

The Servant

A series examining the servant songs in Isaiah

The big idea for this series

This series examines the 4 so-called 'Servant Songs' from the book of Isaiah, which make reference to a figure called the Servant of the Lord. There has been much interpretation of these prophetic songs but Christians associate the servant with Jesus Christ and the New Testament quotes these passages in reference to Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The focus of the series is on Jesus as the fulfillment of these prophecies especially through his death, and resurrection. The Servant Songs need to be understood in their original context but more importantly in how they are fulfilled in Jesus.

The topics

11 Mar	Isaiah 42:1-9	The Servant: the one who brings justice
18 Mar	Isaiah 49:1-13	The Servant: a light for all nations
25 Mar	Isaiah 50:4-11	The Servant: obedient to death
30 Mar	Isaiah 52:13-53:12	The Servant: healed by his wounds

Some Background

The entire book of Isaiah covers a long period of history. Chapters 1-39 are set in the 8th Century BC when the Assyrian empire was the world superpower. By this time the nation of Israel has split into two separate nations due to civil war, the northern kingdom was called 'Israel' and the southern kingdom, which included Jerusalem, was called 'Judah'. Israel is defeated in battle by Assyria and effectively wiped in 722BC. Isaiah 1-39 is written to Judah and contains warnings of judgement mixed with messages of hope as they face the threat of Assyria defeating them too. Judah survived the Assyrian threat but later a new superpower, Babylon, arises, overthrowing Assyria and conquering Judah in 587BC. At this time the population of Judah is taken into exile into Babylon. The temple is destroyed and the people are separated from their land. Isaiah predicts this exile in Chapter 39 and the first part of the book ends with this reality hanging over their heads.

Isaiah 40-55 is written as a message of hope and comfort for the people of Judah in exile in Babylon. Therefore it is set in the 6th Century BC when the people are in real trouble and need rescuing. It starts with the words 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God' (Isaiah 40:1). The 4 servant songs that we'll be looking at are all contained in this section of the book of Isaiah. The people had been warned that they needed to turn back to God or judgement would follow. They ignored that warning and have experienced unimaginable suffering. They are in a foreign land and feel like God has abandoned them. In this context God tells them that he is still with them and that he has plans for a great future. Part of these plans revolved around a mystery figure called 'The Servant of the Lord'. This servant experiences great suffering but through him justice and hope is brought to all the nations of the world. Who is this Servant? Is it a metaphor for the nation of Israel? Or is it a reference to an individual who will come and bring hope and rescue to all the nations? It is unclear at the time but made clear in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Study 1: The Servant: the one who brings justice

Background and Context

- In order to help set the context to these studies you might like to read and talk about some of the material above
- You might also choose to watch this helpful video which gives an overview of the second half of the book of Isaiah (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzdEPuqgOg>)

What is prophecy?

- What do you think about when you hear the word 'prophecy'?
- What examples of prophecy have you read about in books or watched in movies? (Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, the Matrix)

Isaiah is a book of prophecy, that is, God speaks to Isaiah and he takes God's words and delivers them to the people of Israel. Prophecy is not just about predictions about the future but also include God speaking about the present day as well.

The Servant Songs, which we'll be looking at, were written around 550-750 years before Jesus. They speak about a mysterious figure called 'The Servant of the Lord'. It is good to wrestle with how the people at the time would have understood this and perhaps try and put yourselves in their shoes: what would they have thought this was about? What would they have expected and hoped for.

We have the advantage of reading these prophecies after the coming of Jesus who is the fulfillment of them through his life, death and resurrection. This doesn't mean that everything spoken about in them has happened yet as we are still waiting for Jesus to return and for the complete fulfillment of God's plan to happen, when everything prophesied and promised will be concluded. This is helpful background as we approach these studies.

Across the 4 Studies we'll start to build a picture of 'The Servant' and see how Jesus fulfills the prophecies. You might like to use butchers paper or some more creative means of building this picture by adding in each week what Isaiah prophesies about him.

Read Isaiah 42:1-9

- Who is speaking these words?
- Make a list of all of the things that the passage tells us about the servant of the Lord
- What do each of the things on the list mean?

A focus of this passage is that the Servant of the Lord will bring justice to the nations

- What would have been some of the key issues of justice that the exiles in Judah would have been thinking about?
- Are there any issues of justice particularly alluded to in verses 6-7?
- What are some of the key issues of justice that you are concerned about?

Read Matthew 12:14-21

- Why are these words applied to Jesus here? How is he seen to be the Servant?

- How did Jesus bring justice in his earthly ministry?

Thinking more deeply

- Has Isaiah 42:1-9 been completely fulfilled through Jesus? Why or why not? If not, when will it be fulfilled?
- Why is justice throughout the world a good thing to long for?
- Are there any uncomfortable aspects to justice being fulfilled throughout the world?
- You might like to read Revelation 19:11-16 which speaks about the bringing of justice on the last day. How does this passage make you feel?
- What part do you have to play as a servant of The Servant (Jesus) in the bringing of justice in the world?
- Spend some time praying, giving thanks that Jesus is the Servant who brings justice to the nations, praying for issues of justice in our world today, and looking forward to the completion of justice by Jesus, the Servant.

Study 2: The Servant: a light for all nations

Read Isaiah 49:1-13

- Who is speaking these words? [Hint: there are different speakers in verses 1-6 and 7-13]
- Make a list of all of the things that the passage tells us about the servant of the Lord [Add them to your diagram from last week if you are doing this]
- What do each of the things on the list mean?

This Servant Song, like the last, broadens the focus from Israel as God's chosen people to God's concern for all the nations of the earth.

- What promises does God make to Israel in passage? [You might like to print out the passage and use one colour to mark these sections]
- What hope is offered to the nations of the world (non-Israelites) through the Servant of the Lord? [You could use a different colour to mark these]
- How was the relationship between Israel and the nations understood in the Old Testament? Is the servant bringing anything new to this relationship?

Read Luke 2:25-35

- What is Simeon saying about the baby Jesus through the words that he speaks here?
- In what ways does Jesus as the Servant of the Lord act as 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles'?

Read Acts 13:44-49

- How did Paul and Barnabas as early Christian missionaries understand the prophecy from Isaiah 49?
- How is the relationship between Israel and the nations understood now that the Servant Jesus has come?

Thinking more deeply

- If Jesus is the Servant who is 'a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth' what does that mean for our priorities and focus?
- What helps you to focus on the big picture of God's plan for the whole world rather than just to focus on what is immediate and local?
- How can you as a Life Group encourage each other to keep the big picture of God's plan for the whole world in the centre of your meetings?
- Pray
 - thanking God that Jesus is a light for all the nations that his salvation may reach to the ends of the earth
 - praying for mission partners from St John's who are working throughout the world
 - asking God what your part is in this great plan of salvation

Study 3: The Servant: obedient to death

Read Isaiah 50:4-11

- Who is speaking these words?
- Make a list of all of the things that the passage tells us about the servant of the Lord [Add them to your diagram if you are doing this]
- What do each of the things on the list mean?

This Servant Song speaks of the suffering experienced by the Servant of the Lord. Indeed, the theme of suffering is so strong through these songs that the Servant is often referred to as the Suffering Servant

- How might the original readers of Isaiah in have understood this passage about the Suffering Servant?
- What hope does this passage give for the Servant in the face of severe suffering and persecution?

Read Mark 15:20

- What parallels are there between the third Servant Song and the experiences of Jesus during his trial and crucifixion?
- What insights does Isaiah 50 give us into the mindset of Jesus the Servant as he experienced all these things?
- How was he able to endure through all of this suffering?

As well as the theme of suffering, Isaiah 50 also includes the hope of vindication by God.

Read Philippians 2:5-11

- What parallels do you see between this passage and the vindication hoped for in Isaiah 50:4-11?
- How did Jesus bring together seemingly contradictory predictions in the Old Testament about a suffering servant and a triumphant messiah (king)?

Thinking more deeply

- How does the experience of Jesus as the suffering servant help you when you are going through suffering in your own life?
- What hope do you have in the midst of suffering through Jesus the vindicated suffering servant?
- How as a group can you better support and encourage each other in the midst of suffering in light of what you have discussed above?
- Pray
 - Thanking God for Jesus' willingness to suffer for us
 - Asking Jesus to be present with you and help you in the midst of suffering that you are undergoing at present
 - Looking forward to the return of Jesus as the triumphant and vindicated king and the vindication of his people who have suffered for his sake.

Study 4: The Servant: healed by his wounds

Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12

- Who is speaking these words? [Hint: there are various different speakers]
- Make a list of all of the things that the passage tells us about the servant of the Lord [Add them to your diagram if you are doing this]
- What do each of the things on the list mean?

This Servant Song speaks again about suffering but it gives us an understanding about what is achieved through this suffering of the Servant: namely dealing with sin.

- What different words are used throughout this passage to describe the human predicament? Make a list of these things
- In relation to each thing on this list what does the Servant do about it?
- In what way is the Servant a substitute for sinful people here, that is, how does he take their place?

This is probably the best known of the Servant Songs and the New Testament is clear about how Jesus is the Servant who suffers for our sin.

Read Acts 8:26-38

- Imagine you are Philip speaking with the Eunuch. How would you begin with Isaiah 52-53 and tell the good news about Jesus?
- How is the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus all contained within this prophecy from Isaiah?

Thinking more deeply

- Look back over the list you have compiled about the Servant of the Lord through these 4 studies.
 - What surprised you?
 - What challenged you?
 - What comforted you?
- How do these prophecies written over 500 years before Jesus help you to better understand the life, death and resurrection of Jesus?
- Pray
 - Give thanks to Jesus, the Servant, for what his suffering achieved for you.
 - Pray for those you know who need their wounds healed, their sins laid on Jesus, their suffering borne by him, and peace through his punishment.