Isaiah 42 Handout

Last week in chapter 41, God put the nations and their idols on trial, opening with proof of His sovereignty: He's the one directing a rising conqueror (Cyrus) who topples kingdoms unchecked. The nations panic and scramble to reinforce their idols, absurdly nailing them down so they won't fall over. God then turns to Israel with deep reassurance — calling her "my servant," promising "fear not, for I am with you," and vowing to transform her weakness ("worm Jacob") into strength, providing abundantly even in the wilderness. The chapter closed back in the courtroom: God challenges the idols to predict anything at all, past or future, and there's nothing but silence. The verdict is that they are nothing while God alone has declared and controlled history from beginning to end. The core message from last week was that God is sovereign over history, and His people can trust Him without fear — not because circumstances are easy, but because of who He is.

In today's chapter, we are going to encounter one of four Servant Songs (42:1-7, 49:1-13, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12) that are going to progressively reveal God's ultimate plan of salvation for His people. They are scattered throughout the next dozen chapters and describe a figure called to a mission far bigger than Israel alone. The interpretive challenge comes in the fact that sometimes God identifies His people Israel in the same way – 'my servant'. Some of the time God's 'servant', Jacob or Israel, represents the godly remnant. Other times God's 'servant' is portrayed as being sinful and rebellious. However, the 'servant of the Lord' in the four servant songs is a single individual, sent to do God's will and save His people. We are going to get the first of these four amazing prophecies here in this chapter.

What qualities do you think the world expects from a powerful leader?

The Servant Introduced (Verses 1-4)
What are the first few words of verse 1? _____

The chapter starts with 'here is' which in Hebrew is an attention grabbing word like 'behold!' It signals a formal presentation.

Strong, warm language is used in referring to this servant:

- Whom I uphold
- My chosen one
- In whom I delight

As we walk through this chapter, we need to keep an eye on who this 'servant' seems to be. When we read this verse by itself, in its original context, it uses the same 'servant' language that was just applied to Israel last week in Isaiah 41:8-9 where we read, "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen. . . " **Based on what we just read, who would the original audience naturally think this servant in verse 1 is? _____**

The people likely heard this as being about the nation, or at least an idealized picture of what Israel was called to be.

However, because we have the whole Bible we know that Matthew's Gospel takes this passage and applies it directly to Jesus (Matthew 12:18-21). The New Testament writers saw Jesus as the one who perfectly embodies the calling Israel was given but didn't fully live out. So in the fullest sense, and by the New Testament's own writing, this passage points to Jesus.

As we walk through these verses (and going forward), we need to ask ourselves if the description fits the nation of Israel or does it sound like someone more specific. Try to keep this question in the back of your mind as the chapter unfolds.

What does it say God put on him? _____

What does He say the Servant will do? _____

Notice the pronoun 'he' is used in this verse. In Hebrew grammar, masculine singular pronouns are used for collective/corporate entities as well as individuals. So, the 'he' in this verse doesn't by itself prove an individual is in view here rather than the nation. That's why we bring in the New Testament as the basis for believing this 'servant' is Jesus rather than the nation as a whole.
Verse 2 describes how the servant will carry out the mission stated in verse 1. One might think that bringing justice to the nations involves force, conquest or loud proclamation. This verse, however, corrects that expectation by describing a gentle approach.

- He will not shout
- (He will not) cry out
- (He will not) raise his voice in the streets

Verse 3 goes on to more of what He will not do:

- A bruised reed he will not break
- A smoldering wick he will not snuff out

Both the bent reed and the smoldering wick imagery are used to show broken or barely functioning people who are spiritually, emotionally or physically weak, wounded, marginalized or struggling. They look like they have little to nothing left to offer and who most likely have been written off or discarded rather than restored. The approach of the Servant here to people in this condition is the opposite of what one would expect from someone establishing justice through power and conquest. Rather than finishing off what is already weak and broken, the servant deliberately preserves and nurtures.

How will this Servant bring forth justice? _____
This carries the sense of reliability, steadfastness and trustworthiness. This justice being brought forth doesn't come through force or crushing the weak, but rather through faithful, patient and gentle action towards what is fragile and nearly broken.

Verse 4 continues with:

- He will not falter
- (He will not) be discouraged

“Till he establishes justice on earth” - Establish is to set, place or fix firmly in position - he will continue until the mission is completed on a global scale.

The first five descriptions show restraint while the last two describe an inward quality. It shows the servant’s own steadiness and resolve. It is a wonderful picture of strength defined by both outward gentleness and inward endurance rather than force or domination.

This contrasts greatly with how Cyrus was described in 41:2-3 when it said nations would be handed over to him and he would subdue kings using his sword and bow and would pursue them.

What does it say the islands would put their hope in? _____
Once again, ‘islands’ are distant nations. These are the same nations who would tremble in terror at Cyrus’s conquests in chapter 41. Notice the complete contrast of how these nations respond in these two chapters. They see Cyrus’s unstoppable conquest and respond with dread, scrambling to nail down their idols. Here, in response to the servant, that same group of nations responds with hope, looking expectantly to his teaching. We see a definite shift from fear to hope based on the very different methods used by the two figures – one conquers by force, the other draws hope through patient, faithful instruction.

So we see in these first four verses how God presents a Servant who will bring justice to the nations – not through force, but through gentleness and patience toward the weak.

The Servant’s calling and purpose (vs.5-9)

Verses 5-7
What is the Lord described as in verse 5? _____

- Who stretches them out
- Who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it
- Who gives breath to its people
- Who gives life to those who walk on it

Creator in Hebrew is ‘bara’ which is used exclusively for divine activity. This introduction of the Creator here is significant. It shows that before commissioning the Servant, God grounds His authority in being the Creator of everything and establishes that the one calling the Servant has absolute, cosmic authority, not just regional or political power.

“Who gives breath to its people” - Breath here is the same word used in Genesis 2:7 for the breath of life God breathes into Adam. This ties the Servant’s commissioning to the original

creation narrative. This emphasizes that the God who first gave life to humanity is the same God now sending the Servant.

Verse 6 shows God speaking personally to the Servant about his specific calling and mission.

How does it say the Lord has called him? _____
The Servant's calling is rooted in and characterized by God's own righteous character.

"I will take hold of your hand" - this echoes the tender, supportive language we saw God use with Israel in chapter 41, but now it is being specifically applied to the Servant.

"I will keep you and make you" - keep here means to guard or watch over protectively.

We get the mission of the Servant in verses 6-7:

- To be a covenant for the people - this is not just someone who establishes or mediates a covenant, but who somehow embodies it.
- To be a light for the Gentiles - we see the Servant's mission reaches far beyond Israel to the entire world.
- To open eyes that are blind
- To free captives from prison
- To release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness

The last three parts describe the practical outworking of the Servant's mission – restoring sight, freedom and light to those in bondage and darkness. This is not just describing physical conditions but spiritual blindness and captivity.

Verses 8-9

Verse 8 is God's signature on the commission. "I am the LORD; that is my name. My glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols." God has just handed the Servant an enormous task, and he stops to say that none of the glory of that task goes to anyone but Him. This ties the Servant's commissioning back to the larger argument we've been following: God is incomparable, and He won't share His glory with idols.

That raises an obvious question for us as Christians. If God won't give His glory to another, how can Jesus receive worship? Hebrews 1:3 calls Jesus "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being," and Hebrews 1:6 says even the angels are commanded to worship him. In John 17:5 Jesus prays for the glory He had with the Father before the world existed. The New Testament's answer is that Jesus isn't "another" competing for God's glory. He belongs to God's own identity.

Verse 9 adds a second sign of God's uniqueness. "The former things have taken place" refers to what God announced earlier and then brought to pass.

What does it say that God will declare? _____
He does it "before they spring into being." Unlike the idols, who can't foretell anything (41:22-23), God announces what's coming before it happens. The Servant's mission is itself one of those new things. It's announced in advance, so that when it comes, no one can credit it to chance or to another god.

Taken together, verses 5-9 form a single unit. Verse 5 grounds the Servant's authority in God as Creator. Verses 6-7 commissioned him, upholding and keeping him in the same language God used for Israel in 41:9-10, and extending his reach to the nations as a "light" for them. And verses 8-9 seal the commission with God's own name and word. The Servant's authority comes from who God is.

A new song of praise (vs.10-12)

What does it say in verse 10 to sing to the Lord? _____
This is a phrase that appears in scripture when someone has learned of something powerful and good that God has done or will do. In this case, it is sung to celebrate an unprecedented act of God's salvation, redemption and victory. It marks a global response of praise because God is doing something new – He is bringing spiritual light to the nations and showing His power over idols.

Everyone is called to sing this new song:

- Those who go down to the sea (and all that is in it)
- Islands (all who live in them)
- Wilderness (and its towns)
- Settlements (where Kedar lives)
- Mountaintops (Let the people of Sela sing for joy)

*Kedar was a nomadic Arab tribal people who descended from Ishmael. Most scholars identify Sela with the Edomites. These two names here are amazing because they seem to represent people who have been hostile to Israel and to God. Now they will be singing praise for their salvation!

The zeal of the warrior God (vs.13-17)
The tone shifts abruptly here. We go from a call to sing praise to vivid battle imagery.

What does it say the Lord will march out like? _____
'Like a warrior he will stir up zeal'. The terms 'champion' and 'warrior' translate to a term for a mighty man of valor, often specifically a soldier.

'Zeal' is a strong word for passionate, protective intensity - showing God's fierce commitment to His people and His purposes.

It says, 'with a shout he will raise a battle cry' - this is interesting because back in verse 2 it specifically said the servant would not shout, cry out, or raise his voice. Now we see God

Himself acting with forceful intensity. This is a distinction, not a contradiction. The Servant's gentle method (vs. 2-4) describes one dimension of how God's purposes will unfold. There is a quiet, patient mercy toward the weak, and decisive power over what opposes God's purposes.

What does God say He has been for a long time according to verse 14? _____
It goes on to say He has been quiet and held Himself back. We get a picture here of God having deliberate patience and holding back for an extended period of time.

But what is He now? _____
This is such an unusual image for God, isn't it? This is intense physical exertion and urgency – the effort of imminent, forceful action after a long period of waiting. Just like labor, it can't be held back any longer.

We get a list of what God will do in verses 15-16:

- Lay waste the mountains and hills
- Dry up all their vegetation
- Turn rivers into islands
- Dry up the pools
- Lead the blind by unfamiliar paths
- Turn darkness into light
- Make rough places smooth

The language used in verse 15 is that of a divine warrior who is in total command of creation. Isaiah seems to be using it as vivid imagery rather than literal language. In 40:3-4 the valleys are raised and the mountains lowered to make a highway for the return of God's people. In 41:18 God makes rivers flow on barren heights. All of that showed that nothing in nature can obstruct God's people on their way home. Verse 15 seems to be the obstacle clearing side of that picture. But the imagery is anchored in real events. The immediate setting is the return of the people from Babylonian exile. Isaiah later says that God will 'dry up' Babylon's rivers in connection with Cyrus (44:27). So the imagery was not meant as purely symbolic. It also describes God acting in history in dramatic and sometimes literal ways to set His people free.

How does verse 16 end? _____

God promises to lead His people back home through the imagery in these verses. God will take care of any and all obstacles that might stand in their way – He will make a smooth path for them. This is talking about practical, tender care for those unable to navigate on their own.

We get a strong contrast in verse 17. **What happens to those who trust in idols?**

_____

This is the same theme from chapter 41. God's people, weak from exile, receive tender care and rescue. Those who put their confidence in lifeless idols (which could be Babylon

specifically, the nations in general or even compromised Israelites) end up exposed and humiliated when those idols prove utterly worthless in saving them.

Israel's blindness indicted (vs.18-20)

What does God tell the deaf and blind to do? _____
Deaf and blind are the same words used in verse 16 for those God promised to lead and guide. He is calling out to people in a condition that makes hearing His call impossible, which highlights the severity of their condition. Israel is in no shape to do anything for themselves or for the world.

God presented the ideal, faithful Servant in verses 1-9. This figure will bring perfect justice, open blind eyes and fully succeed in His mission. In these verses we see God turn a mirror onto the nation of Israel.

"My servant" in verse 19 is the exact same word and construction used in verse 1 for the commissioned servant and also in 41:8 for the nation of Israel. Isaiah seems to purposely be using identical language.

Look at the words used to describe Israel in this verse:

- *My servant* - matches 41:8-9
- *Messenger I send* - connects Israel's calling (Exodus 19) where their role was to represent and mediate God's presence outward to the watching world. Israel was never meant to privately enjoy a relationship with God for her own benefit. They were to be a visible means through which the rest of the world could see and encounter Him.
- *One in covenant with me* - this points back to covenant relationship that was established with Abraham (Genesis 12,15,17) and then reaffirmed at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19,24)
- *The servant of the Lord* - repeated for emphasis

Verse 20 goes on to say that they have seen many things, but what? _____

'Many things' indicates that this isn't just limited exposure or lack of opportunity. Rather, Israel has witnessed a great deal. God has done amazing works throughout their history - the Exodus, providing for them in the wilderness, conquest, God's patience through generations of prophetic warning, not to mention what is unfolding in Isaiah's day. Even though the people saw all of this, it wasn't retained, considered or acted upon.

"Your ears are open, but you do not listen" - we see they have the physical capacity to hear. The failure isn't auditory - it's a failure to actually heed and respond to what's clearly heard.

So we see that Israel's blindness and deafness aren't physical conditions or a lack of evidence. They have had so many opportunities to see and hear the truth about God. Israel bears real responsibility for her condition. They are not an innocent victim of circumstances beyond their control.

This brings us to the last few verses of the chapter.

The consequence of Israel's failure (vs.21-25)

Verse 21 turns the focus from human failure to divine integrity.

What did it please the Lord to make great and glorious? _____

We get a sharp contrast in verse 22. Despite God's intention, the actual state of Israel is devastation – plundered/looted, trapped and hidden. This describes the real historical condition of exile - captivity and loss.

What does it say they have become in the middle of verse 22? _____
With no one to rescue them.

What have they been made? _____

The repetition of plunder and loot drives home the sense of helplessness they are experiencing. There is no human rescuer nor anyone advocating for their release.

Verse 23 seems to be a direct challenge to the people. This is an invitation to respond differently going forward.

Who handed them over to become plunder and loot (vs.24)? _____
This makes it clear that the exile was in no way due to Babylon's military strength. It was God Himself who handed Israel over.

The end of verse 24 gives us the answer once again to why this happened. What is it?

_____

Verse 25 says that God poured out His burning anger on them. **Yet what?**

_____

The flames consumed them but they didn't take it to heart.

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The chapter opens with an ideal picture when God presents the Servant - the Spirit-empowered, gentle yet effective one called to open blind eyes, free captives, and bring light and justice to the nations. This is a picture of what Israel, as God's servant, was meant to do.

The middle of the chapter responds to that mission with a new song of praise from the ends of the earth. And in the middle of the song, God promises to lead the blind by a way they don't know, turning darkness into light.

Then the chapter turns and reveals a twist – the exact language that was just used to describe the mission gets turned back on Israel herself. The one called to open blind eyes (v.7) is herself blind (v.19). The one meant to lead others out of darkness, needs to be led out of her own. So the ideal calling and the actual condition of the one carrying that calling are shown to be in direct tension.

The closing section explains why, and then connects back to the very beginning. Verse 20 diagnosed Israel's failure of attention and response. Verse 25 ends the chapter almost repeating that exact diagnosis in a different form – even after being judged, *"they did not understand . . . they did not take it to heart."* The same failure to perceive and respond that caused the problem (v.20) is shown to persist even through the discipline meant to correct it (v.25). Israel doesn't learn the lesson from the consequences of not learning the lesson. It's the same blindness described at the start of this section and confirmed unchanged at its end.

What this shows us is that Israel's blindness isn't a single moment of failure that judgment then fixes. It's a self-reinforcing condition: they don't see, so they don't respond to God's word; they don't respond, so judgment falls; and even judgment doesn't produce sight, because discipline can punish behavior but can't cure the condition underneath it. The circle can't be broken from the inside, either by Israel's own effort or by consequences alone.

But the chapter has already told us where the answer will come from. Back in v.16, God says he will lead the blind by a way they don't know, along paths they haven't known. He doesn't wait for the blind to fix their own eyesight. He takes the initiative. And the blind in v.16 are the same blind in vv.18-25. The solution is promised in the same chapter as the problem, and it rests on what God will do, not on what Israel manages to do.

Israel was called to this role and couldn't fulfill it, so the one who can step in." The Servant of vv.1-4 is gentle yet unfailing, brings justice, and opens blind eyes, which is exactly what the servant of v.19 couldn't do. This is why Matthew 12 quotes those opening verses and applies them to Jesus. Isaiah puts both figures in front of us: a blind servant who needs to be led, and a faithful Servant who does the leading. The rest of the Servant Songs will show how the second rescues the first.

So Isaiah 42 leaves us here. Israel's problem wasn't a lack of information or a lack of consequences. She had plenty of both, and still didn't understand. That's the human condition apart from God's intervention. The good news isn't that someone finally points out our eyes are closed. It's that the Servant comes to open them.

Verse 20 says he "sees many things" but doesn't observe. How can someone know a lot about God, or the Bible, and still not perceive?

Why might it be harder to receive help when we're confident we already see clearly?

Think about proofreading your own writing. You read what you meant to write, not what's actually on the page, so the typo stays invisible until someone else points it out. Your eyes work fine. But your mind has already filled in the picture, so you don't look for a problem. That's close to what v.20 describes: "You have seen many things, but you pay no attention." Seeing a lot doesn't guarantee that you perceive it.

Jesus says something similar in John 9. He has just healed a man born blind, and the religious leaders have spent the chapter refusing to accept it. They keep insisting they already understand what's going on. Jesus responds to them in verses 39-41 with "*For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."* ***40*** *Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?"* ***41*** *Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."*

Notice what Jesus is saying. The problem isn't blindness itself. Those who know they're blind can be helped, and the man born blind is the proof. The problem is claiming to see when you don't. That's the answer to our question: confidence that we already see is what keeps us from receiving help. It's the same pattern as Isaiah 42:18-25, with plenty of seeing and no perceiving. And Jesus is the Servant Isaiah promised, the one who opens blind eyes (v.7). But he opens the eyes of those who know they need it.