

Adult Teaching Resources

January 8, 2023



January 1, 2023—Ecclesiastes 3:1-13—“It’s Always Time”

Season of Epiphany: What Does God Expect?

January 8, 2023—Isaiah 42:1-9—“Bringing Justice”

January 15, 2023—Isaiah 49:1-7—“Bearing Light”

January 22, 2023—Isaiah 9:1-7—“Multiplying Joy”

January 29, 2023—Micah 6:1-8—“Defining Expectations”

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Bringing Justice

Isaiah 42:1-9

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Key Verse

Here is 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. (Isa. 42:1)

Opening

After everyone arrives, ask your group to gather into smaller groups of 3-4. Once everyone is settled have them spend time and discussion and conversation with these questions.

How do you define “justice?”

When have you seen appropriate justice?

When have you seen inappropriate justice?

Is justice something for an individual or for a group?

Give each small group time to share with each other, then open the floor for large group conversation before moving to the Bible.

Reading the Bible

What will the servant do for the nations? (bring forth justice)

How will he use his voice? (He will not cry out or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street)

How will he act? (a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice)

What is said about the servant’s endurance? (He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth)

How is God described? (the one who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it)

How did the Lord call? (in righteousness)

What has God done for the servant? (I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations)

Reading the Bible *continued*

Why does God do this? (to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon)

What does God say about his name and himself? (that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols)

What does God say about the state of things? (the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them)

Making Connections

When you think of better days and bringing about change, what kind of person/leader do you envision? Is it a mighty warrior? A gregarious politician? A male? A female? A celebrity? Who? Why do you think that person has a good chance of bringing change?

When you hear the word, “servant,” what comes to mind? How does your understanding of servant inform your understanding of leader? How are they similar? How are they different?

Our Lesson Writer explains, “The second couplet of the verse describes the manner by which God empowers the servant (“I have put my spirit upon him”), and the end result of their partnership (“he will bring forth justice to the nations”).” How does God empower servants today? Who do you know whom God has empowered? How do you know that empowerment came from God?

How do you think God empowers a group of people, like Israel? Does that kind of empowerment still happen? How do we know when the empowerment comes from God? What are we to do with that empowerment?

Our Lesson Writer says, “God’s justice is always tempered by grace to offer what people need most.” Do you agree or disagree with that statement? Why do you say that? What do you think people need the most? What is keeping them from getting it? What can we do to help provide it?

Where do you want or need justice? What is it that you need most? What is keeping you from getting it? What needs to happen in order for you to get it?

Our Lesson Writer reminds us, “The passage closes with an affirmation of Yahweh’s identity as the only true god, the one who controls the earth’s destiny, and who can declare “new things ... before they spring forth” (vv. 8-9). Where is God and what is God’s role in your understanding of justice?”

So What?

Ask everyone gather back in their small groups from the beginning of class. Share with them the words from our Lesson Writer:

“Though Christ-followers focus on the Suffering Servant they see in Jesus, there remains a corporate aspect to the text: if Christ’s justice is to extend throughout the earth, it will be through the gracious and compassionate presence of Christ’s persistent followers.”

So What? *continued*

Ask each small group to share their thoughts and ideas on these questions.

What do you think is Jesus' role in justice? How does Jesus dispense justice? Do you think Jesus does it right?

What do you think is our individual role in justice? How do we dispense justice? Do you think we do it right?

What do you think is the church's role in justice? How do we dispense justice? Do you think the church does it right?

What is the larger Christian community's role in justice? How do we dispense justice? Do you think the Christian community does it right?

After time in small group discussion, open the floor for larger group conversation.

How can we be the effective hands and feet and mouth for God and Jesus when it comes to matters of justice?

The Challenge

This week, look around and when issues of justice present themselves, do what you can to be the one who dispenses justice.

Prayer

Loving God, you are a just and loving and gracious God. Help us to be your servants to dispense justice as your kingdom is being built. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Multiple Isaiahs?—Many readers assume that a single author was responsible for the entire content of a biblical book attributed to him. One might argue that the first Isaiah simply had God-given foresight, and during times of meditation, wrote the sections that would address issues that would not arise for more than 150 years. The most likely explanation, however, is that there were at least two, if not three prophets who contributed to the compilation of prophecies that became known by the name of its primary author, Isaiah of Jerusalem.

During the eighth century, the Israelites lived in two separate kingdoms: a northern realm called “Israel,” and a southern one known as “Judah.” The first Isaiah, often called “Isaiah of Jerusalem,” spent most of his life in Judah’s capital city, but spoke to the people of both nations. He lived in an age of relative peace and prosperity for the Israelites as a whole, but a time of oppression for the poor as wealthier Hebrews bought up property, often leaving the poor homeless and forced to work as indentured servants. The false security of peaceful times led many to think of religion as a system of required rituals, with no demand for personal righteousness and justice. Isaiah joined the prophets Micah, Amos, and Hosea in decrying injustice and launching verbal barbs designed to deflate Israel’s false sense of security.

Isaiah understood the political scene as well as the economic, social and religious aspects of life in Palestine. During Isaiah’s ministry, the northern kingdom was defeated and carried into captivity. As the prophet predicted, Judah also fell under the power of Assyria, living as a vassal state. For the most part, Isaiah 1-39 describes this period in Israel’s life.

With chapter 40, however, the scene shifts from eighth-century Judah to sixth-century Babylon. Judah fell to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE. Many Judahites were marched to Babylon that year, and many more were forced into captivity following the destruction of Jerusalem 10 years later.

God used Isaiah of Jerusalem to afflict the comfortable and warn them of the coming captivity. More than 150 years later, as the people languished in captivity, God raised up another prophet who spoke comfort to the afflicted. We often speak of him as “Second Isaiah.” This prophet spoke words of comfort and hope to a defeated and downhearted people. His work appears in Isaiah 40-55. As he preached in God’s name, this Isaiah envisioned a coming “servant” who would suffer in behalf of his people.

Following the exile, the Hebrews who returned to Jerusalem faced different challenges, which are reflected in Isaiah 56-66. It is possible that Second Isaiah returned with the other Hebrews and continued to speak in that context. It is more likely, however, that yet a third prophet arose to preach in the spirit of Isaiah. He is typically known as “Third Isaiah.”

Digging Deeper *continued*

The possibility that multiple prophets contributed to the book called “Isaiah” does not take away from the Scripture’s authority, but testifies to God’s interest in providing the message people need to hear in the time they need to hear it.

Servant songs—The “Servant Songs” are often identified as Isa. 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:1-11, and 52:13-53:12, but scholars disagree on their precise limits. Some, for example, consider the first song to be comprised of Isa. 42:1-4 only, while others see it as 42:1-7 and others stretch it to 42:1-9. The second song is often delimited as 49:1-6, but some scholars see it continuing through v. 13. Some identify the third song as 50:1-11, but others include only 50:4-11. There is little question about the limits of the fourth song, marked as 52:13-53:12. Some scholars interpret Isaiah 55 as a fifth servant song.

Life in exile—While we often think of the exiles as facing great suffering, their most serious loss was their homeland. A variety of cuneiform texts from ancient Babylon attests that the Babylonians provided regular rations for the Hebrews, assigned them places to live, and allowed them to participate in regular commerce. For an interesting recap of these, see Laurie E. Pearce, “How Bad Was the Babylonian Exile?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 43:5 (Sept.-Oct. 2016), 48-64.



A collection of cuneiform tablets describing commercial activities of Jews living in various places in Babylon, including a settlement known as “Judah-town.” The tablets were on display at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem in 2015. They include tablets recording business deals made by the Jewish family of Samak-Yama, including his son, grandson, and his grandson’s five sons. A brief video of the exhibit can be found at <http://www.reuters.com>.

Digging Deeper *continued*

[com/article/us-israel-archaeology-babylon-idUSKBN0L71EK20150203](https://www.biblicalarchaeology.com/article/us-israel-archaeology-babylon-idUSKBN0L71EK20150203).

The God—Isaiah 42:5 is unusual in that it refers to God (here called 'El) with the direct article attached: *ha'el yhw* means “the God, Yahweh,” an apparent affirmation of the monotheistic belief that there is only one God, Israel’s God, whose name was revealed as Yahweh. This is one of the earliest clear statements of monotheism: while statements such as the first commandment insist that Israel should have no other gods before Yahweh, and earlier prophets and priests pleaded for the people to worship Yahweh rather than the Baals or other gods, the eighth century prophets were among the first to insist that Yahweh was not just the mightiest God and the one Israel should worship, but the only true god.

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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Who was the “servant” in the Servant Songs?

Who did Isaiah have in mind when speaking of this servant? The answer is not as obvious as one would like, for the various songs do not always refer to the servant in the same way, and may not always have the same concept in mind.

Early on, Israel’s rabbis interpreted the texts as predictions of the hoped-for Davidic messiah, tending to discount the aspects of suffering. After Jesus’ life and ministry, New Testament writers described Jesus as a new and different kind of messiah (“Christ,” like “Messiah,” means “anointed one”). They saw the prophecies as looking toward the coming of Jesus, who would suffer on behalf of the people, and thus win their redemption.

The servant sometimes seems to be Jacob-Israel in a corporate sense. Second Isaiah often uses language similar to the Servant Songs to describe Israel as a whole: “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen” (41:8), “But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen” (44:1; see also 44:21; 45:4; 49:3, 5-6). Today, many Jewish and some Christian scholars also think of the servant as describing the corporate personality of the nation, which suffered on the way to becoming a cleansed and better people. Some have argued that the prophet saw himself as the servant, standing in for the nation.

It is possible to see Isaiah’s prophecy as multivalent: God’s challenge to Jacob-Israel might be fulfilled in different ways by corporate Israel, or by a single servant playing a particular role. Some scholars even see the servant in 42:1-9 as Cyrus, the Persian king who would conquer Babylon and set the Israelites free. Isaiah calls Cyrus by name and calls him God’s shepherd who will carry out his purpose (44:28), and even God’s “anointed” or *meshiah* (45:1), the same word that became “Messiah.”

For the most part, Isaiah seems to portray Jacob-Israel as God’s intended servant, though the people are disinclined or unable to fulfill their calling. Thus, another must stand in for them and carry out the mission the people have failed to accomplish.

New Testament writers saw Jesus as the ultimate “servant of Yahweh” who fulfilled the purpose Isaiah described. Matthew 12:18-21 connects the ministry of Jesus with the fulfillment of Isa. 42:1-4, and Philip explained to an Ethiopian seeker that Jesus was the suffering servant described in Isa. 53:7-8 (Acts 8:26-35). It is likely that Jesus, who introduced his ministry with a quotation from Isa. 61:1-2 (Luke 4:16-20), saw Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant” as a model for his life and ministry. The disciples might never have understood Jesus if not for Isaiah’s servant imagery. Even with that scriptural testimony, they struggled long and hard to understand a God who suffered.

In sum, from Isaiah’s perspective, God had chosen the Hebrews to live in covenant as God’s

The Hardest Question *continued*

representative in the world, living obediently as a light to the nations, calling others to trust in Yahweh, too. Through the centuries, it became apparent that Jacob-Israel (indicating the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel) was either incapable or unwilling to live out that calling. The servant in Isaiah, then, can be seen both as Jacob-Israel and as the one who would ultimately accomplish what the Hebrews could not.