

“For the display of his splendor”

Is 49:3; 60:21; 61:3 (see also 55:5; 60:9)

While you are turning to Isaiah 40 (page 1119 in pew Bible), Dolores and I want to again express our thanks to the Lord and to you his people for your faithful, generous and encouraging support in prayer, advice, practical help, and financial support which you have been giving to us since 1975 when we left for the Philippines. Today we are partners together with you in the good work God is doing in Africa through NEGST. We invite you to visit us this year in Nairobi as we celebrate NEGST's 25th anniversary.

Prayer:

I was asked to speak on “How can we pass on our vision and passion for missions to the next generation?” I have added to that “in a time of great change”, thinking primarily of the shift from modernity to post-modernity, but in the last two months we need to add a time of economic and political change. I have selected Isaiah 40-43 so as to stay in line with our place in the OT Discovery series. This single text certainly does not provide a full answer to our question, but it will point us down a couple paths as we think about how best to pass on our vision of mission to the next generation.

1. *Times of Isaiah and Post-Modern Times*

- a. Structure of Isaiah:
 - 1-39 speaks of the Assyrian crisis, 722 BC:
 - 40-66 speaks of the Babylonian crisis, 586 BC
- b. The central message of Isaiah 40-66 is that **God is sovereign especially in a time of great change**. Isaiah proclaims a message of comfort that the mission of God will continue in times of great change.

The great change for Israel was that after 900 years of living in the land of Israel they are about to have their temple destroyed and be deported to Babylon to live as an oppressed people. This was **the** great change at the **center** of Israelite history--the destruction of Solomon's temple in 586 BC. At the beginning (1450 BC) stands the great deliverance from Egypt. At the end (70 AD) stands the destruction of the second Temple and Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans. The Exile impacted their:

- Religion—no longer a temple, at least for 100 years
 - Politics—never had a king again
 - Economics—the elite, small wealthy upper class which dominated society in Isaiah's time and later (Jeremiah) was destroyed and all were impoverished
 - Language—they shifted from Hebrew to Aramaic, the language of Babylon. Parts of the book of Daniel are in Aramaic and undoubtedly Jesus spoke in Aramaic.
- c. **What can we learn from Isaiah 40-43 about passing on the mission of God in a time of great change?** For us part of that change is the current movement from a modern society to a post-modern society which began to manifest itself in earnest in the 70's in art and architecture and now has spread to literature and music and much of the popular culture, such as movies and films. Roughly, those under 25 are post-modern.
 - d. I have selected a large block of Isaiah, chapters 40-43 to **quickly survey** and see what we can learn from Isaiah as he sought to pass on the mission of God in a time of enormous change in Israel. I am trying to grasp **the thematic and literary**

unity of this section. We shall focus on one major idea in each of the four chapters.

2. *Is 40: Comfort/good news that God is sovereign and has not lost control.*

- a. 40:1 comfort (in the face of the fear of the unknown). Are you afraid of the future? Listen to Isaiah. Isaiah 40-66 is a word to Israel about facing a very difficult future full of fears and uncertainties about the very existence of Israel and its mission in the world. The word “fear” is found often in this section of Isaiah (35:4; 37:6; 40:9; 41:5, 10, 13f, 23; 43:1, 5; 44:2, 8; 50:10; 51:7, 12; 54:4, 14; 57:11; 59:19).
- b. 40:2 sin taken care of: cf 43:5; 44:22; especially 52:13ff, the Suffering Servant.
- c. 40:3-5 The heart of mission: revealing the *glory/splendor* of God so that all mankind may see it.
 - In the immediate context the “glory” (vs 5) refers to the LORD’s deliverance of Israel from Babylon at the hand of Cyrus in 539 BC, this is a mighty act of *mishpat* (justice, see below). Note the title of this message: “*For the display of his splendor*” Is 49:3; 60:21; 61:3.
 - In Is 42, “my servant” God’s intent is to display his splendor/glory to and through his people Israel and the Messiah and therefore to the nations/Gentiles.
- d. 40:9 Good tidings/good news in the context of Isaiah is that the Sovereign LORD comes to shepherd Israel. **This mighty act of restorative justice on behalf of Israel via Cyrus’s decree of 539 that Israel should return to the land displayed the splendor of the LORD to the nations.**

Structure of Isaiah:

 - ch 41 displays his glory/splendor via Cyrus
 - ch 42 displays his glory/splendor via the task of “My servant”
 - ch 43 Israel is a witness to God’s working for them (Is 41 Cyrus) and in them (Is 42 “my servant”—*mishpat*), his display of his glory/splendor.
- e. First question (40:14): “Who taught him the right (*mishpat*) way?” *Mishpat* = decision, decision in a court setting, a decision that puts things right, so putting things right. God is over the nations (vs 15), he sits enthroned (vs 22) and rules (vs 23). God is sovereign. He exercises *mishpat*, i.e. he puts things right. (Today we are thinking global missions and God’s sovereign control over the nations, but in your own life he is the one to bring *mishpat*, i.e. to put things right in his own way and time.)
- f. Second question (40:27) “My cause (*mishpat*) is disregarded by my God? God has not put things right/straight for Israel. Some were apparently saying that the LORD must be tired and weary and therefore does not bring *mishpat*. But God does not grow weary (vss 28-31).

3. *Is 41: First demonstration of God’s sovereignty, raising up Cyrus--restorative justice for Israel*

- a. 41:1 Judgment (contest, trial, *mishpat*) between God and the nations about who is in the right, who is in control, who puts things right.
- b. 41:2-4 God manifests his sovereignty by *predicting* the coming of Cyrus (539 BC) who answers Israel’s cry for *mishpat* (40:27). Cyrus defeats Babylon, establishes the Medo-Persian empire and decrees that Jews (and other peoples as well) should return to their homeland and build a temple for their god. For the name Cyrus see Isa 44:28; 45:1, 13. Isaiah names Cyrus almost 200 years in

advance. It would be as if George Washington had predicted that a black man named Obama was to become president of America in 2009. The prediction of Cyrus by the LORD through Isaiah is an unprecedented demonstration of God's sovereign ruler.

- i. 41:5-7 response of nations—fear
 - ii. 41:8-10 response of Israel, *my servant*, do not fear
 - iii. 41:11-20 God protects Israel via Cyrus “so that people may see and know....hand of the LORD 41: 20. *For the display of his splendor.*
- c. 41:21-29 Case (contest, trial, *rib*) between God and idols of the nations
- i. 41:25-25 Cyrus. For his name see 44:28; 45:1,13; for history see Ezra 1
 - ii. 42: 27 Good tidings/good news

APPLICATION:

- The ancient world of Isaiah's time was filled with gods and the wide-spread belief was that the gods were territorial, i.e. the god of Babylon, the god of Assyria, the god of the mountains, the god of the plains. 1 Kings 20:23 says “Meanwhile, the officials of the king of Aram advised him, ‘Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they’.” The gods were *fragmented*. There was no unity to the gods. The universe had no *center*. But Israel asserted in the midst of this that the LORD was sovereign over all of the nations.
 - Post-modernity, like the Ancient Near East in Isaiah's time, believes that there is no central organizing reality or truth. No unity. All is diversity. All is fragmentation. So there is truth for you and truth for me, and these truths are often at odds with each other but all are of equal value.
 - To carry forward a vision of the mission of God to the next generation we must assert in a biblical fashion that God is Sovereign and rules over all of the rulers of this world. This is a *confrontational approach to post-modernism* in seeking to pass on a vision of missions to the next generation. (See further Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 1996, 163.) “So we stand in opposition to the assertion that the world is no more than a collection of incompatible and competing local narratives. There is a single metanarrative, a grand organizing story, encompassing all peoples and all times.” (Grenz) (164) **It is that grand, organizing narrative based on the Bible as a whole in which God brings justice (mishpat) to all nations which we must pass on to the next generation.** Later, Is 42, we shall take a more empathetic and sympathetic stance toward post-modernism for there is much to learn from post-modernism and much to value in it as well as to reject.
4. *Is 42: Second demonstration of God's sovereignty, choosing “My servant” to bring justice to the nations*
- a. 42:1 Who is “my servant”?
 - Israel (42:19; 43:10; 44:1,2,21; 45:4; 49:3);
 - “Messianic figure” (49:6; 52:13);
 - Isaiah, himself (20:3),
 - Eliakim son of Hilkiah (22:20),
 - David (37:5).

- Nebuchadnezzar in Jeremiah (25:9; 27:6).
- Jesus in Matthew 12 where Isaiah 42 is cited.

There is identification or link between my servant the messiah and my servant Israel that is present in the text of Isaiah, so that the task of the servant is that of **both** Israel and the Messiah. From the beginning (see Is 41:8, 9—Abraham) the LORD had chosen Israel to bring justice to the nations via their obedience to the Law (Deut 4:8; Ex 19:6; cf. Gen 18:18, 19). And in the early church as portrayed in Acts “my servant” is both Jesus and his church (Acts 4:25—David, 27—Messiah, 29--church). *Must hold onto this corporate solidarity between the Messiah and his people.*

Focus in this text, as elsewhere in Isaiah, is on *the task* of the servant not his *titles*. Now we take up his task.

- b. 42:2-7 Task of “my servant” cf Matthew 12:15ff; and Is 61 in Luke 4
 - i. 42:3-4 justice (3 times *mishpat* used) *to the nations*.
In Is 49 the servant restores Israel, but here, perhaps surprisingly, the focus is on the nations--missions.
Just as God’s **sovereignty** was manifest in God’s predicting and raising up of Cyrus to deliver his people (Is 41), so God’s sovereignty is manifest in his making his servant **successful**—42:3 “he will not falter or be discouraged.”
 - ii. 42:5 *nations* put their hope in his *law* (cf. 2:3; 42:21; 51:4; see 42:21).
What is the meaning of *mishpat*, translated “justice”, in this context?
 - In light of the story of Israel in which God clearly intends to create of his people a **just society** for the *display of his splendor* and in light of the nations attraction to the Law of Israel (vs. 4 see also Is 51:4 “The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations.”), I suggest that *mishpat* here has the idea of God manifesting and bringing his full-orbed justice to the nations via the **just society** of Israel. God’s intent was that in Israel his righteous and just character, his splendor (Is 61:3—“oaks of righteousness...display of his splendor”), might be displayed to the nations.
 - We certainly do not have time to flesh this out here, but I suggest for your thinking that this is *precisely* what happens during the first twenty years of the early church (30-50 AD) in the book of Acts. They sorted out their economic (Acts 1-6) and ethnic (Acts 6-15) shape which gave power to the proclamation of the Gospel (Act 4:32-35) *before* they ventured out to the Gentiles with the Gospel in a *major way* (first major trip is Paul’s journey in 47 AD in Acts 13, 14). But it is not until after the Jerusalem Council has finally settled the matter of ethnicity, i.e. the Gentile can become Christians without first becoming Jews (circumcision), that the Gospel really begins to spread in the subsequent missionary trips of Paul and his team.
 - iii. 42:6-7 be a covenant for the people & a *light for the Gentiles* (cf 49:6; cf Acts 13:47) to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

- Light is a metaphor in Isaiah for justice: Is 9:1,26; 51:4 “my justice will be a light to the nations”; 58:8; 59:9.
- Darkness is a metaphor for evil, injustice (Is 8:19-22).
- So 42:6-7 is a metaphorical way of expressing the thrice stated task of bringing justice to the nations/Gentile (*goy*).

APPLICATION: The sovereignty of God is again evident in Is 42, but we also have what is surely of the greatest importance for successfully passing on the vision and passion of missions to the post-modern generation—i.e. **the manifestation of God’s splendor in the just society of his people**. (Is 61:3 “They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.”) Post-moderns are relational. They learn by experience, not just by reason and logic. The Messiah creates a just society of his people via his life and death (Is 53) and this just society provides for the post-moderns a place to experience the splendor of God, his justice and righteousness and by this post-moderns are motivated to carry forward the mission of God to the world.

5. *Is 43: You are my witnesses*

- a. 42:10-43:9: God delivers his blind servant Israel via Cyrus
- b. 43:9-13 (44:8; 55:4): Israel is a witness to the reality (Cyrus event) that “I revealed and saved and proclaimed...not some foreign god”, vs. 12. In Acts 1:8, “you will be my witnesses”, the church is a “witnesses” to the resurrection of Christ and is itself via its just social shape a witness, “a light to the Gentiles.” The church is for the display of his splendor.

May God grant by his grace that we, the people of God--the corporate *servant* of God--may pass on to the next generation a passion and vision for his mission as we witness to the “display of his splendor/glorious” manifest in 1) the mighty power of the Sovereign God to predict the coming of Cyrus two hundred years in advance and now in our age the life, death and resurrection of Jesus from the dead and 2) the bringing of *mishpat*, justice, to the nations via the just social shape of his people Israel and now in our age in the just social shape of church.

Amen.

PS. Note Jesus’ understanding of his mission in terms of Is 61 (Luke 4:18ff), Matthew’s understanding of Jesus’ mission in terms of Is 42 (Matt 12:14ff), Jesus’ statement of the mission of the *witness* of the early church in terms of Is 43 (Acts 1:8) and Paul’s understanding of his mission in terms of Is 49:6 (Acts 13:47). Isaiah is the lens through which the Jesus and the early church understood their mission.