

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

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Okay, welcome back to the Deep Dive. You know, this is where we really try to unlock some deep truths from, well, from ancient texts that have just profoundly shaped history and how we think. Yeah, and our goal really is to give you a bit of a shortcut.

We want to help you get really well informed by pulling out the most important ideas, the surprising bits from the sources you share with us. Exactly. And today we're diving into something really fascinating, and I think pretty central: Isaiah's Servant Songs.

That's right. Specifically, we're zooming right into the first one: Isaiah 42 verses one through nine. And this passage introduces this kind of mysterious figure right at the heart of it.

We're going to explore who this figure might be and what their mission is all about. And these Servant Songs, you find them scattered a bit, right? Isaiah 42, then 49, 50, and the big one in 52, 53. People often call them messianic texts.

They seem to hint at some really significant future person. They absolutely do. And to really get what they mean, we definitely need to understand the background, the context they sit in.

So let's set the stage. Where does this fit in the book of Isaiah? Okay. Well, the first thing you often hear about Isaiah is this whole authorship debate.

Right. Who actually wrote it? Yeah. I mean, the common view in academic circles, the higher critical consensus, is that chapters one to 39 are from the prophet Isaiah himself, around 700 BC, give or take.

Okay. The original prophet. But then chapters 40 to 55, sometimes called Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah, are generally thought to come from the time of the Babylonian exile.

So much later. And then there's even a third section. Yep.

Chapters 56 to 66, Trito-Isaiah, usually seen as post-exilic after the return. Different styles, different historical situations seem to be reflected. So scholars see maybe three different main time periods, possibly reflected in different authors in the book.

That makes sense based on historical shifts. It does from a certain perspective, but for this deep dive, just so we can trace the themes clearly across the whole book, we're going to work from the perspective that the eighth-century prophet Isaiah did write the whole thing, allowing maybe for some minor inspired updates later. Think of it like an old grandfather writing a letter to his granddaughter.

For her wedding day, maybe? He knows he won't be there, so he puts in wisdom for her future things she'll face years down the road. That's a helpful analogy. So Isaiah, guided by God, is speaking to a future situation, the exile, even from his own time.

Exactly. He's projecting forward, speaking into that future reality. And it fits because chapter 39 actually predicts the Babylonian exile.

Remember King Hezekiah foolishly showing off his treasures to the Babylonian envoys? Ah, yeah. That diplomatic blunder. Right.

And Isaiah says basically, well, they're going to come back and take all this and your descendants. So when you hit chapter 40, the perspective shifts. It assumes the exile has happened.

The focus changes completely. To what? What's the new focus? Comfort and deliverance. Chapter 40 famously starts, comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Right. It's a message of hope for people who've lost their city, their temple. They're in exile.

Zion is pictured like a grieving mother. Precisely. A mother whose children are scattered but will return.

And then there's that call: prepare the way for the Lord. Which isn't about literal roadwork, you're saying. No, no.

It's about moral and spiritual preparation. Clearing the way in people's hearts and lives for God to act, for his return, his salvation. And that connects later, obviously, with John the Baptist.

Directly. He picks up that exact language. The core message is God hasn't forgotten you, even in exile, even with your sin.

He's bigger than this. He transcends time and space, and he will fulfill his promises. Okay, so God is promising deliverance.

And then in chapter 41, we meet a specific instrument of that deliverance, Cyrus. Yes, Cyrus the Persian, Quraysh in Hebrew. He's the one who conquered Babylon.

This is around 540 BC. Remember, the exile started about 586 BC. Okay.

And Cyrus famously issues the decree allowing the Jewish exiles to go back and rebuild. Isaiah actually names him chapters ahead of time. He's called this warrior king, raised up by God, coming from the east or the north.

Amazing foresight there. But then also in chapter 41, Israel itself is called God's servant. Yes, and this is crucial.

In Isaiah 41 verses 8 through 20, God calls Jacob, Israel, the exiled nation, my servant. Okay. But notice how this servant Israel is described as blind and deaf, as needing deliverance themselves.

This sets up a really important contrast. A contrast with the other servant, the one in the servant songs starting in chapter 42. Exactly.

We absolutely have to distinguish between servant Israel, who is flawed and needs help, and a servant figure introduced in chapter 42. So when we get to Isaiah 42 verse 1, here is my servant whom I support, my chosen one, and whom I take pleasure in. I have placed my spirit on him.

Who is this servant, if not Cyrus or exiled Israel? Well, let's tackle those possibilities first. It's definitely not Cyrus. Why not? Because the description that follows just doesn't match Cyrus at all.

This servant is meek and gentle. He will not cry out or shout, won't break a crushed reed. Cyrus was a great king, but he was a conqueror.

He definitely, you know, crushed people and nations to build his empire. Okay. So the character profile is wrong for Cyrus.

What about exiled Israel? Also doesn't fit. As we just said, Israel is called servant elsewhere, but in chapter 41 and the context around 42, that servant Israel is portrayed as blind, deaf, sinful, punished, needing rescue. The servant in 42.1 has God's Spirit, brings justice, and isn't described as sinful or punished.

They're fundamentally different portrayals. Is there a sort of definitive proof text for that distinction? I think the clincher really comes if you peek ahead to the second servant song in Isaiah 49, verses five and six, which state very clearly that the servant's mission is to bring Jacob back to him to gather Israel. Ah, so his job is to deliver Israel.

Exactly. So he can't logically be the exiled Israel that needs delivering. It wouldn't make any sense.

Okay. That's very clear. So if it's not Cyrus and it's not the nation of Israel in its current state, what's the answer? Who is this servant? Well, a very influential view championed by scholars like John Oswalt and others is that this servant represents an ideal Israel.

An ideal Israel. What does that mean? It means this figure embodies what Israel was always meant to be according to God's plan. Perfectly faithful, embodying God's justice and light.

He functions as Israel should have functioned in order to actually rescue the real historical, sinful, exiled Israel. So, like the true perfected version of Israel acting on behalf of the struggling nation. That's a good way to put it.

He embodies God's perfect design and mission for his people, a mission the nation itself failed to live up to. Okay. I can see that.

So let's look closer at this figure in Isaiah 42 verses one to four. What's his character and mission described as? Well, the absolute core of his mission is justice. He will make just decrees or bring forth justice for the nations.

He's a champion of justice in a world filled with its opposite. Justice for the nations. So a global scope right from the start.

Absolutely. But what's striking is how he does it. It's through incredible meekness, and He will not cry out or shout or make his voice heard in the street.

So not allowed self-promoting revolutionary. Not at all. And a crushed weed he will not break.

And a dimly burning wick he will not extinguish. Think about that imagery. Yeah.

It speaks of incredible gentleness, care for the weakest, the most vulnerable, those just barely hanging on. Exactly. Those on the verge of despair, the poor, the oppressed, he handles them with care, owing justice faithfully, persistently, but gently.

It's a powerful combination. This mission for universal justice is carried out with such quiet compassion. Does it hint at any opposition or difficulty he might face? There are subtle hints.

Yes. That phrase, he will not cry out, is the Hebrew word there. Sokak is often used for the cry of a victim, someone in distress or pain.

Oh, interesting. So the absence of that cry might imply a context where one would expect him to cry out in pain. It could subtly suggest that.

And also the text says he will not grow dim or be crushed until he has established justice on the earth. Implying there's a danger of him being dimmed or crushed. Exactly.

It hints at opposition, at suffering that he must endure without fail until his mission is done. It sets a trajectory, doesn't it? It anticipates the later songs, especially Isaiah 53, where his suffering is described in graphic detail. It really does build anticipation.

Now, this focus on establishing justice- you mentioned it's a primary role for kings in the ancient world. Yes, very much so. In the ancient Near East, ensuring justice, protecting the weak, and establishing righteous rule were seen as a fundamental duty of a good king.

A king's reign was often talked about as synonymous with justice. We see that in the Psalms too, right? Like Psalm 72, praying for the king to judge fairly and defend the afflicted. Absolutely.

Royal Psalms like 45, 72, even historical accounts like 2 Samuel 8 saying David administered justice and righteousness for all his people. Even Absalom's rebellion, remember, partly played on the idea that David wasn't accessible enough to provide justice. It was central.

So while prophets called for justice, kings were expected to actually establish it. That's the idea. Prophets were the conscience, reminding kings of their duty.

But the king had the authority and responsibility to enact justice systemically. So the servant figure whose main task is establishing justice for the nations strongly points towards a kingly identity. Even though the word king isn't used right here in Isaiah 42.

Right. It doesn't explicitly say king, but the function described is kingly. And remember, this figure can wear multiple hats.

He's not just a king. He'll also function prophetically like Moses and even priestly, as hinted later in Isaiah 53. But the justice mission here strongly evokes kingship.

Is there anywhere else in Isaiah that paints a picture of an ideal king that might connect to this? Definitely. The clearest internal connection is back in Isaiah chapter 11. Ah, the passage about the shoot from the stump of Jesse.

Exactly. A new Davidic king. And look how he's described.

The spirit of the Lord rests on him, giving him wisdom, understanding, counsel, power. He judges the poor with righteousness, decides fairly for the afflicted. And he brings his incredible peace, right? Wolf with the lamb, leopard with the goat.

Yes. Universal transformation of society and even nature itself. That picture in Isaiah 11 of the ideal Davidic ruler aligns beautifully with the mission and spirit endowment of the servant in chapter 42.

So the original audience, familiar with Isaiah 11 and the cultural understanding of kingship, would likely make that connection. I think so. It's about relevance theory, right? Communication relies on shared context.

They wouldn't necessarily need the label king spelled out here in chapter 42. The description of his role and spirit anointing would trigger those royal associations, especially linked back to chapter 11. Okay.

That makes a lot of sense. So moving to the next part of the passage, verses five to nine, God speaks again, commissioning this servant. Yes.

And first God establishes his own credentials, his authority. Thus says God, the Lord who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it. He's reminding them and us.

He's the ultimate creator, God, sovereign over everything. Exactly. He has the authority to commission the servant for a global task.

Then he says to the servant, I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness. I have taken you by the hand and kept you.

And then this key phrase: I have given you as a covenant for the people, a light to the nations. Powerful phrases. Let's unpack them.

A covenant for the people. How can a person be a covenant? Yeah, that sounds strange. It's likely a figure of speech, metonymy.

He is the covenant because he mediates it. He embodies the relationship it establishes, like saying the crown represents the monarchy. The servant is the means by which this covenant relationship happens.

Okay. And a light to the nations. Light is consistently used in Isaiah and the Bible generally as a symbol for salvation, deliverance, truth, God's presence.

So he brings God's salvation and truth to the whole world. Who are the people in that phrase, a covenant for the people? Is it Israel specifically or humanity generally? That's debated. Some argue based partly on chapter 49 that the people refer specifically to Israel and the nations refer to the Gentiles.

But others argue, especially given the immediate context here in chapter 42, with its emphasis on justice for the nations and God as creator of all people on earth, that the people here might have a broader sense encompassing all humanity with nations, perhaps emphasizing the political entities or distinct cultural groups. So it could be a covenant mediated for all people, bringing light to all nations. I think that interpretation fits the context of chapter 42 very well.

The scope feels universal here. And what does his light do for seven to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison, those who sit in darkness, which sounds like metaphorical blindness and imprisonment, right? Yeah. Deliverance from oppression, ignorance, spiritual darkness.

Yes. Primarily metaphorical, delivering the oppressed, those unjustly treated, those trapped in the darkness of sin or ignorance. It's about liberation in the broadest sense.

And God underlines his own uniqueness in this process. He does. Verse eight.

I am the Lord. That is my name. My glory.

I give to no other nor my praise to carved idols. He contrasts his power with the impotence of pagan gods. He points to his track record.

He foretold past events like the exodus implicitly, or maybe even Cyrus. And now he's announcing new things before they happen, challenging anyone else to do the same, right? It's proof of his sovereignty over history. He alone knows and directs the future.

And the response to this amazing work of the servant should be universal praise. Verses 10 and 12 call for a new song to the Lord from the very ends of the earth, the coastlands, the deserts, the villages, the mountains. Everyone, everywhere is called to give glory to God because of what he accomplishes through this servant.

It's a global response to a global mission. You mentioned earlier that light to the nations was sometimes used by other ancient kings. Yes, it was.

Some Assyrian kings like Tiglath-Pileser III used titles like light of all humankind. It was royal propaganda, hyperbole. But here it's different.

Oh, absolutely. For Isaiah's servant, it's not just hyperbole. He is the actual means of bringing God's salvation and justice to the entire world.

It's a far more profound claim. So how does this all tie together? The servant brings justice, acts as a covenant, brings light. How does this achieve reconciliation, especially with the

nations? Well, by establishing justice and revealing God's truth, being the light, the servant draws the nations away from their idolatry and rebellion towards the worship of the one true God.

Isaiah elsewhere paints the nations as having broken the universal covenant made with Noah back in Genesis 9, primarily through violence and bloodshed leading to judgment, like in Isaiah 24. But God still offers them a way back. Yes, even amidst judgment.

There's a call, like in Isaiah 45.22, turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. The servant then is the mediator of this renewed covenant relationship. He makes it possible for both Israel and the repentant among the nations to come back to God.

And how exactly God makes that reconciliation possible, especially with sinners that comes later? That's right. This first song lays out the servant's identity, his mission, his character, and the scope of his work. The absolutely crucial question of how he achieves this reconciliation, particularly how sins are dealt with, is really unveiled in the fourth song, Isaiah 53.

Wow. Okay, so recapping Isaiah 42.1-9, this first servant song gives us this incredible multifaceted picture. He's a champion of justice, yet meek.

He seems to have a kingly role. He is a covenant mediator and a light for all nations, embodying an ideal Israel to bring about God's plan. That sums it up well.

It really sets the stage beautifully, hinting at the challenges ahead, the suffering, but establishing the universal importance and divine backing of his mission. It really lays foundational groundwork. So here's something to ponder as you go about your day.

Consider how this ancient portrait, this figure bringing global justice with quiet compassion, mediating a covenant for everyone, this ideal stepping in- how might that vision continue to resonate? How might it challenge our own ideas about leadership, about what redemption looks like, and maybe even our own part in this huge unfolding story? A lot to think about there. Definitely. We'll continue exploring these servant songs in our next deep dive.