

The Book of ISAIAH – Chapter 42

Catholic Scripture Study

Memory Verse: Isaiah 42:1-3

***Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him,
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.***

Week 21 - The Servant of the Lord (1)

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Prophecies of the Suffering Servant

The prophecies of the Old Testament pinpoint the coming of the Messiah by indicating:

- his lineage and family as that of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and David;
- his birthplace as Bethlehem; and
- the time of his coming as about 490 years after the decree for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, (see Dan 9:25) which occurred around for 450 BC.
- We have also seen that the messiah will be a blessing for all the nations, and

- that his task is to crush the head of the ancient serpent, which means that he will crush iniquity.

Nevertheless, he will be bruised in the process (Gen 3:15)!

The prophecy of the Seventy Weeks in Daniel 9:24-27 develops this by connecting the coming of the messiah with an absolutely transcendent purpose:

“That transgression may be finished, and sin may have an end, and iniquity may be abolished; and everlasting justice may be brought; and vision and prophecy may be fulfilled” (Dan 9:24).

How is this to be accomplished? How can a slain Messiah (Dan 9:26) finish transgression, abolish iniquity, and introduce everlasting righteousness?

Furthermore, in what sense can sin be said to be crushed and righteousness introduced in the very course of human history, a history marked by continual sin?

It cannot mean that temporal human history will no longer be permeated with human sin. It can only mean that sin is crushed spiritually.

What does this mean?

The answer is given to us in Isaiah's prophecies of the **Suffering Servant**.

The book of Isaiah is extremely rich in Messianic prophecies. To simplify, we can divide them into three groups:

- a) prophecies concerning the birth and coming of the Messiah (especially Is 7, 9, and 11);
- b) prophecies concerning the “suffering servant” (Is 42, 49, 50, 53); and

- c) prophecies concerning the fruits of the Messiah's coming and the conversion of the Gentiles (especially Is 60-61).

B. The Identity of the Servant

The middle section of the book of Isaiah (chapters 40-55) contains four canticles or songs concerning a mysterious "suffering servant of the Lord."

This person appears to be an **individual** named simply as "my servant," but the text could also possibly be referring to a **collective**, namely, the people of Israel.

The identity of this servant has been the source of endless controversy. There are basically three theories as to who the servant is.

One theory is that he is a particular individual – a king of the house of Judah, or the prophet himself, or a future messiah who will redeem Israel.

The second theory is that the servant is a collectivity, that is, he stands for Israel, or for some group within Israel.

The third theory argues that the servant is meant to be depicted ambiguously – that is, in a way that allows him to be interpreted in both of the ways mentioned previously – **as an individual person of significance but someone who can symbolize all Israel.**

These songs reveal something of the character of God's servant, rather than providing a clear and precise identity of the servant who is to advance the mission of God to **bring forth justice to the nations.**

Here, the servant is portrayed as someone publicly appointed by God who enjoys God's favor, and is infused with the Spirit of God.

C. The Four Servant Songs

The Servant of the Lord is described in the following passages of Isaiah.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Isaiah 42: 1-9; | First servant song |
| 2. Isaiah 49: 1-7; | Second servant song |
| 3. Isaiah 50: 4-11; | Third servant song |
| 4. Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 | Fourth servant song |

In summary, the proposed possibilities as to the identity of this mysterious “suffering servant” are:

- A. Israel is called God’s servant in Isaiah 41:8-9; 43:10; 44:1-2; and 48:20.
- B. Cyrus is referred to as servant in Isaiah 44:26;
- C. Isaiah, the prophet himself is called servant (Isaiah 49:1-3; 50:10);
- D. A perfect servant whom God will one day send – a future Messiah (Isaiah 9:1-6; 11:1-9).

D. Cyrus

We can rule out Cyrus from consideration because he’s a military leader used by God for a time to overthrow Babylon. But, Cyrus lacks the meekness and docility described in ***He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street*** (Isaiah 42:2).

Nor does Cyrus possess the Spirit of the Lord or the ability to establish divine justice on the earth. So Cyrus does not perfectly match the servant of the Lord.

E. Israel

When we consider Israel as the possible “Servant of the Lord,” the differences between the “suffering servant” and the “servant Israel” are striking.

The servant Israel is fearful and blind, yet God loves him and will deliver him so that he can be God's evidence to the nations that He is indeed God.

F. A Future Messiah

But this servant who only appears here in chapters 40-48 and but three times in chapters 49-50, is of a different sort. He's always obedient and responsive to God, his mission is to bring justice to the nations for God, and he's to be **a light to the nations**, and **a covenant to the people** of Israel.

In contrast to the promises of divine blessing constantly being given to the servant Israel, this servant receives no benefits through his ministry but only increasing difficulty. In summary, whoever this servant is, it is not the nation of Israel; it is another figure altogether.

The further description of the ministry of this Servant in 42:6-7 confirms that this is not the nation but someone who will function for the nation and indeed for the world.

Where Israel was **blind** and deaf, captive to the powers of this world, this Servant will give sight and freedom. His ministry will be the ultimate revelation of the "glory" of God, which fills the earth (6:3).

II. FIRST SERVANT SONG (ISAIAH 42:1-9)

A. Overview

The first servant song in Isaiah 42:1-9 points to a servant endowed by the Spirit of the Lord.

Like King David of old, this servant will be called to bring forth justice to the people. *"And the Lord gave victory to David wherever*

he went. So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and equity toward his people” (2 Samuel 8:14-15).

The servant is a prophet/redeemer, sent to liberate the captives in their exile.

Read: Isaiah 42:1-9

[1] Behold my servant, whom I uphold,

my chosen, in whom my soul delights;

I have put my Spirit upon him,

he will bring forth justice to the nations.

[2] He will not cry or lift up his voice,

or make it heard in the street;

[3] a bruised reed he will not break,

and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;

he will faithfully bring forth justice.

[4] He will not fail or be discouraged

till he has established justice in the earth;

and the coastlands wait for his law.

[5] Thus says God, the LORD,

who created the heavens and stretched them out,

who spread forth the earth and what comes from it,

who gives breath to the people upon it

and spirit to those who walk in it:

[6] “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,

I have taken you by the hand and kept you;

I have given you as a covenant to the people,

a light to the nations,

[7] to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,

from the prison those who sit in darkness.

[8] I am the LORD, that is my name;

my glory I give to no other,

nor my praise to graven images.

**[9] Behold, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth
I tell you of them.”**

A. God Introduces His Servant (42:1-4)

These four verses focus on a person who appears to be an individual named simply as “my servant.”

God speaks throughout this song, first identifying the servant; **“my chosen (one), in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him . . .”**

The mission of the servant is to **bring forth justice to the nations** (42:1). So the servant’s task is universal in scope.

Yet the servant fulfills his mission in a quiet and gentle way: **He will not cry or lift up his voice . . . a bruised reed he will not break** (42:2-3). This message clearly distinguishes him from Cyrus.

The reference to the servant **“he will not fail or be discouraged”** before finishing his task (42:4) appears to hint at some form of suffering.

B. The Servant Identified

If scholars and the Old Testament are in doubt as to who the “suffering servant” is, the New Testament sees in these Servant Songs of Isaiah, the promised Messiah, **Jesus Christ**.

The words of God identifying the servant appear in the Gospel account of the Baptism and Transfiguration of Jesus where the voice of God identifies Jesus (Mt 3:16-17 and parallels; Mt 17:5 and parallels).

For example, in the accounts of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan and of the Transfiguration, the voice of the Father refers to those features:

- *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”* (Mt 3:17)
- *“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”* (Luke 9:35).

God the father reveals that Jesus is more than the perfect servant – Jesus is God’s true beloved Son.

Later in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 12:15-21), the first Servant Song illustrates how perfectly Jesus fulfills the prophecy in Isaiah:

- Jesus proclaims justice to the oppressed.
- He’s meek and humble, not wangling or crying out loud.
- *And in his name will the Gentiles hope* (Mt 12:21).

C. Characteristics of the Servant

Three important points are found in this prophecy.

First, the Messiah is to be a unique and elect servant of the Lord in whom the Father delights, and who receives the very Spirit of the Lord, as we see also in Isaiah 11.

Just as Israel was elected out of the nations of the earth to bear a blessing, so the Messiah is elected by God out of all mankind. As in Isaiah 11:3, the Spirit of the Lord enables him to judge the nations.

However, the Messiah’s teaching and judgment will be marked by a spirit of meekness and mercy. ***“The bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.”***

What does this mean?

The bruised reed should be understood as referring to the sinner, who is bruised by sin and the experience of his own misery, but not yet hardened by sin.

The same idea is conveyed by the dimly burning wick: it is about to be snuffed out but it is not yet completely dead. The Messiah will be marked by a predilection for the sinner who is not completely dead to the reality of his sin, but has some awareness of and sorrow for it.

This prophecy is perfectly verified in the New Testament accounts of Jesus' dealings with sinners, such as tax collectors guilty of extortion, women caught in adultery, etc.

Second, the Messiah is said to be, **“given as a covenant to the people,”** referring to Israel (v.6). He shall inaugurate a new Covenant between God and His people.

To understand this we must look to some of the other prophets for texts on the new Covenant to be established by the Messiah (see Jer 31:31-33; Ez 36:25-27; and Dan 9:27).

Third, the Messiah's mission is universal and includes the Gentiles. The Father has given Him to be a light unto the gentiles: *lumen gentium*.

In the New Testament (Luke 2:32), Simeon quotes these words in his prayer of thanksgiving when he encounters the child Jesus being presented in the temple forty days after his birth.

Simeon likewise speaks of the double role of the messiah to be at once **“a light for revelation to the Gentiles,”** and **“for glory to thy people Israel.”**

III. SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS (42:7)

One of the functions of the Servant is **to open the eyes that are blind.**

The word “blind” appears six times in this one chapter of Isaiah (Isaiah 42:7, 16, 18, and three times in verse 19).

The following passage containing the word “blind” refers to Israel as God’s servant and messenger, not to the messiah.

Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the Lord? (Isaiah 42:19).

Blindness and deafness suggest vulnerability and helplessness. Israel had refused to listen to God and to see and heed his warnings in the previous prophecies of doom.

Spiritual blindness and deafness would prevent the people from discerning God’s purpose for them during their time of exile. Just as a blind person needs a guide, Israel will need God to guide them out of the darkness of their captivity.

The Messiah, the true Servant of the Lord will do this!

Jesus not only cured spiritual blindness, but he also cured physical blindness as well. The Gospels report several occasions in which Jesus cured blind people.

Sometimes, he even gave sight to people who were blind from birth, as the Gospel of John reports:

“Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (John 9:32-33).

Jesus has power to heal both soul and body!

D. A Light to the Nations

God expected Israel to be ***a light to the nations***. But, Israel failed to reflect God’s glory. God’s chosen people fell into sin and idolatry. But God did not abandon his plan. Ultimately, He would lead a remnant out of their captivity in exile and return them to the Promised Land.

And a further fulfillment of the plan of God and Isaiah's prophecy would come in the person of Jesus, the light of the world.

"The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world" (John 1:9). Jesus said: *"I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life"* (John 8:12).

IV. APPLICATION

The same spiritual blindness that afflicted the people in captivity can plague people today. Pride and lack of docility to the Holy Spirit can render us vulnerable to sin and separation from God.

Even well-meaning people and spiritual leaders can lead people astray.

Isaiah warned the people in his time.

Jesus also warned people to be aware of blind guides. *"Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit"* (Mt 15:14).

Each person has a responsibility to know what God commands, to understand what the Church teaches, and to be obedient.

- Study the Bible and the Catechism.
- Know and obey Catholic Church teaching.

Home Study – Week 21

1. Read Isaiah, Chapter 42
2. Read Chapter 13 in *Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah*.
3. Answer questions 1-10 in *Come and See* (pgs. 120-122).
4. Read the following paragraphs from the CCC:

Article 3 – Sacred Scripture, Section V – Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church:

Paragraphs: 131-133