

Study Outline

Warning:

This is a passage that is easy to overly complicate! Stick to two simple points:

- Jesus is the Servant (and look what this passage tells us about him)
- We should be servants of this Servant (ie like v10 and not like v11)

Launching Question

READ Mark 10:42-45

What did Jesus not do (and what would that have meant)?

What did he do? Why?

Questions on 50:4-9

READ each of the three paragraphs (4, 5-6, 7-9) in turn, and ask of each: what does this tell us about Jesus The Servant?

(Subsidiary, pushing-it-further questions could be ...

how does the servant serve? what are his tasks? what results from his service?)

(Possibly use some of the NT cross references mentioned in 'Commentary')

Thinking it through

What should be our response to this description of Jesus?

What is your reaction to the description that 'Jesus came to serve me', or even more strikingly, 'Jesus is my servant'?

Questions on 50:10-11

Why would the 'exile' feel like a dark time for Israel?

READ 30:1-2; 31:1-3

What was Israel tempted to do to help them in their 'darkness'?

READ 31:6-7; 48:4-5; 57:11b-13a

What was Israel tempted to do to help them in their 'darkness'?

READ 50:10-11

What should Israel have done in their 'darkness'? (cf 7:9)

Thinking it through

In what ways do we feel that we are 'in darkness'?

(Obviously there are lots of possible answers; give time to let the chat become 'real')

How do we try to 'walk by the light of torches that we have kindled'?

What should we do? What does that actually mean?

Why is that hard?

Verses 10-11 follow verses 4-9: how does that fact help us?

Where does Jesus (and his suffering) fit in to the trusting and relying of v10?

Isaiah 50:4-11

Isaiah at a glance

Isaiah prophesied around 740-680 BC when God's people had rebelled against him and judgment was imminent. Assyria was threatening the northern half of divided Israel, and Babylon was soon to threaten the southern kingdom (to whom Isaiah is speaking). 39:6 ends the first section of the book with the catastrophic news that Babylon will indeed carry them off into exile.

But in ch 40-55, described as 'the Old Testament book of Romans' (!), Isaiah looks beyond this coming judgment to a time when Babylon itself will be destroyed, God's people will return to Jerusalem, and there will be a new kingdom of unimaginable peace and prosperity. All nations can be included. How can such expansive plans ever be achieved? Only because the One and Only, true and sovereign God, the God we are all looking for, will do it. And the way he will do it is by repeating the astounding redemption of the Exodus.

The 'servant songs'

At four points in these chapters (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12), Isaiah describes 'the servant' through whom God will achieve his plans.

Who is this servant? It should be Israel (49:3), but it is plain that the nation does not measure up to this ideal person. Other theories have included Israel's king, the prophet, a 'believing' subset of Israel, or Cyrus (the Persian king who would subsequently allow the exiles to return to the land cf 44:28ff; Ezra 1:1-4). The Ethiopian eunuch asks this question of Philip (in Acts 8:34), to which the evangelist responds by telling 'the good news about Jesus!' So now all readers of the New Testament know the answer. Christians love (eg) Isaiah 53 precisely because it's so clear in its teaching about Him and his death for us.

But in Isaiah itself, the emphasis is more on the role of the Servant than on his identity: though outwardly unimpressive, his ministry of suffering will result in the formation of a new people of God (including drawn-in Gentiles). 50:4-11 (the third song) is all about the Servant persevering in that ministry.

Theme Sentence

Jesus the Servant obeyed the Lord, enduring suffering, confident of vindication.

Application

- Jesus is wonderful! He is the servant who endured terrible abuse (and, as we'll discover soon in ch 53, he endured it all for our sakes).
- 50:10-11 give Isaiah's application for us: we are not the Servant (of v4-9) but the Servant's servants. As we walk in darkness (as Israel would do in their exile), who will we trust/rely on for salvation? Israel, of course, tried to equip themselves with an alternative light-source (eg by looking for help from Egypt or idols) but none would be effectual against a sovereign God.

Commentary

The immediate context in 50:1-3 helps Israel to interpret the coming dark time of the exile. Although it would feel as if God had abandoned his people, he was actually keeping his covenant promises (cf Deut 28:15-68 and verses 64-68 especially). So their exile could not be a matter of divorce. It was for discipline.

Israel had good reason to think that she was the servant (cf 41:8-10; 44:1-2; 49:3). But she had failed to be as verses 4-9 will now describe.

Jesus the Servant

4 READY TO LEARN¹

Is it really the case that Jesus needed to learn anything? The answer is: yes, even though he already knew everything! In humbling himself to be born as a human baby, he had to learn to feed, to speak, to write, etc. And in particular, he had to learn obedience (Heb 5:8). He made it his habit to listen to his Father's voice to set the direction for each day ahead. And, having listened, he therefore had a tongue, given by God, with something to say. This servant has a 'word ministry', serving through the words he speaks to sustain people who are weary.

5-6 RESOLVED TO SUFFER

Having listened, Jesus did what he was told: he wasn't rebellious, he didn't turn backward from what God said. In other words, what Israel failed to be, Jesus was. Jesus did indeed 'set his face' (7 cf Luke 9:51) to go to Jerusalem, to be mocked, spat upon, flogged and killed. Verse 6 predicts all that terrible suffering, personal ridicule, mistreatment and disgrace. No wonder his disciples were amazed and afraid (Mark 10:32) as he walked there, towards his death. Let's not pretend this was comfortable or easy. There were loud cries and tears (Heb 5:7), he prayed 'if you are willing, remove this cup' (Luke 22:43) and he even sweated blood (Luke 22:44) such was the incredible stress he felt. But this servant resolved to do this because this was what the Master wanted him to do.

7-9 RECKONING TO BE VINDICATED

Strangely, after the disgrace of 6, the servant testifies that he's 'not been disgraced'! Presumably meaning that he wasn't left in disgrace (similar to Acts 2:25-31 saying that the dead Jesus was 'not abandoned to Hades').

Jesus was able to go through the terrible abuse he'd face because he knew he would be vindicated (8). Vindication means that after you've been wrongly accused, it is then shown that the accusation was wrong. So 'vindication' of the wrongly-accused must include the unmasking of those who've done the wrongly-accusing. That is the way that God will 'help' Jesus (9): he will cause those who accuse Jesus to 'wear out', just like moth-eaten clothes are only good for the rubbish bin! This is similar to the

point Jesus made during his trial (cf Mark 14:62): he turns the table to say that there will come a time when he, the currently accused, will return as the judge (so that the high priest and all those speaking half truths and lies to convict Jesus will find themselves in the dock).

In other words, when he suffered, Jesus entrusted himself to God who judges justly (1 Peter 2:22). And his Father did indeed therefore highly exalt him and gave to him the name that is above every name (Phil 2:5-11): he was made both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36).

When Jesus was asked 'who is the greatest?' (cf Mark 9:33-35), he said that it's the one who is the servant: the One who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Romans 8:31-35

Paul is speaking to Christians like us who 'groan' (8:18-25) simply because we live in this world and it feels tough. In v31-35, Paul recycles phrases from Isaiah 50:8-9 in a string of five rhetorical questions. His point is that what is true of Jesus the Servant is now true of those 'in Christ': we too are sure of our future vindication. We can agree with Paul's 'reckoning' in 8:18f, and 'hope' for (ie be certain of) what we do not yet see. Since nothing can cause God to stop being committed to those who are called by him/who love him (28), 'weary' people like us can be fully confident of all the good that God intends for us.

Servants of the Servant

10-11 give Isaiah's application of this passage about the Servant. Of the two ways of responding, the true servants of the Servant are those in 10.

10 WALKING IN THE DARK, TRUSTING

This verse describes those who 'obey the voice of the Servant' (ie his servants). Note that they are walking in darkness (as the Servant himself did in v6, and as Israel would do in the exile). But they do that, trusting in the name of the Lord, relying on God. This is the big theme of Isaiah's message to his people: 'if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all' (7:9). Trust God because he's committed to you, however ominous your circumstance (even in exile): lean on him.

11 WALKING IN THE DARK, SEEING

The alternative group of people is not spared the darkness. They just equip themselves with a flaming torch, a DIY alternative lighting system, to help them see as they walk. But is 'seeing' better?

The people of v10 serve the servant and walk, not seeing where they're going but trusting their guide: they end up in whatever place and circumstance he's chosen for them. The people of v11 end up lying down in torment: although they can see where they're going, it appears that they can't stop themselves ending up in a very bad place (- 'torment' is the opposite of the place of God's blessing). Of course this is a similar idea to walking by faith and not by sight in 2 Cor 4:16-5:10.

¹ These headings match the sermon preached at Emmanuel Church, Bramcote on 21 Feb 2016: http://resources.emmanuelonline.org.uk/mp3s/160221_Isaiah_50_4-11_Nigel-Styles.mp3