

## **An Ancient Christmas: The Coming of Jesus in the Old Testament — The Servant**

Isaiah 42:1-13

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Isaiah 42, as we continue our series, "An Ancient Christmas: The Coming of Jesus in the Old Testament." You will have perhaps noticed a pattern in the messages from the Old Testament, a pattern of problem, promise, and provision. We see that, for instance, as we looked at the very first in this series, the promise of a seed in Genesis 3:15. The problem was the sin of Adam and Eve, which had plunged the entirety of the human race into misery. And the promise was a seed, the provision of which came in the coming of Jesus into this world. But we also saw the same thing in the prophecy about the virgin. What was the problem that was the backdrop to the story of Isaiah's prophecy about the virgin to the king of Judah? Well, the backdrop was an invasion of Judah by two kings from the north, and it provoked a crisis, a problem. And in the context of that problem a promise is made through the prophecy of Isaiah of a virgin who is going to bear a child who is going to uphold the line of David. And that provision comes in the person of Jesus Christ. And so whether we were looking at the seed or at the prophecy of the virgin or the prophecy of the child or of the branch so far in our studies, we've seen a pattern of problem, promise, and provision. And you're going to see the same thing today as we look together at Isaiah 42.

Now Isaiah 42 is one of the very important servant passages in the book of Isaiah. For the book of Isaiah, the idea of the servant is one of the key ideas. And though we're going to be reading all the way from one to thirteen, and we're going to draw attention especially to something Isaiah says in verse 6, I want to focus on verses 1 to 4 this morning because those verses will appear later in the Bible and we'll talk about that context. But one way that will help you appreciate what is going on in Isaiah 42 verses 1 to 4 is to notice a word that is used there. Look at the very first word in Isaiah 42:1 — "Behold." If you're using the ESV, "Behold," is the word that is used there. Now that word appears in the immediately preceding six or seven verses twice. If you look at Isaiah 41 verse 24, and then look again at Isaiah 41 verse 29, you will see both of those verses, if you're using the ESV, begin with a "Behold." But in both cases, they're drawing attention to idolatry. So the problem that is the backdrop of Isaiah 42 is idolatry.

And as I said, it's just like the passage that Ralph read to us this morning from Jeremiah. Turn back to Jeremiah 10 and look at what he says here. Jeremiah 10

verse 16: "Not like these, is he who is the portion of Jacob." Now what is the "not like these" that he's talking about? He's just been describing idols and then in Jeremiah 10:16 he says the God of Israel, the portion of Jacob, is not like these; He's not like the idols. And so the contrast that's going on in Jeremiah 9 and 10 is the contrast between idols and the living God. And that is exactly the contrast that is going on in Isaiah 41 and 42. So you'll appreciate the story more when you understand what the problem is that Isaiah is addressing. He's addressing the idolatry of the children of Israel; they are going after idols. And in response to that, comes this prophecy of promise, promise about the servant.

So before we read God's Word, let's ask for His help and blessing in prayer.

*Heavenly Father, this is Your Word and we ask that You would open our eyes to behold wonderful things in it. Make our hearts to believe Your Word, to receive it as Your truth. We pray that You would speak to us saving truth, truth about the coming Savior, and that we would believe it with all our hearts, minds, soul and strength. In Jesus' name, amen.*

This is the Word of God. Hear it, beginning in Isaiah 42 verse 1:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.

Thus says God, the LORD who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: "I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them."

Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants. Let the desert and its cities lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the top of the mountains. Let them give glory to the LORD, and declare his praise in the coastlands. The LORD goes out like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his zeal; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows

himself mighty against his foes.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

## **THE PROBLEM OF IDOLATRY**

The problem that Isaiah was speaking to was the problem of idolatry, and that is not a primitive, prehistoric problem; that is a very modern problem. All of us struggle with idolatry. It's not just the children of Israel, it's not just the ancient nations around them; all of us are tempted to idolatry. Idolatry doesn't just mean making idols of gold and of silver and bowing down to them in some primitive fashion in the wilderness. Idolatry is any time we find our satisfaction, our security, our treasure in someone, something, anything else other than God. Isn't it interesting that in the very passage that Ralph read this morning that Jeremiah says that we don't boast in our riches or our might or in our wisdom? Now riches, might, and wisdom aren't bad. I wish you were all wise, mighty, and wealthy, but when you boast in your wisdom, your might, and your wealth, you are boasting in something that is not ultimate because all three of those things come from the Lord. If you have them, they come from the Lord. He's better than them, He's the source of them, He gives them, and He cannot be replaced by them. But people all the time are tempted to trust in those things instead of the Lord. And when you trust, as Jeremiah warns, in might, and wisdom, and wealth instead of the Lord, when you boast in those things instead of the Lord, what have you become? You've become an idolater. You're worshiping the creature rather than the Creator; you're worshiping the gift rather than the Giver. And all of us are tempted to do this. Idols may not be bad things in and of themselves. They may be things like family or ministry or job or vocation. Anything that is substituted for the ultimate who is God and who is seen as the thing from which we get our ultimate satisfaction and in which we find our ultimate security, if it is not God Himself it is idolatry. And so the problem that Isaiah is speaking to is not just a problem that primitive peoples have, it's a problem that challenges all of us today. And so what Isaiah is saying speaks to us exactly where we are. And so I want you to see the problem and the promise and the provision with me in this chapter.

Isaiah speaks to us about the problem and he highlights it with the words, "Behold." Look again back at chapter 41 verses 24 and 29. Verse 24 — "Behold, you are nothing and your work is less than nothing. An abomination is he who chooses you." Who is Isaiah speaking about? He's speaking about idols. "Behold, you are nothing, idols! You are a nothing!" And then he draws attention to idolatry. Look at verse 29. "Behold, they are all a delusion. Their works are nothing; their metal images an empty wind." So he uses the words, "Behold," to draw attention to the problem of idols and idolatry in Israel. And then he uses the word, "Behold," to draw attention to the solution, to point to where we really ought

to be putting our ultimate hope and trust — not in idols but in the living God. And what does he say? Look at verse 42:1. “Behold, my servant.”

So in Isaiah 41:24 it's, “Behold, the idols!” in 41:29 it's, “Behold, idolatry!” in 42:1 it's, “Behold, my servant.” So the servant is the promise, the solution, and the answer to Israel's problem of idolatry. God is providing this servant who actually is able to do all of the things that Israel is looking to idols to do. Only this servant can do what Israel is wrongly depending upon idols to do, to use. You know, you may be looking to your wealth, your position, your wife, your husband, your children, your family - you may be looking to any of those things to find your ultimate fulfillment and satisfaction. Some of you have found frustration in one or more of those areas and you think that ultimate satisfaction can be found in someone else created since you've been failed in those areas. Some of you may have found fulfillment in those areas so that you think that's all that you need.

But let me ask you this. What if that thing that you're finding your security in, that you're finding your identity in, that you're finding your fulfillment and satisfaction in, is taken away? There are twenty grieving families in Connecticut today — twelve little girls, eight little boys - six, seven years old - snuffed out in an instance by a wicked, malevolent act. What if all their hope and all their satisfaction is in those children? If it is, it's gone, and it will not be returned. But if God is your ultimate source of security and satisfaction, no one and no thing and no circumstance can take it away. That's what Isaiah is speaking about. Israel has looked to things, some of which are good, and tried to find her security and her satisfaction there, and it has ended up meaning that Israel has been ruined because they trusted in something less than God, other than God, instead of God, more than God. And Isaiah's saying, “The only hope is the servant the Lord provides.”

## **THE PROMISE IS THE SERVANT**

And so the problem is idolatry, the promise is the servant. And I want you to see four things about the servant that are explained to us in this passage. Look at verse 1. First of all, notice what is said about the servant. “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights.” So this servant is appointed by God, chosen by God, elected by God. It's God who has chosen him and He upholds him. He equips him and supplies him with everything he needs to do his bidding. But especially it's that last phrase that I want you to see — “in whom my soul delights.” God delights in this servant that He is promising. You know, you may have a person who works for you, an employee, or there may be somebody that provides you a particular service and you really appreciate their work, you really appreciate what they do for you in employment or the service that they provide, but you really wouldn't want to be friends with them; you may not even like them that much. That's not how the servant is. The servant is chosen by God, he's employed by God to do a very important task, but the Lord

uses very powerful language about him. Look at what He says — “in whom my soul delights.” God says, “My soul delights in this servant.” So he says, “Here's the solution, Israel. I'm going to give you my servant in whom my soul delights.” There's the first thing that I want you to see about him. The Lord delights in this servant.

Second, look again at verse 1. “I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations.” So the servant is going to establish justice, unlike the unfaithful and unjust leadership of Israel, both amongst the ministers and amongst the government leaders. This servant is going to lead faithfully and with justice. Now when we hear the word, “justice,” normally we start thinking about a just and equitable, a fair and righteous society. And that's certainly true and Isaiah is speaking to that, especially in the context of the injustice and the unfaithfulness of the kings of Israel. But behind that idea of justice here is especially the idea of the truth of the Word of God. This servant is going to bear witness to the truth of God's Word. It is God's Word and its truth that the world needs, and this servant is going to bear witness to that. He's going to establish it. Notice as well, he's not only just going to establish it in Israel — look at the end of the sentence in verse 1 — “in the nations.” He's going to establish God's Word to the very ends of the earth. So the Lord's soul delights in him and he's going to establish the truth of God's Word to the very ends of the earth, to the nations.

Third, look at verse 2. “He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street.” In other words, when the servant comes, he's not going to startle you, he's not going to shout you down, and he's not going to self-promote. In fact, we're told, look at the very beginning words of verse 3 — “a bruised reed he will not break and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.” So this servant, though he is going to establish justice, is going to do it in such a way that he's not shouting you down, quarreling with you, or self-promoting. In fact, he carries himself in such a way that he is kind and tender and concerned and caring towards the weakest of people, even those who could be described as a bruised reed or a smoking flax - a little candlelight that's just about gone out; you're right at the very end of your rope; you're almost ready to break. This servant, as powerful as he is going to be, as righteous as he is going to be, he's going to be tender to the weak. You know, very often when you think of someone who's going to come establish justice — you know, a new DA is in town and he's going to put things right — you don't think that that's going to be the first person that you go to for some mercy, but this servant who's going to establish God's truth and justice is going to be one who deals tenderly with those who are weak.

And then fourth, notice again verse 4. “He will not grow faint or be discouraged until he has established justice in the earth, and the coastlands wait for his law.” So whereas we get tired, some of us grow weary in well-doing — that's why there's a Bible verse that says, “Do not grow weary in well-doing.” Why is there a Bible verse that says, “Do not grow weary in well-doing”? Because we grow weary in well-doing! You know, we get up one morning and we do it again, and

then we get up the next morning and we do it again, and a thousand days later we get up and do it again, and five thousand days and ten thousand days and fifteen thousand days and we get tired of doing it. We're doing what's right, we're doing our duty, we're doing the best that we can, and we just get tired. And so the Bible says, "Don't grow weary in well-doing." Why? Because we grow weary in well-doing. And this passage is saying this servant will not grow faint and discouraged until he establishes justice in the earth. That's the promised servant. He will be one in whom the Lord's soul delights, he will establish God's Word to the nations — even though he is the one who is establishing God's kingdom, he is not going to be a self-promoter who shouts you down and startles you with his words — and he's going to be tender with the weak, and he will not grow faint or be discouraged in the tasks that God gives him. Those four things are said about the servant.

Now this is not the last time this passage appears in the Bible. If you were to turn with me, and I've invite you to do it now, turn with me to Matthew chapter 12 verses 15 to 21, Matthew quotes this passage in Matthew 12 verses 18 to 21, but he introduces it beginning in verse 15. Now as you turn there, let me point your attention to one thing. In Matthew chapter 12 verse 14, we're told the context of Matthew's quote of this passage. Matthew says, verse 14, "The Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him." So the context of Matthew's quotation of this passage is the Pharisees were trying to destroy Jesus. They had gotten together, they had hatched a conspiracy, and their goal was to destroy Him. And in response to that, we read this. Look at verse 15. "Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known." Now that language is very important. In other words, He didn't get into a shouting match with the Pharisees, He didn't try and shout them down, He didn't enter into a quarrel with them, He didn't try and promote Himself over against their plans, He just withdrew and He told His followers, "Don't get in it with them and don't go out there making these claims about Me. God will take care of that."

And this brings Matthew into mind of what the prophet Isaiah said. Look at verse 17. "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah." Now that's about the thirteenth time that Matthew has said that in his gospel. Over and over he says, "This happened that that might be fulfilled. This happened that what the prophet said might be fulfilled." He's said it to this point twelve times. This is the thirteenth time he says it in his gospel. And then he quotes these words, "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope." Matthew is telling you that Jesus is the provision for the promise in the prophecy of Isaiah to answer the problem of idolatry. Jesus is the provision.

## THE PROVISION OF GOD'S SERVANT

So we have the problem of idolatry, we have the promise of God's servant, we have the provision of God's servant in Jesus. And think about the character of Jesus. In Him, the Lord's soul delights. You know what I think of? I think of what God the Father said to Jesus at the time of His baptism. "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." His soul delights in Him and He establishes God's truth to the nations. You know, there are two billion people on this planet today that name the name of Jesus as Savior. His name has gone out to the very ends of the earth and we pray that it will go out more and that men and women and boys and girls would truly believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But Isaiah had prophesied that He would take the Word of God to the nations six hundred years before He was born.

Notice again the words that "a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench." When I hear those words a lot of images pop into my mind but one of them is His encounter with the woman who had been caught in adultery. You know, she was that close from being stoned to death by a group of Pharisees, but you know what, she was even closer to losing the presence of God for eternity because of her sin. And Jesus did not snuff her out. He did not bruise that reed. He did not quench that smoldering flax, but He said, "Where are those that condemn you?" And she said, "I don't see them." And He said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." He set her free from her condemnation and from her bondage to a life of sin and He set her on the path of righteousness and blessing. He did not quench that smoldering flax or bruise that already bruised reed.

And then we read, "and in His name the Gentiles will hope." He does not grow weary until He has established His justice to the ends of the earth. We grow weary. Remember, it's almost a dozen years ago when our president said to us, in response to the crisis of 2001 and September 11 that, "We will not falter, we will not tire, and we will not fail." But we have. I needed to hear those words, I needed to hear those words, but we do grow weary and we are discouraged. But the servant, Jesus, sets His face like flint towards Jerusalem and He goes there in order to be destroyed so that we might not be destroyed by our own sin. He goes there to bear our own sin and He does not falter, He does not tire, He does not fail. He is the provision for the promise of the servant and He is the answer to the problem of our sin and our idolatry. And once again, we've seen how, in the Old Testament, the coming of Jesus is prophesied six hundred years before His incarnation. May God grant us all trust in Him. Let's pray.

*Our heavenly Father, we bow before You today and we thank You for the provision of Jesus. We all need Him. We know what it is to try and find something, anything, other than You as our ultimate comfort, our ultimate*

*security, our ultimate identity, our ultimate satisfaction. And we know that it is to see that fail. Only in You, O God, were we meant to rest and flourish and have peace and well-being. O Lord, teach us to know, to recognize, the wretched temptation of the wicked tempter, to substitute an idol for the living God, a creature for the Creator, our only true source of satisfaction for something that can never satisfy us. And then point us, O God, to the Servant, the Savior, Jesus, in whom alone we can find true blessing and satisfaction. We pray in His name, amen.*

Let's continue to sing of Jesus using number 216, "Infant Holy, Infant Lowly."

Receive now the blessing of God that flows only from and through the Servant, His Servant in whom His soul delights.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and His Servant, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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