

The Promise of a King

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[0 : 00] So Benjamin Disraeli, he was one of Queen Victoria's prime ministers. He once famously said, I must follow the people. Am I not their leader?

It's a rather good quip. And I think it underlines an interesting dynamic of leadership in the modern world. We choose our leaders and they ultimately dance to the tune of what they deem to be popular, not necessarily what they deem to be right.

But what if what the people want isn't what is best? Do we always choose wisely? Do we ever choose wisely? I assume that we all want wise and strong leadership that embodies principles of truth and goodness.

Why is it then that we so rarely see that kind of leadership? Perhaps we need a leader who doesn't follow the people and their whims, and a leader who doesn't follow their own whims and delusions. You imagine if we could have a leader who truly embodies goodness. And instead of following the people who don't necessarily make wise decisions, the people follow him and trust him because he can be trusted, has the people's best interests at heart, and manages to deliver on his promises and give the people what they really need.

[1 : 23] A leader who not only asks his people to follow him, but actually deserves that people should follow him. Imagine a leader like that. We're working through the servant songs of Isaiah.

These are four songs that sing of the servant that God sent to fix the world. Four songs that sang about Jesus hundreds of years before he was born.

Songs which explained his mission and his character. A servant manifesto promising a changed world through the work of God's humble servant.

We're in Isaiah 49, which we just had read. That's the second song. And it's a song which envisions the entire globe and its leaders recognizing God's servant as their king.

The true and perfect leader the world has been waiting for. Last week we looked at the first one and we were thinking about how the coming of Jesus promises global justice.

[2 : 26] And that idea is very much underlining everything that we see in this song. Where this second song develops things is that it's starting to push us to respond to the servant himself.

And Isaiah is starting to show us more clearly what the fruits of his work is going to look like. The song is, first and foremost, a wake-up call. It begins in verse 1.

Listen to me, you islands. Hear this, you distant nations. Listen up, world. This is important, says the servant. This is who I am. This is why I'm coming.

This is what I'm going to do. And this is what the end result will be. Are you ready for what's about to come? Are you prepared to follow the servant king? We're going to think about three key distinctives that mark out Jesus as the servant and distinguish him from all other leaders.

Those are, the servant is a secret weapon. The servant is salvation. And the servant is our sovereign. And they're up on the screen there. So the servant is a secret weapon.

[3 : 32] The servant is calling here to the entire world, urging them to listen as he tells them who he is. And that's the image we have at the start of this song. His song is playing on every airwave, on everyone's Spotify, on everyone's phone, TV, computer, Alexa, or Google Nest.

And then, when all the world is listening, the servant starts telling us about himself. In the first song, the servant was being described by the sender, by God the Father.

Now we're hearing him through his own words. And you'll notice that he speaks in the past tense.

And though these songs, when they were written, were speaking about a future reality, that future is so sure that we hear the servant speaking about this future as if it's already happened.

And he begins with an autobiography of sorts. I confess I don't read much biography, but I'm pretty sure that most of them don't begin in the womb. But that's where the servant starts.

Before I was born, the Lord called me. From my mother's womb, he has spoken my name. What this tells us is firstly that Jesus is a man.

[4 : 46] He is fully human. But it also tells us that though Jesus was a human, he is very different to other people. He was born with a destiny, a specific purpose.

Ashton and I have just finished reading through Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. The plot of that book largely centers around a prophecy that marks Harry Potter out as the chosen one. And it's a trope that we see all across literature and film. And I suspect that it's because it captures something of a reality. The Bible tells us that all of history is oriented around the coming of the man, Jesus Christ.

Everything before he was born was building up to his arrival. Everything after is about reckoning with what he did on earth and anticipating him coming again.

He is the true chosen one. Born to be a servant in order to fix the world. The servant can speak about being called before he was born.

[5 : 51] Because he was born for a particular purpose. Every birth is important. Every life is a wonder. But Jesus' birth was a turning point in history.

In fact, he was God's secret weapon to transform all that is wrong in this world and make it right. Listen to how the servant describes himself.

He made my mouth like a sharpened sword. In the shadow of his hand he hid me. He made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.

The servant here, he's continuing to speak about God preparing him and fashioning him for a task. And the metaphors, I think, are rather striking. His lips are like a sharp sword, ready to cut with precision and power.

And he's like a polished arrow. And a polished arrow is much more likely to hit its target than an unpolished one. He has been prepared as a weapon that will strike at the heart of the problem.

[6 : 58] And the problem, as we saw last week, is sin. But he's waiting. When Isaiah was writing, Jesus hadn't yet been born. He remained hidden.

A secret weapon concealed in the shadow of God's hand, hidden like an arrow in a quiver. Until the time came for Jesus to be born. And when he was born, he didn't come as a conqueror.

He came as a servant. Notice that though he is, in a sense, God's weapon, it's his mouth that's been isolated for special attention. It is Christ's message that cuts at the heart of our sin.

It's his words that lead us to the light. His words, ultimately, are to display the splendor of God and call people back to him.

Verse 3. He said to me, you are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor. Now, Israel, God's people in the Old Testament, they were supposed to display God's splendor.

[8 : 04] But as we looked at last week, they failed. Jesus came to do what they could not. And much, much more. When Jesus began his work on earth, he began by teaching and calling people back to the God that they had rejected.

Mark tells us at the very start of his gospel, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come, he said. The kingdom of God has come near.

Repent and believe the good news. We live in a time of many words. We have unprecedented access to so many works of literature.

We're able to share our thoughts and opinions all across the world in less than a second. We're drowning in opinions and drowning in content. In that sea of content, Jesus is a sharp sword that cuts through all the rubbish.

He's a pointed arrow that hits at the bullseye of our problems with terrifying accuracy. God's secret weapon is Christ and his message.

[9 : 16] His manifesto for a world that has rejected him yet needs him. A world mired by sin. All leaders have a message. And they all purport to have the solution to our problems.

Austerity, taxes, tax breaks. Brexit, not Brexit. Leveling up. Tighter immigration. More immigration. Single market or international trade deals. Public ownership.

Privatization. The return of imperial measurements. You get the picture. But the problems never really go away, do they? And the root problem especially lies unresolved and unconsidered.

Because today it's not really a popular opinion. And the root problem is sin. We saw that last week. Our separation from God. Our inherent sinfulness.

And the presence of all kinds of sorrow and grief. We see in a world steeped in evil and injustice. And no government or leader can fix that.

[10:18] This is why we need Jesus. This is why we need the servant. Because the servant is salvation. That's us on to our second point.

I think it's probably fair to say in contemporary politics, personality matters more than policy. And rhetoric more than reason. People vote less for parties than they do for people.

The individual has become the manifesto. When it comes to political leaders, this is probably less than helpful. After all, the Bible counsels us not to put our trust in princes.

But with Jesus, well, he actually is the manifesto. The difference is that his work is perfect and his humility absolute.

Jesus is not just a message of salvation from the root problem of sin. He actually is that salvation. But here's the issue.

[11:13] Jesus' death on a cross in first century Palestine doesn't look like a world-beating solution to anything. It looks like defeat.

It looks from a casual observer's point of view like the servant failed and that all his work was in vain. People want to follow strength.

That's why the message of a crucified Messiah was so radical. And when you think about it, it still is. These are the words of the servant about his work. But I said, I have labored in vain.

I've spent my strength for nothing at all. I think this captures something of what we see at the cross.

Jesus had been flogged, been forced to carry the instrument of his death up a hill.

And had been crucified. A shameful way to die for a Jew and a painful way to die for anyone. He had been persecuted by the religious establishment. Failed by Roman justice.

[12:16] Betrayed by one of his friends. Denied by another. And abandoned by all the rest. And on the cross he cried out, My God, my God.

Why have you forsaken me? Now you've got to be honest. This neither looks like victory or the kind of leader that the world needs.

From a human perspective. But listen to what Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthian church. He tells the Corinthians, The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

But to us who are being saved. It is the power of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom. And the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Which is why the servant can also say, Yet what is due to me is in the Lord's hand. And my reward is with my God. Because the work of the servant and his death on the cross, Whilst it looks like pitiful weakness, And it looks like Jesus failed.

[13:22] And indeed that's what the disciples thought. Well actually, Jesus knew exactly what was going on. He knew exactly what the cross would bring. The greatest victory.

And the greatest reward. Jesus' reward was the world. Before the cross, Jesus' followers had expected that Jesus would bring great things for Israel.

That expectation is captured in verse 5 of the song. And now the Lord says, He who formed me in the womb to be his servant, To bring Jacob back to him, And gather Israel to himself. For I am honoured in the eyes of the Lord, And my God has been my strength.

And Jesus had, indeed, Been sent to rescue Israel. Remember, The original readers of this song Were themselves Israelites Who'd been carted into exile in Babylon.

Israelites who needed salvation from their oppressors. But Jesus' reward for the cross was much, much bigger. Because he came to bring salvation from a much darker force.

[14:29] He came to bring salvation from the root problem, From sin. And sin is a worldwide problem. So God says to his servant in verse 6, It is too small a thing for you to be my servant, To restore the tribes of Jacob, And bring back those of Israel I have kept.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, That my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. And here I think an alternative translation captures the force of that last line there.

Because it's not just that God is bringing salvation to every corner of creation, Though that is absolutely true. It's that the servant himself is that salvation.

Jesus is the manifesto. Jesus is salvation. And what's interesting, Is then how the New Testament goes on to pick up on these ideas and these verses.

So Paul and Barnabas, two of the early Christians, They were in Pisidian Antioch, which is in modern day Turkey. And they were telling Jews about Jesus. But the Jews didn't want to hear about

it.

[15 : 41] So the apostles responded to them, Saying, We have to speak the word of God to you first, Since you reject it, And do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life.

We now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us. Gentiles being non-Jews. And here, Paul and Barnabas quote from the song in Isaiah 49.

I have made you a light for the Gentiles, That you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

When the Gentiles heard this, They were glad and honored the word of the Lord.

And all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. So notice then, That Paul and Barnabas saw the practical application of this song, Is to tell people about Jesus.

Because it follows that, If we believe that Jesus was sent to be the salvation of the whole world, Then the whole world has to hear. And when we see this song applied like this, We start to unlock a broader understanding of these songs.

[16 : 53] Who are they about? Jesus. He is the primary focus of each song. Jesus is the servant because God's people in the Old Testament failed to be.

But here's where it gets interesting. God's people in the New Testament, Which includes Christians today, We're all united to Christ. The very spirit of Christ dwells in those of us who believe.

What this means is that we are now, Because of Christ, And because of Christ dwelling in us, A light for those who don't yet know Christ. With the message of the gospel, And the power of the spirit, We're able to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

Jesus is the servant. But for those who are united to him, They are called to follow his pattern of service. The servant songs are a manifesto, Rooted very much in the person of Christ.

But they're also a call to follow him, And model his servant attitude, And his servant mission to a world, Shrouded in the darkness of sin. To illustrate, Imagine you're living in a land controlled by a despot.

[18 : 09] You live in slavery at the mercy of a tyrant. But this is all you've ever known. This is life. In fact, you've been conditioned to love the tyrant, And don't even realize the travesty of the life that you have.

But then suddenly, Everything changes. The tyrant is overthrown by a king. And this new king has released you from slavery, And brought peace and prosperity to your land.

You realize that that old life that you had was characterized by darkness. Your old life was a shadow of the life that you now have under the king's rule.

But the king isn't content just to free you and your people. No, he's got a mission to bring his salvation to the rest of the world.

And he instructs you to be a part of that. You know it won't be easy. But you also know how important it is for people to be freed from their blindness and their slavery.

[19 : 09] You know that people need the rule of the king. The world needs Jesus. The world needs salvation.

The world needs its king. And this leads us into our final point. That the servant, Jesus, is our sovereign.

The idea of a king doesn't really reflect modern leadership trends, does it? The idea of a king, especially a world king, it sounds rather anti-democratic and imperialist.

But our problem is that we struggle to conceive of a perfect king. History is littered with hordes of imperfect leaders. And the more powerful leader, often the more authoritarian and cruel their leadership.

What we need is King Jesus. What we need is Jesus' kingdom. What we need is a sovereign who is also a servant. And this is exactly what Isaiah is showing us at the climax of this song in verse 7.

[20 : 14] This is what the Lord says. The Redeemer and Holy One of Israel. To him who was despised and abhorred by the nation. To the servant of rulers. Kings will see you and stand up.

Princes will see and bow down. Because of the Lord who is faithful. The Holy One of Israel who has chosen you. When Jesus came, he was despised.

Those in authority didn't recognize that he was the one true king. Herod tried to have him killed as a baby. Worried that a rival king had been born. And Pilate mocked him asking, Are you the king of the Jews?

The road to Christ's kingship was through his becoming a servant. That's exactly the point that Paul makes in his letter to the Philippians. He was urging the Philippian church to have the same mindset as Jesus.

And to explain his point, he showed them what that mindset was. And what it resulted in. I'll just quote it at length. Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. Who, being in very nature God, Did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

[21 : 24] Rather, he made himself nothing. By taking the very nature of a servant. Being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man.

He humbled himself. By becoming obedient to death. Even death on a cross. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place.

And gave him the name that is above every name. That at the name of Jesus, Every knee should bow. In heaven and on earth and under the earth.

And every tongue acknowledge That Jesus Christ is Lord. To the glory of God the Father. It is precisely through Jesus' rejection and death That his kingdom has been established.

And you can see the parallels here Between what Paul and Isaiah are both saying. Isaiah is looking forward to Christ. Paul is looking back. Both see a humble servant.

[22 : 29] Rejected by people. But both see that same servant. Receiving bent knees. And worship. And adoration. Christ is, I guess, the counter-cultural king.

And his kingdom reflects that counter-culture. It's not a kingdom about looking out for number one. It's not a kingdom where you're encouraged to Put yourself first. It's a kingdom of kindness. Of humility. Of service. Of putting others before yourself. A kingdom of truth. Of hope. Of love. In short.

Jesus is the leader That the world has been waiting for. And against a backdrop of poor leadership. And I'm sure we can bring many, many examples to mind.

Jesus is the ideal leader. He may look weak in the eyes of the world. But he is, in fact, the victorious king. It's important to note that following Jesus doesn't mean we can stop following those in leadership and authority over us.

[23 : 33] We still have a responsibility to the state and the government. And Jesus himself confirms that in his teaching. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. But he then continued to give to God what belongs to God.

Because if we know Jesus, Well, we now recognize a higher authority. A king to whom all other authorities are responsible. And to whom they will one day bow before.

The implication of all this is that we are part of something bigger. The kingdom of heaven. Paul calls us citizens of heaven.

Because that's now our home. Our home is where Christ is. It's the new reality that Jesus invites us into. It's why, as Christians, we have less cause to be anxious.

We have less cause for worry. We have less need to put our hopes in leaders here on earth. We're citizens of heaven. We are subjects of a better kingdom.

[24 : 40] Members of a better world. And so as we draw to a close, I want to leave us with two questions and a quotation that kind of bring all this together.

The quotations from a Dutch theologian and former prime minister of the Netherlands called Abraham Kuyper. So we started with a prime ministerial quotation. We're ending with one as well. And Kuyper said, There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, mine.

Jesus, because he became a servant, is king over everything. And so question one. How does that shape the way we live? If Christ is sovereign over our lives, how is that going to shape each day?

How are we seeking to shop as citizens of heaven? How are we seeking to read our kids a bedtime story as a citizen of heaven? How are we seeking to rest well as citizens of heaven?

How are we seeking to work as citizens of heaven? In short, how are we seeking to live each day as servants of the servant king?

[25 : 52] And a second question. How does Christ's kingship shape our confidence to share him? Are we anxious about sharing the good news of a better kingdom and a better king?

Or are we drawing confidence from the humble character of Christ and the sovereign power of Christ? And are we praying that Jesus' kingdom might come in the hearts and lives of all the people who are around us and in the hearts and lives of people all across Glasgow?

Because, at the end of the day, to put it in frank and simple terms, we all need Jesus as our king.