

This morning is the third week in the season of Advent, the four weeks before Christmas where we look back at the coming of Jesus and look ahead to His return. During Advent, I am preaching through some of the names given to the Messiah in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word Messiah, which is the Greek name Christos and the English word Christ, referred to the anointed king from David's line who the Israelites believed would restore the nation of Israel to glory. Two weeks ago we looked at the name Immanuel from Isaiah 7, and last week we looked at Isaiah 9 and the names "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." This morning we will look at a name that figures prominently in the second half of Isaiah – the servant of the Lord. This servant figure shows up in four passages. I am going to read and briefly comment on the first three, and then spend most of my time on the fourth passage this morning:

Isaiah 42:1-4 - "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 law the islands will put their hope."

God's Spirit will be on His servant, and he will bring justice to not only Israel but to the nations.

*Isaiah 49:1-6 - Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. ² 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. ³ He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor." ⁴ But I said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength **in vain and for nothing**. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God." ⁵ 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 honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength-- ⁶ he says: "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 you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."*

In some places in this passage, the Servant sounds like the nation Israel, but in other places, he is someone created to bring Israel back to himself and to also be a light for the Gentiles, that the whole world might be saved.

Isaiah 50:4-9 - *The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. ⁵ The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. ⁶ I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. ⁷ Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, **I will not be disgraced**. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. ⁸ He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! ⁹ It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.*

And in this passage, we see the servant has been called by God to a life of faithfulness where he will experience suffering and persecution. What do we learn about the servant? Sometimes it seems to be referring to Israel. Other times, it seems to be referring to a person who will restore Israel to glory and honor, doing for Israel what it could not do for itself. The servant will establish a kingdom of justice for the whole world in which the poor and oppressed are lifted up and cared for. The servant will bring the nations to God. The servant will be faithful to God, even when his enemies persecute him or them. But the story of the servant eventually culminates in the incredible passage found in Isaiah 52:13-53:12:

Isaiah 52:13-15 - *See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. ¹⁴ Just as there were many who were appalled at him--his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness-- ¹⁵ so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.*

Isaiah 53:1 – 12 - *Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a*

lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment **he was taken away**. And who can speak of his descendants? *For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.* ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰ Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and *though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.* ¹¹ *After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied;* by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. ¹² *Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*

This anonymous servant of God described in Isaiah 52-53 is named in the New Testament. In Acts 8, one of the disciples, Philip, is sent by God to an Ethiopian eunuch who has just left Jerusalem and is heading to Gaza and is reading this very passage, Isaiah 53:

*Acts 8:26-35 - Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road-- the desert road-- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of **Isaiah the prophet**. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." ³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. ³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he **did not open his mouth**." ³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." ³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

This servant written about in Isaiah 53 is Jesus, the Messiah, the eternal Son of God made flesh. So what is the significance of this name – the Servant of God – for our relationship with God and for the world?

1) The Servant of God fulfills the calling God's people have failed to achieve

Israel was meant to be a city on a hill, a people that would display the glory of God and bring people back to God. They were supposed to create a just society where God was honored and others were loved and cared for.

***Micah 6:8** - He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

But Israel had failed in their calling. And so, God raised up His Servant, the Messiah, the eternal Son of God Jesus, to do what Israel could not do, to perfectly love God and love others, to bring salvation to the world, to restore people to a right relationship with God.

***Isaiah 59:15-16** -The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. ¹⁶ He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.*

***Isaiah 49:5-6** - 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 honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength-- ⁶ he says: "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 you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."*

Israel failed to fulfill their calling, and so Jesus came to save not only Israel but the whole world from their sins. He perfectly lived out God's law, perfectly loving God and loving others.

***John 8:46** - Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?*

This, of course, is not only Israel's story. This is also the story of the world. We were created in God's image, to reflect Him to the world in how we live and in how we love. But we have failed miserably and made a mess of things. And I would argue that removing God more and more is not leading to a more just and loving world. Think about the current approach to justice, or sexuality, or

peacemaking. But Jesus, the Servant of God, came to do what we have failed to achieve.

This is also the story of the church. Who in here has been hurt by a church or by church leaders? We have failed to be the body of Christ for so many people. We have not loved the way we are supposed to. We have not been a light to the world. But our hope and faith is in Jesus.

And this is our story. We all like sheep have gone astray. We have all failed miserably to be the image bearers He created us to be. We have all hurt others, lived self-centeredly, lied, cheated, and stolen, allowed our sins to create division and hatred. Listen to how Paul puts it:

Romans 3:9-18 - *What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. ¹⁰ As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." ¹³ "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know." ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

What do you think about this description of yourself? A sheep who has gone astray, a sinner, someone who has failed, who has not measured up? I think that in a culture that emphasizes self-esteem, this sounds hurtful, dangerous, problematic. Won't we cause people to think badly about themselves? Wouldn't this lead to depression, despair, suicide? Don't people need more positive self-talk and uplifting messages about themselves?

The answer to that question is found in the second significance of the name "Servant":

2) The Servant of God takes the punishment we deserve upon himself

Isaiah 53:4-8 - *Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD*

has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

Not only will he perfectly live out what we could not, but he will bear the consequences and punishment that we deserved. And Isaiah tells us that he will do it in shockingly spectacular fashion.

Isaiah 53:3 - He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

He will be rejected, that we might be accepted. He will be hated, that we might be loved. He will be crushed, that we might be embraced. He will die, that we might live forever.

Go back to my question – won't an emphasis on our sin and failings lead to despair and depression and low self-esteem? Not if you understand what the servant, the Messiah, Jesus did for you.

Think about romantic comedies – boy meets girl, and they fall for each other, but she has a secret that she is afraid he will find out. She has a shameful past, or her interest was a dare from a friend, or she's not really a princess. Eventually he finds out, and they break up as they experience doubt and confusion. All seems lost, but in the end he decides that he loves her anyways, despite what he has learned. What does that plot reveal about us? Deep down, most of us believe that if people knew the real us – what we really think, what we really do when know one is looking, what we've done in our past – they would reject us, run screaming from us. And so we hide those parts of us that are objectionable from others, especially the ones whose opinion of us matters the most. Here's the dilemma, as outlined by Tim Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*:

“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.”

Our culture teaches us that what people need is high self-esteem. They need to be told that they are special, that they are perfect the way they are, that if people have an issue with them, well it's their problem, that they just need to learn to accept and embrace you for who you are. But that is a superficial love that will not truly meet our heart's need. What our hearts truly need and long for is to be known completely and loved perfectly, with a love that not only accepts all of our flaws and weaknesses and fears and anxieties but heals them as they are brought into the light and met not with rejection but with grace. Think about it: what would it look like to truly confess to someone you love and to be met with grace, with love, with forgiveness, with commitment and loyalty and an "I am with you and I am for you"? It would liberate us from fear and pretense. We don't need to pretend to be better than we are. It humbles us out of our self-righteousness. We don't need to justify ourselves in order to feel okay. We don't need to look down on others to feel better about ourselves. I can be completely honest and transparent about my weaknesses and sins, because the way down is the way to true healing and peace, thanks to the death of the Servant.

1 John 4:18 - There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

If you get this, then you are beginning to scratch the surface of the beauty of the gospel, the wonder of Christmas and Easter and Jesus, the eternal Son of God becoming human. That the one who knows you better than you know yourself did not reject you and leave you to die in the mess you have made, but came down to love you. To save you. To transform you by His grace and by His power. To bring you to God.

And he didn't just do it by snapping his fingers. He suffered for you. He was rejected for you. He was pierced for you. He was crushed for you. He was oppressed and afflicted, led like a lamb to the slaughter, and yet he did not open his mouth or object, even though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Isaiah 53:9 - He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Even though he was innocent and did not deserve it, he willingly gave his life for you. That is how loved you are. Completely and utterly known in all your sins and flaws and weaknesses. And completely and utterly loved with the most costly of all possible loves.

This is why I love **Hebrews 12:1-2** - *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

What was the joy set before him? The only thing he did not have in heaven – you. Keller writes that this kind of love fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us. This is because we know that we are loved, and if God is for us, who can be against us? This is the gospel. This is the meaning of Christmas. We have failed to be the people God created us to be. But Jesus, God’s true and perfect servant, the true image bearer of God, has loved us with a costly love, giving His life to save us.

3) The Messiah shows us what love truly is

Love is a costly love. Love lays down its life for another. Think of Paul’s words:

Romans 5:6-8 - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Think of Jesus, washing the feet of his disciples:

John 13:13-17 - *"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

Love is a mother getting up in the middle of the night to comfort and feed her son. Love is living on less that others might be lifted out of poverty. Love is spending time with the one who is hard to love, that they might know they matter.

And love is forgiving for the hundredth time the one who has hurt you and let you down. What is the most important thing in marriage? To learn how to forgive. I take the punishment upon myself a second time, bearing the cost so that you might receive grace. When we do this, we are following in the footsteps of our God.

As Tim Keller wrote in *Jesus the King*, “*All love, all real, life-changing love, is substitutionary sacrifice. You have never loved a broken person, you have never loved a guilty person, you have never loved a hurting person except through substitutionary sacrifice.*”

Jesus died for us. But after His death comes resurrection:

Isaiah 53:11 - After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

And by laying down our lives in love, we will find eternal life, life to the fullest.

The story of the “servant of the Lord” is the story of one who came to fulfill the calling that we failed to fulfill, who died to take the punishment for our failures, who knows us completely and yet loves us perfectly to restore us to God and give us life to the fullest, life everlasting.