

See, They are all False!

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[0:00] Good morning, St. Silas. My name is Martin Ayres. I'm the senior pastor here. So whether you're watching at home or you're here in the room, it's great to see you.

And we're going to be looking together at this Isaiah 42 passage. We've had some sound problems at home. I hope that you can hear me, and we're doing our best to resolve those.

So I'll pray for that in a moment. It's great having Bishop Andy Lyons with us. And the reason that Andy has come to join us today is so that he can ordain James Lapping this evening, which is great. So that's taking place this evening at the Half Six service. And if you are able to join us virtually by watching that online, then that will be an encouragement, hopefully to you, but to James as well on this day.

Bishop Andy will lead us in communion shortly as well. So let's turn to this. Thanks, Andrew and Darren, for reading. Let's pray together.

[1:01] Heavenly Father, when we see the heavens, the stars that you've made, the whole cosmos, we think, who on earth are we that you would be mindful of us?

Thank you that you condescend to speak to us, and more than that, that the Lord Jesus was sent by you to seek us and to save us.

As we turn to your word, may our knowledge of him deepen, and would our hearts burn within us that our lives would be reshaped for your glory.

And we do pray practically about the sound, Father. We pray that we'd all be able to hear as we turn to your word. In Jesus' name, amen. So we're going to be in this little series for the next few Sundays in Isaiah.

Isaiah is a big book, a prophet from hundreds of years before Jesus came. These four songs that we're going to look at are quite closely tied together in one section of Isaiah, and they're known as the servant songs.

[2:05] Isaiah was given this prophecy around 700 B.C., and he's describing this character who's revealed to him, who's shrouded in mystery, and he's fundamental to God's whole future plans for the world.

That's what we'll see together. They're great to be looking at in the run-up to Christmas. But the setting for these songs was that they were given at really one of the darkest periods of history for God's people, possibly the darkest period of their history.

The people had turned from trusting God in the promised land, and so they've been sent into exile from the promised land. And Isaiah is living before that exile, but he promises, God promises through Isaiah that the exile will come.

They'll be sent away from the promised land. And that happened in 587 B.C., so sometime later. And then this portion of Isaiah, chapters 40 to 55, is given as a message through Isaiah that will become relevant for the people at that time when they're in this dark period.

And for us today, it's not hard to accept in 2020 that the world is in deep need of change. Just as they would have known, change is needed. We can think that ourselves.

[3:22] Just looking at our world, looking at war, looking at poverty, looking at sickness and suffering, a world where relationships go badly, where we get mistreated, where we live in fear in all kinds of ways.

Sometimes the Christian faith falls on deaf ears because people around us think, well, I'm fine, thank you. I'm fine without what you're offering with Jesus.

But maybe in this season, more than normal around us in Glasgow, we're more aware, we're all more aware, we're more willing to admit that change is needed.

Our world is groaning for change. What happens when we long for change is often we put our hope in something. So people around us put their hope in technology and think, well, as long as we get technology advances, then the world will become the place we need it to be.

And yet for all the good things that technology brings, you know, greener energy and smartphones and the like, technology is also used for terrible evil as well.

[4 : 29] Sometimes people put their hope in education, but no matter how well educated people become, we can still be just as self-centered as we would have been if we weren't so well educated.

Another thing people put their hope in for change is politics. And that's often why we see such a strong kind of visceral, angry reaction to politicians not delivering the change that people long for. Because we've put too much hope in our politics. People have identified over the last year or two this rise of populism where new leaders, people really pin their hopes on them and there's this wave of, oh, at last, this person will bring the change that we long for.

But often that's because we're putting too much hope in political regimes and we think, oh, if only we were free from Brussels, then we could change, everything would go right.

Or if only we were free from Brexit, everything would go right. But there's this kind of ideological battle going on as people long for change. But Isaiah would have us look at the darkness in our lives and look at the darkness in our world and look elsewhere for change.

[5 : 42] Not to technology, education, politics, but to look to the living God. And not as a flight of fancy or as wishful thinking, but because God has promised in his word that he will bring the change that we're all groaning for for our world.

But as ever, one of the keys to putting things right is to correctly diagnose the problem. And Isaiah has done that in chapter 41. I just had it printed on the sheets there for those here.

If you're at home, you could just glance back in your Bible or if you're looking online, you could just have a look at chapter 41. But we didn't have it read. What happens there is God gives a devastating critique of the idols that people are worshipping instead of the living God.

And he ends that with verse 29. See, they are all false. That's his declaration of what people have turned to to put their hope in instead of him.

And for us today, an idol is anything that you build your life on and trust to give you what only God can really give you. We might not bow down to shrines.

[6 : 52] We might think that looks primitive. But in our hearts, there are things that we turn to and we put our hope in when we should turn to God. We turn often good things, good things, into God things and worship them.

We worship money, sex, comfort, success, the NHS, good things, but we think that's the ultimate thing and build our lives on them.

We make it our saviour. And it's no good for us. But it's at this point in history for God's people when they have so badly suffered and it was their fault.

They've let God down. Their spiritual failure has been exposed that God breaks in and declares his willingness to act to put things right.

And I don't know what you think about that but I think that's a great comfort to us if we're aware ourselves that we are spiritual failures. Often it's long after we've become Christians and we're just aware that we continue to fail to live up to God's standards.

[7 : 59] We feel that as a Christian we're a spiritual failure. Well let's be encouraged that when God saw his people and it was so obvious they'd failed he at that point promised that he would act.

So Isaiah 42 reveals to us a God whose character is not to look on the broken with disgust. It's not to look on the broken and abandon us. It's to look on the broken and offer to mend them to put them right.

How is he going to do that? Well through his servant. So we're going to see three things from this first song about the servant. His work, his way and his worship.

First the work of the servant. Let's pick things up again in verse 1. Have a look at that. 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. You don't quite get this in our translation but it starts verse 1 with see behold.

[9 : 03] So the last verse of chapter 41 God is he's got the idols in the dock and he ends up saying see they are worthless and then he says see my servant behold my servant put your hope in him instead of anything else.

And the key work of the servant is justice. Did you notice that at the end of verse 1? He will bring justice to the nations. Then the end of verse 3 in faithfulness he will bring forth justice.

In verse 4 he will establish justice on earth. Now when we think of justice what we might think of is the courts and people being punished brought to justice for having done wrong.

And so we maybe then translate that to thinking of justice about God punishing sin. But actually this word justice that Isaiah is using here is much broader than that and it's about God establishing his righteousness in the world.

His will being done on earth as in heaven. So that he doesn't need to punish evil because he's done away with evil. Everyone is treating one another as they should.

[10:21] So friends we dream of a better world. This is it. This is what's being promised. And I was watching a film this week and it was a universal film you know universal productions. So as you'll know if you've ever watched a film when universal make a film at the beginning it always starts with the same opening shot which is of the world and then it kind of pans out and the word universal wraps around the world.

And when we read Isaiah 42 we could do the same with God's promises about his servant that it's not just for Israel this small group of people in the Middle East it's universal in its scope as justice is established for the whole world.

Then at the end of verse 4 that last line in his teaching the islands will put their hope. So this servant is going to give words that mean that the whole world can have a lamp for their feet and a light for their path.

They can follow his teaching and things will be right in their relationships and they'll treat one another with love and kindness and God will be recognised for who he is.

One of the key marks of that better world perhaps a lot more controversially for us in Glasgow today in our pluralistic society is that the unity comes from seeing that Yahweh the God of the Bible is the one true God.

[11:44] People turning from their false gods to say no there is there is a God and there's one God and it's the God of the Bible Yahweh and we serve and worship him from now on.

We follow his words the words of his servant. So that's the servant's work justice to mend broken people our hearts having turned inward on ourselves in self love and point our hearts out again to love God and love other people as we should and to do that for all the nations all the world so that the curse in our world is lifted and the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

Sometimes we describe the Christian faith as an individual personal salvation story don't we? If someone asked us what Christians believe I would often instinctively jump to speak about well here's what it's like for me about having my sins forgiven and my shame taken away and hope of a future with God and eternal life and knowing that God loved me that Jesus died for me it's not wrong to describe the Christian faith like that and then say to someone that's what it would mean for you than actually what turning back to God would mean and yet often that therefore sounds like it's just an individual personal salvation story and we come to Isaiah 42 and we see that the Christian faith is about God promising that the whole world will be put right and God's righteousness will be established forever this is the change that we need that we groan for through the servant how will he achieve it?

we've heard the work of the servant our second point is the way of the servant have a look with me at verse 2 he will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets a bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out in faithfulness he will bring forth justice he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth in his teaching the islands will put their hope in other words he will quietly go about his mission he'll be meek meekness is strength under control it's not being weak it's being strong but holding it in in restraint there's no doubt that he's strong he's going to achieve justice but this servant is gentle and tender it's just worth contrasting that with the leaders we see in our world today isn't it when it seems that almost what we're looking for in leaders is that they they're pushy and dominant overly assertive

I can think of people that I've met over my life people at university people in working life who've been massively high achievers and because they're high achievers people kind of want to know about them and they're really full on unbelievably full on people where you think nothing is going to get in the way of you achieving what you want to achieve you will just smash everything out of your way maybe you can think of people like that in your class at school or in your workplace people who

know what they want and nothing will stand in their way we see it in politicians we often even respect it we think well at least that person will get the job done and we need change and we don't think about the cost of how they treat people around them we also see it in churches it's a big problem today when as the church as churches we long for growth we long for people to discover what we believe and so we're attracted to leaders with real charisma who can make things happen who can set a vision but then we find that people like that get a big crowd around them they get a big church a mega church people saying oh we've got to learn from them look what that guy's doing and then we find out they're exposed that they're actually a bully that they've abused people that they've left people damaged and in the post-match analysis people will often say amazingly often will say yeah you know when you think about it actually no one could ever challenge them they'd learnt to stop listening to their critics yeah I'm not sure they were really accountable to anyone so we have these examples around us of pushy leadership dominant leadership and then see God's servant he's about as different as a man could be verse 2 he doesn't shout out he doesn't force himself on others he's not going to railroad his agenda into people's lives and we heard in our other reading from Matthew's gospel how Jesus fulfills that prophecy as the Pharisees were so furious with him for breaking their rules on the Sabbath to heal a man and his response wasn't to quarrel with them it was to withdraw to a different place where while they plotted to kill him he just went around getting on with healing people and his saving work if we want to see this song fulfilled we just read the gospels about Jesus this is him

[17:14] Jesus is quietly magnificent and then look at verse 3 a bruised reed he will not break so if you think of marshland reeds are so fragile you know all it takes is a duck to swim into a reed and it breaks and the reed here is a person it's the picture of someone who's so fragile they're like a reed that's already bruised so that it would be harder not to break it than to break it when you handle it and this is the servant through whom all the might of the Lord is going to be at work it's only when you think about his strength to defeat death to conquer his enemies it's only it's when you think about what he could break that it's all the more extraordinary to hear what he won't break he won't break broken people who come to him so this is good news for the bruised and every Christian is bruised we're bruised by the conviction of our sin by the recognition that we are not the people we should be and we need forgiveness and we come to Jesus as bruised reeds and we hear a bruised reed he will not break there's the bruising all of us experience or may experience at times from just living in a broken world the bruising of grief the bruising of sickness of depression of being sinned against when you feel bruised and you come to this servant you find that he's gentle to restore you then the smouldering wick

I think best understood as the person whose faith is almost gone almost out the person who feels I'm struggling here I'm nowhere as a Christian on the verge of giving up I've just made such a mess of being a Christian so that your faith is like a candle that left on its own is just going to burn out completely what possible use would God's chief agent to save the world have with somebody whose faith is as fragile as that well we're told here this servant he won't quench out won't snuff out the smouldering wick instead he patiently works with it to rekindle it such is his concern for every little one of his and this is a verse that's been of great comfort to many through the generations to know that we don't have to wait until we've sorted our questions out or sorted our lives out before we approach

Jesus for help no rather we can come with a faith that says Lord I believe but I'm struggling here and I need your help we might think of the two men on the road to Emmaus after Jesus has risen and when you look at their confusion their downcast that Jesus died I wonder if the reason Jesus doesn't expose straight away that he's alive again is because they wouldn't have been able to get it and instead he walks with them and he patiently explains from the scriptures that the son of man had to suffer and die and then it's when later they're with him and he breaks the bread they realize it's him or maybe the way that you think of the way Jesus handles Peter who denied him three times and reassures him and restores him he wants Peter there in Galilee go and tell the disciples and Peter they'll see Jesus in Galilee just as he told them if you feel that your faith is a smoldering wick you take it to the servant and he rekindles it so this is the way of the servant and it's so different from worldly handling of power and he calls his people to be like him that we would handle worldly authority in a different way to the world in our workplaces in our families use your authority to serve others for their good that in our church we'd be marked by gentleness by care that when someone comes to us bruised we wouldn't crush them but would seek to nurture them but we should be in no

doubt as we hear about that gentleness that the servant will still succeed in his mission and so God says then in verse 5 as if to say don't doubt that this will happen look why you should have confidence in me verse 5 this is what

God the Lord says the creator of the heavens who stretches them out who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it who gives breath to its people and life to those who walk on it I the Lord have called you the servant in righteousness I will take hold of your hand I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the gentiles to open eyes that are blind to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness so in verse 6 the servant becomes a new covenant for the people one that they can keep because he'll keep it for them and that's the new covenant we remember as we have bread and wine together shortly in the next line he reveals he'll be a light to the nations that the nations will come to know God through this servant and then in verse 7 that those who are spiritually blind will be able to see God for themselves those who are captive to fear of death and captive to sin will be freed and released into the light of knowing God so God is taking this servant by the hand and leading him to success to change the world and how do we respond to that well that's our third point the worship of the servant as the spirit led Isaiah to the prophecy of verse 1

Isaiah bursts into praise and not just for him have a look at verse 10 sing to the Lord a new song his praise from the ends of the earth he wants everyone to worship God for the incredible wisdom that God would have devised this plan people who sail the sea in verse 10 people who live on islands in verse 10 in verse 11 it's desert dwellers and city dwellers people from places far and wide and it's not just begrudging praise if you look at verse 11 it's shout sing sing shout so the towns raise their voices the settlements rejoice the people sing for joy and then they shout from the mountaintops maybe you can think of being on a mountaintop just picture people shouting in worship of God singing in joy God's goodness and no wonder for we hear this wonderful news that God has not given up on this world when all else seems lost

[24 : 36] God tells us I've got this and I'll do it through my servant that's the plan just as Paul the apostle when he breaks off in Romans he's just explained about Jesus saving work at the cross and the life for the Christian under grace and then he says in Romans about how God's got this plan through history to save people from Israel Jewish people to save people from the nations to save everyone who turns to Jesus and then he breaks off and says oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God how unsearchable his judgment and his paths beyond tracing out who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor God's wise and gracious plan of salvation just moves him to burst into praise and here Isaiah has this such a in a way just a whisper of the gospel just a mysterious glimpse of the man through whom God will save the world and it moves him it wells up in his heart into unhindered spontaneous praise it's a reminder to us that sung worship singing to God it's just so good for us and we're missing it aren't we and I so deeply miss our times together before

March this year when this room was full and there was that coming together in worship it's such an uplifting thing to be able to worship God unhindered in song and those days will come again we trust but this is a reminder to us that it's good for us to worship and it's an appropriate reflection of the joy that God's work puts in the heart of his people even in the desert there when life is tough there's this overflowing joy just as we might think of how in our own lives we were desert dwellers spiritually and Jesus has become living water for us we were spiritually blind and he's opened our eyes to see him and know him we were captive to our sin and he's broken the chains and the question we see the question as we see Isaiah's response of worship is is the joy that comes from the gospel your joy today for it can be how marvelous it is that all the saving power of God would burst through at the very point when there was no other hope that the salvation on offer stretches to the ends of the earth and that God's way to turn the world completely upside down is through a man who won't force himself on anyone and we today can marvel all the more that that message from 700 BC was taken up and fulfilled in the coming of Jesus and from 12 followers we now know that message will be proclaimed all around the world today in nation after nation

God's work should fuel a joy in our hearts that pervades our every waking life so there was a day it was a morning last week when I was getting ready for work and I had my cycling gear on got the lycra on it was absolutely lashing it down with rain outside and Kathy found me I was on the stairs just getting ready to go and thinking about how am I going to get done what I've got to get done today and how am I going to even get to work through that rain and she didn't say it but I think I look

pretty miserable and a bit green and a bit overwhelmed but how foolish to start the day like that when however small our own efforts might seem however overwhelmed we might feel with what's going on around us we serve a God who is powerfully at work through his gentle servant and he's not going to stop until his righteousness is established in Scotland and in the nations of the world maybe we need to hear that today history will end well as Jesus wins and knowing that hope we can gladly sing praise to him whatever's going on
Amen