

Servant Songs Notes

Context

These passages fall in the Servant section of chapters 40–55. Written to a people in despair, who feel God has failed. Instead God demonstrates He alone is God, the sole creator, and that the Israelites are his chosen servants who will declare His glory to the world (even though they do not deserve to be treated with such mercy). The nation, like Isaiah must be cleansed, and God describes the servant who will restore his wayward people to himself. The section ends with invitations to Israel in ch54–55 to come receive restoration and cleansing, as a result of the suffering of the servant ((52.13–53.12). The people are challenged to experience the righteousness of God. In some places the servant refers to Isaiah, in some it refers to Israel – God’s servant people and in others to Jesus who does what God’s people have failed to do.

Isaiah 42.1-9

In 42.21–24 and 25–29 Isaiah has been exposing the ridiculousness of idols – now we have the contrast with God’s answer to the plight of a world without God. The words of v1 are echoed in Matt3.17 as God declares His pleasure with His son (interestingly before he has even done anything). The servant’s role or mission is of justice, liberation, salvation (6, 9) and making his people a light to the world. The word used for justice also brings the idea of judgement. V7 Sees a picture of spiritual liberation – Jesus never released anyone from a literal prison but liberated many who were in spiritual darkness and prisoners or enslaved to sin and the law. The servant is called and chosen by God, as are all who follow in His service (us). The servant is a warrior (see 13) but his character reflects that of God as we see the gentleness and tenderness with which He carries out his mission (2–3, 6, 7). He does not seek to dominate, advertise himself or dismiss others despite how useless they may seem in the eyes of others. The first 4 verses are also quoted in Matt 12.18–21. The LORD’s aid to His servant is repeated in 6 and His success is predicted. 8+9 are an incredible declaration of God’s intention, sovereignty and glory. In the midst of idolatry there is only one worthy of glory. God is about to do something entirely new and amazing through his servant. Despite being the one to bring global justice the means by which he does that will be with gentleness – we have a lot to learn from this in how we engage with those around us as we continue the mission of the Servant.

Isaiah 52.13-53.12

Some of the best known prophecies regarding Jesus. Take time to allow them to impact you afresh. The servant who will bring justice to the nations is surprisingly also revealed as a suffering servant who will bear the sins of his people. The servant will be lifted up in both senses – exalted to a position of glory but also lifted up on a cross. This must have been baffling for the Jews reading it at the time from Isaiah 42 you would be expecting a great liberator. Just as many will be appalled, many will benefit from his sacrifice. Just as Isaiah’s sin was atoned for in chapter 6 so too must the people’s sin be atoned for. These passages blow out of the water many of the Sunday school images of Jesus and reminds us of the shocking violence of the cross – the means by which our sin is paid for and God adopts us as his children – sharing the rights and privilege of our older brother Jesus. There is nothing remotely attractive

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about Jesus in this description. It may be worth reading in a few translations to give fresh insight. In 53.2-3 the servant is to be human with a traceable human ancestry (shoot, out of a dry ground – remember back to end of Isaiah 6). The pain which Jesus suffered on our behalf is more than physical – these are images of what it must have been like for Jesus to be separated from His Father, to ‘become sin’ – if you like for the holy one to soak up all our sin and rebellion so we could come home to receive the Father’s embrace. Verse 6 points this out clearly. The verbs used throughout paint a picture of what it was like. Throughout we see the submission to what was happening that is evident especially in John which is not weakness but actually control, the voluntary pouring out of his life coupled with the Father’s will. There is so much in these verses about the servant’s identification with us, his intercession for us (12) and the cost of salvation, but with suffering also comes glory, and Jesus is again lifted up – this time to a position of power and majesty. The servant’s suffering for our sin brings healing and restoration, justification (made righteous) and vindication from God. They are also full of contrasts; despite the servant being ‘cut off’ he will see his offspring – hinting at the results of his bringing many sons to glory.

As we follow in the path of our Servant King, we too must share in his suffering – we are called to take up our crosses, to renounce our lives, to expect suffering, and ultimately glory. How too do we respond to the plight of our brothers and sisters across the world being persecuted for their faith (with whom we share more in common than those closest to us who don’t know Jesus).

The Bible Study

There is a lot to take in and reflect on in these passages. It may be necessary to take time to reflect and pray. With the Suffering Servant passages it may be an idea to get people to write prayers of repentance and confession, or to do prayers of thanksgiving for what Jesus has done and to read those out.

It is important to allow the cost of our redemption to sink in, not to make people feel worse but to show the tremendous cost of the cross and what that says about the immense value and worth God places on each of us – that was the price He was willing to pay to adopt us as his children and cleanse us so we could enjoy His love forever.

It’s also important to take time to apply these passages. In appreciating more about who Jesus is, God want us to share His character and His Spirit is at work in us to do that. When we see what (written hundreds of years before Jesus) has already been fulfilled it gives us confidence that God is faithful and will complete the task!

It’s also important to take away some practical goals from this – we continue Jesus mission to bring justice, hope, and liberation in gentleness, with suffering as the ‘badge of our discipleship’ (as Dietrich Bohnhoeffer puts it). How can we with God’s help live out these things among the people around us? Let’s not lose the impact of how Jesus was described – a servant – in serving He demonstrated his love for the Father. How do we serve each other and those around us? What does that say about our love for God and how we are following Jesus? Or do we choose the bits we want to follow in and leave out the others?