

Isaiah

Chapter 42:

vs. 1-4 – The First Servant Song – scholars debate the identity of The Servant – nation or individual

The Mission of The Servant – my chosen Israel will with patience bring God's teaching and restore justice to the nations

vs. 5-17 – God's glorious victory

vs. 14-17 – God's intervention in history

Chapter 42-43:7 – Israel the blind and deaf servant

vs. 19-21 – to be blind to God's will and way is, for Second Isaiah, Israel's chief sin for which God has punished (vs.23-25).

Chapter 43:

vs. 1-7 – Israel's redemption; God is Israel's creator and redeemer

vs. 8-13 – The Servant Israel is the Lord's witness

vs. 14-44:5 – The redemption and restoration of Israel. Second Isaiah refers to God as Redeemer and Holy One more than other OT writers. God redeems Israel due to the covenant relationship – other nations may have kings but God is Israel's king

vs. 16-17 – Exodus

MY SERVANT

Isaiah 42:1-9

This is the first of several passages in this section which introduce God's 'servant'. God delights in his servant and will help him to succeed. Through God's Spirit the servant will bring justice to the nations. The servant will not become discouraged. He will be full of gentleness as he brings forth justice. The nations will wait with hope for the servant's justice and teaching.

In verses 5 to 9 God speaks to his servant. God is the Creator of the universe and of humanity in it. God tells the servant that he has called him to bring people into covenant relationship with himself and to reach out to the other nations with his salvation. Verse 7 speaks of 'bringing out prisoners from the dungeon', which refers to the exiles from Babylon. God is concerned that all humanity should recognize him as God. And he reminds the servant that he has predicted the new things that the future will hold.

Who is the servant? In the remainder of Isaiah chapters 40 to 55 the servant of the Lord is identified with Israel. And also, words used here to describe the servant are used of Israel in other passages. So the 'servant of the Lord' probably refers to Israel. The prophet proclaims that Israel will be liberated from exile and will have the opportunity to bring God's salvation to the nations.

Israel never completely fulfilled

this role, but Jesus fulfilled it perfectly. And so the New Testament identifies Christ as the servant of the Lord (see Matthew 12:18-21). It is one of the great pictures for him in the New Testament. Christ mediates the new covenant and brings salvation to the world. Christians must share in this ministry. We, too, should be agents of blessing for humanity while we have the opportunity.

GOD ENCOURAGES HIS SERVANT

Isaiah 49:1-6

God's servant, here definitely identified with Israel (verse 3), speaks out to the nations in this passage. He is very clear that God has called him for a purpose, to be an effective secret weapon (verse 2). Through him God will show his glory.

But verse 4 reveals that God's servant is discouraged. Despite all God's preparation, his mission does not seem to be getting very far. He feels he can only commit his cause to God.

In verses 5 and 6 the servant hears words of deep encouragement from God. His ministry will have results beyond what he could expect. Not only will the exiles return to their homeland and restore the broken spirits of the Israelites left behind in the ruins of Judah, but also Israel, God's servant, will be the means by which other nations will be saved.

As we saw in the previous key

passage, the New Testament calls Jesus Christ God's servant, taking on Israel's mission to bring salvation to the Jews and to all nations. And the Christian church is linked to him in this mission. Christians have a ministry of reconciliation, and as we try to fulfill it we can learn from God's servant in this passage. When we feel that our best efforts are futile, we too can commit our cause to God. He can and will work through us to achieve far more than we can foresee.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Isaiah 53:1-12

In this, the best known of the 'servant songs', we meet God's suffering servant, who suffers pain and death to redeem guilty people from their sins.

The first six verses are set in the mouths of unidentified people who speak as 'we'. They have changed their minds about the servant. Before they had thought him a worthless person who deserved his suffering. But now they have come to realize that he is suffering innocently, and on their behalf.

In the next verses, the prophet agrees with this confession. The servant suffered quietly for the sins of his people.

After he died, he was buried with 'the wicked' (a better translation than 'a rich man'). Verses 10 and 11 say that God made him suffer for other people's guilt, and that he will be raised from death. God

will exalt him because he was prepared to suffer and die for many people. Is the servant still to be identified with Israel, as in the earlier servant passages? It would be surprising if he was not. The probable explanation is that in verses 1 to 6 the prophet speaks for those Israelites not taken into exile, still living in poverty in Jerusalem and Judah. They considered themselves more righteous than those deported to Babylon. But the exiles' liberation from Babylon will lead their fellow Israelites to change their minds about them. In the prophet's mind, the exile was like death and the return like resurrection. He hoped that the return would bring Israel back together, united under the leadership of the exiles.

But whatever the precise meaning in the prophet's mind, Christians have naturally identified the suffering servant with Jesus. He was rejected, he suffered on behalf of others, he was raised from death. We can rejoice even more than the Israelites at the salvation God's suffering servant has won for us.

And also we should make him our model. If we remain faithful to God, even in the face of undeserved suffering, we may help those around us to turn to God.