

# The Promise of Global Justice

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[ 0 : 00 ] So, imagine that you have been torn from your home, dragged out, you and your family, you've been beaten, abused, you've seen some of your neighbours killed.

And now you're in the back of a van to a country you've never been to, and you will never see your home again. All you know is that your homeland is in ruins and the smoke is rising from the centre of the city.

And that you are probably the lucky one. That scenario captures something of the horror of the exile.

The exile is a turning point in the Bible story. It's the moment when God's people lost the land that God had promised to them and went into exile in Babylon.

It was a time for God's people of soul-searching and grief. But it wasn't unexpected. The prophets, God's messengers to his people, had said that if God's people didn't return to him, then God would send them away.

[ 1 : 06 ] Isaiah was one of those prophets ringing the warning bells. Few listened, and God, patient though he had been, was true to his word.

But the exile wasn't the end of the story. God still had plans for his people. And more broadly, plans for the whole world.

And this is where, in the flow of Isaiah, the servant songs come in. Four songs which we find in Isaiah's prophecy, which are going to be our focus over the next four Sundays.

Now, the second half of Isaiah's frankly mammoth book is all about comfort. Comfort for those who will one day be living in exile.

Chapter 40 of Isaiah, which begins that section, begins, Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. And interspersed through this section of Isaiah are these four songs, the servant songs.

[ 2 : 07 ] So named because they speak of a servant that God is going to send to make things right. In the darkness of this exile, God was promising hope.

Not an abstract, indefinable kind of hope, but a very solid hope tied to a person that God was going to send. And these songs are not limited to the exiles in Babylon.

Because as the songs themselves play their music, we're going to see that the servant God was planning to send had a much wider remit than this group of exiles in the 6th century BC.

Because the exile was a dark time, but it was symptomatic of a wider, deeper, and indeed darker problem. This world, though full of beauty and joy and laughter, is also full of pain and suffering and tears.

The world can be a harsh place. And so the servant songs of Isaiah have a pertinent relevance to all of us today. Because they are for the whole world.

[ 3 : 22 ] They are, in fact, like a manifesto. A statement of intent. A blueprint that describes God's servant and what he will do. This is the servant manifesto.

It's God's promise to the whole world to make things right through the work of his chosen servant. And whilst we might be tempted to take political manifestos in our day and age with a pinch of salt, probably rightly so, when God makes a pledge to do something, it's worth paying attention to. Even if you don't believe in him. Perhaps especially if you don't believe in him. Because it's a pledge that you can then hold God to and investigate. The pledge that's made in this first song is a promise of global justice.

We find it in Isaiah 42, which we've just had read. And I want to explore it with two very simple questions. The first one, Who is the servant? And the second, Why did God send him?

So who is the servant? To cut to the chase, the servant is Jesus. In his gospel, Matthew quotes this song and applies it very directly to Jesus.

[ 4 : 38 ] So in short, this song is all about him. But we're not going to leave it there. Otherwise, we're doing a great disservice to the richness of this song. Let's listen to the first line.

Verse one, God speaking, Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.

This is a call from God to see his servant. To see that this servant is distinctive. God supports him absolutely.

God has chosen him. He is the chosen one. And he is the one in whom God delights. God is so close to this servant, that God's own spirit comes upon him.

And that spirit allows him to bring justice to the whole world. In just one verse, we've got so many ideas packed really tightly together there. And these are ideas that are drawing on a rich history that we find in the Bible.

[ 5 : 43 ] The notion of God having a chosen servant is not new. In particular, we might draw attention to figures like Adam or Moses or Joshua or David.

Old Testament figures who have come before. Because these individuals experienced a closeness with God and a commission. A commission of servant leadership that for a time they all fulfilled. And at their best, these were individuals who modeled what it looks like to be God's servant. To lead God's people in selflessness and wisdom.

To love God and neighbor. To hate sin and evil. And to promote God's goodness and justice. And the people of Israel themselves were described as God's servant.

They were to do all of those things as a nation. A nation that called the rest of the world to know God. Isaiah himself actually leans into this.

[ 6 : 46 ] In chapter 1, God says, Now this raises a perfectly valid question.

If Israel is described as God's servant in Isaiah chapter 41. Well, why would Israel not be the servant in view in Isaiah chapter 42? And what it all comes down to is Israel's failure to be the servant.

Later on in chapter 42, God's going to say this. Who is blind but my servant? And deaf like the messenger I send. Who is blind like the one in covenant with me?

Blind like the servant of the Lord? You have seen many things, but you pay no attention. Your ears are open, but you do not listen. And if you read further on, you'll see that there God is speaking very clearly to Israel about Israel.

They had a commission to be God's servant. But they failed in it. They refused to listen. They wanted to be their own masters. And that's not what we see in this first servant song, is it?

[ 7 : 57 ] But here, we see someone who is gentle, faithful, and just. Someone who doesn't resist his servant nature. He will not shout out or cry out or raise his voice in the streets.

He's quiet. He's not domineering or forceful. He's not a demagogue standing on a soapbox shouting for support. He's not a culture warrior looking to get more views and more followers through increasingly incendiary rhetoric.

He is meekness and gentleness personified. A bruised reed he will not break. And a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

He's caring. He's compassionate. He doesn't disregard the weak and the helpless. Those who feel like a snapped branch, he will bandage up.

Those who feel like a candle in the wind, he will shelter and nurture back to a full flame. He truly loves his neighbor and would even love his enemies.

[ 9 : 04 ] In faithfulness, he will bring forth justice. He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on the earth. He stands for justice.

He stands for truth. And though he is gentle, he's no pushover. The words to falter and be discouraged that we have there, those are exactly the same words used to describe the bruised reed and the smoldering wick.

The servant may be gentle, but he's not going to be snuffed out and he won't be bruised. He is gentle, but he's also strong. The servant is not Israel because Israel never did and never could live up to such a description.

Israel failed. But where Israel failed, Jesus comes as the servant of God to fulfill their task. To illustrate, it's a little like Gandalf's return in the Lord of the Rings.

So his fellow wizard, Saruman the White, has turned to evil. And when Gandalf appears for the first time since his companions have seen him plunge to his death, he's clad not in gray as he had been

before, but now in white.

[10:19] And he says to his perplexed companions, yes, I am white now. Indeed, I am Saruman. One might almost say, Saruman as he should have been.

Jesus, one might say, is Israel as Israel should have been. But to do what? Well, to bring justice to the world.

We get told as much three times in four verses. He will bring justice to the nations. He will bring forth justice. He establishes justice on earth.

So you can see that this song is meant for more people than just sixth century exiles. The scope here is truly global. Because the problem is global.

A global absence of justice and goodness. But how do you bring justice to an entire world?

[11:19] Even in this age of globalization where our communications technologies have never been better, the idea seems frankly radical in its impossibility. Yet the song makes the proclamation.

In his teaching, the islands will put their hope. That is to say, even the furthest corner of the world will put its hope in the servant of the Lord and his teaching.

What is his teaching? Well, it's nothing less than the good news which Jesus came to enact and teach. What Christians call the gospel.

What is this hope? What is this gospel? Well, the gospel promise is ultimately a promise of global justice. A promise of a world that has been fixed.

A world without injustice. A world without tears. And that promise is rooted in Jesus, God's servant. The world can be a pretty dark and unjust place, can't it?

[12:27] In Ukraine, shells are falling and cities lie ruined. And the orchestrator of the war seems to face no real repercussions. America is reckoning with yet another school shooting.

And there's no sign that this terrible trend is going to stop. And those are just two very obvious and shocking examples of the darkness in our world. But there are countless injustices happening every single day, even in our own city.

Abuses of power, abuses of trust, abuses of systems, abuses of people. And we all know this, don't we? Injustice is inherent.

And the easiest thing to do is to ignore it. Some will fight against various injustices and abuses that proliferate our culture. It's a lot of effort, though.

And you can't fight them all. And it just seems like an endless task. It's like Sisyphus from Greek mythology, who was forced to push a rock up a hill for all eternity. Every time you reached the top of the hill, the rock would roll back down to the bottom.

[13:35] And the task would begin again. And so why bother? Isn't the easiest thing just to retreat into our work? To retreat into our echo chamber of social media?

To retreat into the endless stream of content and entertainment? Injustice might provoke our outrage, briefly. But what can we do? Might as well just watch a rerun of Friends and forget about the darkness and frustrations of the world.

Right? Or perhaps there is a better way. Perhaps there is a solution. And so already we've begun to think about that second question.

Why did God send his servant? And we might pose another alongside it. If God has already sent his servant, what did the sending of Jesus actually achieve?

Because the world's problems seem to be unresolved. They may perhaps have got even worse. So how are we to measure the success of the servant's work, considering we're told about his intentions to bring global justice in this song?

[14:42] Now we've noticed the sorry state of our world. As Christians, we believe that this world has a creator. And part of why God has sent his servant Jesus is because as the creator, he cares about his creation.

The second part of the song starts in verse 5. It reads, God's identity as the creator is really emphasized here.

And it suggests rather strongly that the sending of his servant is connected to his role as creator of the world. It's because he's the creator that he's sending his servant.

And the servant's work is going to impact the whole of creation. In fact, the servant is going to be a covenant for all people across the whole world.

The song continues as God speaks to his servant here. I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness. I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.

[16:04] Clearly, God is with his servant in an unprecedented way. And the servant is going to be a covenant for the people. Now, whenever the Old Testament talks about God and his covenants, it almost always refers to God being in covenant relationship with his people, Israel.

A covenant relationship with God implies a special relationship with God. A relationship whereby God makes you his own, his chosen possession.

It means the God of the universe knows you and cares for you. He's looking out for you and expects you to live for him. And that was the relationship that historically Israel had enjoyed.

So what's notable here is that the people the servant is going to, the people he was going to become a covenant for, are not Israel, are not the exiles that are reading this.

The servant is going to the Gentiles. That is, everyone who is not Israel. And the notion of God having a covenant relationship with all the peoples of the world and not just Israel, it wasn't a popular one.

[17:16] We see that in the Jews of Jesus' day. When you read through the Bible story, you see that God's plan has always been a worldwide one.

Israel's function in the story was to call the whole world to know God. But when they failed, the servant was sent to make a covenant with every person who would put their faith and hope in him. And this starts to get at some of these questions that we've raised so far. Because without the servant, without Jesus, the world and all its people live outside of a relationship with God, outside of the covenant.

And why is the world outside of God's covenant? And to return to some of our earlier thoughts, why is the world such a dark and depressing place? Well, the answer to both these questions is the same.

And it's given in the rest of the song. The answer is sin and idols. So let's expand on those ideas. What is sin?

[18:24] Well, the song gives us these rather poetic ways of thinking about sin. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Sin is blindness. Sin is darkness. Sin is prison. Sin. We often think of sin as the things we do, and that's not wrong.

It's certainly the primary way our culture would understand the concept of sin if asked. But it's more than that. Sinful action has its root in a state of sin. Sin is first and foremost a state of being, or rather, I suppose, a state of non-being.

Paul tells the Ephesians, you were dead. You were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.

So sin, that's the state that we're all born into, this state of death, this state of non-being, non-life. And it's the reason that people do bad things.

[19:37] It's the reason we ourselves do bad things. It's the reason we ourselves are unable to stop ourselves from doing bad things, no matter how hard we try.

Sin is the root problem in the world. Sin is what keeps us out of covenant with God. Sin is why we live in a world of global injustice.

Sin is why bad things happen and why people do bad things. Sin is why we live in a world of global justice. Sin is the seemingly insurmountable problem of human nature. And if that's the problem, if that's the scale of the problem, well, maybe just sticking on another episode of Friends is the most sensible course of action.

Because that scale of that problem is beyond any of us, beyond anyone. Well, almost anyone. It's not beyond God's servant.

And this is why Jesus was sent. To bring global justice by dealing with the problem of sin. But in our sinfulness, we tend not to want him.

[20:50] The world resists him. And people would rather seek solutions in their own, seek solutions for their problems in other places and in themselves. In the past, most people went to other gods, idols.

And in our culture, we still have them. Though they might look rather different. And God says, I am the Lord. That is my name. I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols. Idols, at best, offer very small rewards. They're created when we elevate our desires to become our focus and our hope. They're often plural because we like to put our eggs in multiple baskets, after all.

And they are, in short, what people worship. Sometimes these are good causes that take up every ounce of our energy. Sometimes these are simple base desires like sex, money, and prestige. Sometimes these are people, our families, or our children. And the list, this is frankly endless. And the idols that we choose never deliver, even on their own small promises.

[ 21 : 55 ] Our idols lead us to think that God is not the solution to our personal problems or the worldwide problems that we see. Idols claim those titles.

And this is the blindness of sin. The idea that God being the solution is by nature anathema to us. We'd rather that solution to all our problems was rooted instead in ourselves.

We're like a child wanting to build a city out of Lego but too young to read the instructions and too stubborn to ask a grown-up for help. And the city that ends up being built is messy and chaotic. You might see something of what it's meant to look like, but it's a parody of the design that appears on the box. And if I might stretch this analogy just a little bit further, when God sends his servant, it's like the dad who sends the older brother to come alongside the younger and fix things, to rebuild the city and make things right.

And so we've got two choices. We've got the choice of the chaotic and unjust city of man on the one hand, or we could choose the perfect city of God.

[ 23 : 10 ] But where is this city of God? Did the servant succeed? Did Jesus fix anything? We've already said things still look pretty bleak out there in the world.

Well, the answer put simply is yes. Jesus went straight to the root of the problem. And what he dealt with is that root issue of sin.

Now, how Jesus dealt with sin is something that we're going to look at in more detail as we look at the other servant songs and as we work through this series. But the point I want to make just now is that Jesus didn't fail.

The servant did what he came to do. And that promise of global justice still stands. But we've yet to see it fully outworked.

Let me illustrate using one of Jesus' own illustrations. The kingdom of God or the city of God is like the tiniest seed. And the tiniest seed in a wide green field looks practically invisible.

[ 24 : 16 ] But when that seed is planted, well, that's when the magic starts to happen, isn't it? Slowly but surely, the seed grows. It grows and grows as the seasons cycle and the years turn.

Until one day, it is a mighty tree and the birds are coming to make their nests in its branches. The kingdom of God has come and his kingdom is a kingdom of global justice.

When Jesus came to earth, he dealt with the sin problem and he promises that all the effects of that problem will, one day and in time, be dealt with too.

See, says God, the former things have taken place and the new things I declare. Before they spring into being, I announce them to you.

Some of those new things are still to come for us. Sin has been dealt with for anyone who puts their trust in Jesus and for those same people. There is a promise of a new world, free from all darkness and injustice.

[ 25 : 23 ] And the evidence for this is in the new life that you experience when you start following Jesus. You become a new creation being prepared for a global new creation.

As Paul said to the Corinthian Christians, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here.

And God himself promises at the very end of Isaiah, see, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.

This is the work of the servant. He brings new creation to broken, sinful people, us. And he promises new creation to the heavens and the earth.

And the evidence for the new earth is in the new creation that we can now experience in our own lives. The seed has been sown.

[ 26 : 31 ] The harvest is about to come. And so, as we close, there are three implications of all this that I'd like to finish with. The first is this, believe.

nothing and no one will fix the problems of this world except Jesus. He is the only solution. There are no others. Put your hope in him and you will not be disappointed. The second implication is this, tell. If you know Jesus and if you believe that he is promising global justice and a new creation, be bold in that belief.

Don't be afraid to say that your hope for yourself and this entire world rests in Jesus. Be confident in your hope.

And the last implication is this, sing. You'll notice that as Isaiah continues, the response to this song is to respond in the song.

[ 27 : 41 ] Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth. If Jesus has brought a future of global justice and he has, what better way can we respond to him but in song?

It's a wonderful, simple way to respond to his promises which are absolutely firm and sure. true.

The work of the servant has built for us a future in the city of God.

So let's sing with one voice, a voice of worship and thankfulness and hope because of all that the servant has achieved for us.

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