



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

A Servant's Mission

Isaiah 42.1-17

David Anguish

Introduction

1. Maybe you've attended one of his group's leadership seminars, designed to "enable greatness in people and organizations everywhere" (from the Franklin-Covey Company's mission statement). Or maybe you've read one of his books on effective habits and principle-centered leadership.
2. Perhaps you've come at the subject from a different angle, hearing or reading the work of a different author with a somewhat different perspective and set of goals. If so, you've approached the matter in terms of being "purpose driven".
3. The latter reference is to Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life* material. The former is to Steven Covey's *Seven [now Eight] Habits of Highly Effective People*.
4. I bring them together to call attention to what they have in common: identify the one main thing to do in life and construct one's life around it. Covey and Warren are not unique in this approach. In fact, they have met with success precisely because they have tapped in to a long standing concern.
 - a. Jesus and his followers also took it seriously.
 - b. Paul said he was devoted to doing "one thing" (Phil 3.13-14), "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." It motivated him to do all he could to see people come to know and grow in their knowledge of Jesus (e.g., 1 Cor 9.18-22).
5. In this, as in all things, Paul imitated Jesus (see 1 Cor 11.1). He, too, boiled down his mission and message to the bare essential of loving God and neighbor (Matt 22.34-40). Whatever the temptation, he refused to be deterred from his mission (see Matt 16.21-24; also Luke 9.51).
6. We know we need to reinforce this principle of being focused, for it is easy to be diverted to things that are non-productive or to those that are secondarily productive. As we think about being servants, our text reminds us of some things that are involved in our mission.

Body

- I. It's About God's Way!
 - A. Let's recall the setting.

1. Isaiah addresses an exilic people wondering about God and their future.
 2. Isaiah 40-41 make bold promises; it would be only natural for those still under mighty Babylon's control to have their doubts.
 3. Chapter 42 begins with a call for trust and faith from the human perspective.¹
- B. The first of two terms we must study more as we come to this text is "servant."
1. 42.1-9 is the first of four sections scholars recognize as Isaiah's servant songs (see 49.1-7; 50.4-11; 52.13-53.12).
 2. For more than a century, the identity of this "servant" has been debated.
 - a) "**Servant** here has been variously interpreted as designating the prophet, prophets collectively, Cyrus, the Messiah ... or Jesus Christ" (John T. Willis, *Isaiah*, 363).
 - b) Another prominent option is Israel. "... [T]he servant appears to be Israel, but also to have a mission to Israel" (Brueggemann, 13). (See e.g., 41.8-9; 43.10; 44.1-2, 21; 45.4; 48.20; 49.3 compared to 49.5-7; 53.11.)
 - c) The question is whether the Servant is the nation or a person, and if a person, which person.
 - d) We should note two matters of context as we try to resolve this question.
 - (1) First is the general context of Isaiah, historical and literary. Whatever future application the text may have, it first spoke to Israel as they encountered Babylonian slavery.
 - (2) The immediate context of *each* servant reference must also be considered. Sometimes, Isaiah is clear that the servant is Israel; at other times, he uses it to refer to some person or leaves open other possibilities.
 - e) When we study the references this way, and especially with regard to the immediate context, we learn that there are times when "servant" refers to the nation and other times when the word seems to refer to an individual (though the personification of Israel must not be overlooked in the matter).
 - f) Granting that the ultimate answer to the question of the Servant is found in Jesus fulfilling (in the sense of filling up) the meaning of what Israel was to be, we must still appreciate the fact that Isaiah intended for his original readers to derive some benefit from the promise of the servant.
 3. Our concern here is with the word as it is used in 42.1-17[19].
 - a) Remembering that chapter divisions are not original to the text, we benefit from looking back at chapter 41.
 - (1) 41.8-9 identify Israel as the servant in this section, meaning that the challenges, promises, and assurances in 41.10-29 are for Israel, the servant.
 - (2) 42.1ff. goes with the last major section of chapter 41 (vv 21-29) by the repetition of the dramatic summons represented by the Hebrew particle *hen* (הִנֵּה)—"behold" (or "look here") in 41.24, 29 (summaries of the respective sub-sections) and 42.1.
 - (3) The effect is: "Look—meaningless idols!" (24); "Look—pathetic idolaters!" (29); "Look—my servant!" (42.1).²

¹ Walter Brueggemann notes that verses 1-9 interrupt the focus on Yahweh's work by stressing "that God's work in the world is to be enacted by *human agency*" (*Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion, 41).

² See J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, 259.

4. The point is that the work of renewal and conquest over the idolatrous Babylonian regime will be carried out through the agency of the servant Israel.³

C. We also need to give some attention to Isaiah's use of the word "justice" (see 42.1, 3-4).

1. Whereas we tend to think of justice solely in terms of "a blind dispensing of rewards for the virtuous and punishment for the wicked," the Hebrew concept is broader than that (see N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, 64).
2. In Israel, justice was about saving, healing, restoration, and renewal (Wright, 64).
3. It is the prophetic call for "the reordering of social life and social power so that the weak (widows and orphans) may live a life of dignity, security, and well-being" (Brueggemann, 42).
4. That understanding is spelled out in our text in the expectations of what the servant and the God he serves will do.

II. It's About Us! (1-4)

A. The first part of verse 1 is clear that the servant of God is special because he is a servant of God.

1. He is "my [God's] servant."
2. He is "my [God's] chosen."
3. He is one "in whom my [God's] soul delights."
4. He is one who has had God's Spirit "put ... upon him."

B. Since the servant is God's servant, it follows that the servant's mission will be God's.

1. It is a mission to "bring forth justice..." (v 1).
2. That justice is to be brought "to the nations" (v 1).
3. This two-sided task is explained more completely in vv 2-4.
 - a) In contrast to Babylon, he will not clamor for attention and power, but will "not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street" (v 2).
 - b) He will be both vulnerable and attentive to others who are vulnerable (the figures of "a bruised reed" and "faintly burning wick" suggest those who are down, but not quite out).
 - c) He will "not fail or be discouraged [footnote: bruised]" (ESV; "be disheartened or be crushed" - NASB) until his task of seeking to influence others is complete.

C. Application: God's work is to be done through human agency. But, Isaiah reminds us that it's never all about us.

III. It's About God! (5-17)

A. Empowerment (5-9).

1. The people would naturally wonder about their ability to accomplish such a great thing; compared to Babylon they were weak.
2. Isaiah recalls language of chapters 40-41 (see v 5) and then tells the people that God will enable them to do what needs to be done (vv 6-8).
3. Verse 9 puts things in the context of their "former" punishment and demise and the "new things" they will yet accomplish.

³ Some see the servant in 42.1ff. as Cyrus. That is not out of the realm of possibility in the text, but given the explicit identification of the servant with Israel in 41.8-9, I think Israel fits the context better.

4. These verses are a powerful statement of hope!

B. Greatness (10-13).

1. In a characteristic hymn, a “new song” (probably a cliché that had grown out of writing new songs to celebrate a new action by God—Brueggemann, 45), the surrounded nations are summoned to celebrate the greatness of God.
2. The theme of the text is reinforced in v 13: God is the true “mighty warrior” who enables the servant to do his will.

C. Purpose Realized (14-17).

1. This section reinforces the message that God's silence is not always about absence, but about divine timing.
2. The figure in v 14 is “daringly inventive” (Brueggemann, 47), suggesting both the attention-getting aspect of God's work and the imagery of newness.
3. Verses 15-16 return to the warrior imagery, suggesting “devastation in the land like Sherman through Georgia” (Brueggemann, 47) by one who, at the same time, is tender and merciful enough to care for the blind.
4. Verse 17 summarizes, reviewing the true status of the soon-to-be-conquered enemy.

Conclusion

1. There is probably never a time when the church does not need to hear the message of this text, but it may be especially appropriate in our setting.
2. How can we make a difference in a world of over 6 billion people? For that matter, how can we make a difference in our own small section of that world? Can we move ahead?
3. It starts with the reminder that we are not just religious people who practice regular rituals and live generally moral lives. We are servants on a mission—God's mission; we are to “bring justice” with all that entails – healing, restoration, renewal. Our surrender is backed by God's enabling power, his glorious presence, and the certainty that his will shall prevail!
4. Let us be sure we are with him!

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