

The Servant Songs

Isaiah 42:1–9; Isaiah 49:1–7; Isaiah 50:4–11; and Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

There are four “Servant Songs” of Isaiah that describe the service, suffering, and exaltation of the Servant of the Lord. All the songs demonstrate the Servant to be God’s humble and gentle Servant. He is a kingly figure, representing Israel in its ideal form; He is the high priest, who atones for the sin of humanity. Isaiah predicts that this Servant of the Lord will save the world from sin. In the regal terms of the ancient world, a Servant was an envoy entrusted with a message, a “confidential representative,” or “the chosen.”

Isaiah at the outset sees God’s Servant as Israel (41:8; 44:1–2), serving as God’s witness (43:10) and as a light to the Gentiles. Yet Israel could not fulfil this mission: Israel was deaf, blind (42:19), and in need of God’s forgiveness (44:21–22). Israel failed time and again. By contrast, God’s Servant, the Servant, faithfully completes all the work He is given to do (cf. Luke 13:32; John 17:4). The Servant of the Lord is God’s faithful and true witness to humanity.

In Acts 3:13 Peter says, “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his Servant Jesus.” Jesus did the will of the Father (John 4:34; 6:38); he never sought to please Himself but always to please the Father (John 5:30); he finished the work that God had sent Him to do (John 17:4); and he came to glorify the Father (John 13:31; 17:4).

Additionally, Peter’s reference to Jesus as the “Servant of God” would have brought to the minds of his Jewish hearers the passages in Isaiah that describe the Messiah as the “Servant of the Lord.”

Isaiah 42:1–9. The first Servant Song introduces us to the Servant of the LORD:

The Servant of the Lord is chosen by God, who delights in Him. He has the Spirit of God resting on Him. Verses 1-3 are explicitly applied to Jesus in Matthew 12:18–20.

When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan, the Spirit of God descended upon Him, and a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” This was a reference to Isaiah 42 made by God, the Father, himself. The teaching of the New Testament points to the fact that Jesus Christ is the Servant of the LORD in these passages.

- What do you think that the LORD’s ‘delight’ in his Servant means?
- What is the significance of the Servant being chosen?
- In what ways do you see the gentleness of the Servant in Jesus?
- In what ways can we take part in the establishment of justice ‘among the nations’ and ‘on the earth’?
- How is Jesus the ‘hope of the nations’? Take some time praying about the part de we play in bringing hope?

Isaiah 49:1–7. The second Servant Song refers to the work of the Servant’s successful work in the world.

The Servant’s assertion that “before I was born, the Lord called me” (vs. 1) uses language similar to the call of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5). The reference to the mouth of the Servant of the LORD being “like a sharpened sword” is a prophetic image that crops up several times in the New Testament (Isaiah 42:2; cf. Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; Revelation 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15).

In this passage, the Servant shows God’s glory (vs. 3), restores His people (vs. 6), and is honoured in God’s eyes (vs.5). Pointedly, the Servant feels great loss: “I have laboured in vain; / I have spent my strength for nothing at all” (vs. 4), yet, in the end He obtains universal praise.

“To him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
to the Servant of rulers:

‘Kings will see you and stand up,
princes will see and bow down’” (vs. 7).

- Who is the Servant according to this song? Why is that significant?
- According to this song, what is the work of the Servant?
- What is the significance of the recurring theme (in these first two songs) of the Servant being chosen?
- Why has the Servant lost strength?
- In what ways is the Servant ‘honoured’ by the LORD?
- Take time to reflect upon how we can take part in the work of the Servant. Pray for inspiration.

Isaiah 50:4–11. This Servant Song contrasts Israel’s failure with the compliance of the Servant.

Here we see that the Servant will be oppressed yet exonerated. The verses before this song (vss. 1–3) equate Israel with an unfaithful wife; only God has the power to ransom her. Starting in verse 4 the Servant responds to the instruction of God. He is not rebellious (vs. 5), even when His obedience to God results in suffering:

- The Servant is said to be a good listener because he obeys the LORD (4-5). What is the connection, for us, between obedience and hearing and understanding God’s message?

“I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting” (verse 6).

- Why do you think it is important how the song emphasises the willingness of the Servant to suffer (6)?

The Servant of the Lord articulates His confidence in God’s help and that He will be vindicated (vss. 7–9). In the light of this, the Servant undertakes to complete his task, no matter how difficult the road is (cf. Luke 9:51).

Some 700 years later, Jesus fulfilled this prophecy too. Abuse and insults were heaped upon Christ; He was given to Roman soldiers; he was beaten, struck in the face, and spat upon (see John 19:1–3; Matthew 27:30). Jesus was obedient to death, even the horrible death of crucifixion (Philippians 2:8).

The songs move from the positive triumph of the first song, through a hint of weakness of the Servant in the second, to the abuse of the Servant in this song. What do you think is the significance of this movement?

- In the case of Jesus Christ, how did the Father vindicate him (7-9a)?
- Take some time to reflect and thank the Lord Jesus for his sacrifice; the Father for vindicating him and ask the Holy Spirit for the ability to worship him in an appropriate way.

Isaiah 52:13—53:12. The final Servant Song depicts the anguish and ultimate victory of the Servant.

It is also the Old Testament's most detailed and explicit accounts of the death and restoration of the Servant.

The song begins with a promise. The Servant will ultimately be exalted (52:13), but turn instantly to a description of extreme violence: he is disfigured and marred (Isaiah 52:14).

- What is the connection between exaltation and suffering in God's working of things?

The Servant will be "despised and rejected by humanity" (53:3). When He is brutally treated, people will assume that God is punishing him (vs. 4). But this Song clarifies *why* He endures such torture: it is for us (vs. 5). It is *our* wickedness placed on *Him* that explains His suffering (vs. 6). Verse 7 foresees that the Servant will be silent before His accusers (cf. Matthew 27:14). Verse 9 says that, although the Servant of the Lord is innocent, He will die with the wicked and be "with the rich in his death."

- Why do you think that the Servant (and Christ) did not defend themselves?

Isaiah 53:10 tells us why the Servant dies: it was the Lord's will that he suffered so we could have our sin forgiven. This is His life for ours. The death of the Servant accomplished the will of God concerning our salvation.

- People may have assumed that God was punishing the Servant for something the Servant did but is God who is allowing him to be punished but for us. How do you understand this difficulty?

Immediately following the prophecy of the Servant's death, Isaiah makes a startling prophecy of the Servant's victory (vss. 10-12). He sees the results of his sacrifice (10); he will be satisfied (11) and he will receive his reward (12).

- Read Philippians 2:6-11. Note the similarities between these two passages. How do you understand them?
- Now read Philippians 2:1-5. What does the Servant's and Christ's suffering and exaltation mean for our lives?
- Take a moment to worship Christ for his sacrifice.