

Reading: Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Theme: The Great Servant Introduced.

We usually refer to the 4 Gospels i.e. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Yet some scholars refer to the 5th gospel and by that they mean the book of Isaiah. Whatever we think of their comments, Isaiah shows us much of the Lord Jesus some 800 years before He was on earth! I want us to note 6 things:

1. Kings and Things.

It is 930 - not AM or PM, but BC and the kingdom of Israel divides off from the kingdom of Judah. The northern tribes of Israel quickly sink into idolatry, while Judah has its ups and downs, but mostly go downward. The northern tribes of Israel are destroyed as a kingdom in 722 BC and Isaiah was alive and around to see it. The kingdoms had been separated for almost 200 years and Israel, despite God's warnings, ended up with their foretold destruction.

Isaiah lived in stable days, as for 25-30 years of his life King Uzziah had been reigning and it was a long, peaceful and prosperous reign. Uzziah was viewed as a great king – just like Queen Victoria's reign and our own Queen's reign. As with all sovereigns, Uzziah died and there was great uncertainty as to what would happen, the kingdom of Israel had designs on Judah, as did other kingdoms. In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah had his call to the prophetic office (Isaiah 6).

Isaiah would minister in the reign of three kings and would have known Uzziah too. He saw great changes and threats, as well Israel as destroyed and removed from their land. He also

met some ambassadors from a far distant kingdom that would later destroy Judah - Babylon and he had to speak of that destruction! Isaiah lived in times of confusion and turmoil politically, spiritually, nationally and probably personally. God's people go through such times - we may well be in or may go through such times personally. The constant factor is that the Lord is always with His people.

2. Doom and Hope.

That heading summarises Isaiah's ministry seen throughout his book. Isaiah's name means "*The Lord is salvation*" or "*The Lord saves*". Thankfully his themes also pick up on his name as he declares that people who will not go to the Lord who saves, will be judged and therefore doomed.

When a minister starts in a church, it is with the expectation and prayer that the work will prosper, that God will bless and save people. Isaiah was told that his ministry would be primarily a destructive ministry - it would be to a hard of hearing people and go on until the land was ruined and only a small number remain (*a remnant is a note found in his ministry and writings*). The Lord was going to judge the people and land of Judah because of their failure to follow, love and honour the Lord. Overall, they would go downhill, with a few ups, but the general direction would be ongoingly downhill.

When Israel and Syria threatened the land, Judah did not seek God, but looked for help from Assyria, who destroyed Israel. Then Judah realised they had invited a mad dog to help them

and they also were threatened by Assyria. Judah then looked to Egypt for help and things seemed ok... for a while.

Isaiah had to tell of the judgements the Lord would bring on Judah - chapters 1-35 speak those events and judgements, these happened mainly in his own time and seem to be a message of doom, but notes of hope are spoken of also. Chapter 36-39 is a historical interlude, while chapters 40-60 speak mainly of events after Isaiah's own time, especially the Babylonian captivity - written as if it had already occurred and the Lord's deliverance of Judah from it. These are remarkable prophecies which show us God is the Lord of history and can speak of what will occur, even name the one who would be used to restore His people back to their land some 200 years before it happened.

In Isaiah's writings there is doom and hope, but within the hope, there is interwoven a bigger, a more dramatic hope as Isaiah wrote of the One who is THE Servant of the Lord. The term "servant" is used in this book of Isaiah to speak of Israel, of Judah, of the people of the nation, and of others to, but THE Servant of the Lord comes into focus at specific points in the later part of Isaiah's writings and we have what are termed "*four servant songs*". This One is presented as the hope not only of the people of Judah and Israel who trust in Him, but incredibly of the Gentiles too i.e. the rest of the world who do the same.

In NT, this One comes clearly into focus as being the Lord Jesus. These 4 servant songs show Israel and Judah they needed someone to deliver them and they have revealed to

them this One, all He would take on and how He would deliver them. We will briefly note something of these 4 songs:

3. The Servant Introduced - The 1st Song (Isaiah 42:1-9).

In Matthew 12:18-21 this prophecy is quoted as a fulfilment in the life and ministry of Jesus - the One sent and honoured by God. At the end of Isaiah 41, king Cyrus was presented as the deliverer of Judah from captivity, but here in chapter 42 the Lord presents a greater Deliverer - His Servant and the Lord would uphold, hold His hand (v6), He is the One in whom He delights and His Spirit would be upon Him. What a One is presented and all this is fulfilled in Christ as He would bring justice to the nations. He is not going to make a fuss and try to get attention to Himself, but He would point all to God. Yet even with such power He is nevertheless careful, gentle and tender as we see in v3a "*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.*" Thankfully this One is still the same and when we feel useless, done in, He will not crush us, destroy us or chuck us out as a piece of rubbish and useless, but He will gently work in us and restore us.

He will always be faithful and can be relied upon to do that which is right. He has the strength and power to do this. Although He is a servant, He is also King and His law and teaching will be that which the islands, the coastlands will wait for, hope for, wait expectantly for (NASB). A further 2 themes are picked up in v5-9 that reinforce what has already been said of the Servant - one relates to the character God and the other to the mission of the Servant. The creator, the sovereign Lord God speaks and commissions this Servant to

His work. He is to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles - here we have teaching on a wider covenant than with Judah alone, as it encompasses the covenant of redemption.

The Lord Jesus points John the Baptist to v7 after John questions if He is the One to come or if they were to look for another (Matthew 11:5). In v8- 9 we have important verses, as they tell us that God was at work for His own glory and would replace old things and put the new in place (*the theme of the book of Hebrews*). That is a very brief summary of the first servant Song. See now:

4. Toil and Frustration -The 2nd Song (Isaiah 49:1-7).

Not only is this one named before His birth, (7:14 = *Immanuel*), but was called before His birth. Even before He arrived, His mission and work were given Him and He is to declare God's message, which would be sharp and pointed. He is clearly identified with Israel as He would be made her representative and labour and work for the people.

Yet despite His calling, His status, His working for the people, He would labour and be frustrated as they would not want Him, but reject Him (John 1:11), yet His work would be to bring Israel back to God (v5). Even though He would work and be seemingly frustrated, yet the Lord would keep and strengthen Him, so much so that His work would be enlarged (v6) and the salvation of the Lord (*the meaning of Isaiah's name*) is going to reach the ends of the earth, all peoples. It is not exclusively Israel; but all peoples will know the salvation of God. Matthew develops this theme in his gospel. The One

who would toil and be frustrated, will be given great honour (v7).

What about us? How do we see the Servant of the Lord? The Lord Jesus offers to us His salvation freely and openly. Have we made sure this Saviour is ours? We should do, for God has highly honoured Him and so should we.

5. Fury Accepted - The 3rd Song (Isaiah 50:4-9).

This Servant, is so glorious, so honoured and doing God's bidding that we would expect He would be listened to and honoured for He obeyed God. Yet in the 2nd Song we noted He has a frustrating reception - He is despised and abhorred (49:7). Now in these verses we have something of the fury which will be levelled against this One. Even though He spoke with a God instructed tongue, that is able to sustain the weary and He taught of God. He is not rebellious against God for He has total commitment to God and all His ways. The Lord Jesus could say He did the Father's will. Despite that He would suffer and be willing to do so, even on the eve of His fullest sufferings, He accepts the cup from His Father. In v6 we see a glimpse of His suffering.

Yet He is determined to go on, for He knew that in spite of all this, He will have God's help and He will not be disgraced (v7), so is determined to go on and obey the Lord. He has a trust and confidence in God. This is a challenge and an encouragement for us to do the same. Finally, we see:

6. Suffering and Glory - The 4th Song (52:13-53:12).

Here is this amazing song of the Servant. It does not specifically give us anything new about the Servant, but it elaborates and opens up on what has been mentioned, hinted at in earlier songs and the Servant is presented as the Deliverer: as is the Way in which He will deliver his people.

One writer (Joachim Jeremias) says *“No other passage from the OT was as important to the church as Isaiah 53”* Jesus Himself quoted 53:12 in Luke 22:37 *“It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment.”* In many things He said, we can trace references back to this Servant Song. The NT writers refer to at least 8 different verses from Isaiah 53: John 12:38 = v1; Matthew 8:17 = v4; Peter in 1 Peter 2:22-25 picks up on v5, v6, 9 & 11. Philip approached the Ethiopian eunuch as he is reading this passage in Acts 8:30ff and in v35 we read *“Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.”* Many others have suggested that the various NT statements about Jesus being rejected, or taken away, are referring to Isaiah 53. Rooted in Isaiah 53 is also His death, being buried as a criminal, His silence before His judges, His intercession for transgressors and the laying down of His life.

One Bible scholar, John Stott, has said *“Every verse of the chapter except v2 is applied to Jesus in the NT, some verses several times. Indeed, there is good evidence that Jesus’ whole public career, from His baptism through His ministry, sufferings and death to His resurrection and ascension, is seen as a fulfilment of the pattern foretold in Isaiah 53.”*

Up until now, this sermon has been the introduction to set the scene, the lie of the land in preparation for a series on this 4th Servant Song. I will be following the careful construction of the song, which consists of 5 parts or stanzas of 3 verses each, which begins and ends with the servant's exaltation and glory in parts 1 (52:13-15) and 5 (53:10-12); parts 2 (53:1-3) and 4 (53:7-9) give us a detailed description of the Saviour's rejection and at the centre of this construction - the 3rd part or stanza (53:4-6) focuses specifically on the atoning work of Christ.

With this little structure, when I am preaching here, it will take us through this song and I hope to finish it off on Easter Sunday evening. It is such a big passage, with enormous truths of our Lord Jesus, so I ask you to especially pray that I'll be given grace, help and insight to be able to present our Saviour in a right way, so that first of all I as the preacher, as well as you as hearers will gain much benefit and many blessings in viewing our Saviour in this glorious Servant song.