

Dr. Robert Chisholm, Servant Songs, Session 1, Video Overview Podcast

Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to The Explainer, where we break down big ideas. And today, we are tackling one of the most influential and debated passages in the entire Hebrew Bible. It's a series of ancient poems that introduce a mysterious figure whose identity has been a puzzle for literally millennia.

So let's jump in and start unmasking this character. You see, tucked away in the book of Isaiah are four incredible poems that scholars call the Servant Songs. They describe this figure chosen by God for a mission that is going to change the world.

But his actual identity? Well, that's a puzzle that has captivated readers for thousands of years. So who is this servant? To solve this ancient mystery, we've kind of got to play detective. We need to look at all the evidence.

And that means we have to start by understanding the time and the place this message was first delivered. Because as you know, context is everything. See, this prophecy isn't actually for the people living in Isaiah's own time.

It's more like a message in a bottle, shot way into the future, speaking to a generation that has lost it all—their homes, their temple, their freedom. So just imagine this for a second. It's around 700 BC, and the prophet Isaiah is writing this message.

It's basically a time capsule, right? It's meant to be opened by his descendants more than 100 years later. He's speaking directly to their suffering, to their despair as captives in Babylon. I mean, for the people in exile, this was a massive crisis of faith.

Just think about it. You're surrounded by the immense power of Babylon, and you start to wonder, hey, was our God just weaker? So this whole message about a new, mysterious servant? Well, that was meant to be a shot of pure hope, a reminder that God's plan was still very much in motion. Okay, so with the scene set there in Babylonian exile, let's start digging into the prime suspects for who this servant could be.

The text itself actually gives us a few clues about a few potential candidates. All right, so the text points us toward three main possibilities. You've got the nation of Israel itself, then there's the powerful Persian king, Cyrus the Great, and finally some kind of ideal future king.

Let's break down the case for each one. And this is where things get really interesting. When you look at the evidence, you see these huge contradictions.

On one hand, the text comes right out and says, "My servant Israel. Can't get much clearer than that, right? But then in other places, it describes that same servant Israel as being blind and deaf and needing to be rescued themselves. Then you've got Cyrus the Great.

I mean, he's this mighty conqueror God uses to take down Babylon. He totally looks like a deliverer, but his whole warrior vibe just doesn't line up with the description of this gentle

servant who, you know, will not break a crushed reed. So yeah, neither one is a perfect fit, not even close.

Okay, so if the servant isn't the nation and it's not a foreign conqueror, then the evidence really starts to point toward a third option, a totally different kind of figure, an ideal king from the line of David. And this really gets to the heart of the paradox. The servant's main job, his mission, is to bring justice to the entire world.

But his methods? They're not what you'd expect. It's not about conquest or violence. It's all about being gentle and restorative.

I mean, he uplifts the weakest people. He doesn't crush them. And you have to remember the context here.

It is absolutely key. When that original audience heard about some figure bringing justice to all the nations, their minds would have immediately gone to one person, a king. In their world, that was the king's number one job.

And that connection becomes crystal clear when you look at other parts of the Bible, like Israel's royal psalms. This description of an ideal king from Psalm 72? Defending the oppressed, delivering the poor. I mean, it's the exact same job description as the servant's.

It's a perfect match. So all the clues are pointing back to an even earlier prophecy in Isaiah, back in chapter 11. It talks about this future king from David's line who's going to be filled with God's Spirit and rule with perfect justice.

The servant from these poems? He fits that description to a T. All right, so if we figured out that the servant is this ideal future king, what's he actually supposed to do? Well, the text lays out this huge two-part global mission for him. First up, he's the champion of justice. His job is to basically end oppression everywhere, not just in Israel.

And second, he's a covenant mediator, which means he's supposed to forge a new restored relationship between God and all of humanity. Yeah, it's a massive undertaking. The text has this incredible line.

It says, he will be a covenant for the people and a light to the nations. And that is such a fascinating idea, right? He doesn't just bring a new agreement between God and humanity. He literally is that agreement.

And through him, through his actions, this light, which really means God's salvation, is going to shine on the entire world. So what does that mission actually look like in practice? Well, it's a mission of total liberation. We're talking about opening the eyes of people who are spiritually blind, freeing those trapped in dungeons, and that's both literal prisons and, you know, metaphorical ones, and bringing God's rescue to the farthest corners of the earth.

So when you put it all together, the big takeaway is this. The servant is this ideal king, but his kingdom isn't just for one nation. His reign of justice and salvation is meant for all of humanity.

It's about restoring the entire world to the way God always intended it to be. But here's the twist: for all its hope, this first song has these subtle little hints of opposition. It foreshadows a much darker turn in the servant's journey, a path of suffering that the later songs are going to reveal in absolutely shocking detail.

And that, of course, raises a whole new set of questions.