

A SERVANT FOR TURBULENT TIMES

by Doug Goins

The notion of voluntarily becoming a slave, of being owned by another, stands in stark contrast to the prevailing values of the world we live in today. You don't have to watch too much television or read too much of the print media to be convinced that as a people we are attracted-if not addicted-to power and authority. The recent local, state, and national elections were all about the power of political office. Money can buy access to those who are powerfully positioned in society. The Somalian warlords and the Serbian and Croatian troops believe that power comes out of the barrel of a gun. Then there is manipulative power in knowing how to work a system; we have a grudging respect for people who can do that. Understanding how to tap into people's belief systems is also very powerful. Again, that was evident in the elections. Remember Dianne Feinstein sitting in the rocking chair holding an infant just before the vote; and the Republicans invited Pat Robertson to speak at their convention, and Bill Clinton has invited Billy Graham to speak at his inauguration. Knowing how to manipulate people's belief systems is an important aspect of power today.

A book by Washington newsman Hedrick Smith describes what he calls the "soft sides of power." Let me quote from *The Power Game: How Washington Really Works*:

Information and knowledge are power. Visibility is power. A sense of timing is power. Personal energy is power, so is self-confidence. Showmanship is power. Likability is power. Access to the inner sanctum is power. Obstruction and delay are power. Winning is power. Sometimes the illusion of power is power.

The question in all the headlines today is, What kind of power on earth can calm the turbulence of unrest in our cities, our nation, and our global community? Is it going to be accomplished through getting tougher on crime? Through UN peace-keeping forces? Through a new Democratic administration? Or for that matter, could giving George Bush four more years have calmed the racial strife, settled the turbulence of poverty, and lifted the hopelessness they bring? Can Owen Greenspan or Clinton's new group of economic advisors quiet our unsettled economy? That's an issue we care about especially; we're impressed with any power that can give us high-paying jobs with good benefits. And finally, what authority figure can restore biblical family values to our nation?

We live in a world that is out of control everywhere you look, in both the microcosm and the macrocosm. What figure of power and authority can set things right? Who can establish equity? Who can bring justice into a turbulent world of inequality, violence, and dehumanizing evil? The nation of Israel had similar questions and concerns. They were struggling with their identity as a people in Babylonian captivity. They were living with the barbarism and savagery of an ancient Near Eastern culture. In the last section of Isaiah's prophecy, chapters 40 through 66, the prophet speaks words of comfort and hope for that nation. In chapter 42 he introduces an individual who can address issues of righteousness and justice in the world of ancient Israel as well as those in our world today. In verse 6 God speaks to this one who was coming:

"I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness...."

Now let's look back at verse 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."

In Chapter 41 God has examined all the political, military, and economic institutions on the face of the earth. He has evaluated their efforts to bring moral order to the world, to establish and maintain just societies and nations. God asks these national and international leaders to offer solutions to the problems that face mankind. His question to them is, How can we heal this broken, suffering, struggling humanity? At the end of this amazing dialogue between God and all the national and international leaders, we see God's final summary in verse 28 and 29 of chapter 41. God says:

"But when I look, there is no one;
among these there is no counselor
who, when I ask, gives an answer.

Behold, they are all a delusion;
their works are nothing;
their molten images are empty wind."

Among all the leaders there wasn't anyone who had anything of substance to say. They had nothing to offer but hot air, or wind. There is even the implication here that all this talking about solutions is itself idolatrous. Today's campaign rhetoric is idolatrous. There is nobody to give good counsel, nobody to lead mankind out of these circumstances, nobody to lead us through the turbulence of difficult times. And we are commanded in verse 29 to "behold" those leaders; that is, to carefully examine them, to evaluate what they say.

Then that command to behold is paralleled in verse 1 of chapter 42, "Behold my servant," in contrast to all the other options. It comes like a trumpet blast: Pay strict attention to this one who is going to be introduced! Let's read the first nine verses of chapter 42:

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.

He will not fail or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.

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;

"I am the LORD, I have called you [the servant] 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,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to graven images.

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

Before we examine who the servant is, let's make sure that we clearly understand who it is who has chosen him, called him to this important work, and given him this overwhelming task of setting things right in the world. In verse 5 he first introduces himself as God, and in Hebrew this is the word for Almighty God. This is the Creator God and the absolute Sovereign of the universe, the God who stands utterly distinct as creator from the universe that he is responsible for, including humankind. His creativity continues powerfully in the natural order and in the human race.

Three times, in verses 5, 6, and 8, he additionally introduces himself as the Lord, that is, Yahweh God, the God of Sinai, the God who established an unconditional covenant love relationship with the nation of Israel. He is an eternal, self-determining God. Yahweh is the name by which he identified himself to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM," meaning, "I am complete in myself." He is the God of all resource, all strength, and all adequacy. The nation of Israel desperately needed that strength, and he was the deliverer God who saved them from bondage in Egypt. He continues to offer that adequacy and strength to people who do not recognize him and do not realize how lost and helpless they are.

Let's look more closely at verse 8:

"I am the LORD [Yahweh], that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to graven images."

That speaks of God's unimpeachable character and his absolute credibility. He jealously guards his reputation. He always follows through on every commitment that he makes. And he demands in response to that exclusive loyalty, devotion, or fidelity to him. It says he himself can't even give away his essential glory; that is, he can't deny himself, and he can't delegate it to anyone else. And nobody can take it from him. There is divine jealousy and exclusiveness at work in God, and these are really beautiful qualities that are consistent with his character. Worship and praise belong to him alone; there can be no substitutes.

This one who sends the servant into the world is the absolute Sovereign of the universe, the one in charge, the one running things all by himself. It is important for us to get some grasp of this idea, as enormous as it is, in order to understand the authority and credibility of the servant of the Lord.

This idea of God's exclusivity, and his running things all by himself, was illustrated to me in one of Gordon MacDonald's books a few years ago. He tells the story of a very exclusive New England prep school that maintained the conservative, traditional ways that stolid New Englanders embrace. One of the students was the son of a wealthy Boston businessman who was also a prominent member of the board of the school. The boy got into some mischief, and with no particular regard for who he

was, the headmaster suspended him. His father, outraged, took the first train north to New Hampshire, stormed into the headmaster's office unannounced, and fired this opening salvo at the distinguished older gentleman: "You damn well think you're running this school all by yourself, don't you?" The headmaster stood up very slowly, looped his thumbs into the pockets of his vest and said, "Your language is koss [coarse], your 'gramma' is despicable, but YOU HAVE GRASPED THE IDEA!"

Now let's examine more closely the identity of the servant whom God sends into the world. Verses 1 through 4 introduced him to us. Matthew, writing as an inspired apostle, speaks of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as being a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic word. In Matthew 12:18 he quotes:

"Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased."

Now, that is an amazing title for this one who is coming, because the word servant is synonymous with the word bondsman, which means a menial laborer enslaved to another, working at the total disposition of his owner and master. It is someone who has no rights of his own, who is in a position of powerlessness and helplessness. He has to live his life in full obedience to the master of the estate. The Messiah we saw last week in Isaiah 40 was introduced as a strong Shepherd King in complete control of the universe and of our individual lives as well. He was a powerful figure of gentle and tender strength. But now he is a servant. It's a jarring contrast.

Verse 6 says that he is a servant who is called in righteousness. And three times in verses 1 through 4 he is introduced as one who will bring forth justice. These two words, righteousness and justice, always work together in the Old Testament. Righteousness means to bring something into conformity with a standard. In the ancient world scales that were accurate were called righteous weights because they conformed to a standard of accuracy. And evergreen trees in the Old Testament are described as trees of righteousness because they look like a tree ought to look; they don't drop leaves, and they retain their fullness and beauty all year round. (So you could quite properly go to your friend's house and tell them they have a righteous-looking Christmas tree!) Righteousness is making something the way it ought to be. And the standard for our personal lives is the character of God: his righteousness, beauty, and glory. So what this servant is going to do is bring things into conformity with the character of God.

He will accomplish this through justice, which is the practical outworking of righteousness or the way it is applied in our personal lives and in social institutions. In ancient Israel the responsibility of the king as a servant of God was to establish righteousness and justice in the nation. And now God is going to send this new servant, who as we see in the New Testament is Jesus the Messiah, to bring justice to the world, to establish things according to God's standard and patterns, to set things the way they're supposed to be in our hearts, our homes, our cities, our nation, and our world. It is clear in these verses that it is only the servant of the Lord who can align things in our world with the Lord's standard; there is no other alternative.

Let me suggest three distinctive things about this servant from the first few verses: the resources that he draws from to accomplish this difficult work; his approach or his attitude toward the work that God has given him; and an amazing tenacity, persistence, or tough-mindedness that carries him through the work.

There are three resources that the servant draws on. In verse 1 God calls him "my servant, whom I uphold." In verse 6 he reinforces that idea, saying to the servant, "I have taken you by the hand and kept you." The servant is upheld by his heavenly Father; that is, he is protected and led by the Father. These both speak for the necessity of Jesus Christ to depend on God the Father for direction, support, and strength for everything he did. His effectiveness in ministry came from his total dependence on

his Father. Jesus clearly testified to that, saying, "I don't do anything without checking with the Father. I can accomplish nothing except through his power." [John 12:49]

The second resource we also see in verse 1 in the phrase, "my chosen, in whom my soul delights." And in verse 6 again, God says to the servant, "I am the LORD, I have called you...." He is called and chosen by his heavenly Father who delights in him completely. Twice during Jesus' public ministry on earth God affirmed his deep love, respect, and admiration for his Son: once at his baptism by John in the Jordan River, and again on the Mount of Transfiguration. Both times God spoke audibly, and the disciples heard it. In Luke 3:22 he said, "Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased." Jesus had the full confidence that his Father loved, accepted, and delighted in him. Now, that acceptance had nothing to do with what he did. When his Father affirmed him at his baptism it was before he had ever taught any truth or performed any miracles. He knew that it was because of who he was that he was accepted and loved by the Father. That was a powerful resource for the Lord Jesus. Even when people rejected him and brutalized him, he was secure in his heavenly Father's love.

We see the third resource in verse 1 when God says, "I have put my Spirit upon him." That is a very rich phrase. Jesus is filled up, surrounded, and totally overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the person of the godhead who gets things done, the animator. Jesus knew that the Spirit of God was powerfully at work in him, and this was why he was able to make a difference in people's lives wherever he went. People's hearts were changed as they responded to the truth that he spoke, and that happened through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now let's examine the attitude of the servant in verses 2 and 3:

"He will not cry or lift up his voice,
nor 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."

Verse 2 suggests that Jesus was content to minister in obscurity. He was unassuming; he didn't go around loudly talking about himself, bragging about what he was accomplishing, trying to build a reputation or a public following. Jesus told the truth wherever he went and people responded to that, but there was nothing of self-promotion in his life or ministry. In Matthew 12 the events suggest just the opposite of self-aggrandizement: "...he healed them all, and ordered them not to make him known." [v 16] It is amazing to me that Jesus never needed personal attention or demanded recognition. He didn't have a press secretary or a public relations advisor. He just went around doing what his Father told him to do.

Verse 3 gives a beautiful description of the kind of people Jesus was attracted to, on whom this ministry of bringing forth justice was focused. It speaks of the extraordinary patience and gentleness with which he ministered to people. Jesus, the Lord's servant, came to care for bruised and broken people, those whose flickering light of faith had almost been extinguished. Those are both very graphic pictures. We have a solitary blade of grass that has been stomped on and crushed, and the servant is bending over and giving full attention to that blade, stretching it out to its full height, supporting it, and restoring it to what it was intended to be. And we have a little oil lamp that is out of oil; there is no flame left and the wick is down to a glowing ember. He very gently blows on it to fan it back to life.

These pictures describe a ministry of justice done in obscurity, focused on individuals. In Matthew 12 Jesus ministers to an individual man with a withered hand, for example. Jesus himself said that he didn't come to the healthy, those who were well, strong, powerful, and attractive, those with the most

giving potential or resources to advantage him. No, he came to sick people, those with the least ability to personally serve him. He came to people in desperate need.

Now let's look at verse 4, where it talks about the amazing tenacity with which this servant did the work of bringing forth justice.

"He will not fail or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law."

The terms fail and be discouraged are the same terms in Hebrew that we just looked at to burn dimly and to be bruised, respectively. The servant cares for people who are struggling, people who are bruised and burning dimly, but he himself will never fail in his mission or get overwhelmed and discouraged by the difficulty. The good news is that this servant Jesus will never give up on the human race or on any of us individually. He will never get frustrated or disgusted with any of us and say, "I've had it with you. I can't take this anymore. You've blown it too many times." He will never have a nervous breakdown and resign from ministry. Because of that persistence and confidence, his ministry ultimately took him to the cross. In his death he was literally bruised and broken and his life extinguished-and it happened for the injustice that we sinful men and women perpetrate. But he remained confident that through his life and death and resurrection he would be able to bring men and women into submission to him. And he persisted until he brought both justice and salvation through the cross.

This specific work that this servant will accomplish is detailed in verses 6 and 7 and then in verse 9. The middle of verse 6 says:

"I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations...."

The work of justice began with God's giving his beloved Son to the nation of Israel as a covenant, and then to all the Gentile nations as a light. Both images are consistently used to speak of salvation in both the Old and New Testaments. The covenant love relationship that God had with the nation of Israel was to accomplish salvation to all the other nations in the world. And Israel was called to be a light to all the nations, and Jesus said that he came to be the light of the world. Jesus went even farther and said that only in him was life eternal, resurrection life, and that he was the life of the world as well as the light of the world.

Verse 7 continues:

"...to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness."

These figures depict people with congenital blindness and people who have been captives since birth. Both depict the results of the sinful nature that we were born into. Without Jesus' rescuing us and healing our blindness, we will never see reality the way it is, only distortions. Jesus came to open blind eyes and to set us free from the incredible weight of the load we carry of guilt, bondage to sin, and condemnation. That is the servant's work of accomplishing justice.

Finally, in verse 9 he says that it is going to be something brand-new that has never been seen in human history before.

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

What is going to be new and different is that God isn't going to transform identities on a national level anymore; this work of justice will be accomplished in individual human hearts. The former things that Isaiah talks about were accomplished in Israel's history when God saved the entire nation from the darkness and captivity of bondage in Egypt. They were brought into light and freedom when he brought them into the promised land. But now God is committed to establishing a deeper and richer justice through the servant, and it will be a work of justice that starts in human hearts. And he says he is going to tell us about this before it ever happens. Isaiah prophesied seven hundred years before Jesus was born, and his prophecy was completely fulfilled in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

In Luke 2, one of the narratives of Jesus' birth, there is a wonderful story that speaks of the fulfillment of this new thing that God is bringing into being. Simeon, an elderly priest, had spent his entire life waiting for Isaiah's prophecy of messianic justice to come. There was just as much turbulence and turmoil economically, politically, and militarily in his day as there is in ours. He was standing in the temple in Jerusalem holding the baby Jesus in his arms, looking down on this tiny one born to be the beloved servant of the Lord. You can imagine his voice trembling with emotion and gratitude as he speaks in verse 29:

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace
according to thy word;
for mine eyes have seen thy salvation
which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to thy people Israel."

Here is the amazing truth in light of all of this. If we have personally accepted the salvation in Jesus Christ that is offered to us individually, if we have bowed before him as the Lord of life; then we can stand with Simeon today as we behold this servant given to the world and call ourselves servants of God. As the apostle Paul identifies us in 2 Corinthians 3:6, we are now servants of a new-covenant relationship. In Christ we ourselves are servants of the one God calls his servant. He has conquered the injustice in our hearts-the greed, lust, and self-promoting, power-hungry ambition that controlled us before-through his shed blood on the cross.

This is great news, isn't it? The very resources, attitude, and persistence of Jesus the servant will become ours as he expresses his own life through us. He will make us submissive to the will of our heavenly Father. He will sensitize us to needs around us. He will deliver us from the need to control our own life, our time, and our material resources. He will save us from the desire to always get credit for everything we do. He will make us servants of the cross who are willing to die every day to self-protectiveness, who rely completely on his resources and not our own, who are absolutely secure in God's love and acceptance, and who minister in the power of God's Holy Spirit with great flexibility and freedom. This servant wants to pour his very life into us and express it through us.

The issue of ownership is very central here. In Matthew 11 Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you...my yoke is easy...." This yoke speaks of his ownership of us, of our slave relationship to him. First Corinthians 6:19-20 says, "You are not your own; you were bought with a price." The price was Jesus' death on the cross. And we have nothing to fear in his ownership of us because he says in the same verse, "I am gentle and lowly [humble] in heart." He is talking about the servant leadership that

we can trust him for, his amazing attitude of gentleness and humility.

We have a great privilege this morning as we minister as servants of this wonderful servant of the Lord. We're privileged to talk about him and his life, his righteousness, and how he wants things to be in individual lives. We're privileged to serve him as we meet needs among the "bruised and broken" and patiently encourage the "dimly burning wicks," those who are about to give up. We can serve him with the same confidence and persistence that he demonstrated in his life and ministry; because we're sustained and empowered by the same Almighty God, Lord of the universe, and everlasting Father as he was.

The only appropriate response to this truth this morning is praise and worship, and that is what Isaiah breaks into in verses 10 through 13. Let's read this explosion of gratitude and confidence because of the work of the servant:

Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,
the coastlands and their inhabitants.
Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice,
the villages that Kedar inhabits,
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,
let them shout from the top of the mountains.
Let them give glory to the LORD,
and declare his praise in the coastlands.
The LORD goes forth like a mighty man,
like a man of war he stirs up his fury;
he cries out, he shouts aloud,
he shows himself mighty against his foes.

The fury of God that is mentioned in verse 13 has the same root as the word for the jealousy that God has for his character, his righteousness, and his completing what he starts. It gives us incredible confidence!

What has been promised in verses 1 through 9 is a new work of salvation and justice in the human heart; this is the new possibility of salvation to the ends of the earth. That is why we can have enormous optimism about God's establishing justice in our families, our neighborhoods, our communities, our nation, and the world order itself.

The good news is that we don't have to be discouraged or intimidated by any kind of power that we see out there today-political, economic, or military. Our God is defined here as an awesome conquering general, a God who will bring justice to all the nations. But his justice is going to come through individual people like you and me who are willing to be submissive to the servant of the Lord in the same attitude he had, trusting him to express his life through us. We can go in the same power of the Lord that Jesus went in to dimly burning wicks, to bruised and broken reeds. Let's respond to this in the same way that Isaiah did, with praise and worship and adoration that honor the Lord Jesus for who he is and what he accomplishes!

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