

### **The Servant Who Displays God's Splendor**

It probably started out like any other day for John. He was in the wilderness by the Jordan River, preaching and baptizing. All sorts of people came out to him from Jerusalem. He told them that one greater than him was coming. And there, out of the crowd, stepped a man. A seemingly ordinary man. But John recognized him, not just as his relative, but as the Lamb of God, the Savior of the world. After Jesus was baptized by John, the Triune God marked this day as a special occasion. The heavens were torn open, the Spirit descended upon Jesus, and the Father spoke, designating this man as his Chosen Servant: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

The Jews had been waiting for this Chosen One for generations. How did they know he would be coming? Through the prophets, God laid out his plan of a substitute Servant who would win back God's people. Today, we look at one of the prophet Isaiah's Servant Songs, describing who this Servant would be and what he would do. The term "servant" often designated someone like a special agent with a specific task. Isaiah shows how Christ would be the Servant who displays God's splendor in God's planned time and to all people.

When Isaiah first started describing the Servant in his prophecies, he actually named Israel the nation as the Servant. God gave his chosen people a mission. In Exodus 19, God says Israel is to be a kingdom of priests. The men who served as priests to the people acted as go-betweens with God by making sacrifices and doing the temple work. When God called Israel to be a "kingdom of priests," he wanted them to be go-betweens for the nations around them, to be the connector between these foreigners and God. But God's people were failing at maintain the holy standard expected of priests. In chapter 42, Isaiah describes this Servant Israel as blind and deaf. They were ignoring God's ways. Instead of being a light to the nations, they became just as bad – if not worse – than the Gentiles. Because the Israelites turned away from God, he let the Babylonians destroy their country and carry them away to live as exiles.

Israel was incapable of being the perfect Servant that God desired. But we're not just pointing the finger at Israel. By God's Law, all people are led to realize the need for a Savior. The crowds who came out to John heard his call to repentance and cried out, "What should we do then?" This is indeed a desperate need. As we look at the world around us tainted by the curse of sin, we might feel distant from God. If he is so glorious, where is his splendor? Are we supposed to just

keep hopelessly fumbling in the darkness, trying to find our way? Even our best efforts feel like we're laboring in vain – and we can rightly say that! On our own, we would never be the Servant that would give God his due glory.

Thanks be to God that he always had a plan to provide the true Servant. Since the fall into sin, even from eternity, God knew he would give this special mission to the one fully capable to save. Now, Jesus wasn't sent right away. In verse 2, Isaiah describes how the Servant was prepared and hidden for a time. Although Jesus was eternal, God waited to reveal his splendor through this Servant. Through loving discipline, the Father directed hearts to look for the Messiah. The Creator God who controls all things moved history so that the stage was set for his beloved Son to fulfill all the prophecies about this Servant, and so that both Jews and Gentiles were primed to hear the good news. The LORD held this prepared Servant at the ready in his hand until the time had fully come. In the day of salvation, the LORD would send his helper, the true Servant Israel.

God's people might have expected their helper to come in public splendor. Throughout Jesus' ministry, many people were looking for an earthly ruler to restore the nation. Think of how the Magi, the wise men from the East, looked for the new king of Jews in the royal city of Jerusalem. But God sent his Servant in humility. Born in a lowly shelter and placed in a manger. Raised in the town of Nazareth. And when he came to be baptized, Jesus looked like any other man. As a true human being, Jesus didn't always show the full glory of God. But at moments like his baptism, we do get glimpses that show Jesus is also true God. As Isaiah said, the Servant was honored in the eyes of the LORD. The Father spoke those words, naming Jesus as his Son, and with that designation Jesus began the public aspect of his special mission. He would do the Father's will to be what the nation Israel could not. He would be the perfect go-between, the Servant who truly displayed God's splendor.

Jesus would show God's glory throughout his ministry –not in outright, dazzling displays, but by his Word. Notice how God prepared his Servant. The LORD made his mouth like a sharpened sword. He made him into a polished arrow. The Servant was carefully prepared to be this powerful weapon, and his Word, like a double-edged sword, works on our hearts. The Law reminds us of how we've failed as his people. Think of the times that you've hurt your spouse, your children, your friends. You know what it's like to disappoint people. The Law reminds us how we cannot be who God wants us to be, and how we deserve to be separated from God for all eternity. Then, the other side of the blade, the beautiful Gospel, defends us from our enemies of sin, death, and the devil. It deflects their attacks and says that we are God's people, loved and restored. As

he accomplished the mission by proclaiming God's Word fully, the Servant glorified the LORD.

Jesus was gaining glory for God, even when his efforts seemed in vain. In verse 4, Isaiah records the Servant's words: "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing." How could Jesus, the perfect Servant, say that his efforts were all for nothing? As true man, Jesus did express weakness. This isn't to say that Jesus doubted whether his work was worth it. But Jesus was rejected, even by the most educated people of his time. The apostle John says that Jesus' own people, the Jews, did not receive him. Israel, who had been waiting so long, was still blind and deaf! At the end, Jesus was betrayed by a friend, abandoned by his closest disciples, and condemned to a criminal's death. From a human perspective, it seemed that Jesus' efforts were in vain!

But that's only the first part of verse 4! That first part could read, "I *thought* all my effort was in vain," leading into the second part, "but THIS is what's true." The Servant always knew that his true reward was not in worldly gain or earthly splendor, but what was due him was with God. The LORD, who had planned the work of his Servant before he was even born, the one who formed Jesus for just this purpose, God would be his strength for this task. God would bring the believers to Jesus to be that righteous reward.

Isaiah makes it clear that those believers would not just be from the nation Israel. Yes, God does highlight his chosen people. Isaiah speaks of the Servant bringing back Jacob and gathering Israel. God graciously preserved a remnant among his chosen people. While many drifted away, the LORD maintained faith in the hearts of Israel. He continued to keep them so that they could see the fulfillment of his salvation plan. That plan included the islands, the distant nations, the ends of the earth! In the previous chapter, Isaiah told Israel to be free, to leave their captivity in Babylon. They were to announce their redemption with joy and shout it *to the ends of the earth*. Why would the foreign nations want to know about freedom for the little nation of Israel?

Think again about this good news of great joy. God didn't just want people to know a history lesson about how he freed his exiled nation and brought them back to the Promised Land. He was proclaiming spiritual salvation for all peoples! He was giving a light to the Gentiles. Think about how those Magi followed the star above Bethlehem to come worship the King. Jesus, the Servant of Israel, also connected with Gentiles in his ministry. And as he was going into heaven, he commissioned his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. God also appointed Paul as the chosen apostle to these Gentile nations to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

What kind of an all-powerful God would limit himself to saving one nation? God had always planned a big, global mission for his Servant – to bring salvation to all people! In Chapter 40:5, Isaiah foretold that "the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it." God wants his splendor to be displayed to everybody! Because God provided witnesses to the ends of the earth, we too have seen his splendor through the powerful Word. With those who worshipped the infant Christ, with those who witnessed his public ministry, we can proclaim, "My eyes have seen the salvation which God prepared for all people." Because Jesus took on flesh and made his dwelling among us, we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only Servant, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

What is this spiritual salvation that Jesus brings to all people? He grabbed hold of unworthy rebels separated by their sin and brought them to his kingdom of grace. He shines light on those sitting in darkness by giving them understanding of his truth. He proclaims freedom for captives of sin, relief from the burden of guilt, restoration for those who faced destruction, comfort for the oppressed. Just a few verses after our text, Isaiah describes the eternal rest we find in Jesus – no more hunger or thirst, no heat beating down on us. Instead, we will rejoice forever as he leads us to springs of water. All these blessings are ours because the Servant suffered in our place. God is glorified because we are saved.

We started by looking at a simple baptism that displayed God's splendor. The significance of the Servant's baptism gives significance to our humble baptisms. They may just look like a bit of water and some words to the world. But we know that in our baptisms, we are honored in the eyes of the LORD. He speaks to us those powerful words: "You are my child whom I love; with you I am well-pleased." Our God is our strength. We become full-fledged members of God's family. He gives us new life, hope, freedom, and glory. As we contemplate the glory that the Servant displays, he is glorified further as we are given an ever-increasing glory from God. While we, like Israel, were never capable of being the Servant who displays God's splendor, we give thanks that the LORD prepared and provided his Servant at just the right time. We proclaim this good news to the ends of the earth: Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. And you have chosen to use all your goodness to bring salvation to all people. To God be the glory for sending us his Servant! Amen.