THE SERVANT SONGS

Isaiah 49:1-6 The Servant Songs: The Servant of the Lord

Too small a thing: the servant, the nations, and the story we step into

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, November 15, 2020
PASSAGES	Isaiah 49:1-6; 1 Peter 3:15; Romans 10:13; Galatians 4:4; Genesis 32:28; Matthew 27:46; Isaiah 44:28-45:1; Luke 2:29-32; John 8:12; Acts 13:46-47; Matthew 5:14-16; Isaiah 9:2
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:59:34 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Without a story to step into, life looks like a random clash of atoms. In the second Servant Song God tells his servant that bringing Israel home is too small a task: “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” That servant is Jesus, and because we are in him, we are light too – prepared, sometimes discouraged, but part of a mission that cannot fail.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Everyone needs purpose to live fully human. Following Christ means stepping into God’s story of light overcoming darkness.
- The servant was called before birth and kept ready like a sword in its scabbard and an arrow in the quiver – until the fullness of time.
- Every follower of Jesus should be ready to do two things: tell how they came to follow him, and explain the simple gospel.
- The “Israel” of verse 3 is best read as the ideal Son of Israel, the Messiah, not the nation as a whole.

- Even the servant says, "I have labored in vain." It was Friday at the cross – but Sunday was coming.
- The outcome belongs to God. His mission will not fail, and it is not up to our wisdom or persuasive powers.
- Jesus is the light of the world, and those in him are "y'all, the light of the world." Small acts done in his name carry the flavor of eternity.

▶ 0:59:34

"Without a narrative, without a story to step into, our lives can seem like the meaningless result of a random clash of atoms," Geno began. Without purpose we live sub-humanly. But followers of Christ step into purpose the moment they say yes to Jesus: God's story of light overcoming darkness, of slaves to sin rescued by a hero, God's anointed one – "not a costumed Superman," but one who gives up his life for broken, rebellious people. That story is older than the Gospels; it is in Israel's prophets.

The second Servant Song

▶ 1:01:30

This was the second of four Servant Songs. Isaiah speaks in the servant's voice:

> "Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'"
>
> ISAIAH 49:1–3 ↗

▶ 1:02:42

> "But I said, 'I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God.' And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him… he says: 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'"
>
> ISAIAH 49:4–6 ↗

▶ 1:03:16

"A beautiful, beautiful picture," Geno said, "and frankly a profound prophetic insight."

1. Called, named, made ready

▶ 1:03:47

The poem is framed by distant lands: it opens with the coastlands and closes with the nations. In Isaiah's mind God is the God of the world, not a regional deity serving a small people – a vision Geno traces to Isaiah's call in the temple, when he saw the Lord high and lifted up and was sent out. Then the servant: called from the womb, named before birth. "That should remind us of somebody whose name I will name in a minute." Last week's song said this servant would bring *mishpat* – relationships restored as they ought to be, between God and nations, God and people, people and people.

▶ 1:06:42

His mouth is a sharp sword and he himself a polished arrow. The servant's ministry is proclamation, but it is also his very life. And a sword in its scabbard, an arrow in the quiver, speaks of readiness: when God is ready, the servant is ready. Paul calls it "the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4) – Jesus came when God had prepared the world for his life, death and resurrection.

▶ 1:08:26

Readiness applies to us too. We are servants of God not because we serve well but because we are in Christ, part of the ministry of the capital-S Servant – a status of great honor. And we too are called to be ready:

> "But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."
>
> 1 PETER 3:15 ↗

▶ 1:09:28

Geno said there are two things every follower of Christ must be able to do, "hands down, without question." First, answer "Why are you a Christian?" with your own story: how you came to follow Jesus and what it means to you. Second, proclaim the simple gospel: Jesus died for the sins of the world, and "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). Not teaching the Bible from Genesis to Revelation – just this: "Jesus did this for you whether you believe it or not. Jesus gave his life for you whether you ever turn toward him or not. That's the proclamation, and it is good, good news."

2. Which Israel?

▶ 1:11:35

In verse 3 the ESV prints "servant" with a small s and reads "Israel" as the nation or a prophet. Geno, "not in a class by myself," disagrees: he reads it as the ideal Son of Israel, the Messiah. First, Israel began as a personal name, given to Jacob when he wrestled the angel and would not let go without a blessing (Genesis 32:28). Second, the language – called from the womb, named from his mother's body – is intimate and personal. Third, the servant brings Israel back to God, and "how could collective Israel bring collective Israel back to God?" "You don't need to say that stuff to me," someone might object; maybe not, he said, but you will run into the argument.

3. "I have labored in vain"

▶ 1:14:31

After all that build-up – called, named, a sharp sword, a polished arrow, the one in whom God will be glorified – verse 4 "fell off a cliff." The servant labored in vain? Read all four songs and you see that this servant is different: no conqueror crushing people, no arrogant self-promoter, gentle enough not to break a bruised reed. And at one point he says, I have failed; I have spent my life for nothing.

▶ 1:16:20

That fits the Messiah. Jesus on the cross cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). All the teaching, the healing, the raising of the dead seemed not to matter; they killed him anyway. His disciples forsook him, and Peter had denied him three times hours earlier. Isaiah's contemporaries would have been shocked: our hero feels like a failure? "I think it's helpful to us, because we experience that as followers of Christ. That was Friday. But beloved, I have some news: Sunday is coming."

▶ 1:18:42

"Yet surely my right is with the Lord." Even when life looks spent for nothing, the servant keeps trusting. "I will give my life to God – not because my ministry is going well, not because people listen to me when I talk about Jesus – but because it's the truth." This hero does not dominate; he persuades, and gives himself for others. The picture gains shades of darkness, and grows deeper and richer for it.

▶ 1:19:51

The servant leaves the outcome with God, and so must we. "We must trust that the mission of God will not fail" – it should be "plated to our soul." He comes gently because if he appeared in his glory today, he would destroy us all. "It is such good news that it is not up to us and our wisdom and our persuasive powers to move the kingdom forward." Like the servant we are instruments in God's hand, "sharp or dull," and like him we will often feel our lives spent in vain. Take those thoughts to God and leave them there: "You will have your victory," you who snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

4. Too light a thing

▶ 1:22:25

Then comes what Geno called one of the most important insights in the Old Testament. Isaiah saw the northern tribes carried off in his lifetime and foresaw Judah's captivity, and he saw that God intended to bring his people back. Some see Cyrus in that language, the Persian king who about 140 years later let the exiles return, as Ezra and Nehemiah record. Between the first and second Servant Songs, Isaiah had named him outright:

▶ 1:24:15

> "...who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.' Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped..."
>
> ISAIAH 44:28–45:1 ↗

▶ 1:25:24

A Jewish prophet in Jerusalem naming Cyrus the Great generations ahead. Skeptical scholars say someone inserted it later. "Honestly, if that's what you think about the Bible, you ought not to be teaching it." God can easily show a prophet amazing things.

▶ 1:26:05

Geno asked the church to put themselves in Isaiah's place: an old man in Jerusalem who has watched the north destroyed and the great empires rise and fall, who has seen God and been used by him, and now sees Israel gathered again. "That blew his mind, I'm sure." But God says there is more – not just a

return to the land so they could do horrible things again, but a return to right relationship with God, to love him with heart, soul, mind and strength. And even that is too small. Here is how you encourage a servant who feels he has poured out his life for nothing: you give him a bigger view. "I see the nations that I created."

▶ 1:30:21

"That my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" – "the last line in this servant song tells the entire story." "Beloved, make no mistake, that's us. That's where we are in this text." Isaiah did not see Jesus by name, Geno cautioned, but he saw that the servant's purpose was greater than reestablishing Israel: to be the Savior of the world. "This, dearly beloved, is the great narrative into which we get to step."

5. The light of the world

▶ 1:31:33

When Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to the temple, old Simeon took him in his arms and quoted this very song over him: "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:29–32). Grown, Jesus stood in the temple at the feast and said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness" (John 8:12). He knew who he was. And when the synagogue rejected Paul, he turned to the Gentiles with this very text: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:46–47). This song became fundamental to how the first church understood Jesus and its own mission.

▶ 1:34:14

One more text. Early in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world" – "in Central Texas, y'all; all y'all, second person plural." How could poor, powerless people under the heel of Rome be the light of the world? "Because you will be attached to me." The servant is the light to the nations, and all who are in the servant are light too. "That's all that is. Simple as that."

> "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."
>
> MATTHEW 5:14–16 ↗

▶ 1:36:33

Practically, that means doing good in Christ's name. And it means carrying the word of freedom into darkness – to people far from God, angry with each other, caught in addiction, broken relationships

and misery: repent, and God will set you free; “he’s the God of second and third and fourth chances.” To someone walking in darkness that is a drink of water in the desert. “Those who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isaiah 9:2).

▶ 1:37:16

“Your life of faith means more than you can possibly know.” How you treat someone who is hurting, your “however broken” explanation of the gospel, telling your story – these have “the smell, the smoke, the flavor of eternity in them,” because we are part of the servant whose job is to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. “What story are you stepping into? Don’t step into a self-made narrative. Step into the narrative of Jesus, light of the world.” He prayed for the church to recommit to following Jesus and to being his witnesses in small ways and large – “renew your church to be your light in dark places.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Isaiah 49:1–3
- Isaiah 49:4–6
- Galatians 4:4
- 1 Peter 3:15
- Romans 10:13
- Genesis 32:28
- Matthew 27:46
- Isaiah 44:28–45:1
- Luke 2:29–32
- John 8:12
- Acts 13:46–47
- Matthew 5:14–16
- Isaiah 9:2

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Geno said everyone needs a story to step into. What narratives compete for your life, and how does God's story of light overcoming darkness change how you see your days?
2. Could you, right now, tell someone how you came to follow Jesus and explain the simple gospel? What would help you be more ready?
3. When have you felt, like the servant, "I have labored in vain"? What helped you keep trusting that your recompense is with God?
4. How does it change your sense of purpose to hear that restoring Israel was "too light a thing" and that God's salvation is meant for the end of the earth?
5. What is one small act this week – how you treat someone hurting, a conversation, a good work – through which you could let your light shine?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt preached this second message in his November 2020 series on Isaiah's Servant Songs. He reads the servant of these poems as the Messiah, Jesus, and, by his own account, does not hesitate to disagree with a translation when he thinks the text points elsewhere. He urges every follower of Christ to be ready to tell their own story and explain the gospel.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-y5w4pzkThM&t=3574s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.