

The Servant Songs

In Isaiah 40—55, the words “servant” and “servants” appear frequently. Most of these occurrences refer to the Israelite people who were exiled in Babylon between 586 and 539 BC. God, against all expectations, called these people His chosen servants, through whom He would demonstrate His absolute superiority over the so-called gods of Babylon. Despite this calling, these servants were represented as being fearful, even rebellious, and as not listening very well to God’s voice. Nevertheless, God promised that He would deliver them from Babylon (chaps. 41—48) and restore them to himself (chaps. 49—55).

Within these chapters, however, there are four poems (42:1-9; 49:1-12; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12) that depict a different kind of Servant (individual, not plural): one who is responsive to God; one who, although rejected and abused, remains confident in God; one who will bring justice (Heb. *mishpat*) to the world through suffering in “our” place. The differences between this Servant and the “servants” of God—the people of God—seem unmistakable.

Who Is the Servant?

Since New Testament times (beginning with Philip; see Acts 8:34-35), the Servant in the four Servant Songs, particularly as described in the fourth poem, 52:13—53:12, has been identified as Jesus Christ.

The placement of the poems, sometimes called the “Suffering Servant Songs,” seems significant. As mentioned above, chapters 41—48, after the introductory chapter 40, focus primarily on God’s intent to deliver His people from Babylon. In this context, the Lord repeatedly affirmed that He would use Israel, His servants, as evidence that He alone is God. They would be witnesses that God had specifically fulfilled His prior prediction of the exiles and the deliverance from exile,

a feat that idols, caught within time, were incapable of performing.

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Within those chapters is the first of the Servant Songs. It is found early in the section, in 42:1-9.* This poem emphasizes that through the Spirit of God (v. 1), this person would bring God’s “justice” (that is, the settled plan for human flourishing that God, as Creator, has established) on the earth (vv. 1, 3, 4). This would involve the opening of blind eyes, deliverance from prison, and so on (see 63:1-3).

Yet God would not bring about this “justice” by force, as many rulers claimed to do. He would accomplish it gently (vv. 2, 3).

Thus, He would affirm God’s covenant for Israel (“the people”) and be a “light for the nations” (v. 6). He would bring God’s torah to the waiting ends of the earth. Occurring as it does near the beginning of the section on the deliverance of God’s sinful people, it introduces in advance the answer to the question that this section will pose—namely, how can God do this? How would God, the Holy One, be able to use these condemned people as His servants? If He restored them to their land, how would He restore them to himself?

The other three poems all appear in chapters 49—55, which provide the extended answer to the question just mentioned. Here, in an atmosphere of growing anticipation, the mighty arm of the Lord, His power to defeat their sin and bring them into fellowship, is spoken of repeatedly. The section then closes, after the fourth poem, with a ringing call (chaps. 54—55) to come and experience the promised deliverance.

The second poem (49:1-12), appropriately enough, opens the section. There is less agreement about the actual extent of this poem. Some would end it at verse 6. In verses 7-12, God is speaking, and although He seems to be speaking to the Servant, that is not absolutely certain. However, the presence of the call to praise in verse 13, like that in 41:10, and the similarity of language argues to me that the poem does indeed include verses 7-12. Like the first poem, this one speaks of the ministry of this Servant as the restoration of God’s people (vv. 5, 6, 8, 9-12) and of being a light to the nations, even to the ends of the earth (v. 6). However, now it is emphasized that this Servant is called from the womb (vv. 1, 5), and that although His work would seem to be a failure (v. 4) and would be rejected by some (v. 7), He was completely confident that God would make it a success (v. 4).

The third poem appears



Ecce Homo (Behold the Man) by Guido Reni. The work of the Servant would be completely successful. This is good, because much of what we learn about Him suggests the opposite. He would astonish all who saw Him, seeming to be weak and insignificant, sickly and helpless. Yet He was actually suffering for our sins, not His own. And wonder of wonders, His suffering would somehow procure our healing!

in 50:4-9 after a segment (49:14—50:3) in which God attempted to convince an unbelieving Israel that He really had not forgotten them and that He would indeed deliver them from their alienation from Him. This poem continues the darkening note that extends from the first poem through the second. Here, the Servant speaks of His complete submission to God and of His total attention to God's voice (50:4-5), and thus of His ability to convey God's teaching to those who are despondent (v. 4). Yet the Servant is not only submissive to God, He is also submissive to those who would abuse Him, including beating Him, pulling out His beard, mocking Him, and spitting on Him (v. 6). Yet He would remain totally confident in God, knowing He would be vindicated by God (vv. 7-9). Some hint that this person is supernatural appears in verse 10, where obedience to the Servant's word is made equivalent to the fear of God.

Following this poem there is an extended passage in chapters 51 and 52 in which God, with increasing intensity, promises to deliver His people, and indeed, the whole world (note particularly 51:5).** The segment ends with a powerful illustration in 52:7-12: The

watchmen of a besieged city look longingly for evidence that their king is coming with a relieving army, having achieved a distant victory. Sure enough, they see a messenger coming toward them through a mountain pass, waving the tokens of victory. They will be delivered!

That is the preparation for the final poem revealing the Servant (52:13—53:12). Here in five beautifully crafted three-sentence stanzas, the work of the Servant is finally and fully displayed. The poem is framed by 52:13 and 53:12, which tell us that despite all that lies between, the work of this Servant, who is described in language elsewhere used in reference to God ("high and lifted up"; see 6:1; 57:15), will be completely successful. This is good, because most of what lies between suggests the opposite. He would astonish all who saw Him, seeming to be weak and insignificant, sickly and helpless.

This is not what "the arm of the Lord" is supposed to look like. He would be rejected, seeming to have brought God's judgment on himself. Yet a closer look will show that He was actually suffering for our sins, not His own. And wonder of wonders, His suffering would somehow procure our healing. This

in spite of the fact that He would die young and childless, a victim of perverted justice. Yet His death would not be merely the result of human sin and perversity. He died because it would fulfill the will of God! God wanted it so that we could offer this Man's life as a sin-offering in our place and be forever justified.

It is no wonder then that chapters 54 and 55 are resounding calls for us, the readers, to come and experience the joys of restoration into the arms of our Creator.

*Some restrict this passage to vv. 1-4 or 1-7, but the Masoretic (Heb.) punctuation as well as the call to praise beginning in v. 10 confirm that the poem extends through v. 9.

**This inclusion of the whole world in the promise of deliverance, along with the absence of any mention of Babylon, is a strong argument that a different level of deliverance is being discussed here and not merely a further discussion of deliverance from Israel's physical captivity.

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Nazareth, Hometown of Jesus

Nazareth was settled some 2,000 years before Christ. People were probably attracted by the spring of water, the fertile soil, and the sheltered hillside overlooking the Valley of Jezreel to the south.

The city that was Jesus' home for 30 years sits high in a sheltered valley on a hill some 1,300 feet above sea level. It rests nearly midway between the Sea of Galilee, 15 miles to the east, and the Mediterranean Sea, 20 miles to the west.

From the summit above the village, you can see 30 miles in each direction on a clear day. Mount Carmel lies west on the Mediterranean coast. To the east, you can see Mount Tabor, where Deborah and Barak overwhelmed the armies of Sisera and where the transfiguration of Jesus took place.

To the south, about 1,000 feet below Nazareth, is the fertile Valley of Armageddon, where at least 22 major battles have been fought throughout the centuries. The gentle terrain and strategic location made this Valley an inviting battleground for the likes of Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and British General Edmund Allenby.

Nearby was a heavily traveled caravan route that hugged the coast and led north to Asia and south to Egypt. It was probably this same route that Mary and Joseph used when



Night view of a street in the old part of Nazareth decorated for Christmas. Nazareth was settled some 2,000 years before Christ. People were probably attracted by the spring of water, the fertile soil, and the sheltered hillside overlooking the Valley of Jezreel to the south. When Jesus was a child, the village probably covered about six acres and was home to about 1,000 people.

they fled from Herod and then later returned to Nazareth when Herod died.

When Jesus was a child, the village probably covered about six acres and was home to about 1,000 people. Its only claim to fame is that it was the home of Jesus. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament, the writings of first-century Jewish historian Josephus, or the ancient writings by Jewish rabbis.

It was apparently a small, undeveloped farming village. This is possibly why Nathanael reacted as he did when he was told the Messiah came from there: "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46). The fertile limestone slopes of Nazareth are well suited for raising the olives, grapes, fruit, and sheep you'll find there even today.

Archaeologists have found little that gives us clues about Nazareth, though they have unearthed some of the foundations of the ancient city. The city is so heavily populated that excavation of archaeological sites is

limited. Houses are nearly wall-to-wall, with only gutters separating them.

Archaeologists have uncovered in Caesarea an inscription that lists Nazareth as one of the villages to which Jerusalem priests fled after the Jewish revolt and fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Some scholars say that based on this, and the absence of pagan symbols discovered in Nazareth, the city was a religious one.

The City Today

Nazareth is a beautiful city, with touches of old and new, East and West. Christian pilgrims had little interest in the city during the first few centuries after Christ. However, early in the fourth century, the Roman emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, recognized some of the sites as sacred. These include Mary's well, where Mary probably drew water from the only spring in the village.

Other holy sites there include:

- the Church of the Annunciation, built on ruins dating back to at least the fifth

century;

- a six-foot-high cave known as Joseph's carpenter shop;
- a simple synagogue where Jesus supposedly worshiped and later taught (see Luke 4); and
- the steep, tree-covered precipice, known also as the "Leap of the Lord," from which angry Jews threatened to throw Jesus after His inaugural hometown message.

A short description of Nazareth from 570 says Christians were still worshiping in the synagogue where Jesus preached His sermon. Reportedly, worshipers still used the bench on which Jesus sat. The account adds that although Jews could not move the bench, Christians could move it with ease.

Whether these legends and venerated sites are authentic, we cannot deny the difference that Jesus of Nazareth has made in our world.

This article by Earl Morgan was originally published in the Summer 1990 issue of *Illustrated Bible Life*.

Living with the Beatitudes

Both Matthew and Luke record several short statements that we have come to know as the Beatitudes. These beatitudes were spoken by Jesus as the introduction to a longer sermon about what it meant to be a citizen of the kingdom of God.

Two Sets of Beatitudes?

Although both Matthew and Luke are similar in their wording of these short statements, it is clear they had different emphases—and perhaps even different events—in mind when they recorded their gospels.

For instance, Matthew identifies the geographical locale where this material was presented as a "mountain," the origin of the title, "The Sermon on the Mount." Luke, however, notes that it was presented on a "level place," hence, "The Sermon on the Plain."

Another difference is the setting. Matthew prefaced his Sermon on the Mount with the growing fame of Jesus through teaching and healing (4:23-25). The crowds came from Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee, Decapolis, and beyond the Jordan (a central, northern, and eastern audience). Luke prepared for his Sermon on the Plain by recording Jesus' inaugural sermon in Nazareth, the calling of the first disciples, and a mixture of teachings and miracles (more miracles than Matthew). Luke also noted the presence of a "crowd of disciples" and a "multitude of people" from Judea and Jerusalem and the coast of Tyre

and Sidon (a central and western audience) at this "level place."

Did Jesus preach two different sermons in two different places with much of the same content? It is probably safe to assume that Jesus did indeed repeat these teachings on more than one occasion, and probably

for different audiences. It is also likely that Matthew and Luke were being selective about which occasions they wrote about in light of the specific audiences to whom they were writing.

The Big Question: Although the audience in each case is designated as a crowd or

The Beatitudes

Matthew

- A: The poor in spirit (5:3)
- B: Those who mourn (5:4)
- C: The Meek (5:5)
- D: Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:6)
- E: The merciful (5:7)
- F: The pure in heart (5:8)
- G: The peacemakers (5:9)
- H: Those persecuted for righteousness' sake (5:10)
- I: Those insulted, persecuted, and slandered (5:11)

Luke

- a: The poor (6:20)
- c: Those who weep (6:21b)
- b: The hungry (6:21a)
- d: Those hated, excluded, and insulted (6:22)

The Woes

Luke

- a': The rich (6:24—in contrast to 6:20)
- b': Those who are full (6:25a—in contrast to 6:21a)
- c': Those laughing (6:25b—in contrast to 6:21b)
- d': Those praised (6:26—in contrast to 6:22)



Illustration of the Sermon on the Mount (1849). “Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them” (Matt. 5:1-2). Both Matthew and Luke record the words we have come to know as the Beatitudes at the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

multitude, the focus of the teaching is clearly directed to “disciples” (perhaps even “would-be disciples”). The Beatitudes are the introductory keynote to the sermon (for both Luke and Matthew). The question that then arises is: Given the context and the literary interrelationships, how do the Beatitudes recorded by Luke differ from those recorded by Matthew? And what difference does it make?

Comparison of the Beatitudes

A chart comparing the Beatitudes in each gospel will help us to answer these questions.

Observations

Choice of Beatitudes: Matthew has *nine* beatitudes (only eight if 5:11-12 is understood to be an expansion and application of the beatitude in v. 10) and no “woes.” Luke only has four beatitudes, but explains and interprets them by using four parallel woes that describe the destiny of those who reject the values and virtues of

the kingdom. Note that Luke changes the order of the beatitudes about weeping/mourning and hunger from the sequence in Matthew.

Format of the Beatitudes: Luke presents the beatitudes and woes in the second person (blessed are **YOU**), giving the vivid impression that Jesus was directly addressing members of His audience (both disciples and would-be disciples) and challenging them to kingdom understanding and living in a culture that contradicted and made light of kingdom values. Matthew reports that Jesus used the third person (blessed are **THOSE**) in the first eight beatitudes (presenting the concepts more as principles or proverbs), and then used the second person in the ninth beatitude, thus transitioning to His teaching on salt and light (5:13-16).

Luke further sharpens the challenge by using the word **NOW** in the second and third beatitudes (6:21) as well as in the second and third woes (v. 25). Wouldn’t it have been interesting to see the steely focus of His eyes as Jesus announced these decisive (and

non-negotiable) kingdom values—and their eternal outcomes?

Focus of the Beatitudes: In the four beatitudes common to both Luke and Matthew, Luke records slightly different wording. It quickly becomes apparent that Luke’s reference is to disciples who are economically poor and physically hungry to the point of weeping because they have been disenfranchised and rejected for following Jesus. Matthew, by contrast, reports Jesus speaking more about the character and integrity of the disciple with a decided spiritual cast (e.g., “poor in spirit,” “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” and “pure in heart”). In both cases, Jesus showed His disciples that joining the kingdom of God is counter-cultural and would involve living by different values—and correspondingly very different perspectives—than the surrounding culture.

The Difference Luke’s Version Makes

If the only collection of the Beatitudes available to us was from Luke, we might be tempted to think he was writing about any kind of poverty and weeping and hunger. His fourth beatitude, however, changes everything with the words “because of the Son of Man.” The poverty and defamation and rejection are a result of total commitment to Jesus and to Him alone.

Luke evidently was especially impressed with Jesus’ statement that “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (19:10). Throughout the gospel, Luke features the marginalized and disenfranchised and voiceless people for whom the gospel is especially good news. His selection of beatitudes reflects this consistent theme, and it underlines the awareness that totally committed and persecuted followers of Jesus can look forward to a complete reversal of circumstances and conditions when the Son of Man returns in His glory.

Comparing the Beatitudes in both Luke and Matthew provides a much richer understanding of the kingdom of God and invites us into an eternal perspective that frees us to handle the current circumstances “because of the Son of Man” (Luke 6:22). Earthly disadvantages created because of our commitment to Jesus place us in the company of the mistreated prophets (v. 23).

What a brilliant introduction to the invitation to love our enemies (vv. 27ff.) and even “leap for joy” in the process (v. 23)! We can thus even be merciful to our enemies—just as God is (v. 36)!

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