

To Serve and to Save



SABBATH AFTERNOON

In northern Iraq, near an old Christian monastery, lie small holes in the ground where hermits stayed for decades without coming out, in order to better focus on God.

In the steamy slums of Calcutta, Mother Teresa had a different approach to focusing on God. “Jesus comes to meet us,” she said. “To welcome him, let us go to meet him.

“He comes to us in the hungry, the naked, the lonely, the alcoholic, the drug addict, the prostitute, the street beggars. . . .

“If we reject them, if we do not go out to meet them, we reject Jesus himself.”—*Mother Teresa: In My Own Words*, compiled by José Luis González-Balado (New York: Gramercy Books, 1996), p. 29.

Isaiah spoke of a servant of the Lord with a similar mission of mercy: “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; . . . to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (*Isa. 42:3, 7, NRSV*). Who is this Servant, and what does He accomplish?

The Week at a Glance: How is Christ prefigured in Isaiah? Why is Cyrus deemed a “Messiah”? How are the first and second comings of Jesus meshed in some of these prophecies? What does Isaiah teach us about God’s power to predict the future?

Memory Text: “Here is 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” (*Isaiah 42:1, NRSV*).

**Study this lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 29.*

Servant Nation *(Isaiah 41)*.

In Isaiah 41:8 God speaks of “Israel, my servant,” and in 42:1 he introduces “my servant.” Who is this servant?

Is it Israel/Jacob, the ancestor of the Israelites? The nation of Israel? The Messiah/Christ, identified in the New Testament as Jesus?

There are two kinds of references to servants of God woven through Isaiah 41–53. One servant is named “Israel” or “Jacob,” as in 41:8; 44:1, 2, 21; 45:4; 48:20. Because God addresses Israel/Jacob in the present, it is clear he represents the nation descended from him. This is confirmed by the fact that redemption for the Lord’s “servant Jacob” is accomplished at the time when he is to go out from Babylon (*Isa. 48:20*).

In other instances, such as Isaiah 42:1, 50:10, 52:13, 53:11, God’s servant is not named. When he is first mentioned in Isaiah 42:1, his identity is not immediately apparent. However, as Isaiah develops his profile in later passages, it becomes clear that he is an individual who restores the tribes of Jacob (Israel) to God (*Isa. 49:5, 6*) and dies sacrificially on behalf of sinners (*Isa. 52:13–53:12; see also 49:5, 6*). Therefore he cannot be the same as the nation. So it is clear that Isaiah speaks of two servants of God. One is corporate (the nation) and the other is individual.

What is the role of the servant nation? *Isa. 41:8-20*.

God assures Israel that the nation is still the servant of the Lord: “‘I have chosen you and not cast you off’ ” (*Isa. 41:9, NRSV*). Then God gives to Israel one of the most magnificent promises in the Bible: “‘Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand’ ” (*vs. 10, NRSV*). Here and in the following verses one of the basic roles of Israel is to trust the true God to save them (as King Ahaz did not) rather than to trust in other gods and their images as other nations do (*Isa. 41:7, 21-24, 28, 29*).

Notice how in Isaiah 41:14, the Lord calls the nation a worm. What point is He making? Look at the whole text to get a better answer. What should this teach us, as well, about our need to depend totally upon the Lord?

Unnamed Individual Servant *(Isa. 42:1-7)*.

What is the role and character of God’s unnamed servant, whom God chooses and on whom He puts His spirit? *Isa. 42:1-7*.

Choose the best answer or combination of answers:

1. He provides justice for the nations.
2. He accomplishes his goals quietly and gently, but successfully.
3. He is a teacher.
4. He serves as a covenant between God and the people.
5. He gives light/hope by healing blindness and liberating prisoners.
6. All of the above.

How does the role and character of this servant compare with that of the *shoot from the stump of Jesse*, on whom the spirit of the Lord also rests (*Isaiah 11*)?

As in Isaiah 42, the Davidic ruler of chapter 11 acts in harmony with God, providing justice and deliverance for the oppressed, as well as wisdom and knowledge of God. We found that this *shoot* and *root* of Jesse is the Messiah, the divine child of Isaiah 9:6, 7, who also brings “peace for the throne of David and his kingdom” with “justice and with righteousness” (*vs. 7, NRSV*). The servant in Isaiah 42 is, obviously, the Messiah.

How does the New Testament identify the servant of Isaiah 42:1-7, who provides justice? *Matt. 12:15-21*.

Matthew 12 quotes from Isaiah 42 and applies it to the quiet healing ministry of Jesus, God’s beloved Son, in whom He delights (*Isa. 42:1; Matt. 3:16, 17; 17:5*). It is He whose ministry reestablishes God’s covenant connection with His people (*Isa. 42:6, Dan. 9:27*).

Jesus and His disciples gained justice for people by delivering them from suffering, ignorance of God, and bondage to evil spirits, caused by Satan’s oppression (*Luke 10:19*). Then Jesus died to ratify the “new covenant” (*Matt. 26:28*) and to gain justice for the world by casting out Satan, the foreigner who had usurped the position of “ruler of this world” (*John 12:31-33*).

Look at Isaiah 42:1-4, the depiction of Christ. Spend some time dwelling on the life of Jesus. What specific characteristics of His ministry so aptly fulfilled this prophecy? What lessons can we learn about how we should be ministering to others, as well?

Persian “Messiah” (*Isa. 44:26–45:6*).

What stunning prediction appears in Isaiah 44:26–45:6?

Isaiah’s ministry lasted from about 745 B.C. to about 685 B.C. After mentioning a conqueror from the east and from the north (*Isa. 41:2, 3, 25*) and implying that this was to be good news for Jerusalem (*vs. 27*), Isaiah accurately predicted Cyrus by name and described his activities. He did come from north and east of Babylon to conquer it in 539 B.C.; he did serve God by releasing the Jews from their Babylonian exile; and he did authorize the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (*compare Ezra 1*).

Put this prediction into perspective. Since there are about 146 years from the time of Isaiah’s death to the fall of Babylon, his prophecy was a century and a half ahead of its time. Because the actions of Cyrus are well attested from a variety of ancient sources, including Babylonian chronicles, his own report in the “Cyrus Cylinder,” and the Bible (*2 Chron. 36:22, 23; Ezra 1; Daniel 5; 6:28; 10:1*), the accuracy of Isaiah’s prophecy is beyond dispute. This confirms the faith of people who believe that true prophets receive accurate predictions from God, who knows the future far in advance.

Why does God call Cyrus His “anointed” (*Isa. 45:1*)?

The Hebrew word for “anointed” here is the word from which we get the word “Messiah.” Elsewhere in the Old Testament, this word could refer to an anointed high priest (*Lev. 4:3, 5, 16; 6:22*), an anointed Israelite king (*1 Sam. 16:6; 24:6, 10; 2 Sam. 22:51*), or the Messiah, a future ideal Davidic king and deliverer (*Pss. 2:2; Dan. 9:25, 26*). From Isaiah’s perspective, Cyrus was a future king, sent by God to deliver His people. But he was an unusual messiah, because he was non-Israelite. He would do some things the Messiah would do, such as defeat God’s enemies and release His captive people, but he could not be the same as the Messiah, because he was not descended from David.

By predicting Cyrus, God proved His unique divinity by demonstrating that He alone knows the future (*Isa. 41:4, 21–23, 26–28; 44:26*). He also reached out to Cyrus: “I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name” (*Isa. 45:3, NRSV*).

Think about some other Bible prophecies that have come to pass as predicted (such as all the kingdoms of Daniel 2 except the last, Daniel 7, or regarding the time of Christ in Daniel 9:24–27). What kind of hope do these prophecies offer us as individuals?

Hope in Advance

The fact that Isaiah accurately predicted Cyrus by name disturbs people who do not believe that prophets receive predictions from God. To cope, they accept the theory that a “second Isaiah,” another prophet living in the time of Cyrus, wrote Isaiah 40–66. Thus, the book of Isaiah is “sawn in two,” the same fate traditionally understood to have befallen the prophet himself (*compare Heb. 11:37*).

There is, however, no historical witness to the existence of a second “Isaiah.” If he did exist, it would be strange for the Bible not to mention him, because his message is profoundly important, and his literary artistry is phenomenal. Not even the oldest Bible manuscript, the Isaiah scroll from Qumran, has any break between Isaiah 39 and 40 that would indicate a transition to the work of a new author.

Isaiah’s basic message is consistent throughout his book: Trust the true God, including His messianic Deliverer, rather than other powers. Scholars rightly emphasize the shift in focus from the Assyrian period in Isaiah 1–39 to the Babylonian period in chapters 40 and following. But we have found that Isaiah 13–14 and 39 already envisage a Babylonian captivity. It is true Isaiah 1–39 emphasizes judgment and 40–66 emphasizes consolation. But in the earlier chapters, divine comfort and assurance is abundant also, and later passages, such as Isaiah 42:18-25, 43:22-28, 48:1-11, speak of God’s judgments on Judah for forsaking Him. In fact, Isaiah’s predictions of future comfort imply suffering in the meantime.

Though the nation did face terrible calamity because of their sins, some people among them did not give up hope. They clung to God’s promises, such as found in **Leviticus 26:40-45**. Read the texts carefully. Put yourself in the place of those Hebrews who are alive after the nation’s defeat by Babylon. What hope could you find in these words?

Read once more through Leviticus 26:40-45. What spiritual principle do you see at work in those verses? What is the Lord saying to them there? How does the same principle work in our own lives?

A Feeling and a Suffering Servant

(*Isa. 49:1-12*).

Who is God's servant in Isaiah 49:1-12?

God calls and names him before he is born, makes his mouth like a sword, and will be glorified in him. God uses the servant to bring the nation of Israel back to Himself, to be a light of salvation to all the world, to be a covenant, and to release prisoners. There is plenty of overlap between this description and that of Isaiah 42, where we identified the servant as the Messiah. The New Testament finds the servant's attributes in Jesus Christ, in both comings: *Matt. 1:21; John 8:12, 9:5, 17:1-5, Rev. 1:16, 2:16, 19:15*.

If this servant is the Messiah, why does God call Him "Israel" here (*Isa. 49:3*)?

Earlier we found that in this section of Isaiah, God's servant "Israel/Jacob" refers to the nation. But here the name "Israel" (without a parallel reference to "Jacob") clearly applies to the individual servant, who restores the nation to God (*Isa. 49:5*). The individual servant has become the ideal embodiment or representative of the nation, whose failure has compromised its use of the name "Israel" (*Isa. 48:1*).

What new element appears here? *Isa. 49:4, 7*.

Here is the first intimation of the difficulty involved in the servant's task. He laments, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity" (*vs. 4, NRSV*), an idea echoed in Daniel 9:26: "an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing" (*NRSV*). But he clings to faith: "Yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God" (*Isa. 49:4, NRSV*). Isaiah 49:7 is startling. The servant is "deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers," but God says to him: "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you" (*NRSV*).

Look back at Christ's ministry. Right up until the end, didn't He have reasons for discouragement? Yet, He stayed faithful, despite outward appearances. How are we to do the same—despite outward appearances?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White’s description of Jesus’ healing and teaching ministry in “At Capernaum,” *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 252–261.

“In the work of soul-winning, great tact and wisdom are needed. The Saviour never suppressed the truth, but He uttered it always in love. In His intercourse with others, He exercised the greatest tact, and He was always kind and thoughtful. He was never rude, never needlessly spoke a severe word, never gave unnecessary pain to a sensitive soul. He did not censure human weakness. He fearlessly denounced hypocrisy, unbelief, and iniquity, but tears were in His voice as He uttered His scathing rebukes. He never made truth cruel, but ever manifested a deep tenderness for humanity. Every soul was precious in His sight. He bore Himself with divine dignity; yet He bowed with the tenderest compassion and regard to every member of the family of God. He saw in all, souls whom it was His mission to save.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 117.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** As a class, read over what Ellen White wrote above about how Christ ministered to others. Discuss the principles there and then as a class discuss how well your local church, corporately, reflects those principles.
- 2** Do you know a “bruised reed” or “dimly burning wick” (*Isa. 42:3*)? How can you help this person without “breaking” or “quenching” him or her? In what ways can you point this person to the Lord? What would you tell him or her, in a practical sense, to do, in order to receive healing and help?
- 3** The argument for different authors of Isaiah originated from the premise that people cannot tell the future the way Isaiah did. What is the fundamental problem with this argument, and why, as Christians, must we reject its premise outright?

Summary: Deliverance requires a Deliverer. God’s servant nation would be delivered by two deliverers: Cyrus, who would set the captives free from Babylonian exile, and an unnamed Servant, whose identity as the Messiah is progressively revealed. This Servant would restore justice and bring back the community of survivors to God.

Searching for Souls

J. H. ZACHARY

Dr. M— is a dentist living in a Muslim region. He wanted a more meaningful relationship with Allah, God, and decided to study about Jesus, who is mentioned in the Koran. He studied the Bible with a Protestant minister, but he was puzzled. Why do Christians eat pork? he wondered. After all, both the Bible and the Koran forbid eating unclean meats. And why do they reject the Sabbath? Dr. M— wondered if there were any believers in Jesus who followed all the Bible teachings.

One day he learned about a church that kept the Bible Sabbath. He made an appointment to visit with the church pastor. “I have been a Muslim all my life,” Dr. M— said. “Now I believe that Jesus is the Messiah. I want to worship Allah as the Bible teaches, but it seems that Christians do not follow the Bible. Now I have learned that your church follows the Sabbath that is taught in the Bible, and your members avoid unclean foods. I want to learn more about your beliefs.”

The pastor gladly agreed to study the Bible with Dr. M—, and a year later the former Muslim dentist decided to join the Adventist church.

In his clinic, Dr. M— began to share his testimony with his clients. He asks God to work on their hearts as he works on their teeth. So far the Lord has blessed him with over 170 professions of faith.

One evening Dr. M— invited the pastor to go with him on a special boat trip. When the pastor arrived at the dock, he found the boat crowded with more than one hundred fifty people. The boat made its way down river to a hidden cove, and there by the moon’s dim light, 60 people were baptized in the cold river. The baptism had to be kept secret, because it is against the law to change religions in the country where Dr. M—works. Following the baptism, the group enjoyed a simple breakfast; and as the sun rose, the happy group reboarded the boat and started for home.

Throughout the Muslim world doors of interest in Jesus are opening. Some countries are easier to enter than others, but every Muslim needs to hear that Jesus is the Messiah. Pray for Dr. M— and others who have accepted the gospel and are sharing it with their Muslim friends.

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