

The Source of Seelsorge

An Exegesis of Isaiah 42:1-4

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Opinions abound on how to build congregations. Scores of books fill store shelves on methods and techniques we might employ - or avoid - if we really want to build big. Evangelicals continue to borrow from the business world, suggesting that the church is just like any other business and should be treated as such. No longer is it considered dirty inside the church to use words like "branding" or "advertising." Parishioners are viewed like customers, and workers are not called, they are hired and fired. You can attract more customers, er, parishioners, if you provide the right services and creature comforts - breakfast bar, stadium seating, padded pews and chairs, happy music, dramatic presentation, air conditioning. Welcome to Christianity in America, 2014. This isn't your grandfather's Christianity. If Charles Finney were alive today, he would be really proud.

Lost in this generation's obsession over numerical growth is a congregation's lack of focus on how they get a soul to heaven, or how the Church might adequately care for the souls God in his grace has given her to serve on earth. The Roman Catholic Church has maintained for centuries that you do that through a top-down, hierarchical system of clergy who coerce you into pay, pray and obey. American Evangelicalism's answer is a little more muddly. In the end, there is a lot of guilt and legalism under the guise of scratching you where you itch. It leaves you just as empty.

Despite manic efforts from every corner of Christendom to grow Christianity numerically utilizing the best business techniques, the dirty little secret is that Christianity is not growing - at least not in the United States. In fact it is shrinking. That is, to say the least, curious.¹ Some studies suggest that now less than 70% of Americans claim to be Christian, and less than 18% participate in worship on any given Sunday. Over the last decade, the decline in souls in our own Synod has accelerated. Should we take pride in the fact that we are shrinking less quickly than other Lutheran church bodies? Than other Christian church bodies? Should we panic and adopt Arminian methodology because we fear that's where they are going? Grandpa's Christianity is sounding better and better all the time.

No one loves souls more than God. How many times in the Bible do you sense God getting agitated over a lack of numerical growth? Once Elijah, after God's miracle on Mt. Carmel, had evidently convinced himself that his church was going to grow substantially. But Elijah ended up holed up in a cave, hundreds of miles away from his call, with the Lord exhorting him to return to serve the faithful 7,000. God seemed much more interested in Elijah's faithfulness to his call and the care of the souls he was neglecting than the size of the remaining flock. The city of Ninevah provided Jonah

¹ Romans 9:6 comes to mind, "It is not as though God's word had failed."

with a tremendous mission opportunity he was intent to ignore. Was God interested in the mass conversion of 120,000 people?² Of course he was, but that's not how he explained it to Jonah in the last verse of the book. *But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. **Should I not be concerned about that great city*** (Jonah 4:11)? During Jesus' ministry, people flocked to listen to him teach and preach. People lined up to have their sick healed. But how many believers were there really? We don't know. Did a lack of numerical growth bother Jesus? After many "disciples" left Jesus at the end of his famous bread of life discourse in John 6, he didn't chase after them, grab them around the ankles and beg them to stay. He doubled down on the truth of the Word, encouraged the believers with the Word, and faithfully served the souls in front of him. The first chapter of Acts reports the size of the gathering Christians was only 120 before the Holy Spirit jump started it with 3,000 additions on Pentecost. How did they all come to faith? Peter's fantastic law and gospel sermon. The book of Acts makes it repeatedly clear that the care of souls was a primary concern of God's, even as those who were scattered partnered with Paul to build out missions throughout the known world.

The Scriptures continually relate God's concern for the care of souls. To do so, God sent prophets and apostles, and now pastors and teachers to faithfully handle his Word of truth. Yet the source of our soul care is not the prophets and apostles, or modern day Christian practices. Soul care is best exemplified by God. He modeled it first in Eden, but we see it mostly fully and clearly in the work of his servant. That servant is introduced us to in Isaiah 42:1-4.

1 הֵן עַבְדִּי אֶתְמַדְּבוּ בְּחִירִי רְצֹתָהּ נַפְשִׁי נָתַתִּי רוּחִי עָלָיו מִשְׁפָּט לְגוֹיִם יוֹצֵיא׃

Translation - *Behold, my servant, on whom I depend, my Chosen One in whom my soul delights. I have put my Spirit on him. He will bring justice to the nations.*

The Servant of the Lord is Christ

Crucial to the understanding of this verse - and this servant song - is the meaning of עַבְדִּי. Who is "my servant?" Throughout the Old Testament, God refers to many different subjects as his servants: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, the prophets, all Israel. In the preceding chapter, God referred specifically to faithful Israel as his servant (41:8) before announcing he would raise up another of his servants, Cyrus, to assist in his salvation plan. Could it be possible that God is referring to one of these servants?

The immediate context indicates that there is something different about the servant in 42:1. In the final verses of chapter 41, God encourages the Israelites to bring forward the idol gods whom they think will help them, who can predict the future and determine their fate. In the final verse of the chapter, God's sweeping verdict is

² Whether or not the city of Ninevah's repentance was tantamount to conversion and faith remains an open question.

introduced with the bold interjection הִנֵּן, “behold, look here,” in order to put Israel’s idols on display. By calling attention to them, God’s obvious point was that these idols were completely worthless.

Chapter 42 begins with same word, הִנֵּן. At God’s invitation, the Israelites had their chance to show off their gods. Now it is God’s turn to put his servant on display. Juxtaposed against the worthless idols of Israel is now the value and significance of the Lord’s servant. “What you chose is useless and nothing. Look what I’ve chosen. My servant will save you.” Context itself would suggest that עַבְדִּי cannot refer to Israel or another of the prophets.³

For the Christian, the servant’s identity is settled by the gospel writers. Matthew, Mark and Luke allude to this verse in reference to Jesus’ baptism, and again at his transfiguration. In 12:18-20, Matthew quotes these verses as being fulfilled in Christ. The עַבְדִּי of Isaiah 42:1, then, is an unmistakable reference to Christ.

It is immediately noteworthy to observe God’s alternative to Israel’s idols. God puts a servant on display. Not a king. No ruler, president, dictator, or premier. Not a CEO, a boss, a board chairman, or a charismatic power broker. God displays his servant, and according to many lexicons, a slave. A slave finds his highest delight in fulfilling his master’s will. Jesus did not only teach his followers to obey God’s will and to pray “thy will be done.” Jesus himself followed God’s will like a slave. “*My food,*” said Jesus, “*is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work*” (Mark 4:34).

Many pastor’s today suffer from a kind of identity crisis. Are they the CEO’s of the congregation? Do they run the church? Many parishioners elevate their pastors to some type of pedestal, and defer to their office for the most menial decisions. Pastors should never suffer such a crisis. This matter is settled by Scripture. When two cheeky disciples tried to broker an authoritative position in Jesus’ kingdom, the other ten bristled. With the strongest possible Greek negation, Jesus insisted that the church never be operated top down like it is in the business world. Instead, it should be operated from the bottom up by servants, even slaves. Then he offered us his own model for ministry - himself. *Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Matthew 20:26-28).

The Servant’s preparation

With the descriptions that follow, Isaiah confirms the identity of the servant as the coming Christ. With each successive phrase, Isaiah brilliantly describes the incomparable qualities and character of God’s servant. אֶתְּמַדְּבוֹ is more literally “I am held up in him” or “I depend on him.” Most translations opt for the transitive “whom I uphold.” Depending on how the phrase is translated, there would seem to be a

³ This view, of course, is opposed by Jews and unbelieving authors. They understand עַבְדִּי most often to refer to the nation of Israel. Considering the descriptions in the rest of the verse and song, that poses other difficulties.

difference in meaning. Is it God who is depending on his servant? Or is God supporting his servant, strengthening him for his Messianic work?

The root verb is commonly used to refer to the grasping firmly, keeping securely, or holding tightly to spiritual or moral truths. It is found frequently in Psalms and Proverbs, as a son might hold on tightly to his father's instruction, for example. Even without the Nifal, there is an intensity in the verb - to hold tightly, to grasp securely (and not let go). The sense of the construction suggests that both God and the reader hold on firmly to this servant, that is, trust in him and his work. In stunning contrast to the worthless idols of chapter 41 which deserved to be thrown away, God introduces his precious servant who is worth holding onto tightly, clinging to. In him alone the work of salvation depends. Who else but God realized the enormity of the work of salvation? Who else but God realizes that no man is equal to the task? No man other than his servant, that is. This thought from Pieper is helpful: "The Lord has taken hold of this Servant, places Him in the world and sustains Him so firmly that no power can overthrow him, as if to say: Here is My Servant, let us see who is able to stand against him."⁴

The next adjective with first person suffix, **בְּחִירִי**, simply means "my chosen." The word carries the picture of a selection only after careful scrutiny. The thing chosen is chosen only after careful testing and examination, as in "choice silver" or "choice gold" from Proverbs. Although the adjective is used with men as the subject,⁵ Old Testament usage more often employs this vocable with God as the chooser and therefore eternal significance in view. His choices, of course, are never insignificant or arbitrary, but carefully weighed. His choices are always worth our further investigation.

New Testament verses spring to mind. At Jesus' baptism and transfiguration similar language is put to work to affirm Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. A less remembered example was spoken from the cross. *The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One (Luke 23:35)."* But perhaps the clearest verses come from Peter. Peter was there bumbling on transfiguration mountain, but was completely lucid when he wrote his first epistle: *He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake (1 Peter 1:20). And again, As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him... (1 Peter 2:4).*

The Father's language at Jesus' baptism will also resonate with the next phrase, **רֵצְתָהּ נַפְשִׁי**, "my soul delights" (in him). The Father has every reason to delight in his Son. Jesus is holy and righteous; in him there is no sin, but complete obedience and fulfillment of God's will. All of Jesus' substitutionary active obedience is now in view, something which brings the Father great delight. There is another reason God delights in his servant. In his servant, he makes known his loving, gracious heart to mankind. In his servant, he makes known his relentless desire to save. Luther comments on this phrase, "This is nothing else than the preaching of the Gospel. It is spoken to you to

⁴ Pieper, August. Isaiah II. p. 178.

⁵ As in Genesis 13:11 when Lot chooses the plain.

strengthen you.”⁶ God *delights* in his servant! The Word incarnate, God’s carefully chosen servant - God delights both in Christ’s work and in revealing Christ’s work to mankind that he might be saved. In Psalm 1, the man is blessed who delights in God’s Word day and night. And why not? Knowing the Word better is knowing Jesus better. Knowing Jesus better is knowing God better. Knowing God and his servant better means knowing our calling better.

These descriptions of the servant echo in the ears of those who strive to minister in the name Jesus, the source of our soul care. God does not settle for just anyone to care for souls. He chooses carefully, and he has chosen you, brother. You are not in the ministry by accident; you do not serve your particular parish by chance. God chose you. Yet God does not send you into service ill-equipped. He strengthens and sustains you; he holds you up just as he did his Servant. In you God delights, since by your baptism you have been found clothed in Christ’s righteousness. *Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God* (2 Corinthians 3:4-5).

The Servant’s power

We routinely refer to Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration as plain examples of the work of the triune God. We can add to that list this servant song in which the Father enlists his Son as his chosen servant, and then empowers him with the Holy Spirit. Wrapped up in the unfolding of salvation is always the mysterious inner workings of the Trinity. The Hebrew says simply *נָתַתִּי רוּחִי עָלָיו*, “I have put my Spirit on him.” The verb is Qal perfect, indicating a fact in the mind of God. God had not only chosen Jesus before the creation of the world, but has empowered him to carry out his work.

One might wonder why it is necessary that God’s Servant would need the Holy Spirit? If it were Israel, Cyrus or a prophet we would completely understand. But this Servant is Christ, eternal God, possessor of almighty power and every divine characteristic. Isn’t that qualification enough to carry out the task? Yes. But there are several reasons why it was necessary for the Holy Spirit to be given. First, the Holy Trinity delights to participate fully in the work of salvation. This is not the Father as creator, the Son as redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as sanctifier. This is the Father who sent the Son (John 3:16, Galatians 4:4-5), the Son who lived and died as mankind’s substitute, and the Holy Spirit who enabled the Son to carry out that work. Secondly, according to his divine nature, Jesus did not require the Holy Spirit, but once he took on human flesh according to his exinanition, he did require the Spirit. Pieper mentions the same. “This Spirit was not His originally, but he requires it for the accomplishment of the task assigned to him.”⁷ We take Pieper’s words to mean that the Holy Spirit was not given to Jesus in fulfillment of this Scripture until his baptism in the Jordan River. Jesus’ reception of the Holy Spirit at his baptism provides a further explanation. That was his call into public ministry. *No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be*

⁶ Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works, Vol. 17: Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*. p. 61.

⁷ Pieper, August. *Isaiah II*. p. 179.

called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (Hebrews 5:4-5).

Another explanation for this special endowment of the Holy Spirit has to do with the nature of the work of the servant. Almighty power is obviously a welcome attribute when you are charged with the work Jesus was. Remember though, Jesus was a servant. Almighty power seems more compatible with a master, not a servant. Nor is it the only attribute necessary for the Servant's work. After all, if raw power were all that was needed for salvation, God wouldn't even have needed his Servant! Other passages from Isaiah give a fuller explanation of the broad scope of Messiah's ministry. First of all, this section from Isaiah 11:1-5.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord—
3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
5 Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

Next, these verses from Isaiah 61:1-3.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor.

The servant will require an ability to minister to people of all kinds. He will need the Spirit's gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, faithfulness, righteousness. More than leverage his pervasive authority, he will be expected to preach, to proclaim, to comfort, to bestow. The rest of the verse in the servant song gives additional perspective to this endowment.

How heartening is it to know that in order to meet the diverse challenges of his ministry, God equipped his Servant with the Holy Spirit, calling him into office? Who other than Jesus would be able to serve a single soul if the lone perquisite was almighty power? The disciples followed Jesus for three years, but it wasn't until the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost that wisdom and preaching followed. In the same way, we have no special powers or qualifications to serve. The same Holy Spirit who equipped Jesus equips us to care for souls. He calls us to faith, empowers us with the Gospel, then calls us to serve as overseers and soul-carers. *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers* (Acts 20:28).

The Servant's mission

The final phrase in verse one, **מִשְׁפָּט לְגוֹיִם יוֹצִיא**, "he will bring forth justice to the nations," is arguably the the most important in the song. After juxtaposing Jesus against worthless idols, describing his unique characteristics and preparedness, investing him with the Spirit's power for his soul-caring ministry, God now unfolds his mission. What is this Servant supposed to do? **מִשְׁפָּט** is the word that causes the most conversation. As a verb, the root means to "exercise the process of government." The noun here is commonly translated "justice." What justice is the Servant supposed to bring? The better question is whether we should understand **מִשְׁפָּט** to be law or gospel.

Since Isaiah writes in Old Testament times, should we read **מִשְׁפָּט** as a reference to the Sinaitic covenant? Is Jesus' mission to bring forth Ten Commandment justice, to establish the meaning of morality? That can hardly be the understanding since Moses already did that. The following verses will also bear this out as Isaiah describes the gentle way the Servant carries out justice.

Of the fourteen different nuances in meaning various lexicons offer, a common thread that weaves them all together is the concept of "verdict." What verdict or pronouncement is the Messiah supposed to make? Moses' law has already made its verdict, namely that "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23) and the whole world stands condemned. That's why God sent his Servant! The more famous servant song in Isaiah 53 graphically describes the substitutionary work the Servant will offer in place of these condemned sinners. He will take God's verdict of condemnation on himself. Since the Servant has satisfied Sinai's legal requirements, God is now forced exercise the process of government again. What is his verdict? Paul said it well. *God was*

reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19). מִשְׁפָּט, then, does not refer to law, but to God's Gospel verdict in Christ. *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ* (John 1:17).⁸

יֹצִיא is Hifil, which carries a causative sense. The mission of the Servant will be to cause this justice, this Gospel verdict, to go forth to the nations. Messiah's mission is not just for Jews. He is to bring the Gospel לְגוֹיִם, to the nations, to the Gentiles. He brings forth justice as our priest by offering himself as substitute. He brings forth justice as our prophet when this Gospel verdict is proclaimed to the world. He brings forth justice as our king when our enemies are conquered, Satan flees, death is destroyed and finally he leads us to heaven.

If Jesus is the source of our soul care and his mission is to take the Gospel to all nations, can our own mission be any more clear? If we want to understand our role of caring for souls, look no further than God's servant. Jesus has established his Gospel verdict, objective justification, for you and me; now he calls us as his under-servants to bring it to the world. *And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God* (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

2 לֹא יִצְעַק וְלֹא יִשָּׂא וְלֹא יִשְׁמִיעַ בַּחוּץ קוּלוֹ:

Translation - *He will not cry out, lift up his voice, or raise it in the streets.*

The Servant's meekness

By way of litotes, Isaiah now emphasizes the way in which the Servant will carry out his work. Using the three negative clauses, Isaiah means to emphasize the quiet and gentle hearted manner in which the Servant will carry out his mission. All three clauses make essentially the same point.

Previously in chapter 41, Isaiah described the way another servant, Cyrus, would carry out his work. *He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow. He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay* (Isaiah 41:2,25). Typical of earthly rulers, kings and despots is the force with which they carry out their work. If they are opposed, it is the power of their armies or the force of their personalities that overcomes obstacles. Should God allow them to achieve any measure of success, they do not credit their Maker, but self-righteously brag about their achievements publicly.⁹ Oftentimes worldly leaders of all kinds have ruled by shouting down opponents, by screaming over their enemies. They do not have the confidence of their convictions or power in their message. They must leverage their personalities in a way that extends their empire.

⁸ See also John 3:16-18

⁹ Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14 is a case in point.

How completely different is God's Servant and God's kingdom! During Jesus' ministry, he was constantly confronted with people intent on deterring him. Scribes, Pharisees, teachers of the law all tried repeatedly to trap him in his words. Jesus didn't need to engage in a shouting match. As God's Servant, the power was in his message, not in his force of personality. When his mob screamed "Crucify him," when Pilate questioned him, or when the soldiers and criminals mocked and jeered, Jesus calmly and gently answered accordingly. He was always in control of his emotions. Many times Jesus taught publicly, but he did not come across like smarmy evangelist who was trying to con you with his charisma. *Jesus taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law* (Matthew 7:29).

We stand in awe at the marvelous display of Jesus' active obedience! This is the righteousness with which we are covered. It is also the ministry manner we strive to mimic. Do you find it significant that the character traits spoken of in verse two repeat themselves in the following character traits God requires of overseers in 1 Timothy 3? Above reproach, even-tempered, self-controlled¹⁰, respectable, not violent but gentle, see that his children obey him with proper respect, have a good reputation with outsiders. Elsewhere Paul implores Timothy on different occasions not to engage in quarrels about words. The self-control Jesus exercised over his tongue and the meekness he modeled in his ministry was consistent with the nature of a servant. We who care for souls seek the same.

That is no easy task. Our culture militates against that kind of servant leadership. It glorifies the aggressive, the brash, the domineering, the overbearing, the assertive type A persona. Have you ever been jealous of a brother pastor who, humanly speaking, has that worldly "it" factor? It is very tempting to fall into a ministry manner that models the world. We're on a mission from God and we've got to get things done! It's easier to chuck meekness and impose your will. It's more efficient to manipulate people with our personalities, to browbeat them into submission. "I'm the pastor, and this is how we're going to do it." The end justifies the means, right? Wrong. Recall Jesus' teaching to his disciples when they demonstrated some of the same self-righteous traits. He called them together and drew a clear line between worldly leadership and soul-caring servant leadership. *You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you* (Matthew 20:25-26). The world is not the model of ministry. Business practices are not paradigms for the church. If we are to care for God's souls God's way, we need less dynamism and more meekness. There is power in meekness! That is the way of God's Servant.

3 קָנָה רָצוּץ לֹא יִשְׁבּוֹר וּפְשֵׁתָהּ כִּהְיָה לֹא יִכְבָּנָה לְאֵמֶת יוֹצִיא מִשְׁפָּט :

Translation - *A bruised reed he will not break, a faintly burning wick he will not extinguish, in truth he will bring forth justice.*

¹⁰ A sage pastor once mentioned from the floor of a conference that you might be able to lose your temper once - with a parishioner, in a Bible class, at a meeting, etc. After that, you will have lost the respect of your congregation and your ability to care for souls at that place.

The Servant's gentleness

The litotes continues into verse three, adding two additional negative constructions. The Hebrew in this verse is much more interesting. Typical Hebrew word order is verb, subject, object. By placing the objects at the beginning of the first two phrases, Isaiah emphasizes the quality or characteristics of the objects. He means to focus our attention on the fragility of קִנְיָהּ רְצוּיָן, “a reed that has been bruised.” A reed growing on river bank is already very delicate. With the passive participle, Isaiah furthers the image by suggesting it has been bruised or broken. This already flimsy plant has been harmed and damaged by some outside source and requires tender care if it is to survive. The second image is like the first. פְּשֵׁתָהּ is a wick or flax, and כְּהָהּ is an adjective meaning dim or faint. The chances are good that this wick is barely aglow and will burn out all by itself. Each of the phrases represent the kind of fragile, delicate people God's Servant will minister to - the weak and oppressed. How will he handle them?

The three verbs in the verse all describe Jesus' gentle, soul caring ministry. Immediately remarkable is the fact Jesus pays these weak and delicate people any attention at all! Not only so, he handles them skillfully, with extreme care, supplying for them the patience and tenderness they require to restore them. This is a brilliant picture of God's Servant! The way of the world is to pay them no attention at all. Worse, the weak and infirm should be hidden in hospitals, stuffed in homes and out of sight in institutions. When Babylon invaded Israel in 605, they took a young, bright Daniel; but they left behind the weak and lame. All of the people Isaiah describes are despised, forgotten, and overlooked by the world. God's Servant ministers to them all. Those that try to serve them are not gentle enough and exacerbate the hurt. But when Jesus serves, he does not further the damage. Rather, in his gentility he provides healing and restores their strength. How exactly does the Servant do this? לְאַמֵּת מִשְׁפָּט יוֹצִיא מִשְׁפָּט, by causing God's objective verdict to go forth into the world, or by the Gospel. “The Servant will effectually plant His judgment, His Gospel, in the hearts of the broken-hearted, so that they possess it as their own, in faith.”¹¹

Teddy Roosevelt once quipped, “Speak softly, but carry a big stick; you will go far.” His comments are typical of the arrogant and brash politician or worldly business leader who steps on and over people to get his way. The work of God's Servant is the opposite. “Speak loudly, but carry a small stick.” Be clear and bold in your proclamation of the Gospel, and be prepared to minister gently and humbly as many times as necessary to every needy soul who requires it.

Jesus' ministry was cluttered with bruised reeds and smoldering wicks. Many of them he called to be his disciples. Consider how Jesus dealt with the bruised reed at Jacob's well. Recall Jesus' answer to the adulteress who was about to be stoned, and remember that he allowed a prostitute to anoint him, shaming Simon his host who was ready to cast her away. The woman out of whom Jesus cast seven demons became one of his closest followers, and the Gadarene demoniac had a similar story. After the

¹¹ Pieper, August. *Isaiah II*. p. 181

disciples reported how many invitees excused their way out of the great banquet, Jesus insisted his servants *Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame* (Luke 14:21). He forgave the sins of the paralytic before he healed him of his paralysis. Countless thousands walked past the man at Bethesda, but Jesus took the time to heal him. There was no end to the number of people who had been harmed by the Pharisees, beaten up by their brash self-righteousness. Jesus' mercy was universal; his invitation was for all. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls* (Matthew 11:28-29).

Our pews are filled with bruised reeds and smoldering wicks¹², people who have been mistreated and oppressed.¹³ Some come to us because they've never known the Gospel. Some have bought in to the lie of our culture, and over time become disillusioned when they realize it's a farce. Some come to us because they've been mistreated by another denomination or another servant who was too rough and nearly snuffed out their wick. Are you prepared to carry out the Servant's gentle ministry to these poor souls, strengthening them with the Gospel? Do this first. Remember that it was your faintly flickering wick and your bruised reed to which Christ ministered first. He cleansed and fed you; he strengthened you with his Gospel. Now, fellow servant, you are called and equipped to minister in Christ's name. These souls rely on your gentle and patient ministry. Serve your call! Do not look past these weak and oppressed. Bear their burdens.¹⁴ Go bring God's verdict to those precious souls entrusted to your care. Use the Gospel! The Word works.

4 לֹא יִכָּהֶה וְלֹא יִרְוֵץ עַד-יָשִׁים בְּאָרֶץ מְשֻׁפֵּט וּלְתוֹרָתוֹ אַיִם יִיחִילוּ: פ

Translation - *He will not faint, nor will he be bruised until he has established justice on earth and the isles trust his teaching.*

The Servant's determination

The negative clauses that begin verse four carry forth the poetic rhythm of the previous two verses, but the litotes has been satisfied as of verse three. The overall point of verse four is to communicate the enormity of the work that lies before the Servant, as well as the difficulty that comes with such a big job. Not only is he called on by God to establish the Gospel, he also is responsible to cause it to go into the world, using it to convert the unbelieving and sustain believers. Does the possibility exist that

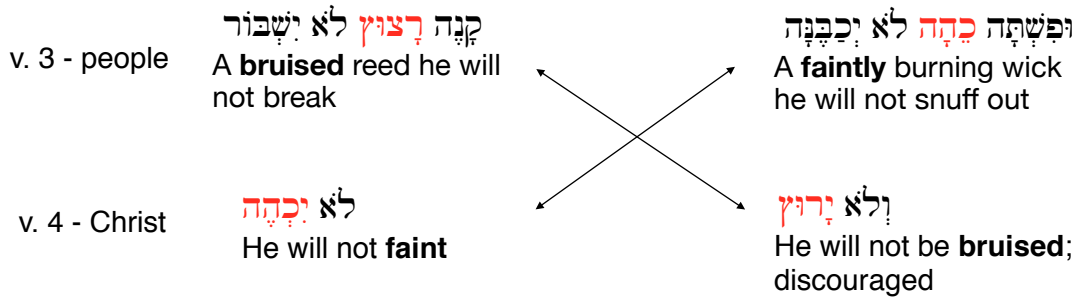
¹² Who are we kidding? Our pulpits are filled with them, too.

¹³ A parishioner recently remarked to me, "Pastor, I don't think I can take one more needy person in my life." If only she realized we are all needy!

¹⁴ Galatians 6:2 - "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." A recent study of the brain suggests that when we keep a secret or assist with others mental and emotional burdens, the brain processes it as though it were a physical load.

he will buckle under its pressure? Will he fail to see it through? Categorically, Isaiah answers “no.” The descriptions in this verse give further credence to the identity of עֲבָדִי in verse one as Jesus, as well as the necessity of his strengthening by God and his endowment with the Holy Spirit.

There is a chiasm in the text that follows through on the thought of verse three.



NIV84 captures the meaning of the verse very well, “he will not falter or be discouraged.”¹⁵ This servant who humbly took on flesh to live and die for us would not succumb to the pressures and temptations that other mortals do. Isaiah makes abundantly clear that this Servant who gently consoles the bruised soul with the Gospel will not himself be bruised, crushed, or fall apart in the face of his task. He is God’s servant, and he has a mission to fulfill; he will accomplish its purpose. Neither will the Servant, who calmly fans the faintly flaming wick with the Gospel, ever have his wick snuffed. He will resolutely see God’s mission through, undaunted by the scope of work. During his ministry, the devil fought strenuously to deter Jesus from his mission (Matthew 4:1-11). Later, Peter objected to the suffering and death Jesus insisted must happen (Matthew 16:21-23). Each time Jesus persevered.

Isaiah's prophecy now rises to the spectacular. Everything about it is unexpected. In contrast to Israel’s idols, God displays his Servant. Rather than equipped with worldly power or a larger than life persona, Jesus is empowered with the Holy Spirit. He brings Gospel, not law. He builds his kingdom with meekness, gentility, and humility. You can imagine the people lining up to belittle God’s plan. “This is laughable! Meekness!?! Humility!?! That can't build a congregation. It will never work!” Yet the balance of verse four states conclusively that God’s Servant will not stop “until he has established justice on earth,” עַד-יָשִׁים בְּאֶרֶץ מִשְׁפָּט. For the third time in four verses, Isaiah mentions מִשְׁפָּט, God’s verdict. In verse one it was introduced as Christ’s mission for all people. In verses two and three it is connected with meekness and mercy and was the cause of healing for the bruised and oppressed. Here it is the goal of Messiah to establish it “in the earth,” and is something for which the islands yearn. Can there be any doubt that this verdict is God’s declaration of

¹⁵ The tradeoff NIV84 makes is the connection with the chiasmic terms in verse three.

innocence for mankind in Christ? How else does God's Servant care for souls other than with forgiveness at the cross and Easter justification?¹⁶

Grammatically, the final phrase could be governed by the preposition עַד, or it can be understood as an independent sentence. Regardless, the meaning does not drastically change. וְלִתְּוָרָתוֹ is parallel in meaning to מְשַׁפֵּט. Both refer to the Gospel, God's verdict. The verb יִיחַיְלֵנוּ is interesting. By itself it means "to wait." Since it is in the intensified Piel, it then carries the idea of "hope, confidently expect, trust." Messiah's mission is not complete until he establishes the Gospel on Good Friday and Easter, and then causes it to be preached throughout the Gentile world in the New Testament era.

The Servant's determination to fulfill his mission illuminates our own work. It depicts a servant in the trenches grinding out his ministry day by day. Isaiah shows us a Jesus who is renewed and refreshed daily by the Spirit, and then joyfully and intently goes about God's business until the work is done. You will not find him cutting corners, pursuing fads, or looking for silver bullets. This work happens one day at a time and one soul at a time by means of the meek, gentle, humble ministry of the Gospel. The conversion of the heathen is not the result of one mighty, eschatological act, but of the gradual, tireless work of the servant.¹⁷

Does that not sound exactly like our call? Which one of us does not have a stack of sticky notes in our office that we know we'll never get to? Who of us does not shrink when he sees the size of souls who needs the Gospel? Who among us does not feel the burden of work in the trenches? Consider this: we are not providing the Gospel, we are proclaiming it. It's still good news! Refresh yourself daily with the Spirit, and then go about your calling joyfully and intently, just like Jesus did before you.

The servants

If it is true that Christianity is on the decline in the United States, it begs us to ask the question "why?" Has the rain shower of the Gospel passed us by? Is the impact of godless philosophies such as evolution, humanism, and post-modernism taking its toll? No doubt the devil continues to violently attack Christ and his Church. Does the church bear any blame? Have we grown worldly along with our culture? Is materialism and hedonism choking out faith as Jesus warned it would in the parable?¹⁸ Has she gotten complacent with her witness? Are pastors to blame? Have Christian clergy sold out the care of souls for numerical growth? Have they sold out the Word of God for business models? Are we doing it wrong?

I wonder about that. What has happened to the care of souls? What once passed as pastoral care has now been handed off to psychologists. The proliferation of specialists rather than generalists has impacted the way we deal with sinners. It has

¹⁶ Romans 4:25

¹⁷ Young, Edward J. NICOT, Book of Isaiah, Volume III. p. 115.

¹⁸ Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

been observed before, but today sin no longer needs repentance and forgiveness, it needs therapy. Do churches operate more often with the attitude that it is more important that we get you through our church doors than we get you through heaven's door? If we pastors are the ones God charges to care for the souls in the parish, shouldn't we be asking ourselves some hard questions?

As long as God is content to place his Gospel treasure in jars of clay, we are bound to wrestle with these things. There will be a reluctant Moses. There will be a defiant Jonah. There will be the runaway Elijah. There will be a neglectful Eli. And there will also always be Christ, God's Servant, who will center our ministry and focus our efforts. As long as we have Christ, our ministries are not in need of rethinking or retooling. They are in need of returning to the type of soul care Jesus demonstrated for the world: chosen by God, hidden in his righteousness, strengthened by him and endowed with the Holy Spirit. Jesus' mission is to establish and extend the Gospel throughout the world. We don't need worldly wisdom; we need the foolishness of the cross. We don't need power paradigms; we need the power of the Gospel. We don't need grandpa's Christianity; we need God's Servant. His greatness is in his meekness, his power is in his humility, and his strength in his gentility. We can learn from that. We can practice that. The care of the souls God has entrusted to us depends on that. *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us* (2 Corinthians 5:1,5,7).

To bring good news to souls in sin,
The bruised and broken hearts to win,
In every place to bring them in
Where you yourself will come. (CW:572.3)