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## Sermon

### ***A Covenant of Love and Obedience***

**Isaiah 42:1- 9; Acts 26:12-18; Matthew 3:13-17**

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Let's turn in our Bibles to Isaiah 42 so you can follow as I talk about it. In Isaiah 42 is the first of four Isaiah passages which have been named the 'servant songs'.

Isaiah's description of the servant here can only be fulfilled by someone who has authority over nations - plural. This is not just a bit-player, or a small-time king over a bit of the Middle East. So we deduce that Jesus must be the servant who will bring justice to the nations. The Son of God does not need to make a big noise or a fuss to impress anybody, he stands in his servanthood and in his majesty. He is gentle and kind enough to give the most broken person another chance; yet strong and wise enough to enforce complete justice for nations.

Remember in the gospel passage, Father God tore open the heavens when Jesus was baptised and shouted to the world, "This is my Son, whom I love" and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove. It is a fulfilment of the prophecy in Is 42:1 "My chosen one in whom I delight, I will pour out my Spirit upon him." This is a beautiful picture of God the Father and Jesus working in harmony and love. Jesus honours the Father by his choice to fulfil all righteousness. The Father honours Jesus publically with words of love and the Holy Spirit seals it with his coming.

The Christian life works when we combine love and obedience. Respecting, obeying and honouring the Lord with our time, our attitudes, our behaviour, our money – in fact, with every part of our lives is a normal response as we gratefully dwell on his goodness and faithfulness to us.

In v 5 we see God's complete right to rule and to receive honour: Isaiah paints a word-picture of God stretching out the heavens like a canvas on which to paint a picture. Then he forms the earth and spreads it out as an sculptor would with his clay or bronze, making hilltops and valleys, streambeds and ocean depths. In v8 he says, "I am the source of your life; do not credit anyone or anything else for the artistry and complexity of the life I have given you." An impersonal explosion as the beginning of life I find totally unbelievable. No blind, directionless chance could achieve the precisely-balanced, furious beauty of our blue and green globe.

The beauty of our world is an expression of who God is and how he loves us. On Friday Ian and I were down near Whitianga and our cousin caught four big schnapper. I reflected on how pleasant it is to spend time on the sparkling water, catching these beautiful rose gold fish then eating the succulent flesh. We used to imagine as children how it might be in the future when food would be produced in tablet form. That

utilitarianism might feed the masses, but it would be a far cry from the beauty and pleasure God created for us.

V6 starts, "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness." We are called by God for particular purposes, that he knew long before we were born. As we face the New Year, we have no need to feel lost or purposeless. I have noticed in the last couple of weeks that as I pray in the morning, "Use me today, Lord" that wonderful things happen. I get opportunities to minister the love of Jesus and to extend the Kingdom and influence of God. This week as I was trying to write this talk, I was interrupted by a workman coming to measure up for some vinyl. He has a serious wrist problem that became pain-free on the inner side and I am hoping he will come back for more prayer. It is good to keep our eyes open for opportunities to co-work with God.

V6 goes on as the Lord promises to take hold of your hand and keep you from harm. That does not mean we will never be hurt, the life of Jesus tells us that, but there is absolutely no room for fear! We will never be permanently harmed. He is closer than our breath. As we keep close to him, he will make us that light which reaches the Gentiles. Gentiles are everyone not already part of God's family.

That's an exciting bit! He says, "I will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles." The Lord is initially talking to Jesus here. In Jesus, God has provided a new way for himself and people to be in covenant together. We get to share in this by helping people get connected with Jesus. We get to help people, who have lost all hope, to connect with God, the source of hope. "I will make you a light to the Gentiles" says the Lord. (Romans 1:16)

Isaiah is prophesying about things yet to happen and foretelling that Jesus would suffer so we could step into the new covenant. But many times in the New Testament, Christians are spoken of as being "in Christ". So our ministry must be wrapped up in the ministry of Christ. Jesus has a purpose, a mission and a destiny that is ours as well, because we are in Him. We are invited into Jesus' purpose, his mission and his destiny.

So we also get to help Gentiles to see. Here in Isaiah 42, God uses three ways of describing reasons for people not being able to see.

1. They have eyes that are blind.
2. They've been taken captive in prison. (A captive is imprisoned because some enemy overpowered him and put him in chains)
3. Sitting in the darkness in a dungeon. (Another reason for sitting in darkness is you have chosen to break the law and are being punished for it.)

I understand this as being unable to see body, soul and spirit. Physically blind, taken captive by the deceptions of Satan - and sitting in darkness in a dungeon because of one's own foolish, sinful choices. Looks like a recipe for being totally hopeless and unable to help oneself.

Jesus' mandate in the new covenant is:

1. To heal physically,
2. To be the Truth that reveals & destroys Satan's crippling lies and
3. To take the punishment we deserve, so we go free.

In the epistle for today, Jesus is choosing a most unlikely co-worker for his mission to turn people's darkness into light. Saul was a highly intelligent, proud, legalistic, fanatical religious murderer. Sounds like a suicide bomber! But Saul was zealous for the true God, not Allah. Acts 26:12-17 Let's turn there p1087

V13 – A light from heaven brighter than the sun, blazes around him. V16, Jesus says "I appoint you as a servant and a witness. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to:

1. Open their eyes,
2. Turn them from darkness to light,
3. Turn them from the power of Satan to God so that they may receive forgiveness of sins.

Now Saul was one of the top-most Jewish scholars of the day and he would have probably known Isaiah off by heart, so for him to hear those words from Jesus' mouth would have been breath-taking. Later on, Paul, as he became known as, wrote lots of letters to the churches he planted around the then-known world.

Paul's writing has been carefully preserved to help and inspire us to live in covenant relationship with God, to help us learn how to love and obey him.

Do you see how we are walking in the footsteps of Jesus and Paul and Origen and St Theresa and Catherine Marshall and CS Lewis and so many others who have found the light that makes darkness flee? It is our turn. We are the servants of Jesus who are carrying on the good work in this day and age.

As I looked at commentaries about the opening of blind eyes, there seemed to be some blind commentators! They could only see the passage as talking about opening people's mental understanding. If only they could have seen the joy of Samson, the old man whom Ian prayed for in Tanzania! They would realise that in Jesus' name, blind eyes can be healed.

Jesus clearly understood Isaiah's prophecy to include physical healing of blind eyes, because when John the Baptist was in prison and sent word to Jesus saying, "Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, (Matt 11 4-6)

*"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. <sup>6</sup> Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."*

Poor John. He knew that Isaiah had said the Messiah would free captives from prison. Jesus had not freed him. It was a big pill to swallow. He had risked everything to proclaim the coming of one who is "more powerful than I" and there was no sign of this power being used to free John from prison. No wonder that John was thinking, "Did I make a mistake in proclaiming Jesus as the One who was to come?"

V6 starts by establishing a call from One who always acts in righteousness. There is no shadow of wrong which can He can be blamed for. John the Baptist had a choice. He had to say to himself, "Jesus is the Messiah, the one sent from God. I can choose to trust him or I can get bitter that he is out there having fun making blind people see and I am stuck here in this horrible place when he has the power to free me."

If there is any sense in which you hold God responsible for something which has gone wrong, or not fixing something, I urge you to re-think. The one who will bring justice to the nations, the one who would not give up on a smoldering, flickering candle that is about to go out; this God is not one who does callous, mean or cruel things. If you step aside from judging God in that way, it means you can stand beside him with his comforting arm around you.

Then together you can look at the meaning of that bad thing. From that position, it is possible to see that the source of the evil is Satan, not God. From that position, we have the strength and perspective to respond in the most productive way to whatever went wrong. To a trusting, faith-filled person, God may show us how to pray to shift the problem in a way we had no idea of before. Or we may get no clear explanation, like John the Baptist.

But we can be confident that whatever the situation, God is still good and good will come as we love and obey him.

I am sorry to say, it took me quite a while to get around to following Jesus' example. Acts 10:38 says when the Holy Spirit came upon him, he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

We sometimes have a mental picture of Jesus gliding around in a state of semi-trance smiling and blessing people. When I was working in a London church office, the curate come in one day with a toy that made the whole staff team crack up. It was a plastic model of Jesus, with "moveable arms and gliding motion."

Acts 10 gives us a different picture. It takes focus and power and goodness to set people free. Doing good must be generated from our relationship with Jesus, not be a plastic do-gooder shirt we put on now and then.

Having the Holy Spirit within us should make a significant difference in our sphere of influence. Paul corroborates this in

**1 Corinthians 2:4-5** *“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.”*

If anyone would like to learn about how to heal to people, following in Jesus' footsteps - or to be more effective in prayer - I will be teaching a 4-part series on “Effective Prayer for Healing”, starting in February. There is a sign-up sheet for expressions of interest on the table under the office window or you can speak to me about it.