

## Didn't See That Coming IV - July 18/19

### SERIES RECAP

This is week 4 of our series "Didn't See That Coming." We've been looking at a specific section of the book of Isaiah - Isaiah 40-55, which was written for the Israelites when they were in exile in Babylon.

As we've seen, in exile the people of God hit **rock bottom**. They had lost their power, their culture, their city, their temple... and now they were far from their home, surrounded by the powerful Babylonians and idols of their gods.

It seemed like Yahweh, the God of Israel, was nowhere to be found.

And yet, what we see through the words of the prophet Isaiah is that **God is still working**. He's going to do something *new*, which nobody sees coming.

Now, I've said this before, but biblical prophets like Isaiah are not fortune tellers. **They don't tell the future. They tell the truth.**

Yes, sometimes that truth does look ahead, but what they are doing is looking at the world around them and seeing it through God's eyes. They're speaking *his* heart into *their* reality.

Which is why, when we read these passages today, even though our world is vastly different than ancient Babylon, **we can find hope too** to get us through our own time of crisis because through these words we can understand God's heart for the world.

As with all BYOB (Bring Your Own Bible) series, we're going to look at the three worlds of the text.

**The world behind the text** - what was going on when this book was written.

The world *of* the text - how these passages connect to the rest of Scripture.

And the world *in front of* the text - *our* world, and how the Holy Spirit is still speaking through these words today.

## THE SERVANT SONGS

Ok. So let's dive in and see what truth the prophet Isaiah has for us today.

This week and next week it's kind of a **two-part message**. We're going to be looking at one of the most distinctive features of Isaiah 40-55. Throughout these "exile prophecies", there are four separate passages which all describe a so-called "servant of God" with some really compelling poetry.

They're sometimes called the "servant songs" of Isaiah.

### The "Servant Songs" of Isaiah

I - 42:1-9

II - 49:1-7

III - 50:4-9

IV - 52:13-53:12

Today I want give kind of a big-picture overview of all four, and next week we're going to zero in on the fourth one, specifically, which is the longest and probably the most familiar to many of us (you'll see why next week).

For now, let's turn to **Isaiah 42** and meet this "servant of God."

Before we read, though, let's use our imagination to remember **the world behind the text**. Remember, the Israelites are in exile. They're defeated, confused, ashamed... They've hit rock bottom and it seems like God's mission has failed.

Into that context, God begins to speak through Isaiah. Here's what he says.

**Isaiah 42:1-4**

*"Look at my servant, whom I strengthen.*

*He is my chosen one, who pleases me.*

*I have put my Spirit upon him.*

*He will bring justice to the nations.*

*He will not shout*

*or raise his voice in public.*

*He will not crush the weakest reed*

*or put out a flickering candle.*

*He will bring justice to all who have been wronged.*

*He will not falter or lose heart*

*until justice prevails throughout the earth.*

*Even distant lands beyond the sea will wait for his instruction."*

Ok, so right off the bat, it's clear that **this servant is called by God**. He's *chosen* to do something important. And what is that? Well, look at the end of verse 1: he's called to bring God's "justice" to the nations.

God's justice. The Hebrew word here is *mishpat*.

***mishpat - justice***

It's one of Isaiah's favorite concepts. It shows up 40 times in the book of Isaiah alone.

But this word *mishpat* is more than just *legal* justice. It's not just law and order. **God's *mishpat* is the world made right**. God's rule and reign complete. When what God wants is what God gets.

And what does God want? Well, we've talked about this, especially back in February when we did our series about the law of Moses. God's law - his justice - is not just a list of arbitrary morality rules laid out by a distant deity;

No. His law is a **way of living** which brings humanity back into God's presence. Back to Eden.

God's justice allows us to live our **very best possible lives** - fullness, peace, healing, harmony, abundance...

When God's *mishpat* is present, our broken world is healed.

You with me so far? So, the *servant* of God in Isaiah, is **one who dedicates his life to God's *mishpat*** - who works to bring God's justice - God's intentions - into the world.

By the way, this fits in with what we've been talking about throughout this series. It's the theme of this whole section of Isaiah - **God is still working**. His justice is growing in the world, even in exile. And this servant is participating in that.

But, here's where **the twist** comes in. Where we can once again say, "I didn't see *that* coming."

Because when we think about things like justice and judgment in the world, we think about **power**, right? The *Justice League* [image: [Justice League](#)] - those are pretty powerful heroes.

Justice in our world requires an iron fist. **Strength and might and battle cries and biceps** - even violence if it serves your ends (apparently Batman kills people now?).

We glorify power today, and power was *glorified* in Babylon. **Might makes right**. It's how the world works.

But how does God's servant bring about justice? Well, look at verse 2.

"He will not shout or raise his voice in public. He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle."

What? He's no caped crusader. There's no biceps at all. This servant is gentle... he's meek. He's humble. *That's* how God's justice is supposed to show up? Tenderly? That's weird...

But it goes way beyond that in the other servant songs. He's not just humble, it's like he willingly accepts *humiliation*.

In the second song, the servant is described as:

**Isaiah 49:7**

*The one who is despised and rejected by the nations.*

In the third song, the servant himself speaks and says,

**Isaiah 50:6**

*I offered my back to those who beat me and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard. I did not hide my face from mockery and spitting.*

And the fourth song says that the servant was,

**Isaiah 53:3**

*A man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.*

Again and again, this servant of God is neglected and abused by humanity. In his mission to bring God's *mishpat* - his justice - into the world, the servant is chewed up and spit out by a hostile humanity.

And yet, he doesn't put up a fight. He just... takes it.

Even though the servant is dedicated to making all things right, **the wrongness of the world** takes a heavy toll. And in at least one of the songs, God's servant pays for it with his own life.

It's the paradox of the suffering servant of God.

It's a paradox because this downtrodden servant is working for the God of the universe.

It's also a paradox because, despite all of the humiliation, and pain, and suffering of the servant, **his mission is ultimately a success**. Verse 4: "He will not falter or lose heart until justice prevails throughout the earth."

Again, I didn't see that coming! Humiliation leads to justice. Humility is stronger than power.

Imagine hearing this in the Babylonian exile. **God is still working**. His servant *is going to* prevail. Just not the way you might expect... The *suffering* servant of God.

WHO IS THE SERVANT?

Ok, so that's the bird's-eye-view of these poems - the servant songs of Isaiah. A pretty fair question to ask at this point is, **who is he?** Who is this suffering servant supposed to be?

Well, let's see. It's a person who dedicates himself to the mission of God, who suffers at the hands of humanity and gives his life to bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth... Who does that sound like?

**Jesus!** Obviously. And when we read passages like,

**Isaiah 53:5**

*He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins.*

It seems even more apparent. Case closed.

But wait just a second. This is a BYOB series. We want to understand **the original context** of the passages we study. I want us to keep digging.

When we read Isaiah and just jump straight to Jesus, we **collapse the three worlds of the text** and we might miss some of what the passage

has to offer.

Think about it: these poems were written over **500 years before Jesus** was born. What about the world *behind* the text? I mean, these prophecies must have meant *something* to the Israelites living in Babylon. The original readers.

Of course the Holy Spirit was breathing through the prophet Isaiah when he wrote these words, **but prophets don't tell the future, they tell the truth.** The truth about our world. What truth was he telling here?

The Israelites who first heard these prophecies wouldn't have just thought, "Huh, that's weird. I guess we'll wait 5 *centuries* to figure out what Isaiah meant..." No! **This meant something to them.** Who did *they* understand the servant to be?

Well, there are lots of discussions in scholarly circles about this. Lots of different theories. But there's a growing consensus about one idea which I tend to agree with.

It has to do with the way these four passages are different from one another. **The world of the text.** Again, we miss this when we read them with Jesus-colored glasses. Let's talk about these differences

For example, two of the songs are **first person** ("the Lord called *me*"), the other two are in **third person** ("*he* will bring justice...").

Of those, one of them is **God speaking** ("Look at *my* servant"), and another is from the perspective of **a fellow Israelite** ("it was *our* weakness he carried").

Some parts of these passages are in **past tense**, some are in **present tense**, and some describe the **future**.

Here's what scholars are starting to suggest: these differences are intentional.

This isn't just a list of facts. This is poetry and it's meant to fire up our imaginations.

These unique angles and perspectives on the servant are here because these passages don't describe *a* servant of God. **They describe *any* servant of God.**

These poems, these prophecies, are meditations on **what it means to pursue God's justice with your life.**

Think about it. Our world is broken. Anyone who dedicates their lives to the *mishpat* of God - the healing of pain and isolation and hatred - is facing down powerful, corrupt systems. Injustice fights back. Sin has teeth.

The Apostle Paul calls this

**Ephesians 6:12**

*"mighty powers in this dark world"*

And they are woven into the fabric of humanity.

And yet, **God calls his servants to non-violence and humility and gentleness and patience.** "He will not crush the weakest reed."

God calls his servants to obedience even in the face of what seems like failure. "I offered my back to those who beat me."

If you are a servant of God, you will be victorious. God's justice will prevail. But the road to the world's healing is a painful one and it costs us.

This is why we talk here at Grace about the **"Low-Grade Fever of Sadness"**. You know, when you have a low-grade fever, you can walk around and try to go about your life, but things are just not right.

And that's **the same for us spiritually**. Yeah, we have joy, we have hope... but

until the justice of God is universal - until the New Creation comes in all its fullness, we, like the servant of Isaiah, will bear the pain of living in a still broken world.

Anyone who becomes a servant of God is going to suffer in part until God's kingdom comes.

Now, if we want to really understand what this looks like, we look at Jesus. Because yes, **Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of these prophecies.** He is the *ultimate* suffering servant of God. It's why the New Testament apostles quote these passages all the time to describe him.

But here's what I'm getting at. **These prophecies are not just about Jesus. They are also about you.**

If you have chosen to give your life to Jesus, to be a fellow servant of God alongside him, then you are called to a life of self-giving love, of surrender, of carrying your cross daily. You are called to be a suffering servant as well.

This is why the Apostle Paul said,

**Philippians 1:29**

*You have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him.*

By modeling our lives after our savior - by giving of ourselves - **God's healing purposes can come to fruition in our broken world.**

Because God's kingdom is upside down. Weakness is strength. The last are first. Our king's ascent to the throne was a descent into death.

Jesus let the brokenness of the world do its worst to him on the cross. Sin and death *destroyed* him. But in the process, Jesus - the ultimate suffering servant of God - *destroyed* sin and death. God's *mishpat* emerged victorious.

And now we - like the Israelites in exile in Babylon who first heard these words - we are invited to join in God's mission of redemption - in God's justice.

**Not through strength. Not through violence. Not through power.** But through humility, service, gentleness, peace, love...

*This* is how the servants of God heal this broken world. This is the truth Isaiah was speaking.

#### LISTENING TO THE SPIRIT

Now, I know that's a lot to chew on. And normally, I might try to give some practical tips on how to apply these ideas.

But today I want to do something different. I want **to let God's Holy Spirit talk to you directly.**

Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to read the first servant song in its entirety (it's only 9 verses). And as I read, I want you to close your eyes and listen as if this passage is talking about you.

I know, I know... it's about Jesus. It is. But as we just talked about, **these prophecies describe what it's like to be a servant of God** - like you and like me, especially when our world has hit **rock bottom** - exile, pandemics, chaos. When we are feeling that low-grade fever of sadness.

So, servants of God, as I read, listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit. I believe if you are paying attention, **one word, or phrase, or concept** will jump out at you from this passage. And when it does, hold onto it. Pay attention.

And when we're done, we're going to ask God why he chose that word or phrase for you.

[PRAY]

Let's read about you...

**Isaiah 42:1-9**

*"Look at my servant, whom I strengthen.*

*He is my chosen one, who pleases me.*

*I have put my Spirit upon him.*

*He will bring justice to the nations.*

*He will not shout*

*or raise his voice in public.*

*He will not crush the weakest reed*

*or put out a flickering candle.*

*He will bring justice to all who have been wronged.*

*He will not falter or lose heart*

*until justice prevails throughout the earth.*

*Even distant lands beyond the sea will wait for his instruction."*

*God, the LORD, created the heavens and stretched them out.*

*He created the earth and everything in it.*

*He gives breath to everyone,*

*life to everyone who walks the earth.*

*And it is he who says,*

*"I, the LORD, have called you to demonstrate my righteousness.*

*I will take you by the hand and guard you,*

*and I will give you to my people, Israel,*

*as a symbol of my covenant with them.*

*And you will be a light to guide the nations.*

*You will open the eyes of the blind.*

*You will free the captives from prison,*

*releasing those who sit in dark dungeons.*

*"I am the LORD; that is my name!*

*I will not give my glory to anyone else,*

*nor share my praise with carved idols.*

*Everything I prophesied has come true,*

*and now I will prophesy again.*

*I will tell you the future before it happens."*

[PRAY]

Grace family, it is a chaotic time, but God is still working. And I sure didn't see this coming, but **God is still working through you and through me as we follow Jesus.**

We are the servants of God. We feel the pain of a broken world, yes. But don't falter or lose heart, because in the end, **God's justice will prevail.**