

## **“The Gospel according to Isaiah: My Servant”**

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“It’s the most wonderful time of the year. . . . It’s the hap-happiest season of all.” Or the song says. Are you feeling it this year? Does it feel wonderful and hap-happy?

When I was a child, I felt the thrill of “the Christmas spirit,” whatever that is. I used to love lights and music and Christmas movies and TV specials and special food and gifts. Especially the gifts. But as I get older, I find those things to feel a lot less special.

Yesterday, I saw a picture that someone posted online. It was of a dumpster that said “EMPTY WHEN FULL.” The joke, of course, was how can a dumpster simultaneously be empty and full? But perhaps that’s the way some of us feel at Christmas. We’re full of food, our lives are full of stuff, our schedules may be full, and our relatives may be full of it, but we feel empty.

For some people, the holidays remind them of what they’ve lost in the past year. The other day, I was writing Christmas cards to people. Two were to people who were now celebrating their first Christmas after the death of a spouse. Another was to someone who lost a spouse the previous year. One was to a couple that lost a child this year. The holidays can highlight what we have, but they can also highlight what we’ve lost.

Many people try to cover up that emptiness and loss. The message of secular Christmas celebrations is, “Be happy.” If you don’t feel happy, the key is to celebrate more, to buy more things, to spend more time with family. The holiday takes on this strange empty meaning. It’s not really about anything other than celebrating celebration, feasting on festiveness, an attempt to buy pieces of peace. It’s about nostalgia and sentimentality and the many dozens of ways that the Hallmark and Lifetime Channels can make Christmas romance movies out of the same basic plot.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I still enjoy Christmas lights, and some Christmas music. I’m a sucker for Christmas decorations. I love getting presents. Occasionally, I enjoy spending time with family. It’s not that these things are bad. But I need more than that. I suspect that you do, too. If that’s all there is to Christmas, then it’s just the largest Hallmark holiday, a phony reason to celebrate for celebration’s sake.

Providentially, the real meaning of Christmas is not found in all those trappings. The meaning of Christmas is that God sent his ultimate servant to rescue us. This servant didn't come to put a feel-good band aid of tinsel over our problems. He didn't come to fill our emptiness with more food and drink and money. He came to heal us, which required getting to the root of our problems. God loves us so much that he didn't send us a comedian or entertainer, a politician or a general, an economist or a get-rich-quick adviser. He didn't manipulate our emotions. Instead, he gave us a Savior, his own Son.

Today, we're going to learn about Jesus and what he has done for us by looking at passages from the book of Isaiah. We have been studying the Gospel of Luke, which is all about Jesus in a very direct way. But this month, we're taking a look at some passages from a book about a prophet called Isaiah. God sent a message to his people through a man named Isaiah in the eighth century BC, roughly seven hundred years before Jesus was born. He gave them a message about who he is, what their problem was, and the hope that would come through one person, a special child, a descendant of King David. Over the last three weeks, we've looked at who God is, our problems of sin and idolatry, and prophecies about a coming king. This week, we'll look at passages about a servant of God.

The first one is Isaiah 42:1-7:

- <sup>1</sup> Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
- <sup>2</sup> He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;
- <sup>3</sup> a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
- <sup>4</sup> He will not grow faint or be discouraged  
till he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law.
- <sup>5</sup> Thus says God, the LORD,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people on it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:
- <sup>6</sup> "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness;  
I will take you by the hand and keep you;  
I will give you as a covenant for the people,

7 a light for the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.<sup>1</sup>

God promised Israel that he would send his servant into the world. The Holy Spirit—the third person of the triune God (Father, Son, and Spirit) would rest upon this servant, empowering him. Though the servant has power, he would be gentle, especially with people who were “bruised reeds,” people who were beat up and knew they needed help. To those people, he would bring comfort. Though he’s gentle, he is strong, and he will work until he brings justice to the whole Earth.

Then, we’re told that the God who has made the whole universe, who gives life and breath to everyone on the Earth, says this about his servant: God will give this servant to his people as a covenant, which is kind of like a contract that establishes a relationship between two parties. The way that God and his people will be related will be through this servant. He will gather the remnant of Israel, God’s people, to himself. He will be a light to all the nations—people from across the globe will come to God through him. The people who are living in darkness will see a great light (Isa. 9:2).

That is the first of four “servant songs” found in the book of Isaiah. The next one is in the beginning of chapter 49. Let’s turn there now. Here is Isaiah 49:1–6:

<sup>1</sup> Listen to me, O coastlands,  
and give attention, you peoples from afar.  
The LORD called me from the womb,  
from the body of my mother he named my name.  
<sup>2</sup> He made my mouth like a sharp sword;  
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;  
he made me a polished arrow;  
in his quiver he hid me away.  
<sup>3</sup> And he said to me, “You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”  
<sup>4</sup> But I said, “I have labored in vain;  
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;  
yet surely my right is with the LORD,  
and my recompense with my God.”  
<sup>5</sup> And now the LORD says,  
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

to bring Jacob back to him;  
 and that Israel might be gathered to him—  
 for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,  
 and my God has become my strength—  
<sup>6</sup> he says:  
 “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
 to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
 and to bring back the preserved of Israel;  
 I will make you as a light for the nations,  
 that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Here, God’s servant is called from the womb of his mother. His words will be powerful: his mouth is like a sharp sword. He is called Israel. He is the one who will truly be God’s person. If you read the Old Testament, which is long and complicated, you’ll see that most of it is about a group of people, a nation, called Israel. And it doesn’t take much reading to see that these people are in many ways failures. They were supposed to live for God, worship him, represent him on Earth, and obey him. But they don’t worship God alone; they also worship false gods, which are called idols. They don’t obey God, living according to his commandments and laws. Instead, they often live like everyone else lives. They, like everyone else in the world, deserve condemnation, to be cut off from God forever.

But not this servant. He will be perfect. Yet at first his work will seem to be in vain. His work doesn’t always appear to have accomplished something great. But God said to this servant that he would bring his people back to God. He would be a light to the nations—this is the second time we’ve seen that. He would bring salvation to people throughout the world. That salvation is reconciliation with God. It’s a salvation from the condemnation that their sins have earned them. They will be saved from a broken relationship with God, from rebellion, and from all that comes with it, including death and condemnation. And this salvation will come through this servant.

The third song about this servant comes in the next chapter. Let’s look at chapter 50:4–11:

<sup>4</sup> The Lord GOD has given me  
 the tongue of those who are taught,  
 that I may know how to sustain with a word  
 him who is weary.  
 Morning by morning he awakens;  
 he awakens my ear  
 to hear as those who are taught.

- 5 The Lord GOD has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious;  
I turned not backward.
- 6 I gave my back to those who strike,  
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;  
I hid not my face  
from disgrace and spitting.
- 7 But the Lord God helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like a flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.
- 8 He who vindicates me is near.  
Who will contend with me?  
Let us stand up together.  
Who is my adversary?  
Let him come near to me.
- 9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps me;  
who will declare me guilty?  
Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;  
the moth will eat them up.
- 10 Who among you fears the LORD  
and obeys the voice of his servant?  
Let him who walks in darkness  
and has no light  
trust in the name of the LORD  
and rely on his God.
- 11 Behold, all you who kindle a fire,  
who equip yourselves with burning torches!  
Walk by the light of your fire,  
and by the torches that you have kindled!  
This you have from my hand:  
you shall lie down in torment.

The servant says that God has given him wisdom, a tongue that will sustain those who are weary. Again, this man has powerful words, words that not only can cut like a sharp sword, but words that can also heal.

This servant has his ear open to God. He listens to God. He does what God tells him to do. He is not rebellious. He is even obedient in the face of persecution. People will strike him, pull his beard, and spit on him. But this servant didn't run away from such rough treatment. Because God strengthens him, he is able to face that affliction square on, setting his face like

flint toward it. He knows that God will not let him be put to shame. No one will be able to say that he's guilty. He will be vindicated.

This servant calls all who are living in darkness to come to him in the light, to fear the Lord and to obey his servant. As I said last week, the fear of the Lord isn't necessarily being afraid of him. Though, if you're on the wrong side of God, you should be afraid. But the fear of the Lord is having a very healthy, awestruck respect for God. If you know who God truly is, you will fear him, respect him, honor him. And if you do those things, his servant says, you will obey the voice of his servant. You will come to him, the light of the nations, instead of living in darkness. But those who remain in darkness, who think that they can light their own way with their own torches, will lie down in torment. In other words, those who trust that they can cure themselves, who can fix their greatest problem, which is a broken relationship with God and rebellion against him, will not only remain in darkness, but they will be punished.

If we can't bring ourselves back to God, and if our efforts to do so result only in torment, how can we ever get back to God? As we've already seen, the key is the servant of God. But how does this servant make us in the right with God? How does he fix this problem of a broken relationship?

To answer those questions, we must look at the fourth and final song of the servant. This one begins at the end of chapter 52 and runs through all of chapter 53. Let's first read Isaiah 52:13–15:

- <sup>13</sup> Behold, my servant shall act wisely;  
he shall be high and lifted up,  
and shall be exalted.
- <sup>14</sup> As many were astonished at you—  
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,  
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—
- <sup>15</sup> so shall he sprinkle many nations.  
Kings shall shut their mouths because of him,  
for that which has not been told them they see,  
and that which they have not heard they understand.

We're told that God's servant will be exalted. He will be high and lifted up. Yet though he's exalted, his appearance will be marred. We must remember that this servant will be struck and beaten. He will be battered. But he will "sprinkle many nations." That means he will cleanse many people, washing them from what defiles them, which, according to the Bible, is sin. His work will be so great that even kings will be rendered speechless by what he will do.

Let's now look at chapter 53. We'll read the first three verses:

- <sup>1</sup> Who has believed what he has heard from us?  
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
- <sup>2</sup> For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
and no beauty that we should desire him.
- <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

This servant will grow up like a root out of a dry ground, which means that he will be greater than his historical circumstances. His background on Earth will be humble. He won't look majestic. He won't look exceptionally beautiful. He will look rather ordinary.

But there's something more. He will be despised and rejected. He will be a man who knows sorrow and grief. People will hide their faces from him. They will betray him and reject him. And we're told even this: *we* esteemed him not. If we saw him on Earth, we would probably reject him.

This servant has a strange combination of qualities. He's powerful, given strength by the Holy Spirit. He is wise and his words are powerful. They are able to condemn and save. God will be with him and he will not be put to shame. He will be vindicated and declared righteous. Yet he will also suffer and be rejected.

We're also told that his suffering does something. He doesn't suffer in some meaningless, pointless way. Look at verses 4–6:

- <sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.
- <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his wounds we are healed.
- <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

This servant will bear our griefs, our sorrows, our iniquities, or sins. Though we thought he was rejected by God, condemned and afflicted, the reality was that he was being condemned in our place. His suffering—his being pierced and crushed—was for our sake. He was crushed for our sins, not for his own. The condemnation—the chastisement—that we deserve fell upon him so that we could have peace with God. His wounds heal us. We were like sheep, going astray, wandering from God. Each one of us was like that. But God does something amazing. He takes our sin and lays it on his servant, who suffers in our place.

The reason that we feel empty is that we were made to have a relationship with God. Because that relationship is broken, we have a God-shaped hole within us. We were made to love God and worship him and obey him. But instead of going to God to have that hole filled, we try to fill it up with other stuff, often with things that aren't necessarily bad. But those things, even good things, weren't made to fill that hole. So, we're empty when full. We're not full of God, but things he made, thinking that we can be satisfied by the gifts instead of the Giver. As Augustine wrote over sixteen hundred years ago: "You [God] stir men to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>2</sup> He might have said our hearts are empty until they are filled by God. Until then, we're a bunch of dumpsters.

Yet this servant is the one who was treated like trash. Look at verses 7–9:

- <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he opened not his mouth.
- <sup>8</sup> By oppression and judgment he was taken away;  
and as for his generation, who considered  
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people?
- <sup>9</sup> And they made his grave with the wicked  
and with a rich man in his death,  
although he had done no violence,  
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

He was afflicted, beaten, led to die. But he didn't protest. He didn't try to escape this fate. He was like a sheep led to slaughter. He was cut off from the land of the living, paying for the sins

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.



of God's people. He died among wicked people, and his body was laid in the tomb of a rich man, even though he never did anything wrong. He never did violence to other people. He never said anything deceitful. He only told the truth. He was never selfish. He only loved God and other people. Yet he still was treated like garbage.

But this wasn't an accident, or just the result of the works of evil people. Look at verses 10–12:

- <sup>10</sup> Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;  
he has put him to grief;  
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,  
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;  
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
- <sup>11</sup> Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,  
make many to be accounted righteous,  
and he shall bear their iniquities.
- <sup>12</sup> Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,  
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,  
because he poured out his soul to death  
and was numbered with the transgressors;  
yet he bore the sin of many,  
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

This servant suffered because it was God's will. It was God's plan. His suffering was an offering for our guilt.

But there's good news. Even though this servant is crushed and afflicted, led to slaughter, killed and laid in a grave, he will see his days prolonged. He will see his offspring. He will be satisfied. This servant, though he is killed, will live. He will make many to be accounted righteous. He will take away their sin and make them in the right with God. He will also live to intercede for sinners, to go between God and them, to lift them up in prayers to God.

Of course, these servant songs are all about Jesus. He alone is the One sent by God to be a light to the world. He alone is perfectly righteous and perfectly wise. He alone was sent to bear the sins of his people.

Jesus is not just a servant. He is the Son of God. He, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, are the triune God. But he was sent by the Father to become a human being in a "dry ground," in humble circumstances. Though he was and is all-powerful, he looked like an ordinary human being. He was conceived in a miraculous way—by a virgin—but otherwise, his

background was rather ordinary. He was a carpenter's son. He grew up in a small town, away from the capital city. He didn't act like the rulers of the Earth, trying to appear powerful, using their power to their own advantage. He was humble.

He lived the perfect life. He was never rebellious toward God the Father. He perfectly loved, honored, and obeyed God. Yet he was rejected by the very people who should have known who he is. He was mocked, rejected, betrayed, arrested, tortured, and killed. This was because people are evil, and they did an evil thing to him. But ultimately, it was God's plan to have him killed. And it was Jesus' plan; he laid down his life voluntarily. He did this to take away our sin. Strangely, his death is his victory and exaltation. How is Jesus "high and lifted up"? On the cross!

Not only did Jesus die, but he rose from the grave in a body that can never die again. His resurrection showed that he has power over sin and death, that his sacrifice paid the penalty for sin in full, and that his people, though they will die in this life, will be resurrected to eternal life. He lives to see people come to faith in him, and he intercedes for those people. He prays for them. He is their advocate.

This is the message of Christmas. God sent his Son into the world to save his people from their sin, to make atonement for their sin, to receive the penalty they deserve.

This message is hard to receive. A lot of people don't like it. They don't like it because it says that we are bad, that we have done wrong, that we deserve condemnation, and that we can't fix ourselves. But that's the truth. Evil isn't just something that's "out there." It's within us, and we can't remove it from ourselves. As the Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) once observed, "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"<sup>3</sup>

But Jesus came to take away our sin and our guilt. He came to be destroyed in our place. He also came to give us new hearts, to give us the Holy Spirit, who gives us the strength to live the way that we should, to cause us to love God and obey him.

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007), 75.

But notice that in that last song, the servant only takes away the sins of God's people. He bore the sin of many—not all. He causes many—not all—to be accounted righteous. Not everyone benefits from the work of Jesus.

How do we have become part of God's people, so that our sins are removed from us and we are put into the right with God? We need to see that our own torches can't remove our darkness. Our own attempts to feel good will fail, often because they are only superficial. Only Jesus can get to the root of our problems and dig them out.

Recently, I had surgery to repair a hernia. The hernia itself wasn't as bad as it could be. I couldn't see a visible bulge. I wasn't bent over in pain. But it was uncomfortable, and the fact is that once a hernia starts, it doesn't get better on its own. If left alone, it would get worse. In rare cases, it could be life-threatening, though mine wasn't.

I recognized that I had a problem that I couldn't fix. So, I found a doctor who could fix me. I actually saw a couple of doctors who didn't accurately diagnose the problem. But my surgeon did, he told me he could fix it, and I said I wanted that. So, on December 12 I went to the hospital and had the surgery.

Having surgery is a strange thing. You are yielding control of your body to others. They tell you to take off all your clothes and put them in a bag. They give you a little apron to wear and little socks. You lie on a bed, and they put an IV in you. And you wait. Then, when it's your time, they wheel you around on that bed and bring you to the operating room.

It's so strange to be wheeled around in a bed. Usually, when we get in bed, the bed stays where it is. So, it's odd to lie in a bed that's moving. And it's odd to be pushed around, at least when you don't normally have that done for you. I could have walked to the operating room, but I wasn't in control. I realized I couldn't fix myself. I had to give control over to those who could fix me.

Then, they knock you out and the surgeon does his work. I didn't fully understand the surgery, but I didn't need to. I only had to trust that the surgeon could fix me. I had to have faith in his understanding and skill, not in my own.

After surgery, things felt worse. I've improved and I will continue to heal, but the healing doesn't come immediately. Sometimes, in order to be made well, we have to feel worse for a while.

And all of this is a lot like salvation. If we understand that we have a problem we can't fix, and that Jesus alone is the Great Physician who can fix us, we put our trust in him. We yield control of our lives to him. And it might feel like weakness. But what it is is simply facing reality. We are not in control. We can't fix ourselves.

We don't need to know everything about Jesus in order to be fixed. We don't need to know everything about how that salvation works. We simply need to put our trust in Jesus. And when he fixes us, it may feel worse at first. Or, it may feel like instant relief, or perhaps a little bit of both. But Jesus promises to be with us as we heal, and he gives us the Spirit to strengthen us.

Jesus' work isn't finished. Justice has not been established across the whole Earth. But he makes us right with God if we come to him in faith. If we do that, we will listen to the servant of God's voice and obey him. And if we do that, we will find our lives changed.

I urge us all to put our trust in Jesus. Only he can make us right with God. Only he can remove the cancer of sin, taking away our shame and guilt. Only he can give us eternal life. Everything else that we try to make us right is just a band aid. Jesus gets to the root of our problem. Let's turn to him this Christmas.