

Be a Servant at Work

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Isaiah

Where righteousness in Isaiah 1-39 is a term used to reveal Judah's shortcomings and infidelity, the Hebrew *mishpat* in Isaiah 40-55 is understood primarily as a gift from God that he accomplishes on behalf of his people. Isaiah himself serves as the prime example of the servant of God who brings this gift of God.

Justice or judgment is established in Isaiah 40-55 by the enigmatic "servant" embedded within this portion of Isaiah's witness. Isaiah 42:1-4, the first of the so-called servant songs, speaks of the servant as one who establishes justice in the earth. Here, in the figure of the servant, God answers Judah's cry for justice: "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right (*mishpat*) is disregarded by my God." (Isaiah 40:27) God's own divine initiative is now enacted to accomplish for his people what they could not accomplish for themselves. The means by which God will accomplish salvation both for Israel and for the nations is in this developing figure of God's servant. Righteousness and justice are accomplished by the servant.

The servant's narrative identity develops within these chapters - from Israel per se in chapters 40-48, to an individual figure in chapters 49-53 who takes

on his own shoulders Israel's missional identity for both herself and for the nations.

“The Lord said to me: You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” (Isaiah 49:3)

The reason for this shift from national Israel to a figure who is Israel incarnate (or an idealized Israel) is Israel's failure to fulfill her mission because of her sin. What one observes in this servant figure is the unique means by which God communicates his gracious presence and restorative intentions to his wayward people.

This prompts us to ask about our own roles. As members of a people being redeemed by God's grace, we can be vessels of that grace for the benefit of those around us. Sometimes we have the opportunity to make our workplaces more just, more compassionate, more oriented toward making the world a better place. In doing so, we may enact the servant's mission in small ways ourselves.

Conversely, at other times, it is difficult to do our work as God intends. Individuals or systems in our workplaces may resist the way God is leading us. Our own sin and shortcomings may short-circuit any good we might have accomplished. Even our best efforts may not seem to make much difference.

In these cases, Isaiah has a word of reassurance for us.

“I said: I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God.” (Isaiah 49:4)

Despite the discouragement we often feel, the ultimate result of our work is in God’s hands. We can trust God not only to use what we have done, but in God’s time to bring it to fulfillment. As Philippians puts it, “The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ.” (Philippians 1:6).