

### Songs of the Servant (3) ... Isaiah 50:4-9

We're back again this evening in the book of Isaiah ... the focus of our interest is chapter 50 where we are tuning in to the third of the four Servant songs ...

The final one is the longest and stretches from verse 13 of chapter 52 down to the end of chapter 53 - a total of 15 verses, 5 stanzas; the Lord Jesus is seen as the Suffering Servant, the Servant for the guilty. It seems to me, they are well named as songs, for here is a Servant worth singing about!

We did the first one on Sunday evening when we explored chapter 42 where we thought about the **equipping** of the Servant. He was chosen by God and anointed by God for the job in hand. We were reminded then that the hope of the world is a Servant!

We caught a glimpse of his heart for folks like us who are damaged goods, battered and bruised - his mercy and tenderness shine through when we are in a dark and difficult place ... for 'a bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.' Or 'He will not crush those who are weak or quench the smallest hope' (NLT).

Then, last evening, we stepped into chapter 49 where we were thrilled to see something of the global **mission** of the Servant - God's 'servant plan' is no small thing, his mission to rescue and redeem and restore is international in its scope.

The mission is to every man everywhere!

It reaches beyond the borders of the land of Israel to the uttermost ends of the earth. This is

Acts 1:8 stuff! Pure and simple, that's why we are here this evening ...! And that's why God's grace is so outrageously amazing.

Right here, in chapter 50, the spotlight is shining on the **faithfulness** of the Servant. The contrast between him and the nation of Israel is obvious in the first 3 verses - she is perverse and foolish in her ways; her track record of loyalty to the God of her fathers - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the covenant, is not the best - truth be told, it leaves a lot to be desired ... she messed up, big time.

**BUT** the Servant is impeccable in all his ways - he is obedient, he's not his Father's 'blue eye' for nothing - the Father delights in him, we were told that in the first poem; and his faithfulness is the stuff of legend ... he is faithful in listening, in suffering, in believing ... that's why he is seen here as one who is the Servant for all those who are weary! He always has a fresh pick-me-up word straight from his Father's heart for those of us who are weary.

And, for you and me this evening, that's a huge blessing. That's why he's known in Isaiah 9:6 as the 'wonderful counsellor.' It reminds me of the warm, open invitation in Matthew 11:28 (NLT), 'Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'

So often the challenge for us as believers isn't that we are blown away or tossed around, it's just that we're worn down and, at times, we feel worn out! We're tired, we're exhausted, we're foot sore,

our energy levels have plummeted - the baseline is that we are weary! Well ... here's a tonic, it's a cheery word for your heart and mine.

There are some beautiful pictures in the text - as we work our way through it, we'll see how suited this Servant is to us in our weakness and in our weariness - as we read in Hebrews 4:15, one who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. As the chorus reminds us, Jesus knows all about our struggles.

There are three main lines of thought: we see, one who is skilled in God's word in verse 4; one who is submissive to God's will in verses 5-6; and one who is sure of God's help in verses 7-9.

These verses are so up-close and personal, they are intimate, there's a real warmth to them as he opens his heart and shares, there's also a sense of rugged realism as he anticipates the trials and troubles up ahead ... they are autobiographical - over and over again (25 times in the space of 6 verses in the NIV) we read the words, 'me, I, and my.'

To put it simply, this is Jesus the Servant talking about himself - this is what he has to say about himself. This is Jesus on Jesus! Unlike us when we talk about ourselves, he's not blowing his own trumpet, there's nothing pompous or conceited in what he says, no air of arrogance in his attitude - instead, he pays eloquent tribute to the one he calls, 'the sovereign Lord/Yahweh' - aka 'the Lord God' - he uses that term 4 times at the beginning of verses 4, 5, 7, 9.

The first two times show how he prepared the Servant for a ministry that sees, and succours,

and sustains the weary pilgrim; the last two show how he stands by the Servant and supports him in his hour of adversity in the lead-up to Calvary and beyond.

Number one: here is a Servant conversant with the Word of God - verse 4.

This is tremendous ... you see, these truths apply primarily to him as the Servant; the lessons we learn, though, are so relevant for you and me as we seek to serve him day by day.

It's a bit like the cart before the horse in verse 4 - it starts off with what the Servant has received for God has 'given him the tongue of those who are taught' and, as a result of that gifting, what he's able to do - 'he knows how to sustain the weary' ... only then does it tell you **how** and **why** he can do it - it's because the Lord God has a significant input into the Servant's ear morning by morning!

The Servant is a disciple - he's been instructed in the word of God, he's been taught in the ways of God. As a pupil in God's school, with classes every morning, he's learned all that he needs to know ... that means, he can bring a word in season to all those who are weary, he brings a skilled word to the people of God. That's why it was often said of him, 'never man spoke like this man.'

A quick read through the gospel narrative and you see ample evidence of this - all kinds of people with all kinds of problems in all kinds of circumstances - to discouraged, despondent or downhearted souls, a word of wisdom was given. Just what they needed to hear! And just when they needed to hear it! The Servant, Jesus, is the

lifter-up of bowed-down heads (Psalm 3:3). His ministry was uplifting ... so should ours!

A word to sustain all of them in their weariness: a weariness maybe brought about through guilt or emptiness or despair or sadness - think of it, a relatively young man, thirty years of age, knew precisely **what** to say to every single person; and, importantly, he also knew **when** and **how** to say it! That young man is the Servant of verse 4a, the one 'who has been given the tongue of those who are taught.'

Every time, without fail, it was the right word that he spoke - all of us here this evening need to hear that 'word' ... a word from the Lord, a word from Scripture ... on a human level, you can live on the words of a loved one, they mean so much, they keep us going, it's a kind-of fuel that fires us up and drives us on. How much greater is a word from One who knows ...!

How is the Servant able to do it - because every morning he hears direct from the Father! That's what it says in verse 4b. Yes, it was day after day, after day - the Lord spoke intermittently, now and again, to the prophets, but he spoke continually to his Son.

It was manna as a daily portion - like an alarm clock, the Father wakened him ... those were precious moments of worship and communion. The Servant was well taught, well instructed. That's why we often read in the Gospels that he was up bright and early to seek his Father's face and to hear from him!

And, for you and me, there's the priceless value of a quiet time - before we hear every other voice

clamouring for our attention, we take time out to hear first from the Lord. An appointment with the Lord where we are richly blessed - moments with majesty; and one which leads us to bless others. A word for today sets us up for the rest of the day. There was a freshness to it - nothing stale here! It wasn't yesterday's bread. As he spoke with weary saints, it wasn't a common cliché that he shared, it wasn't a hackneyed expression that he passed on, it wasn't a canned formula that he proposed - none of these; it was a word fresh with the dew of heaven - a word straight from the higher throne, and from the heart of the Sovereign Lord. God spoke **to** him and **through** him as the Servant of God.

**Number two: here is a Servant committed to the will of God - verses 5-6.**

These two verses are among the most insightful you'll read anywhere in the Messianic scriptures; they point vividly to what happened in the run-up to Calvary. They were penned over 700 years before the Cross, yet they are so breathtakingly accurate. This actually happened. We write over these prophetic words, 'and it came to pass.'

We read in verse 5 that 'the Sovereign Lord has opened my ears' - that's an idiom that speaks of being submissive. This was all that mattered to him - this was all he ever wanted to do ... this was top priority in his life - when things got very hot and almost unbearable, we read that he testified: 'I have not been rebellious, I have not drawn back.'

Wow! Amazing words. Jesus went all the way, for you and me! No hesitation on his part, not a brief

moment's deflection, no distractions, never even a second thought - he followed it through. He obeyed! There was no Plan B ... this was it, the Calvary road, Jesus willingly chose the tortuous path that led to the Cross.

The suffering was God's will for his Son, who is the Servant; this was what Yahweh wanted him to do - we read in Isaiah 53 that 'it pleased the Lord to bruise him.' No explanation is given. We don't know the rationale behind it. There's a mystery to it all. Yet, he yielded to it, he submitted to it; never once did he flinch or falter or fumble - he did not rebel or resist. His attitude was exemplary; even in the Garden he prayed, 'not my will but thine be done.'

See what it meant for him - this is gruesomely grim. So hard to put into words, impossible for us to understand what he endured and experienced on our behalf. There's a glimpse here in verse 6 but, let's be honest, we are out of our depth.

This is hallowed ground - this is the Servant being treated appallingly - there is verbal abuse, psychological abuse, physical abuse - it was all foretold in the second song in 49:7 where he is 'despised and abhorred by the nation.' And you see it right here ...

And even though that is awfully true, see the singular desire on the Servant's part to still do the Father's will - even though it would cost him so much, we read that he 'gave' or 'offered' his back to the smiters. He's still in charge, he's in control, they can only go so far and no further ... Jesus walked into this with his eyes wide open. There was no place he wouldn't go, there was nothing

he wouldn't do, to care for weary people with the truth of God's grace.

They roughed him up - under Roman law, this was the most brutal and merciless punishment imaginable. When they judicially flogged him, his back would have resembled a ploughed field - he was savagely torn to pieces. Yes, that's what they did to my Lord and Saviour ... and there's more, for he also gave his cheeks to those who pulled out his beard.

This was nothing less than gratuitous torture; it was ill-treatment at its worst. No Roman court ever sentenced a man to have his beard pulled out. Never. This is sadistic cruelty from a bunch of thugs who show nothing but contempt for Jesus. This was one of the greatest insults you could inflict upon a man in that day - it was degrading in every sense. And, yet, wonder of wonders, that's what he was willing to bear on our behalf ... to quote the old hymn: 'O make me understand it, help me to take it in ...'

And there's still more in verse 6 - there is public humiliation when he 'did not hide [his] face from mocking and spitting.' They taunted him, they jeered at him, they cursed him, they reviled him, they slapped him - they spat **at** him and they spat **on** him ... ah, this is venom and vulgarity meted out to the spotless, innocent Servant of Jehovah. It was unjust, it was unfair, it was undeserved ... yet, I'll say it again, he did it all for you, and me. Yes, he suffered, he suffered greatly ... we know from Hebrews 5:8 that 'he learned obedience from what he suffered' ... and that's the reason why he can empathise with us in our times of

distress and severe trial - he's been there, he's seen it from the inside, he knows what it's like ... and that adds weight to his ministry of the 'word' in verse 4.

Next time he whispers a word of consolation, or cheer, or counsel in your ear, remember this, Jesus knows, really knows ... and it's all because of what we read in verses 5-6.

Number three: here is a Servant confident of the help of God - verses 7-9.

In spite of all the horrendously horrible suffering he endures, the Servant strikes a note of utmost confidence in these verses - all these words ring with steely conviction ... and, again, the one who enables him to press on is the Sovereign Lord.

Two times over he acknowledges that God is the one who helps him - it doesn't come any more personal than this when he testifies, 'he helps me.' In his weariness, God helped him ... in the heat of the battle, God helped him ... God was his 'present help' in the hour of trouble (the good news is, he does the same for us).

His resolve to go all the way to Calvary is nothing short of admirable - here is pure courage, dogged determination - the Servant is resolute in his total commitment to fulfil the Father's plan. Nothing and no one will stand in his way - he steadfastly set his face like a flint to go all the way up to Jerusalem ... Jesus persevered to the bitter end. O, may God help us to do the same when the going gets tough! So often we want to pack it all in when things go pear shaped - we often fall at the first hurdle - we lack the grit and enduring spirit of our blessed Lord. Ah, when difficulties

come, we give up and give in all too easily - not Jesus! When the going is hard and painfully slow, when the hill is steep, we need the help of our God. Thankfully, he's always there for us!

The Servant knows the help of God, but he's also conscious of the close presence of God - we read in verse 8 that he 'is near' ... God doesn't leave him to get on with it on his own, he doesn't walk off and leave him to carry the can, he doesn't do a runner when the heat is on - no, God is close by, he's at hand ... and Jesus knows it! God is **with** him ... and from the other statements in the text, God is **for** him ...!

How do we know? Well, it says that 'he will not be disgraced ... he will not be put to shame ... and he who vindicates me is near.' Wow ... there's no fuzziness in those affirmations. Nothing woolly in those dig-your-heels-in declarations.

God always has the last word - and that's what the resurrection, the ascension, the exaltation, and the enthronement of Jesus the Servant are all about! Any doubts lingering in the front of your mind - read Philippians 2:9-11 and every doubt will dissolve and disappear. The message is: God has the final say!

You can see something of the sheer defiance of his faith in verses 8-9 ... there's an audacity to it, a real buoyancy to it ... 3 ginormous questions he asks: 'Who then will bring charges against me? Who is my accuser? Who is he that will condemn me?'

He throws down the gauntlet to his enemies, he raises the stakes, he ups the ante when he says: 'Let us face each other! Let him confront me!' It

seems to me that is fighting talk. It comes from a Servant who knows that God has delivered all the goods, a God who has kept all his promises - as the hymn says: 'from the fight returned victorious.'

Echoes there of Paul when he penned Romans 8:31-39 ... like him, we are on the winning team.

There's more than a touch of irony in the closing sentence in verse 9 - 'they will all grow old like a garment, the moth will eat them up.' Sure, at the end of the day, their doom is certain - they will perish, their fate is sealed, and they're helpless to do anything about it - the moth gets the better of them. Basically, they are impotent in time and in eternity, as verse 11 makes so incredibly clear.

As before, in the previous two songs, we need to take on board the message from Hebrews 12 to 'fix our eyes on Jesus [the Faithful One], the pioneer 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' ...

When trials come, and they will, God will help us and he will be near us. He will see us through - his grace sustains. And bearing in mind that the Servant has 'a word for the weary' in verse 4, I'm reminded of the lovely hymn:

*O soul are you weary and troubled, No light in the darkness you see,  
There's light for a look at the Saviour,  
And life more abundant and free ... so ...  
Turn your eyes upon Jesus, Look full in his wonderful face,  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,  
In the light of his glory and grace!*