

“THE SERVANT AND HIS MISSION”

Our most fundamental need as sinful human beings is for a mediator, someone who will stand between us and the sovereign Lord whom we have offended. As Isaiah frequently reminds us, God rules as supreme King over all the earth. But we cannot stand before this King on our own. We cannot find acceptance with him based upon our performance. Regardless of the amount of good that we do, each and every one of us still falls miserably short of meeting the righteous requirements of God’s law. For this reason, if the Christian message was merely a setting forth of the kind of life that the Lord of heaven and earth wants his human subjects to lead, then we would have no hope. But thanks be to God that the gospel is far more than that. It is the wonderful announcement that God has provided the mediator that we so desperately need, a mediator who is perfectly suited and perfectly empowered to accomplish what is needed for us to be able to enjoy communion with the God who is the judge of all the earth. This is what this passage is about. This first of Isaiah’s four “Servant Songs” tells us about Jesus Christ, the one true mediator between God and man. *Specifically, these verses tell us that Christ has been appointed and empowered to bring about God’s justice in all the earth.* In this sermon, we will consider this theme under four points: (1) Christ’s mission and its source of

power; (2) the manner in which Christ carries out his mission; (3) the nature of Christ's mission; and (4) the goal of Christ's mission.

### **Christ's Mission and Its Source of Power**

In the first verse of our passage, we are told about Christ's mission and his source of power for fulfilling it. The first thing that I want us to consider under this point is the identity of the one whom the Lord refers to as "my servant." I have already said that this is a prophecy about Jesus Christ, but some interpreters have argued against this. It is true that Isaiah sometimes uses the name "servant" to refer to the people of Israel as a collective whole. He does so in verse 8 of the preceding chapter. And there are several places in the book where Isaiah himself or some other individual is referred to as God's servant. Nevertheless, when we compare all of the uses of the name "servant" in Isaiah's prophecy, it becomes clear that there are some passages where the name is used in a very unique sense.

Consider the two instances where God speaks of his servant in chapter 42. In verse 1, God says that his soul delights in his servant and that he will empower him to bring forth justice to the nations. But look at what God says about his servant later on in the chapter. In verses 18-19, God says that his servant is deaf

and blind. He does not listen to God. He refuses to see God's hand at work.

Obviously, God would not be well-pleased with this deaf and blind servant. This must be a different servant than the one who is described earlier in the chapter.

This is a reference to the people of Israel.

We gain insight into what this means in the Servant Song that is found in chapter 53. There we are told of an individual servant of the Lord who represents God's people in order that he might atone for their transgressions. Isaiah tells us that this servant "was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed." Such words could only apply to Jesus Christ. And the same is true of the things that the Lord says about his servant in the passage that we are studying today. The one whom the Lord refers to as "my servant" in these verses is Christ.

As for the servant's mission, we are told three times in verses 1-4 that he will "bring forth justice to the nations." This is not a reference to what people often mean nowadays when they talk about "social justice." Of course, we all want a just society, but different people have different ideas about how we should go about trying to make our society more just. Isaiah is not talking about something

that *we* need to do to bring justice to the earth. He is talking about something that God is going to do through his servant, through Jesus Christ.

We need to understand the references to justice in these verses in light of the courtroom setting in the preceding chapter, where the Lord gave irrefutable evidence that he is the one true God and the Lord of history. When Isaiah says that the servant of the Lord will establish justice in the earth he is saying that Christ will make the judgment that God rendered in chapter 41 known in all the earth. He will reveal the one true God and will bring his truth to the world. In the words of John Calvin, these verses are saying that “Christ was sent in order to bring the whole world under the authority of God and under obedience to him.”

The Lord says four other things about his servant in the first verse of our passage. First, he promises to uphold Christ in the work that he is sent to accomplish. The Lord will equip him with everything that he needs in order to successfully complete his mission. He will not fail. Second, God says that he is the one who appointed Jesus for this mission of bringing the world under his obedience. The Son of God was chosen for this mission in the counsel of God before the beginning of time. Third, God says that he delights in Christ. Jesus is the perfect servant. He testified to this when he said, “I seek not my own will but

the will of him who sent me.” (John 5:30) And Jesus not only said this, he followed through with it in his actions. This is why God the Father is well-pleased with him. Fourth, God says that he will put his Spirit upon his servant to empower him for his mission. This brings to mind the important role that the Holy Spirit played in Jesus’ life and ministry, beginning with his conception. The Son of God was empowered for his earthly ministry by the Spirit of God. The servant’s source of power for carrying out his mission is God.

### **The Manner in Which Christ Carries Out His Mission**

We turn now to our second point: the manner in which Christ carries out his mission. This is the emphasis in verses 2-4, where we are told three things about how Christ accomplishes his mission. First, he does not carry it out by crying aloud and lifting up his voice. Jesus brings about the rule of God in a manner that is extremely different than the manner in which military conquerors like Cyrus the Great build their kingdoms. Jesus does not usher in God’s kingdom by domination or by intimidation. He does not shout down his opponents. On the contrary, he does his work by methods that seem weak and foolish to the people of this world. As Paul puts it, ““it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” (1 Corinthians 1:21)

The second thing that these verses tell us about how Jesus carries out his mission is that he does so in a manner that does not overwhelm or destroy those who are weak. God likens his people to bruised reeds and faintly burning wicks. A reed is weak to begin with, but a bruised reed is so weak that it cannot support anything at all. And the bruising that God is talking about here is not merely a matter of being under some kind of affliction. It also involves being humbled under your afflictions and looking to Christ as your only source of deliverance. As for the image of a faintly burning wick, the point is that it does not take much to snuff out such a flame. This is a picture of those times in the lives of God's people when there seems to be little evidence of his grace in their lives, those times when their faith grows weak and their hope grows dim. By using these two images, God is saying that Christ goes about his work of establishing God's rule in our hearts in a gentle manner. He does not overwhelm us. The Puritan Richard Sibbes expresses this well in his classic book *The Bruised Reed*, where he writes: "The lion of the tribe of Judah will only tear in pieces those that 'will not have him rule over them' (Luke 19:14). He will not show his strength against those who prostrate themselves before him." [9]

We might wonder why God allows his people to reach the point where they can be likened to bruised reeds and faintly burning wicks. Listen to Sibbes'

answer to that question: "After conversion we need bruising so that reeds may know themselves to be reeds, and not oaks. Even reeds need bruising, by reason of the remainder of pride in our nature, and to let us see that we live by mercy." [5] The Lord knows that it is not good for us to be allowed to think that we are strong. He allows us to be bruised so that we will not forget how helpless we are apart from him. He lets our wick burn low in order to make us depend upon him all the more. Yet he also promises that he will not deal with us in a manner that crushes us. He knows how to deal gently with us. He knows how to make sure that the grace within us is not snuffed out but is instead fanned into a flame that will burn to the end of our days.

The third thing that these verses tell us about the manner in which Christ carries out his mission is that he does not grow faint or discouraged. To me, this is perhaps the most amazing part of this passage. Stop and think about the potential sources of discouragement that our Lord is confronted with as he carries out his mission of establishing God's kingdom in this world. Think of the many problems in the church today. Think of the things that have been wrong with the church in ages past. Think of the many failings and struggles in the lives of individual Christians. I doubt that even the most persistent optimist could remain encouraged in his work if he had to deal with this many extensive

and persistent problems. But Jesus never grows discouraged in his work. He never grows weary or faint as he carries out his mission. In the words of one commentator, “the pressures and blows that immobilize others will not deter him.” [Motyer, 326] And why is this? It is because Jesus has no doubt about the outcome. He knows that he will succeed. Remember this when you have to deal with potential sources of discouragement in your church, in your family, or in your individual life of discipleship. If Jesus does not get discouraged at such things, then neither should you.

### **The Nature of Christ’s Mission**

This brings us to our third point: the nature of Christ’s mission. This is the emphasis in verses 5-7. These verses begin with the Lord reminding us once again of who he is. He is the creator of heaven and earth. He is the one upon whom all the creatures of the earth depend for their every breath. God’s point in reminding us of this is to emphasize that there is no uncertainty about the outcome of his servant’s mission. Because God is the one who has appointed Christ for this work, there is no possibility that he will be thwarted in it.

In verse 6, God says that he will give Christ “as a covenant for the people.” Notice that God refers to Jesus himself as the covenant. This is a way of saying

that all of the blessings of the covenant have their root in Jesus. The only way we can partake of these blessings is by being engrafted into Christ's body. As Michael Horton explains,

"The Messiah not only saves; he is the corporate head of the people whom he represents and makes to share in the spoils of his victory. As goes the King, so goes the kingdom. As the firstfruits of the whole harvest, Jesus Christ is not merely an example to be imitated by his followers, but the head of a covenantal body to be incorporated into by the Spirit... This is what it means to be baptized into Christ." [*The Christian Faith*, 604]

To use the terminology with which this sermon began, Jesus is the mediator of the covenant of grace. He represents us before God so that we can be accepted as righteous in God's sight -- not on the basis of what we have done, but on the basis of what Christ has done on our behalf.

As God speaks about the nature of his servant's mission, he also says that Jesus is a light for the nations, that he will open the eyes of the blind, and that he will bring prisoners out of the darkness. This is a picture of how people experience the consequences of sin in this life. Sin leaves us in the dark. It makes

us blind. It locks us up in a deep prison where we cannot see God's truth and light. But Jesus came into the world to undo all of that. We will sing about this at the end of today's worship service:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray;  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
my chains fell off, my heart was free;  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.*

That is what Jesus Christ does in the life of every Christian. He sets us free from the darkness of sin and brings us the light of life. If you have experienced this, never let yourself lose sight of the wonder of God's amazing love. And if you have not experienced it, then I urge you to not wait another day. Look to Jesus to set you free from the dark dungeon of sin. Place your trust in him. If you do, God will shine in your heart the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

### The Goal of Christ's Mission

We come now to our fourth point: the goal of Christ's mission. This is the emphasis in verses 8-9. Christ's work of establishing justice on the earth has one thing as its ultimate goal: the exaltation of God above all else. As God says in verse 8, "I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols." All creation exists for the purpose of giving glory to God. God's chief end in sending Christ to be the mediator in the covenant of grace is the same as his chief end in all things: to bring glory to his holy name.

In the last verse in our passage, the Lord reminds us once again that he is able to declare what will happen long before it comes to pass. He says, "Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them." God is the Lord of history. There are many other claimants to glory in this world, but no human being can make the claim that God makes in this verse. No one else can decree what will take place in the future. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:33, 36)

---

This passage tells us that the Lord has sent us the mediator that we so desperately need. He has sent his one and only Son, his beloved Son, and he has equipped him with all that he needs to ensure the success of his mission. This means Jesus has all the power that he needs to bring you under the rule of God. And in these verses, God assures you that Jesus will carry out this work in a gentle manner. He may allow you to be bruised; he may let your flame burn dangerously low, but he will not allow God's grace to be extinguished altogether. Christ will see God glorified in your life. He will not fail in the work for which he was sent. As Paul assured the Christians at Philippi, "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6) Therefore, as Richard Sibbes writes: "Let us make use of this mercy and power of his every day in our daily combats: 'Lord Jesus, thou hast promised not to quench the smoking flax, nor break the bruised reed. Cherish thy grace in me; leave me not to myself; the glory shall be thine.'" [123]