

April 5 Lesson 6 (NIV)

A JUST SERVANT

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 98
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 42

ISAIAH 42:1–9

- ¹ “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.
- ² He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
- ³ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”
- ⁵ This is what God the LORD says—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
- ⁶ “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,
- ⁷ to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
- ⁸ “I am the LORD; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.
- ⁹ See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.”

KEY VERSE

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. —Isaiah 42:1

JUSTICE AND THE PROPHETS

Unit 2: God Promises a Just Kingdom

LESSONS 6–9

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HOW TO SAY IT

Babylon *Bab-uh-lun*.

Cyrus *Sigh-russ*.

Davidic *Duh-vid-ick*.

Isaiah *Eye-zay-uh*.

Judah *Joo-duh*.

Messiah *Meh-sigh-uh*.

messianic *mess-ee-an-ick*.

Nazareth *Naz-uh-reth*.

Persia *Per-zhuh*.

Introduction

A. Champions of Justice

A few years ago, the Consumer Attorneys of California created the “Champions of Justice Award” to honor extraordinary service among the association’s members. Sandra Ribera Speed received the award in 2015. This honor was awarded to her in part for her involvement in a case involving a runaway delivery truck that crashed into a family vehicle.

Sandra’s law firm at the time wanted nothing to do with fighting this case against a powerful company and its army of attorneys. But Sandra believed the case had merit and refused to give up. She used all her savings and incurred credit card debt in order to work on the case by herself for six months. She was so well prepared that the seven lawyers from the prestigious firm representing the delivery company settled the case on the first day of trial. In addition to serving her clients well, Sandra’s portion of the settlement allowed her to establish her own law firm.

About 2,700 years ago, the prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of the ultimate champion of justice. He would fight for, defend, and serve not just one person but all those who would accept his help.

B. Lesson Context

This lesson begins unit 2, which emphasizes God’s promises of a just kingdom. The prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah as the champion of justice. Such prophecies, of course, have direct bearing on Palm Sunday. As appropriate, some of these connections will be explored in the commentary below.

The prophet Isaiah, for his part, had a lengthy ministry, from about 740 to 680 BC. The book featuring his name as its title is comprised of two parts. Isaiah 1–39 has been described as the Book of Judgment; it focuses on the sins of the people of Judah. Isaiah 40–66, the Book of Comfort, looks forward about a century and a half to the time when Judah’s exile in Babylon is about to end. We keep in mind that the exile did not even begin until 586 BC.

The end of exile is foreseen in the chapter preceding our lesson text: God called “one ... in righteousness” (Isaiah 41:2) to bring the captivity to its end. That man was Cyrus, the king of Persia who conquered Babylon in 539 BC (see 44:28 and 45:1, where he is designated “shepherd” and “anointed,” respectively). He issued a decree permitting the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem beginning in 538 BC (Ezra 1:1–8).

The word *servant* occurs more than three dozen times in the book of Isaiah. In chapter 41, the Lord applies it to “Israel, my servant” (Isaiah 41:8, 9). This servant was fearful. For that reason, God reassured the people of his love. They didn’t need to fear; their exile in Babylon was not evidence that God had cast them away forever. He promised Israel that they were still his covenant people. The Lord encouraged his helpless servant Israel by stating that the people need not fear, because God would help them (41:10, 13, 14).

The Lord then addressed, in a courtroom setting, the nations and their idols. He challenged the nations to provide evidence that idols had ever correctly predicted the future. After announcing

judgment on the false gods, the Lord proclaimed that he had “stirred up one from the north” (Isaiah 41:25)—surely once again alluding to Cyrus. Although the Persian emperor hailed “from the east” (41:2), he conquered several kingdoms north of Babylon before eventually attacking Babylon from that direction. Against this backdrop of a pagan king as an instrument of God to rescue an exiled people, Isaiah introduced the intriguing servant of the Lord.

Isaiah 42:1–9 (today’s text) is the first of Isaiah’s five “servant songs,” in which the servant is identified with the Messiah to come (see 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12; 61:1–4). These messianic songs highlight what the servant is to accomplish on behalf of the world.

I. Presentation

(ISAIAH 42:1–4)

A. God’s Servant (v. 1)

1a. “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight;

The *servant* introduced here bears some similarities to the anointed shepherd Cyrus and servant Israel in having God’s approval (see the Lesson Context). However, this servant is profoundly different from both; the quotation of Isaiah 42:1–4 in Matthew 12:18–21 establishes this to be Jesus. God both supports and delights in him (Matthew 3:16, 17). This suggests the servant will be obedient and godly in a way like no other.

1b. “I will put my Spirit on him,

Members of ancient Israel did not experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as Christians do today (see Joel 2:28–32; Acts 2:14–21, 38). Thus the servant is marked as special for a special purpose, and Jesus’ baptism clearly points back to this verse. On that occasion the Spirit will descend on him after he rises from the water as the Father expresses his pleasure with his Son (Luke 3:21, 22; see also Isaiah 11:1–5).

1c. “and he will bring justice to the nations.

We cannot miss the servant’s mission of bringing *justice* to the world, since it is mentioned three times in the first four verses of Isaiah 42. The concept of justice encompasses much more than judicial equity in a courtroom, a fair redistribution of goods in society, etc. The justice that the servant *will bring* also includes making available the salvation of God. Isaiah’s prophecy includes *the nations* in this plan (compare Isaiah 42:6, below). Although Israel often found itself being enemies with surrounding nations, God’s plan ultimately is to make one people of many (compare Genesis 49:10; Romans 5:18, 19; Galatians 3:26–29).

B. Gentle and Just (vv. 2–4)

2. “He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.

This servant of the Lord will be quite different from the typical king or conqueror who calls attention to himself through loud proclamations (example: Acts 25:23). No, he won’t even *shout or cry out*, nor *raise his voice in the streets*. God’s answer to the world’s arrogance is not more arrogance.

The crowds at Jesus’ triumphal entry will shout, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Luke 19:38). Notice that while the crowd speaks “in loud voices” (19:37), Jesus never says a word. He will be silent just as this prophecy says. Jesus will not speak up even to defend himself against false accusations (Acts 8:32–35, quoting Isaiah 53:7, 8).

As in ancient times, many people are attracted to leaders who draw attention to themselves, boasting of their abilities and accomplishments (see Acts 8:9–11). Christians do well to remember that Jesus didn't boast. Paul also refused to boast about anything "except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14; compare 2 Corinthians 10:17, 18).

3a. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

Instead of using his power to crush the mighty, the servant will be so gentle that he won't even *break off a bruised reed* that is bent over (compare Matthew 11:29). With gentleness, the servant will support the weak and mend the broken.

3b. "In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

We are told again that the servant's mission is tied to *justice*. This is most fitting for a king from David's line (see David's words in 1 Chronicles 16:14, repeated in Psalm 105:7; see further his son Solomon's words in 72:2). But now the qualifier *in faithfulness* is added. Where servant Israel has failed (see Isaiah 48:1; 59:12–15), servant Jesus will succeed. Indeed, Jesus will prove himself to be the very embodiment of faithfulness (2 Timothy 2:13).

4a. "he will not falter or be discouraged

We see here a hint of the suffering the servant will experience, since this prediction presupposes the presence of things that can result in failure or discouragement. This finds full expression in the fourth servant song (Isaiah 52:13–53:12). Although surrounded by many chances to depart from God's chosen path, the servant will faithfully and obediently remain true to God's mission.

4b. "till he establishes justice on earth.

Here we have the climax of Isaiah's statements regarding *justice* in Isaiah 42:1–4. The servant won't merely preach justice as a desirable goal; he will enact it (compare Isaiah 9:7; 16:5; 54:14). Although the servant will be exceedingly gentle, he will not be weak. Establishing justice—God's divine order—*on earth* is a huge task. It requires unimaginable power. It is not the power that is typically used when trying to establish governments (compare 2:4; 51:4).

Centuries later, the people in Malachi's day will ask, "Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2:17). Malachi's prophetic response is fulfilled in John the Baptist, who prepares the way for the Messiah (see 3:1; Matthew 11:10). The Messiah in turn inaugurates justice (example: Luke 1:46–55).

4c. "In his teaching the islands will put their hope."

Islands is likely Isaiah's way of referring to distant places on the earth. These far places are meant to indicate that the prophecy concerns the entire world (compare Genesis 49:10; Isaiah 11:11; Matthew 12:17–21). The whole world is to have an opportunity to *put their hope* in and depend on the servant's *teaching*.

II. Commission

(ISAIAH 42:5–9)

A. Called by the Creator (v. 5)

5. This is what God the LORD says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:

The Lord is not merely Israel's *God* but is *the Creator* of all things (Genesis 1:1, 9; Psalm 102:25; Isaiah 48:13; etc.). On this basis, God rightly claims authority not just over the land and people of Israel but over all nations (Psalm 82:8; etc.).

More significantly, he is the one who gives *breath* and *life* to *people* (Genesis 2:7; compare Acts 17:24, 25). How sadly ironic that those very people in turn create idols that have no breath themselves (Jeremiah 10:14; 51:17), let alone being able to impart breath to others!

B. Called to Covenant (vv. 6, 7)

6a. "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you

Having presented the servant and his mission, now *the Lord* addresses and commissions his servant. God has *called* the servant according to his own nature—his *righteousness* (compare Jeremiah 23:6). The servant doesn't have to fulfill the mission by himself; *God will take hold of* him tightly by the *hand* and won't let go (see Isaiah 41:9, 10, 13). The servant will do the Lord's work in God's power according to God's will.

6b. "and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.

At the heart of that work is the fact that the servant will initiate *a covenant*. We know from other Scriptures that the Messiah is to fulfill the Davidic covenant and establish a new covenant through personal sacrificial death (compare 2 Samuel 7:12–16; Isaiah 55:3; Jeremiah 31:31–34; Hebrews 8:6–13; 9:15). This covenant is without end (Isaiah 54:10; 59:21; 61:8).

The people refers to those who have already received God's revelation—the Israelites (see Isaiah 49:8). Their role as a priestly nation is meant to draw other nations to the Lord (Exodus 19:6; compare 1 Peter 2:9). The scope of the servant's ministry reflects this concern as he also becomes *a light* on behalf of *the Gentiles* (compare Isaiah 49:6; Luke 2:29–32; Acts 26:18, 22, 23).

7. "to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Ancient prisons are extremely dark, both literally and figuratively. The light-imparting ministry of the servant will indeed be welcomed by *those who sit in darkness* (see Isaiah 49:9; 51:14). Light would come through freedom, not by the installation of lamps or windows. The *eyes* of the *blind*, whether physical or spiritual in nature, are to be opened by the servant as a sign of his identity and call (compare Psalm 146:8; Isaiah 32:3; Matthew 11:5).

As is often the case with the Old Testament prophets, this prophecy likely carries a double meaning. In the first sense, Isaiah is probably looking about 150 years ahead to his people's release from captivity in Babylon (Isaiah 48:20; 52:2; compare Zechariah 2:7). In the context of the calling of the servant, however, Judah's deliverance from exile can only serve as a foretaste of the release of people from the bondage of sin and ignorance. While Cyrus, an instrument of the Lord, will provide deliverance from the oppression of Babylon, this servant will provide liberation from the bondage of sin (compare Acts 26:18; 2 Timothy 2:26; Hebrews 2:14, 15).

This fulfillment will come into sharp and dramatic focus when Jesus reads Isaiah 61:1, 2a in Nazareth (Luke 4:18, 19). God offers deliverance from the imprisonment of sin to everyone—whether Jew or Gentile—who accepts Jesus as the Messiah according to the biblical plan of salvation (John 3:16; etc.).

C. Called for God's Glory (vv. 8, 9)

8a. "I am the LORD; that is my name!"

The Lord's declaring of his *name* recalls the scene of Moses at the burning bush. There God revealed his personal name to Moses at the event that commissioned that man for his task. That task was to go back to Egypt so that the Lord could establish his covenant with Israel at Sinai (Exodus 3:13–15; 6:3; 19:1–6; compare Psalm 81:10; Isaiah 43:3, 11).

8b. "I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols."

Isaiah's own calling has surely impressed on him the fact that the Lord is holy and "the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). God alone has all authority; *idols* cannot share his *glory* or *praise* (compare Exodus 8:10; 20:4). Both the servant and Isaiah's audience are reminded that the servant's mission will confirm that God is beyond comparison.

9. "See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you."

In Isaiah 41:22 (not in our lesson text), God challenges the idols to reveal *the former things*—the things God has revealed in prophecy and brought to pass later. Of course they cannot. God can reveal not only those things but also the ultimate end result. Events predicted about both Cyrus and the servant *have taken place*. This confirms the Lord's sovereign authority.

The *new things* of the Old Testament era likely point to Israel's restoration following the end of the Babylonian exile (see Isaiah 43:19–21). Once again, though, historical hindsight tells us that God's plan for his people will remain largely unfulfilled until the coming of the servant Jesus and his perfect work. Because of this, there is hope for all the world.

Regarding the beginning of the New Testament (new covenant) era, the Jews of Jesus' day will hope for a militaristic Messiah to come and, like Cyrus, deliver them from the oppression of a foreign nation. To be rid of Roman rule would be the new start they want. During Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the people will cry out "Hosanna" (Matthew 21:9), which means "save" (compare 2 Samuel 14:4; 2 Kings 6:26). This is both an appeal of prayer and an exclamation of praise.

Jesus is certainly worthy of loud and absolute praise (Revelation 5:12)! Yet the humble Messiah ends up being much different from what anyone expects. The past, present, and future king of the universe comes not as one to be served "but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Conclusion

A. In His Steps

The biblical concept of judgment represents God's righteous world order. At his first coming, Jesus treated people more than justly; when Jesus walked the earth, he overcame enemies with gentleness and love. When he returns, he will judge the world based on how each person treated "the least of these" (Matthew 25:45). At his first coming, the Lord's servant inaugurated God's just and right order from a position of apparent weakness when compared to worldly strength; in so doing, he is an example for us so that we can "follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21–23).

We have a part to play in the servant's task of bringing light to the nations and to our neighbors who live in darkness. The Holy Spirit, working through Scripture and circumstances, motivates

Christ's followers to take his gospel to the ends of the earth. For more than 2,000 years, Christians have borne witness to Jesus through evangelism (see Matthew 28:18–20) and ministries of mercy: establishing hospitals and schools, caring for prisoners and the poor, and participating in countless other charities (25:34–40).

Particularly challenging for most of us is following the manner and attitude of the servant's life and ministry. It's not easy to surrender the self-centeredness and assertiveness that has been with us since birth in the surrounding culture. But God's Word calls us to pattern our lives after his servant Jesus (Philippians 2:4–8). How will you follow the example of Jesus? How will you *serve*?

B. Prayer

We thank you, Father, for sending the promised servant to save us and inaugurate your justice on earth. May the Holy Spirit empower us with the courage to follow your servant's humble example as we serve him and those around us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus is the champion of justice
and the servant of all servants.¹
