary method of attraction. One of the reasons we believe in **team** and multinational teams is that we, together as team, can better **attract** people by living out together the Biblical principles of love, prayer etc. This is a very powerful witness.

Perhaps the main reason why Jews today reject the Messiah Jesus is that they can't accept the fact that the Messiah has come, because they don't **see** a messianic people. They can't **see** the Messiah reigning in justice over the Kingdom. They can't see God's judgement, God's covenant or God's light in those who claim to stand for it. We have ceased to be attractive!

So Biblical mission involves both attraction **and** a pro-active "going out" to the nations.
In Acts 13:47 Paul gives his reason for preaching to the Gentiles:

"I have placed you as a light to the Gentiles that you should bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

We **are** lights and we are to go and carry that light to the ends of the earth.

2. How the servant is called upon to act?

Given a job description, how are we called upon to go about this task? This is a sort of job profile. Not only is there a job description, but also the core values needed to carry out the job.

"A bruised reed He will not break and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish." (v. 3)

Here we see two ways of talking about violent death:

- ✓ a reed snapped
- ✓ a flame put out

"They have been quenched and extinguished like a wick" = death (See Isaiah 43:17)

So we are imagining a people who are barely alive – afflicted, oppressed, bent and bruised – their candles sputtering and nearly going out with the slightest breeze.

- **In the world** you don't mend broken reeds. You throw them down to be trampled on.
- **In the world** you snuff out flickering candles and light a new one.
- This is how the world treats people.

There is nothing really beautiful about reeds. They grow in smelly swamps! They have weak and slender stems.

Hearts are broken so easily – so quietly – crushed by the heartlessness, unkindness and impatience of living in a world full of selfishness and unfeeling cruelty. They break without a sound.

God's servants don't snap broken reeds. They bind them up and support them. They don't put out sputtering flames. They fan them into a blaze again. Isaac Watts wrote the following verse in one of his hymns:

"He'll never quench the smoking flax,
But raise it to a flame.
The bruised reed He never breaks,
Nor scorns the meanest name."

In these two chapters there are two views of the nations:

- ➢ Wilful idolaters – enemies of the One True God – guilty adversaries destined for punishment
- ➢ Poor, pitifully blind, weak and helpless people – broken and fading away

They will be punished, but if they acknowledge God, they can run into His arms of love – the arms of love extended by His servants.

The world is full of broken reeds and fitful fading flames destitute of any kindling power. People love to disguise themselves as proud, strong and aggressive. But those with this outward exterior are often the most bruised ones.

The Servant of the Lord is called to a ministry that binds not breaks – making bruised reads into pipes of music! It is a ministry that fans the flame rather than snuffing it out. Remember Peter! Within seven weeks of threatened extinction he set on fire 3,000 souls!

The servant is called, ***"To open blind eyes, to bring the captives out of prison, to bring those who live in the dark out of the dungeon."*** (v. 7)

These are powerful descriptions not so much of death and pain but rather of loss:

- To be blind is to be helpless – incapable of finding your own way – unable to avoid dangers – it is to lose all independence.
- The worst punishment was to blind people – see the fate of Zedekiah when Jerusalem was captured (Jer. 52:11) – a terrible example of the deprivation of blindness.
- To be imprisoned is to lose your freedom. In our culture liberty is a fundamental human right. A prisoner has no liberty. He can't make plans or decisions. He can't take any initiative. Prisoners just sit and rot physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. This happened to King Jehoiachin who was thirty-seven years in a Babylonian prison!

So these are the metaphors used to describe "the nations" – blind and imprisoned.

The task of the servant is to bring sight and freedom to the nations. The works of the devil have imprisoned them and blinded them. He is to remove the scales from their eyes and to bring deliverance.

3. What should the servant be wary of?

We are called to minister to people who are bruised and blind who are barely flickering with life in a dark dungeon. The danger is that you become like the people you are ministering to. It is easy to be dragged down by the people we are trying to help. During our years in Saudi Arabia I found my driving habits adapted to those of the local people. Every summer back in the UK I had to re-learn correct driving skills!

The Lord's servant, ***"Will not cry out or lift up his voice or make himself heard in the street."*** (v. 2)

The implication is that he should not be an extroverted, loud-mouthed showman! Here to "cry out" is to **"cry in distress"**. There are two words in Hebrew but only one in English.

40:6 cry out = preach

42:2 cry out in anguish

The servant will minister to people who are broken and wavering, but **he himself will not waver or break** until he has established judgement in the world! (v. 4)

The servant will not contract the diseases of those to whom he ministers. He is not immune to suffering, but the pressures that immobilise others don't deter him.

- He has the personal resources to make a success of his calling.
- He has staying power – never slackening the pace – perseverance. The energy of the flesh soon peters out. He won't burn out, he will burn on. But he must be aware of the pressures he will be under.
- His style is important. Quietness is the hallmark of **reality** in service – unostentatious – never promoting self. ***"I have put My Spirit upon him."***

The anointing is for all. It is to be received by faith and is intended to equip for service. Have you had your share? The "holding of your hand" implies co-working with God – co-witness of the Holy Spirit.

4. What is there to encourage him?

There are three things to encourage us in these verses:

- We are not dependent on people's awareness of their need of God's truth.
- We are not dependent on their knowledge of their broken and wavering state.
- We are not dependent on our own resources – everything does not depend on us.

➢ **First encouragement: God is sending us out into His world**

The God who calls us is, ***"The one who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth with all that comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and life to those who live on it."*** (v. 5)

God loves to answer questions that we haven't yet thought of asking!

Our unasked question: why should I care about these people? They are heathen – they are rebellious – they persecute Your people. Don't they deserve to remain in darkness? Anyway it's impossible! They will never believe!

God's answer: "I am the Creator of heaven and earth, of the world and man! So any plan I make will be effective. I am mighty enough to accomplish it. I made the universe. I have power! Also I made man. I breathe life into each human being. I'm not interested in only a few people. I made **everyone**.

So I am sending you, My servant, to **all** the people I care about. Your effectiveness is not dependent on **your** ability to love them and **your** ability to tell them the truth. Your effectiveness is dependent on Me."

➢ **Second encouragement: we go into God's world because of God's call**

In every situation all the potential comes from being **called by God**, ***"I am the Lord (Yahweh)"***. God always seems to make a self-declaration like this when He is about to say something really important. ***"I called you with a righteous purpose – I took you by the hand – I kept you – I have appointed you … as a light to the nations!"***

We are chosen. We are called. We are taken by the hand. We are given God's Spirit. We are kept. We are upheld. This is God's commitment to us! We are not acting on our own initiative or in our own strength but with **all the resources of His special call and special relationship with us**.

➢ **Third encouragement: God's call for us to be servants arises out of God's own concern for His glory**

"I am Yahweh. That is my name. My glory I give to no other, nor My praise to idols." (v. 8)

The task of the "servants" was to call the bluff of the Babylonian idols. What about us? We must call the bluff of false religions – characterised by self-salvation. Will it work? Will they laugh in our faces?

Yahweh says it will work because of His own personal concern. He is not willing for worship that ought to be His alone to be given where it does not belong!

Our unasked question: is God really powerful enough to do this?

God's answer: yes, I will fulfil My plan. **I have always fulfilled My plans before**. This is a wonderfully pragmatic answer for a sceptical scientist!

"Now that the earlier things have already come about, I am declaring fresh things. Before they begin to happen, I make them known to you." (v. 9)

It is very pleasing to prove a hypothesis by experiment. Prophets appeared to regularly declare what God had been doing, was doing and was going to do:

- ✓ The Assyrians would punish Judah.
- ✓ Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians.
- ✓ Babylon would fall into the hands of the Medes. (Isaiah 13)

Since the earlier things have come about, God says we should **believe for fresh things**!

In summary: the servant goes into God's world by God's call that arises out of God's concern for His glory and is backed up by the **proven power** of God's Word.

A Personal Testimony about Arabia (v. 10-13)

This is a call for **world praise** in response to the worldwide work of the Servant of the Lord.

He refuses to share His praises and summons the world to sing!

He acts like a mighty warrior hero – a champion. (Is. 9:7)

Isaiah 42 is very important in the call of my wife and myself to Saudi Arabia.

Kedar – a son of Ishmael – is the generic name for Bedouin in the Old Testament. Some Saudi tribes still have the names of Ishmael's sons! The Bedouin were not urbanised until the 1970s. There was an oil hike after the 1973 war and rapid urbanisation in the 80s and 90s.

Sela is the northern Hijaz up to Edom – Medain Saleh.

So the promise is that when the Bedouin are urbanised, God is going forth as a champion warrior and will prevail. These Bedouin people of northern Arabia will sing a new song aloud (no secret believers) and will shout for joy.

This is reinforced in Isaiah 60:6-7. The wealth of Arabia will be poured into the church. This was Samuel Zwemer's prediction, "Arabia – a challenge to faith" (1903)!